Reflections on the Western Maryland Railway

by Robert B. Hoover

As the Blacktop bends and winds through the hills, the railroad's bridges — deck-plate girder bridges painted black or a fading silver-gray — appear suddenly, come at you, and then loom overhead at angles as you pass on the road below. Big white "speed-lettering" on the bridges announce WESTERN MARYLAND RAILWAY. Then they angle away once more, crossing the line of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, rivers, and entire valleys. There is no mistaking that this railroad had purpose, and its viaduct looms even larger than life, dominating the lush gold and green fall in the Casselman River Valley, which stretches out all around me; husky, faded green-painted steel girders stride across the valley; then at the end of the bridge, far off from the line of sight: a cut in the hillside. Standing on the eastern edge of what was once the railroad's Salisbury Viaduct near Meyersdale in south-central Pennsylvania, I stand atop a giant monument to the past.

There will be no trains running on this bridge today, or any other day, or ever again. In a few years, bicyclists and joggers and hikers will partake of the remote and wild views of the Casselman and Youghiogheny valleys previously enjoyed only by trainmen and trespassers like me. For the last 12 years, Robert B. Hoover is a paralegal with Strassburger McKenna Gutnick & Potter. He grew up in Zelienople and has been interested in railroads ever since.
after a chance encounter on an abandoned trestle outside of Connellsville, in Fayette County, Pa., I have slowly, thoughtfully, and always just a little too late, pursued the ghost of the Western Maryland. Poring over books, staring at videotapes, and hiking to remote, abandoned tunnels, bridges, stations, shops, and famous photo locations, I have acquired over time respect for a railroad that I never saw in actual operation. Other than the preservation work of museums and rail history groups, in books, or through re-creations presented by tourism boards, evidence of the railway’s existence comes almost totally from those who lived it.

My first-hand experience is limited to twice glimpsing the last active diesel engine in WM paint, spotting a few freight cars wearing the WM logo or paint scheme, and once tripping over a fallen signal tower. But standing by the right-of-way, or even looking through picture books, I am convinced that there could never have been a better mid-sized railroad.

In January 1996, I finally joined the Western Maryland Railway Historical Society. Among other things, the society publishes a quarterly magazine filled with letters, maps, photos, and reminiscences. It also contains articles written by WM employees which describe or explain various operations, construction details, locations, and railroading practices once employed by the WM. I read each issue carefully. I attended my first WMRHS annual convention; I finally got to see not ghosts but real live people.

In a conference room at a suburban Holiday Inn in West Chester, Pa., the conventioneers seem to be either former employees, their children, or contemporary admirers of the WM. The median age appears to be about 50. Almost entirely male, they wear steel-rimmed glasses, denim jeans with belts, sport hats, and crew-cuts. Many have wallets held in their back pockets by chains attached to belt loops — the kind you usually see on some motorcyclists and truck drivers. And all the people have those jackets, those great shiny black jackets with the big gold “WM,” or the red and yellow fireball “Fast Freight Line” logos on the back. The older men are treated with great deference, and have their wives with them. Once, at the Hagerstown Roundhouse Museum in Maryland, I recall seeing old black-and-white photos of Christmas parties, Fourth of July celebrations, railroad glee clubs, special parties — smiling children and mothers all over the place — taken at the roundhouse or in the back shop, locations that would cause insurance-sensitive executives today to blanch. Now, at the convention, I suddenly understand what it means that this railroad was a tight-knit, family-like operation.

There is just one other who resembles my appearance, but he has been coming to these conventions for several years and is well-known to the others. A few stares come my way. Pulling my WM hat down lower, I muster the courage to introduce myself to a few of the younger men. They are children of former employees. One man’s father was an engineer who supplied some of the film footage for a video I recently bought. The other is in some of the footage, as a small child, riding the scale steam train at the company’s Pen-Mar amusement park in the summer of 1940. His father was the photographer; another WM engineer on leave from the railroad was operating the miniature steam locomotive seen in my video. I talk quietly, asking them questions about certain things I saw on the video, and fill them in on the status of the Rails-to-Trails project in Somerset County. (Running from Cumberland to Connellsville and completed in 1912, the “Connellsville extension” is still referred to by the conventioneers as “the new line.”) The slide presentations begin.

The first presentation includes slides of some of the steam-powered excursions run on the WM in the early 1970s. I stare intently at the screen, seeing again what I missed. The other men in the room break into debating the particulars of each image. From their memories of work, and from daily experience and observation, these men possess something that I can never obtain in all my study and exploration: the men have a “feel” for the lived past, brought to the present. Often details hint at, document, how the mind sees all at once everything to be remembered — entire scenes impossible to fully re-tell.

“No, that’s 2101. The 2102 burned up in the fire the year before.”

