7-15-2011

Winesburg, Indiana: Walt "Helper" Voltz

Michael Martone

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/booth

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/booth/vol3/iss7/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Booth by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact omacisaa@butler.edu.
Winesburg, Indiana: Walt "Helper" Voltz

Abstract
You are looking at the proud owner of the shortest short line in the United States or really what you are looking at is the longest story about the shortest short line in the country.

Keywords
railroad, Indiana, small towns, abandonment

Cover Page Footnote
Note: "This story is exclusively available in the anthology, Winesburg, Indiana, published by Breakaway Books, an imprint of Indiana University Press, in the spring of 2015. Available wherever fine books are sold, borrowed, or used as dowry."

This article is available in Booth: http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/booth/vol3/iss7/3
Winesburg, Indiana: Walt “Helper” Voltz

by Michael Martone

You are looking at the proud owner of the shortest short line in the United States or really what you are looking at is the longest story about the shortest short line in the country.

Your eyes going back and forth over these lines like my engine shuttles back and forth on my siding. My railroad runs 5284 feet east to west, west to east. I have 150 pound flat-bottomed rail, and every morning I don my gandy dancer’s hard hat and walk the length of the property, checking the joint plates and lag bolts, the tie plates and spikes, the ties themselves with their date nails I have stamped and installed. The ballast is pristine ballast, crushed quartz (from the smallest quarry in the United States, a scooped-out glacial moraine banking up against the property) that sparkles in the Indiana sunlight. I switch the switches on either end of the line that connect me to the mainline of the Chicago, Fort Wayne and Eastern, nee the old Conrail, nee the older Pennsylvania, nee the older still Pittsburgh, Fort Wayne and Chicago. I check the switch points and the frogs. I maintain what’s left, hereabouts, of the telegraph too. I have a shed at each terminus of my line. I will send train orders from one depot to the
other, following the old rules of the old rule books, about train movements, labor practices, and traffic. I've been told I have a distinctive hand on the key. Dah dah, dit, dah dah dah.

My motive power? I roster 1 engine, a GP7 “Geep.” numbered “4.” Rolling stock? One boxcar serving my one customer, the Marcel Box Company. A hopper to haul my ballast. One mixed baggage and parlor car. And I have one crummy, a caboose you call it, or clown wagon, hack, waycar, dog house, go cart, glory wagon, monkey wagon, brain box, palace, buggy, van, cabin, or cab—a train of names naming that car. It’s a steeple type, the crummy, extended vision, with cupola and bay windows, which serves both as corporate headquarters and my home.

My livery’s a deep, deep-sea blue, almost black, and I apply my own spray paint graffiti at night so that during the day I can stay busy erasing the make-believe vandalism. Folks bumping over the crossing up the way can see me and imagine my diligence in maintaining the fleet. I walk the track, check for messages, and fire up the Geep for the daily run a mile up the track, a lay-over there for lunch, and, then, a reverse move back down the line.

The road is known as the Winesburg & Winesburg, reporting as WW, but the name’s not accurate. My right-of-way lies right outside the corporate limit of the namesake town, in a whole other town, named Helper. Helper, Indiana. Here is the story on that. In days gone by, the mighty Pennsylvania Railroad ran over 300 trains a day along this adjacent route, calling it the Broadway. Broadway because from Chicago to New York the road was, at least, four standard gauge tracks wide. That way, the streamlined passenger limiteds could coast along the inside rails while the heavy freights and locals jostled on the outside ones. Not a train idling, waiting for a meet or juggling an overtake. I was a boy then, and I remember the endless pulse of it. Numbered and named trains so long they broke them into sections that sped like dots and dashes on the wire, one after another separated, only by a minute or two, tail-end to head-end, as they clocked east, clocked west, the specials flying white flags at their smoke-boxes, the red lights beating a slow pulse beating it out of town. So many, the four tracks solid with riveted iron, quilted steel, pleated aluminum, varnished wood, a rapid rapid hustling east, shuffling west. All gone now. The road demoted to tertiary line. A unit train or two, toting Wyoming coal to a power plant power by from time to time and then roar
back the other way with the hoppers and gondolas all empty empty. Full of nothing now.

