THE LIGONIER VALLEY RAIL ROAD AS IT TOUCHED THE LIFE OF LATROBE

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For more than a century railroads have played an important role in the history of Western Pennsylvania. A very interesting example of these railroads was the Ligonier Valley Rail Road. Built to meet a great need, it prospered and aided considerably in the development of Western Pennsylvania, and then hesitantly retired after it had served its purpose.

As this paper was written for the occasion of the Centennial celebration of Latrobe, it is concerned with only a part of the history of this colorful railroad. Attention is given only to general facts and to the men and events connected with the history of Latrobe. This is in no way meant to be disparaging to the estimable men and events chiefly connected with the history of Ligonier and the Ligonier Valley. The entire history of the railroad will be written later.

The Ligonier Valley Rail Road was very prominent in the life of Latrobe. Instituted at about the same time, the railroad's corporate existence persisted almost to the end of the first hundred years of the borough's history. By that time even liquidation could not stay the lasting benefits which the enterprising road had bestowed on the community of which it had been a vital part.

Like many other communities Latrobe and the Ligonier valley were affected by transportation from the first. However the early transportation influence was chiefly negative. The Old Trading Path that had been used by the Indians, trappers, and squatter settlers was abandoned on the top of Chestnut Ridge when Forbes' Military Road was cut through in 1758. The new road kept to the left towards the present Youngstown and on a more direct route toward the French fort of Duquesne. Thus Latrobe's present site was bi-passed.

Forbes' Road was followed, with a few deviations, by the Old State Road, authorized by an act of the Assembly on September 25, 1785; and later by the Pittsburgh and Philadelphia turnpike. The "Turn-

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pike” was authorized by the State in 1807 and completed in 1817. The Ligonier valley section of this toll road became known as the Greensburg-Stoyestown Turnpike, and had a very colorful part in the history of the valley.

The development of passenger and freight transportation by stagecoaches and wagons over the Turnpike aided materially in the development and prosperity of Youngstown, a little town often considered as the nucleus of Latrobe. Youngstown developed first and then spread to the present Latrobe area when the era of the stagecoach was superceded by that of the railroad.

When the Pennsylvania Railroad replaced the old Portage railroad, Latrobe received its initial impetus. The first train passed through Latrobe to Beatty on November 29, 1852, and on December 10th of that year a train ran the entire distance from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh. At that time transportation assumed a definitely positive influence on the new town.

As soon as the location of the Pennsylvania Railroad became a certainty, interested citizens of the Ligonier Valley and the Latrobe area began to think of a branch railroad from Latrobe to Ligonier. The resulting Ligonier Valley Rail Road was destined to become a tremendous factor in the development of the entire region.

In an article “Historic Ligonier and the Valley,” which appeared in the Ligonier Echo for April 23, 1913, John R. Oursler wrote that Col. John McFarland, after being elected state senator, had a charter granted for a branch railroad to Latrobe in 1853 and kept it alive until 1871 when an organization was effected to build the road. However this short statement covers considerable work, interest, and even heartache by quite a few people. Even after the organization was effected and actual work on the road had begun much was still left to be done.

The original act of incorporation was approved by the Assembly April 15, 1853. The company was named the Latrobe and Ligonier Rail Road Company with 13 of the prominent citizens as commissioners. A supplemental act of Assembly passed April 4, 1866, extended the time for completing the railroad, and added eight additional incorporators. Further supplemental acts extending the time limit were approved April 17, 1869 and March 15, 1871. Both the name and commissioners were changed May 2, 1871. The road at that time became the Ligonier
Valley Rail Road Company. The last act of Legislature relative to the railroad was on March 20, 1872, when extension of the road up Mill Creek and the right to make necessary branches was authorized.

The organization meeting of the Company was finally held April 29, 1871. William A. Baer was elected president and John A. Miller, secretary-treasurer. In subsequent meetings an effort was made to secure letters patent. The charter was finally granted by Gov. John W. Geary and bore the date of June 3, 1871. On June 26, 1871, the commissioners turned over the control of the corporation to the duly elected board of directors and their president, M. W. Dallas.