“Cross-compound pumps are mounted higher up on this one.”

“No, this GP-7...” (“Jeep” 7, not “Gee-Pee” 7 — the way I have been saying it all these years.)

Someone sternly interrupts, “No, that’s a GP-9! Look at the compressors, still roof-mounted in the Phase 1 model!”

“No dynamic braking fins!” someone else calls out.

I just sit there and let it soak in, basking in the warmth of human company. A slide comes up showing the American Freedom Train — magnificent, wreathed in steam, pounding upgrade, frozen in time crossing a bridge. My mouth drops open and my eyes start to tear. I am stunned by the sight of the Southern Pacific locomotive, but the conventioneers instead fall into an animated discussion about its complicated equipment moves, and then about the bridge itself.

“Number 94 bridge?” someone calls out.

“No, that’s outside of _____.town”; or, say several others, “_____.town.” (I’ve never heard of any of the places; that they ended in “-town” is all I recall.)

“What about _____.town?” a chorus rings out.

Shortly, they reach a satisfied consensus that it’s the bridge over Highway 550 outside of Sabillasville, Md. And on it goes. The following evening includes a slide presentation on the intricacies of cement switching operations at Union Bridge in the mid-’70s, followed by a retrospective on the last five conventions given by the other young man attending this one.

The following day’s excursion provides a similar experience. Running between West Chester and Wilmington, Del., the Brandywine Scenic Railway had borrowed two diesel locomotives owned by two other rail history groups, and the chance to witness the diesels in action was a major factor in my attendance. The morning sun just drops so smoothly onto the handsomey...
The power of freight locomotives was awesome. Here a freight pushes a caboose to help another freight carry its load at Helmstetters Curve, Md., 1950.
The mark of a good railroad was one that stayed on schedule. This eastbound train picks up orders on the fly as it passes through Maryland Junction, W.Va., June 1954.
restored 1954 Reading FP-7s, dazzling in their gloss black paint with green and gold markings. I rush back and forth, unsuccess-fully straining for just the right angle for a portrait photograph. The knot of men in front of the lead engine breaks into a discus-sion about the relative drawbar performance of these anthracite haulers versus the WM’s own F-3s and F-7s, hauling bituminous out of deep West Virginia, over the summit past Spruce (only the highest mainline in the East! they say) and Blackwater Canyon’s Black Fork Grade. I sheepishly shake my head. I have nothing to say about drawbar performance. Black Fork was so remote that there were very few pictures ever taken there; it has been abandoned since 1983. Had I only known sooner…. The men rattle off performance data as though they had just climbed down out of their locomotive cabs.

During one of the slide presentations the night before, a slide came up and in it I saw George Leilich. A button-down graduate of Yale University’s transportation school, he had gone on to become WM’s vice president of operations and an instrumental part of WM’s success. He was a strong supporter of the historical society and also a deep-down rail enthusiast, once found running one of WM’s hottest freight locomotives, the Nickel Plate 765, well over the speed limit on the “property” (a railroad term for equipment and track). Several years ago on the return trip of an excursion on a steam-powered logging line deep in the eastern mountains of West Virginia, I sat next to some men wearing WM hats. Before the last “photo run-by” of the day, we fell to talking. The smiling, gray-haired older man whom they had been sitting with had gotten off the train to take part in the run-by, and his companions asked me, “Do you know who that man is? That’s George Leilich. He used to be in charge of all WM operations!”

The run-by was set up at a bend, on a bridge crossing a deep, blue stream. The train dropped off everybody wanting photograph- photographs at an agreed-upon “photo line,” and began backing up, to run by the line for the cameras. Some of the shutterbugs, including George Leilich, however, weren’t satisfied with their positions, and crossed to the other side of the bridge, quite a ways up the track. The train came by, smoking it up, and by the time the engineer got the brakes on and the engine stopped around the bend, the group that had crossed the tracks for the vantage point up the line was now way back up the line.

We could see George running after us on the track and grinning at the foolishness of his situation. When he got to the bridge, he hesitated, then went down and jumped into the water, snapped off a few shots, and thrashed across the stream, waist deep, cutting across the bend and emerging marginally closer to us. After much shouting, the engineer realized what had hap-pened and reversed the train a little. When he got back on board, having crawled up the stream embankment, George Leilich had an air of importance greater in my eyes than anything else that day. He told everyone that he did manage to get some good shots of the train from his cold-water location.

I wished I’d talked to him then, while he was soaked and human and laughing at himself. I could have spent the whole three-hour descent talking to him. Next time, I vowed, I would be better prepared. He died before I had my chance. But what a fine memory to have of a railway’s vice president.