From here east to Fort Wayne there is a steady upward grade. Fort Wayne is known the Summit City after all, 765 feet above sea level, high point on the line. I started on the Pennsy firing the K-4s on that grade. The Pacifics were wholly underpowered to haul all the tonnage, so, often, the company double-headed or triple-headed a train. A little past Winesburg, you could feel the steam’s pressure bleed out the boiler, the smoke belched and bleached, the driving wheels slipping even as the engineer sanded and scolded me to lay on more coal. It was like that children’s book about the engine that would think, I think, I think I can, the huffing and the sliding in the cylinders, matching up with the beat of the repeating words. I think I can, I think I can, you know the one. But all the thinking in the world could not out-think the physics of centripetal force. I dropped right down out of the cab and left the engineer in the lurch, licking my backside with his cursing as he hove to and stoked his own firebox. I out walked the train into town. I think I can, I think I can, indeed.

It was back then that the Company, in its wisdom, built the little switch yard hereabouts and stocked it with a string of “helper” engines that coupled on the tail-ends of the stalling trains as they leaned into their climbs, and pushed them up the long grade to Fort Wayne, a steady acceleration, a long reach.

That was me in the cab of the Geep (the Geep, then, painted in Brunswick Green, the stenciled “Pennsylvania” in that buff yellow foil) running cab forward on the tail-end of a mixed freight drag out of Chicago, waving to the kids of Winesburg, who matched the trains slow pace with a sloppy jog or standing on the pedals of their Huffys, all the time yanking their arms up and down, a pantomime for me to toggle the horn switch which I did at the crossing, a tootle here and there, the smoke standing up from the vent of the exhaust as my little engine dug into the track, the slack, the brakes hissing and wheels slipping, just a little bit, the sun catching the glaze of the window on the cupola of the crummy just ahead and through the glare, I saw the red-bandanaed neck of the conductor there, sitting on his perch thinking through the manifest of all the cargo in the cars stretching out ahead in his head. Long drag freight moves like that contained most anything back then—automotive parts, sheet steel, appliances, tires, coiled wires, artificial flowers, rolls of newsprint, bolts of cloth, ingots, springs, tin...
toys, tee shirts, boiled ham, chlorine gas, pallets of lumber, screws, sawdust, sail canvas, fuses, ballast, turpentine, crates of light bulbs, live cattle, mattresses, bone meal, popcorn, potash, cans, drums, and boxcars and boxcars containing boxes and boxes of boxes. And more cars, deadheading empty, containing nothing, the hollow booming of the empty empty empty empty cars on the way to some far away siding, some yard, some depot someplace somewhere.

I would hitch a ride back the other way, back down the hill listing from Fort Wayne, attaching my idling locomotive to the tail-end of the west-bound mixed freight, the Geep’s pneumatic lines slaved to the big road engines’ dynamic brakes up front. I was a drag on the drag. Dead weight. Dead heading myself now as if an empty. Doing nothing. Taking in the view of corduroyed fields, the smudged wood lots, awkward windmills, the brittle barns and fermenting silos, the outbreaks of little Indiana towns—Larwil, Arcola, Atwood and Inwood, Log Cabin. My Geep’s job now to tap the forward momentum of the cascading tare and tonnage spilling down the slope. No runaways. The deadman switches all depressed. You know the deadman switch, yes? The metal pedal that needs to be tread on steady in order for the train to run. If the engineer falls asleep or, heaven forefend, keels over dead, that switch comes unengaged, the whole train sent into emergency, grinds and grinds to a dead stop. A precaution, that switch.

And there I was, a brake on the back end of all those trains now, nursing the weight of all of it with an easy drifting coasting, coast down into the pleasant seat of Winesburg, its orderly grid of streets queuing up into long strings of little neat boxes with the smoke from all those chimneys puffing like antique engines in a hostler’s yard.

The conductor, then, comes out onto the platform between his crummy and the Geep’s pilot, gives me a little wave as he springs the hoses free and knocks the knuckle coupler loose, scrambles up from his knees as the train pulls away barreling west. I am left behind. To drift. I skate into town. All inertia. All tendency. I’m powered down. The highballing train speeds off, the block signals tripping red, red, red in its wake.

I did this flying drop so many times, I had it all timed-out to perfection. I would run out of steam on a dime. My little engine, its bell ringing, slowing, slowed to a stop just shy of my turnout, stopped, stopping its
brakes all seized. I’d hop down, then, to throw my switch, then, clamber onboard to start her up and nudge the throttle just enough to ease the now panting engine home.

That’s my story, then. Back then. My story now is that daily routine I have already laid out. Each day, I move my little train from one end of the siding to the other. I push the empty boxcar to the loading dock of the box factory and set it out there, backing away back up the line, moving the remaining three-car consist back to the other end of the line. I will send a telegram or two to be picked up by myself on the other end of the line when I get back there. Mostly train orders and such. Then Burt will come over from the plant to tell me the car’s been loaded-up and locked, and I chuff down there to couple on and push the load to the far switch where in a day or two the road engine of the Chicago, Fort Wayne, and Eastern will pick it up. I leave it there and retreat up the line and go about my business until the empty boxcar returns. My business then is just moving the train back and forth on the 150 pound rails, making sure the rails don’t rust until I have to fetch the empty off the main line in a day or two and start the logistics up all over again.