For the next five years interested citizens of the Latrobe-Ligonier region worked, sweat, and worried to get their railroad built. Continuous effort was exerted to secure additional subscriptions of stock and to collect those already subscribed. Rights-of-way were secured; various surveys were made; bids for grading were advertised for and contracts let for the grading and masonry. However throughout the country the "Panic of '73" hit and the Ligonier valley suffered with the rest. Consequently after most of the grading and the roadway were made ready for the superstructure, sufficient money was not available to continue and to satisfy outstanding obligations. On November 27, 1875, the road was officially taken over by John Guffey, sheriff of Westmoreland County, to satisfy court judgments. He in turn sold it to Henry D. Foster, congressman from the district to the 28th and the 42nd Congress, and also one of the early stock subscribers to the railroad.

Hope rose again in the valley when S. H. Baker, president of the company, reported January 10, 1876, that certain members of the board of directors had joined and repurchased the road. They offered it to the stockholders for what they had paid for it, but they were not reimbursed and remained the owners, still handicapped by the lack of adequate capital.

By this time in 1876, many far-seeing citizens had attempted to do what they could to advance the building of the railroad. But despite the earnest desire and the continuous effort of these eminent pioneers of early Latrobe and the Valley, the railroad was still incomplete and gave indication of becoming only a heart-breaking dream. Outside help was solicited but to no avail. Finally the Honorable Thomas Mellon of Pittsburgh was contacted. Although he was averse to such enterprises
at the time, the Judge finally accepted the strong inducements offered since his sons thought well of the undertaking.

On August 17, 1877, a contract was drawn up between the stockholders of the Ligonier Valley Rail Road and Thomas Mellon. The latter was to complete, stock, and operate the road. He was to keep an accurate record of all money spent; this was to be repaid to him. As an additional inducement Mellon was to have four-fifths of the capital stock. Work on the road was to start on or before the first day of October, 1877, and it was to be in running order within six months.

In addition to the original contract offered by the stockholders, evidence that the public spirited citizens of the Valley sincerely believed that the railroad was extremely important can be found in such contracts as that between P. A. Riggs and the Mellons. Riggs agreed to give the coal under five acres of land to the Mellons as soon as they would complete the railroad between Ligonier and Latrobe. Such agreements show that they were more interested in getting the road built than in retaining holdings in the enterprise. In his "Historic Ligonier and the Valley" John Oursler wrote that it was a happy day when the road was turned over to Judge Mellon & Sons.

The Honorable Judge and his capable sons did not disappoint those who had put trust in them. Presaging the congenial, co-operative attitude of all connected with the road in the future, practically the entire family of the Mellons pitched in to aid the work as soon as the contract was signed. While Thomas and nineteen year old Dick worked with the grading, bridging, and track laying, James secured contracts and materials, and Andrew handled the secretarial and financial records. As a result sixty days from the time that the first spike was driven the first train rolled out of Latrobe for Ligonier.

That was a great day for the Valley. The historic event was excitedly watched from the beginning at Latrobe to the ending at the as-yet unpainted station in Ligonier. All the company's rolling stock—an engine, one freight car, and one second hand passenger coach—composed the train. Inside the beautifully refurbished coach proudly rode Judge Mellon with his wife beside him. Thomas A. Mellon was a happy passenger. Probably the proudest of all was young Richard B. Mellon who acted as the first conductor. Charley Kuhns was the brakeman and Samuel L. French began his twenty years as engineer on that
December 1, 1877. A dream of twenty-five years had become a reality.

R. B. Mellon became extremely devoted to that budding influential railroad. No job was too small nor too difficult for him. In addition to being a conductor he at times loaded baggage, sold tickets, and operated the telegraph. He was general freight agent and manager. He became the moving force, even after others were doing the various jobs, that propelled the road into a place of great importance for all sections of the community that it served.

