On the Right Track?
A Photo Mystery

For the past half-century, the image at right has been identified as the first locomotive to cross the Allegheny Mountains. It’s said to show the train’s arrival in East Liberty, on Pittsburgh’s East End, December 1852.

Jim Richard, a history buff from Wilkinsburg, was leafing through the History Center’s Points In Time book when he realized the photo looked like one in the archives of the Wilkinsburg Historical Society, where he was previously president. Jim checked, and indeed, it’s not only the same but Wilkinsburg’s photo is an original print. However, at the bottom, it’s captioned differently:

View of Group of Excursionists on the West Pa. R. Road at Natrona Oct 20th 1866.


[in different hand] Picture belonged to Miss Becky Kelly, daughter of Mr. James Kelly, founder of Wilkinsburg. (Mr. Kelly in Picture?)

Also written is “Photograph by CARGO.”

The photo from Points In Time is in the History Center’s archives; it’s captioned “First Train over The Pennsylvania Railroad at East Liberty’ (enlargement).” That would be believable but there is more: “copy of original given by Mrs Hilliard to PRR and subsequently lost” and “photo probably taken Nov., 1851.” The photo was donated in 1935—considering the eight-decade difference, the missing original, and the 1851/1852 discrepancy, the 1866 caption becomes more plausible—but is it correct?

A 1949 history of the Pennsylvania Railroad recounts the rails progressing westward to Pittsburgh from 1850 – 51, and the opening of a line across the state at the end of 1852. But others place that as late as 1854, so I asked railroad researcher Ken Kobus:

The 1866 date at Natrona fits with the completion of the Western Pennsylvania RR (later Conemaugh Div. PRR) which was 1866. The railroad was completed from Freeport to Pittsburgh that year. However, saying all of that, there is one thing that bothers me about the photo, there are two tracks and not one. These “first” roads weren’t double tracked when built as far as I know.

So I checked with my brother Kevin, who knows a little about locomotives:

It is almost impossible to tell precisely what kind of engine it is without seeing it from the side. Number of wheels, valve gear, etc. would be visible. But I found a picture in a book that shows a Rogers engine built in 1865 that looks very similar. Most prominent features are the spark arrester (wide bulge on the smokestack) and the headlight. Same steam domes, too (bumps on top of the boiler behind the stack). But that still doesn’t really date your picture with any accuracy — some engines like that were made starting about 1845.

So we’re no farther ahead.

Meanwhile, Jim Richard checked with Thomas M. Weprich, whose thesis on early photographers in Pittsburgh includes information on Robert M. Cargo, a popular and successful photographer in Pittsburgh and Allegheny City from 1851–1874. Weprich said the newly discovered photo is authentic and likely captioned correctly:

In 1866, Cargo had studios at 70 Federal and 81 Federal, Allegheny, as well as at 69 Fifth Street, in Pittsburgh. In addition he operated a “Photo Stock Depot” at 37 Fifth Street. Cargo may have had connections to the railroad officials, and he may have been commissioned to take the shot. Or he may have been asked because he was among the best photographers in either city. Then again, he may have sensed an opportunity to document some local history. Regardless, I am not surprised to see that the Cargo Studio took the photograph.

If the photograph had been taken in 1852, it would have been most definitely a daguerreotype, because no professionals in Pittsburgh or Allegheny were using the paper process. I know of one amateur (B.M. Brackenridge from Tarentum) who may have experimented with paper that early. I do not believe the photograph in question is a copy of an earlier image.

Weprich also checked local papers between 1851 and 1853 and found no reference to photos being taken during celebrations regarding trains.

So the photo is likely from 1866, but unearthing a news clipping about the event would bolster the argument. Like so many bits of history, we’re sure of the facts ... until better facts come along.
This photo by Robert M. Cargo once thought to be of East Liberty in 1852, was most likely taken in 1866 and at a different location. Wilkinsburg Historical Society.