George, as part of WM’s management, had taken part in the railway’s decision to merge with its competitor, the Baltimore & Ohio. About a year ago, just before I saw the news of his death, I came across the preface he had written to a WM book that had just been reissued.1 His preface was a fond but clear-headed account of the fortunes of the railway and its demise as an independent entity. During the early days of my exploration of WM, I often wondered why the railway didn’t survive — why I couldn’t see it running for real instead of only in my imagination.

By the time I had discovered the Western Maryland, eight years had passed since the last train departed Connellsville and the tracks were removed. The employees and rail fans I meet always seem saddened by the loss, and there is still some bitterness towards the B&O and the dismemberment of “Wild Mary.” Standing by empty rights-of-way in deserted countryside, I had to start learning about WM from scratch.

Far from home and too shy anyway to talk to people like those attending the convention, I accumulated the knowledge and memory of others with every book I purchased. WM, after a 50-year struggle to get from Baltimore to Cumberland, was in 1902 suddenly caught up in railway baron George Gould’s final attempt at fulfilling his dream of creating a truly transcontinental railroad system. Collapsing into bankruptcy two years later, the Gould system fell into separate pieces, leaving the WM in receivership. Emerging from bankruptcy, it belatedly flung itself west from Cumberland, and by 1912, having the lowest grade crossing of the Alleghenies, became an important link between the Eastern Seaboard, Pittsburgh, and the Middle West.2 After the end of World War I mandated control by the U.S. Railroad Administration and years of struggle to avoid takeover by other railways, WM gained its independence. But this was achieved only through a 1932 Interstate Commerce Commission order placing into a non-voting trust the 43 percent share of the WM owned by the B&O.3 After World War II, the WM burst into full flower, becoming one of the best-run railroads in the nation. An innovative, disciplined, and fierce competitor, the railway’s strength was manifested in its people and physical plant.

WM’s direct competitor and part-owner, the much larger Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, had seen its financial condition steadily deteriorate after World War II. By the early 1960s, the B&O was broke and merged into a prosperous southerly neighbor, the Chesapeake & Ohio Railway (which had acquired, as well, 21 percent of WM’s stock).4 In 1964, B&O and C&O filed a joint request with the Interstate Commerce Commission to set aside the terms of the 1932 non-voting trust.5 The request was approved three years later.6 In my early suppositions and imaginations about the fate of the WM, I pictured the new WM board, its majority made up of B&O and C&O directors, in a darkened, smoke-filled

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room, voting to “merge” with B&O/C&O. Then in 1975, the last trains ran over the once-great line, and their traffic was moved to the B&O. WM’s rails were quickly ripped up, and today rusting bridges, crumbling tunnels, and weed-filled ballast are all that remain, along with the sadness and memories of its loyal employees and fans.

But as I gathered more information, the storyline that had I developed gradually evolved. To the management of the B&O, the freight traffic carried on the parallel and competing WM, once just a grudge held since the Gould days, had become a precious loss it could little afford. To the management of the WM, by the mid-’60s, it was losing important freight business to trucks and the St. Lawrence Seaway, and was hurt by changes in its traffic base and declining coal traffic. As a “bridge” line linking traffic on other railroads, WM also was hurt by the changes in freight car accounting charges and by the steady demise of the rail companies which were its eastern connections. Operating expenses in the ’50s and ’60s had increased faster than revenues. Long-term survival as an independent seemed unlikely. By merging, both railways could reap the economies of scale that could help them survive.

When B&O/C&O sought termination of the 1932 federal order, WM supported the move. After approval of the merger, plans were drawn up to gradually coordinate the roads’ operations. Following the re-routing of freight caused by the 1968 Penn Central merger and the deteriorating condition of the connecting roads with which WM still shared traffic, WM traffic levels dropped further still. During 1975 and 1976, operations over WM mainlines west of Hagerstown ceased, and although the excess capacity of B&O and WM was eliminated, all WM

Above: The Western Maryland joined with the B&O Railroad’s Somerset line at Rockwood, Pa. Junction operator C. A. Minder minds the station, c. 1930. Left: March 1952, on the Salisbury Viaduct, a once-important route for the railroad.
employees received comparable jobs and the seniority they had earned. Today, the roads which connected with the WM are abandoned, or are parts of the two other mega-railroads in the East which do not need a bridge line connection. The coal fields from which WM derived so much traffic are largely empty and silent. No matter how efficient it was, the railroad could not have survived on its own. Merger was the best long-term choice for stockholders and employees. So, the WM vanished. I wish so hard that it hadn’t, and I’m sure it will be a primary topic at my next meeting with fellow conventioneers.