As the enterprise was both industriously and capably handled, and as the public eagerly availed themselves of its promising opportunities, the new company was soon well established. Passenger travel and freight shipments increased month by month. To the early shipments of lumber, bark, and pit posts, coal and stone were added. Branch lines were built to reach those natural resources, which could have been futile enterprises before the railroad was a reality.

By late 1882, it was felt that although the narrow-gauge railroad had answered every practical purpose up to that time that it was time, owing to the large increase of freight shipments, to change from the narrow to the standard gauge. This change was authorized on December 1, 1882, and promptly carried out.

During the next seventy years the Ligonier Valley Rail Road had an outstanding record. New branch lines and spurs aided the development of coal mines and various industries. Passengers were afforded safe, comfortable, and scenic transportation. It greatly aided the war effort of World War I. A total tonnage of over thirty million tons was shipped out over the road and over two million was brought in. Well over nine million passengers took advantage of its service. The railroad gave faithful and adequate service to a section of the country for which such service was a requisite for development and well-being.

However with the exhaustion of the coal region and the inroads made into the passenger business by buses and automobiles, the end of the railroad was inevitable. It had been begun with difficulty, rose high, served well, and died away even more hesitantly than it had risen. The era of the railroad was ended. Eventually the last day came. On August 31, 1952, with appropriate ceremonies the "last run" was made over the Ligonier Valley Rail Road. The old era was ended. A new era had begun.
Special attention must be given to the employees that made the exceptionnal record of this road possible. Beginning with those hired by the Mellon boys when the road was completed, to those on the payroll at the time of the abandonment, a type of employee was in evidence that could be relied on and so faithful and satisfied that most of them remained for the rest of their lives or until they retired. Such men from the early years as Samuel French, Tom Dunlap, and Charley Kuhns began a veritable parade of these trusted employees. Well known figures with the railroad such as R. D. Piper, Milton E. Geeting, Walter L. Dapper, and Joseph P. Gochnour, Jr., managed the last run.

Exemplifying one of the meritorious characteristics of a Mellon enterprise, "the right man for the right job," was the selections of general managers. The first of these, George Senft, joined the organization in 1881 as superintendent. From that time until his death in September, 1914, he devoted his life to building up the property and improving the business of the company. Due to the increase in the enterprise, he was given the title of general manager in 1898. His successor, W. V. Hyland, served capably in this position until 1927. In January of that year Joseph P. Gochnour, Jr., who had joined the organization in January, 1921, as an accountant, began his distinguished service as general manager which outlasted the railroad itself.

But before this sample chapter in the great saga of American railroading was closed, much had been accomplished. Great had been the benefits that could be attributed either directly or indirectly to this proud and independent railroad. Naturally Ligonier and the upper Ligonier valley received a great share of these benefits as the road presented an easy and acceptable outlet to the outside world. This made possible such things as the exploitation of the natural resources and gave life to the otherwise restricted community. Leading the activities that took advantage of the opportunities presented by the railroad were the various coal mines. Thousands of acres of coal were now accessible. Stone quarries, led by the large operation of Booth and Flynn, followed closely in the volume of freight traffic. Other products from the upper valley included lumber, farm products, fire clay, and bricks, and even ice. Thus with the help of the railroad, the community prospered and grew.
However the Latrobe area was also a great beneficiary. This means of transportation aided not only the growth of the borough but even the direction of growth was influenced as the new industries tended to locate along the line of the road. In the early years after Latrobe was incorporated and prior to the laying of the Ligonier Valley Rail Road, industries were small and rather centrally located. The Pennsylvania Car Works was established by Oliver J. Barnes in 1852 and later sold to S. H. & Reuben Baker. There were also three mills, two tanneries, and a shoe factory. Breweries developed, as did also brick yards. At about the same time that the railroad was coming to life, Mathias Saxman, a leader in enterprises who helped bring wealth and growth and prosperity to the town, began to develop the coal around Latrobe. He was very successful, and coal was a big part of Latrobe's industry until World War I, when steel took its place in importance. In 1870, James Peters established the Peter's Paper Company and operated it until the first World War.

