

NEARBY RAIL YARD OFFERED GLIMPSE OF HARD WORK, DESPAIR & TRAGEDY

07/20/99

As I returned from the daily mail run on Saturday, July 10, I was amazed by the number of vehicles and people at the train station in Thendara.

This, in spite of what was not a particularly pleasant day weather-wise, coupled with the relatively early start to the tourist season, and I began to realize the growing popularity of the rejuvenated Adirondack Railroad.

I grew up with the railroad in Phoenix, NY. We lived next to the New York Central line between Syracuse, Fulton and Oswego. It was an important economic base for our village and the necessary link for much of our employment.

It brought the raw material for our four paper mills and returned the finished products, along with produce from our local muck farms. It did the same for Fulton, home of the Sealright and Nestle. It brought much of the coal and coke that supplied the power for all three communities and the steam-generated electricity for the power station in Oswego.

In its heyday we boasted of two passenger and two freight trains a day. They passed near enough so that the dishes rattled in the cupboard as they lumbered by. Old timers in this area will recall the liquor shelves in the old Thendara Hotel being slanted to the back to prevent the bottles from being worked off the shelves.

The whistle of the 10:10 evening passenger train signaled the start of curfew for the Allen brothers. We were expected to be in the house by the time it faded in the distance.

The kids all got to know the people who kept the railroad running – the station agent, crewmen and stevedores who loaded and unloaded the cars. Some of my first realities of life were realized by my proximity and interaction to same. There were Knights of the Road (or hobos) in the Depression Era who presented a seamy side of life we had never known existed. If you were lucky, you might even be treated to a ride in the steam locomotive.

The railroad provided me with my first real taste of hard work and tragedy. The war was on and a buddy and I landed a job on the section gang. Throwing 400-pound

ties around in the hot sun caused us to reevaluate our situation and quit. The foreman would not give us a release and without it the Manpower Board would not assign us another job. We stuck it out, but were a lot smarter by the end of the summer.

Witnessing a crewman named Dolly Gray, who was a favorite with us kids, being dragged to his death on the crossing by our house was the tragedy. It fortified the admonishment every parent gave to their children about staying away from the tracks and from moving trains.

Just as an aside, I caught my own son and Mike Myers hitching rides on boxcar ladders while they were being shifted in the Thendara yard. I called Mike's parents and I sent him packing and I am sure he got what my son did when he got home.

My other experiences with the railroad involved travel for the military and that insured my continued preference for air travel. By the time I traveled from my home to Albany, thence from there to Fort Dix and Fort Knox and spent five days and nights from Syracuse to Camp Stoneman, I had all the train travel I wanted. Several sojourns on Japanese trains cinched it.

The railroad, like everything else, has come a long way since those days. I have had a few experiences since with the Adirondack Railroad and enjoyed every moment of them.

When I started this missive, I intended to relive them for you, but began to wander down memory lane a bit, ending up here. So, to borrow a line from the famous old Adirondack character – “to be continued...”