

## The Railroad Connecting Geneva and Ithaca

“No American industry was ever more fascinating or has ever stirred the blood and the imagination of the individual more than he who has heard the far distant shrill of a steam locomotive’s whistle in the night or witnessed a train’s thunderous passing at the village depot.”

That comment appeared in a 1961 article in the *Interlaken Review* and takes us back to a time period quite different today. It refers to a time when the trains of the Lehigh Valley Railroad were transporting milk overnight from area farms to New York City markets and a time when local residents could board the train in the morning and shop in either Geneva or Ithaca and catch a train back home that same day.<sup>1</sup>

At their peak in the early 1900s the local railroads were a major factor in the local economy. According to George Townsend, an Interlaken resident interviewed in 1961, several local hay and grain dealers shipped ten cars of hay per day. He also pointed out that the railway station in Seneca Falls loaded more hay for shipment than any other railroad station in the United States. Trumansburg had the distinction of being second in the same respect. Mr. Townsend also pointed out that “apples were another commodity shipped via the railroad facilities. Two large cold storages located here, the Holton and the Weagers, processed, sold and shipped many thousands of barrels of apples, plus many more that were fancy wrapped for export. Three dry houses also added to the busy fruit shipping business.”

In that same article Mr. Townsend said, “There wasn’t much else to do then but to go down to the depot and watch the trains come in. It was quite something to see the through trains such as the Black Diamond coming from New York, make a stop here to let off 30 or more passengers at a time to spend their vacations at Cayuga Lake’s famous resort hotels.” He told how there were six trains making regular stops in Interlaken (Farmer), plus about seven through trains that would stop on signal.<sup>2</sup>

In 1870 the Geneva and Ithaca Railroad company was incorporated to build the first railroad connecting these two cities. This line extended from Geneva, where it connected with the Auburn road of the New York Central, to Ithaca, where it formed a connection with the Ithaca and Athens branch railroad, which extended south to the Pennsylvania state line near Sayre. The railroad was opened for business in 1873. It was consolidated with the Ithaca and Athens railroad, the new corporation being known as the Geneva, Ithaca and Athens Railroad Company. The Ithaca and Athens railroad had opened for business in 1871.<sup>3</sup> It was quite a task to build the grade beds and bridges over the many ravines on the route. By mid-April of 1873, the laying of track began. On July 23, 1873, the first “testing” of the newly-constructed railroad bridge over Taughannock Creek took place when the “Geneva” engine of the Geneva and Ithaca Railroad Company and the “Big Six” engine of the Ithaca & Athens Railroad Company were run simultaneously on the bridge.<sup>4</sup>

The ceremony of completing the construction of this new railroad took place near the train station in Romulus on September 23, 1873. Invitations to about 1200 people were sent out. Local notables attending included Charles Titus, and Ezra Cornell. The actual driving of the ceremonial golden spike was to be done by prominent Romulus resident Robert Steele, the president of the railroad. As reported in *The Geneva Times*, “The seriousness of the occasion turned to humor when the president said ‘I now hold in my hand this golden spike,’ and at that he faltered before continuing, speaking to his son, ‘Richard, where is that spike?’ The spike was

ultimately located and the ceremony continued as planned.”<sup>5</sup> The golden spike was given to Ezra Cornell. Cheers arose from the crowd as they heard the whistles of the two trains approaching—one from Geneva and one from Ithaca.

The joy of this ceremony was short-lived. Just a day or two later, the Geneva and Ithaca Railroad got caught up in the nation-wide financial collapse called the Panic of 1873. Unable to pay outstanding bills, there was a bankruptcy sale. The Lehigh Valley Railroad Company bought the railroad line for \$50,000. Thus the railroad became the Lehigh Valley and was commonly known as the “Ithaca Branch.”<sup>6</sup>

The first schedule of the new line had become effective November 27, 1873. Two passenger trains each way daily were provided, the Express taking two hours five minutes for the journey from Ithaca to Geneva; the Accommodation three hours, stopping at “Pinckney, Ganoung, Taghanic, Trumansburg, Covert, Farmer, VanLiewes, Ovid, Hayt’s Corners, Romulus, and Geneva.”<sup>7</sup>

The railroad from Geneva to Ithaca was later extended to Sayre, Pa., ultimately becoming the Ithaca branch of the Lehigh Valley. For years it thrived, serving as the main artery for inbound shipments of farm machinery, furniture, lumber, fuel, food, and in fact, about every commodity of life, outbound shipments of grain, hay and grapes, and as an outlet for travel.<sup>8</sup>

About 1918 this railroad line reached its peak. It was in that year, under government operation, that the first passenger train, No. 1, a Sayre and Buffalo local, was withdrawn. Its business was incorporated with that of No. 19, an express train, but the latter due in Interlaken in early afternoon often arrived anywhere from 5 to 7 p.m. The express business was so great that its schedule could not be maintained with any regularity.

In the years following 1918, the decline in business has been gradual. The last of the through trains, No. 7 and No. 8, were discontinued in February 1961. In September of that year, a pick-up freight was the last to travel the whole route from Geneva Junction to Sayre.<sup>9</sup> Regular passenger train service on the local trains was ended on November 11, 1949. These trains had been running between Geneva and Sayre, PA, with one train leaving Geneva in the morning and returning in the late afternoon. The loss of milk business was probably responsible for this action.<sup>10</sup>

The demise of this railroad line didn’t leave a void, as cars and trucks had become the major means of land transportation. The *Interlaken Review* article of 1961 provided a fitting tribute to the end of the railroad: “The days of the Black Diamond, the fast express trains, the noisy little milk trains, the smoky steamers, with the exception of the powerful diesels, are at an end. And somehow—for all their noise—the smoke and the whistles that split the night, we are sorry to see them go. We shall remember and admire them for the tremendous tasks they performed and how they helped link village with city and east with west and of the good will they dispatched at every stop in between.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Romance of a Railroad,” *Interlaken Review*, 1961

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> “Tells History of Local Railroad Branch,” *The Ovid Gazette*, April 6, 1956.

<sup>4</sup> “Trumansburg Loses Last Railroad Passenger Train,” *Interlaken Review*, November 11, 1949,

<sup>5</sup> “90 Years Ago Today, Golden Spike Driven” *The Geneva Times*, September 23, 1963.

<sup>6</sup> “Tells History”

<sup>7</sup> “Trumansburg Loses”

<sup>8</sup> “90 Years Ago Today”

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>10</sup> “Trumansburg Loses”

<sup>11</sup> “Romance of a Railroad”