The first steel company to take advantage of the new railroad was the Latrobe Steel Company, organized by Marriott C. Smythe in 1888. It was bought by the Railway Steel-Spring Company, in 1905, who in turn sold it to the present owners, the American Locomotive Company, in 1926. The Pearce Manufacturing Company, makers of blankets and other woolen products, moved to Latrobe in 1904, and have had continuous operation since then. The second large steel industry established along the Ligonier Valley Rail Road was the Latrobe Electric Steel Company, organized in 1913 by C. W. Guttzeit and Marcus W. Saxman, the father of the present president of the same name. This company is now called the Latrobe Steel Company. Vulcan Mold and Iron Company was established in the early twenties by Col. E. H. Williams, receiving its first charter on March 5, 1923. Other companies that have more recently sprung up along the line include Stupakoff Ceramic and Manufacturing Company, the Latrobe Construction Company, the Latrobe Foundry Machine and Supply Company, and finally at Kingston one of the plants of Kennametal, Inc.

These industries have provided steady employment to a great many citizens of the town and surrounding community, increasing both the wealth and the population, and thus have been a great asset in the growth of Latrobe. By serving these industries and aiding in their suc-
cess, the Ligonier Valley Rail Road therefore played a major part in the history of the community.

So well had this colorful vein of transportation become a part of the history and life of the community that even its liquidation as a company did not end its influence. The Latrobe end of the line that served the various businesses and industries, from Latrobe to Kingston, was sold to the Pennsylvania Railroad Company and its operation continued. The beautiful scenic section of right-of-way from Kingston to Longbridge is destined to become the westbound lane of the Lincoln Highway. Furthermore in addition to the material aspects of the organization, cultural, and esthetic attributes have been, and will continue to be, listed as achievements of this defunct company. One of the landmarks of Pennsylvania is Idlewild Park. Its origin dates back to the early 70's when Thomas Mellon realized its inherent possibilities. From that time to the present its natural beauty and facilities, enhanced from time to time by its beauty loving owners, have been used by countless thousands. Church meetings, reunions, community picnics, and group gatherings through the years have perpetuated the custom of making Idlewild Park the Mecca of worship and play. Rich in historic lore and unexcelled in virgin mountainous beauty this place has been preserved and is now a nostalgic example of the former natural beauty of the region. Modern recreational facilities have added to the overall value of Idlewild. Although begun and capably operated by the owners of the Ligonier Valley Rail Road, the Mellons were fortunate in 1931 in securing the able assistance of Mr. C. C. Macdonald to aid in the development of the park. Since then Mr. C. C. Macdonald, his wife, Grace, and their two sons, C. K. and Richard Z. Macdonald, have become the sole owners of the beautiful park. They have continued the early preservation and development of the section. They are attempting to improve on a place previously described as "a mountain park magnificent in scenery and unexcelled in its appointments." Indirectly, therefore, it remains a monument in the vicinity of both Latrobe and Ligonier to the Ligonier Valley Rail Road; and the statement made in 1881 is even more true today: "Anyone who has poetry in his soul or art in his eye, will find here at Idlewild, full scope for such indulgence."

The story of the Ligonier Valley Rail Road, although the road itself is no more, is therefore not an epic to feel sad about, but one on
which to look with pride. The railroad did what it was intended to do — plus. It contributed greatly to the establishment and growth of Latrobe, presented transportation facilities when they were needed, and added lasting benefits to the region such as conservation of nature and beauty and also the undescendable benefits derived from having such good friends and neighbors as the Mellons and the others associated with the railroad.

Of necessity brief, this little story of the Ligonier Valley Rail Road, as it is connected with the history of Latrobe, is very inadequate. The railroad is so inextricably connected with both the past and the future, though no longer in actual existence, that it is deserving of considerable treatment.