Walking on a rail-less viaduct east of Meyersdale — this one the Keystone Viaduct — the wind blows against my jacket as I mull over the remains of what brought me to the area in the first place many years ago: the mysteries of the majestic upper Potomac; the ruggedness of the Alleghenies; the sunny broad plateaus and valleys of Somerset County; and the beauty of the Casselman and Youghiogheny valleys. My interest originally was the B&O line and its history. (And, for the time being, there are still lots of trains on the B&O line going through the region.) But, as I learned from conventioneers devoted to the Western Maryland line, the past is for some the living past, the past of memory and experience; in the case of my fellow conventioneers, the past was perhaps among the best parts of their lives. Having had that experience, I realize I am part of the first generation to experience the railway as the unlived past.

Walking on the viaduct, an ATV driven by a boy of perhaps
Western Maryland Railway

This 1916 view of Cumberland, Md., shows just how integral the railroad was to the city's economic growth.
12 or 13 growls past. He waves and then thumps onto the bridge — thump, thump, thump, tie after tie, fading into the distance. I see in my mind’s eye the modern red, black, and white GP-40s, the Alpha-Jets, the fireball fast freights, and imagine the smartly shopped Challengers, Potomacs, and Decapods. But I wonder what the boy knows about the viaduct. Is it for him just a convenient route across the valley? I am left without answers to whether the empty bridges, the lines of ballast, the water-filled tunnels hold any significance for those without some knowledge of their past use.

My own long-distance relationship to the Western Maryland is just a small part of a much larger, long-term personal dialog: what is my, and our society’s, relationship with the past, or, said another way, what is the past’s present meaning? The convention brought me back to the question of whether the past gets its currency just from books and photographs and oral histories. The experiences and shared everyday life of the past, relived and recounted, lend real human substance to what is otherwise record-keeping. When I visited Washington’s Crossing, Gettysburg, the Bloody Angle, Chancellorsville, the Vietnam War Memorial, saw the AIDS quilt, I wondered each time what meaning these things had for those who come after the events. I doubt that a place can have genuine meaning simply standing on its own, without context. As the tangible evidence of the past fades over time, what is left behind? Standing alone, a railroad viaduct is a rusting human contrivance hulking across a valley.

In a way, the men at the convention possessed the past: through them, it is still alive, and the convention is a convening place for past and present. They make my visits to the countryside all the more poignant, for since I have been on the old line with them and studied the railroad’s history, I too am a link. I have at least filled in the space of not knowing with knowing.

I have the further consolation of knowing much of the railroad’s right-of-way will not be lost to nature, that it will become a hiking/biking trail running all the way to Cumberland from Connellsville. Already, east of Cumberland along the Potomac, the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal towpath has been preserved and restored. (It was doomed in the 19th century by its more efficient B&O and WM competitors, and finished off by the 1924 flood of the Potomac.) Highlighted by the three quarter-mile-long restored Paw Paw Tunnel (built by hand over a 10-year period beginning in 1840), the C&O Canal is complete with a visitor’s center (in the WM’s former Cumberland Station), maps, interpretive signs, and museums along its entire path to
Top: A common sight to earlier generations was a locomotive like this one traveling the rails in the Indian Creek area, 1913. Above: Modern-day visitors to the Western Maryland Railroad will find only abandonment and blocked passages such as the Welton Tunnel West Portal.

Georgetown, Md. The canal offers a clear contrast to the nearby but inaccessible WM Cumberland Extension, running from Cumberland through the wild Potomac Valley towards Big Pool and Hancock, Md. Although perhaps ideal for excursion trains with its remote views, pioneering bridges, tunnels, and fills, the Cumberland Extension has faded fast in 20 years, and will someday vanish and exist only in books like the ones on my shelves. As they travel the right-of-way, my hope is that cyclists and backpackers will wonder, as I do, about the great bridges passing over them.

Notes
1 Robert Cook and Karl Zimmerman, The Western Maryland Railway: Fireballs and Black Diamonds, 2nd ed. (Laury’s Station, Pa., 1992), ix-xi.
2 Ibid., 49.
3 This paragraph: Cook, Zimmerman, 44-51; Ross B. Grenard and John Krause, Steam in the Alleghenies: Western Maryland (Rockville Centre, N.Y., no date), 5; David R. Sweetland, Western Maryland: In Color (Edison, N.J., 1995), 3.
5 Cook, Zimmerman, 52; Grenard, Krause, 5.
6 Sweetland, 69.
7 A book about the parallel B&O line contains this photo caption: "We have already nominated the WM Connellsville Extension as one of the most unnecessary railroads ever built, and, as we gaze at their Salisbury Viaduct ... we suspect that it was also one of the most expensive." Charles S. Roberts, Sand Patch: Clash of Titans (Baltimore, 1993), 94; nomination made in photo caption on p. 88.
8 This paragraph: Cook, Zimmerman, xi, 52, 281-291; Salamon, Hopkins, 4; Sweetland, 69.
9 Cook, Zimmerman, xi.