So, will that do you? All your questions answered? Is that enough human interest, this old man and his little train? Train lines and railroads are abandoned every day now. Mile after mile. You see the rusting rails, the ties turning to dust, ballast washed away. A depressing depression where a grade once cut through a hillock. The right-of-ways, if they are lucky, get turned into hiking trails or bike paths, or banked until the day we might need the easement again to get us from where we are to where we need to go.

That? Oh, that? That siding siding off my siding? My own abandonment. That is the old necropolis branch. You can barely make it out. The ditch weed, the paw-paw and the sassafras saplings reclaiming it, disappearing in the undergrowth, the overhang, the general moss and vine. I should schedule a special maintenance-of-way train back into that slough and clear it out with Paraquat, pick-ax, and chainsaws. There was the time, when that branch was clear, I’d make a run or two down that line every day, bringing my cargo to its last off-loading. That branch meanders for a mile or two and then doubles back through Thoreau Park and the Waterworks to the platform, now decaying, at the Wine Dark Sea Cemetery and Crematoria.
Those were the days! The caskets, in state, on the catafalques I built myself, rested in the parlor of the parlor car, the mourners and the undertaker’s men from Jonesing Funereal Funerals arrayed in the upholstered banquets built-in beneath the big Venetian blinded windows. The mounds of flowers off-gassing that waxy scent of flowers on the edge of rot. The pace was slow through the woods, the glades, over the one through truss bridge, its girders painted lamp black, the color the Pennsy used to call “boxcar color.” I would wear my dress bib overalls of dark blue denim, a black plume in my engineer’s shako, and I wailed with the air horn, its harmonic bowling ricocheting off of the draping leaves of the weeping willows in Shaw’s weeping willow nursery, a dirge accompanied by the cottonwood and sycamore along the south fork of the Fork River. I blasted a blast of the horn as if the sound alone would keep the tracks cleared of creepy ever-creeping vegetation. I crept along, a mournful pace, the joints in the rail not click-clacking so much as the stuttered thumping of a muffled drum beat, punctuating the thrum of the Geeps prime mover that spewed ozone in the air, throwing off from the spinning magnets in its overheated core.

I pause today in the silence of my telegraph shack for that line to come alive again. Oh, to field orders from the Jonesing undertakers again, to decode that black framed message once more. A transshipment inbound, perishable goods to be expedited. That dah dah dah, dit dit dit, dah dah dah. But I could wait forever it seems. Bodies move through space by other means of transport now. More efficient for sure but less impressive, less illustrative. There is something about a locomotive moving through the landscape, something so big, even my little engine here, all that metal, that power, that sound, connected to earth through this tiny tangent, a kiss of steel on steel, no bigger than a dime.

That reminds me of the kids who still come down to my line and put the pennies on the rails to watch the change change before their eyes, the slugs turned into holy wafers by the slow rolling of this hulking shadow I pilot through time and space.

There is an uphill grade that leads to the terminus in the cemetery. It is steep. The manifest slows to a crawl. I think I can. I think I can. You remember. I remember firing the boilers on those old Pacifics. My helping all those freight trains down the line. I keep my foot pressed down on the deadman pedal on my Geep. The horn warbles and howls. The mourning
passengers, the ambulatory ones, dismount and latch on to the enameled handholds and bronze handrails on the outside of the midnight blue parlor car, lightening the load but also putting a few extra foot-pounds into the tractive effort of the train. I think I can. I think I can. I lean forward in the cab. Lean on the horn. The bell peals and reports. The platform hoves to. The whistle shrieks and sighs. I put all my weight on the deadman as if it is an accelerator and the race has just begun.

Michael Martone was born in Fort Wayne, Indiana, attending the public schools there. Graduating from Butler University in 1977, Martone has butled, in one form or another, his entire career with his domestic service beginning in the employ of the Eli Lilly family as a footman and then commencing to the rank of steward at the governor’s dacha on Geist Reservoir. Martone served as batman for the brevet lieutenant-colonel in command of the 42nd Royal Highland Regiment of Foot (The Black Watch) in the Falkland’s War, and currently is the Majordomo at the Carol Lombard House in Fort Wayne.