

# **“THE GLORY OF WHITE RIVER JUNCTION”**

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I remember visiting the station platform at White River Junction in the spring of 1940. I was small then, but the memory has grown with the years. It was a real junction in those days, with steam freight and passenger trains coming in and leaving from every direction, north to Woodsville, west to Montreal, and south to New York. There were times during the day when two or three passenger trains would be in the station at once, and as soon as they left, a heavy freight would clomp by, and then the heavy eight wheeled switch engine would keep the hills and valleys reverberating with the rise and fall of its powerful exhaust sounds. There was plenty of smoke around, but railroading was the lifeblood of the community, and since railroad men lived to the ripest of old ages, no one could possibly associate smoke with shortness of life.

Those broad, dull, sunbaked expanses of cement super highways hadn't slashed through the woods and fields in 1940, and DC-3 plane travel out of the White River Junction Fairgrounds carried its own set of hazards. In a word, people took the trains, and the trains were there for them to take. The chief railroad in White River Junction as the Boston and Maine, but bear in mind that much of its equipment dated to prior to World War I. Imagine driving a 30 year old automobile or airplane at the same speeds permitted when factory-new. Yet the old Moguls, Pacifics and Consolidations huffed and puffed along over hill and dale, running on time more often than not despite blizzards, rainsqualls, frost heaves and other torments of the rugged northern climate.

The place to stand, of course, was close to where the line from Boston crossed the Connecticut River line. From there one could spot train movements in every direction, with the bonus of keeping tabs on locomotive operations all day and night, but certain times were more exciting than others, for instance between 2 and 3 P.M. when the east and west bound “Ambassadors” rolled through town. The Ambassador No. 332 bound for Boston would leave Montreal at 9:10 A.M., reaching WRJ about 2 P.M. With luck, a traveler could catch southbound train 74 for Bellows Falls and Brattleboro. Stopping only a minute or two to change engines, the Ambassador would accelerate across the river bridge, stampeding uphill through Lebanon towards Boston, which it would reach at 5:30 P.M. Often there would be a cleanlined B&M P-3 Pacific on the headend. The train was a reserved seat affair, and carried a buffet-lounge car. The two Ambassadors passed at Canaan, and if on time, the westbound would squeal into WRJ at 3 P.M.

Service north was limited to two passenger roundtrips daily. There was a morning mail, express and general accommodation train that whistled out of WRJ at the unholy hour of 6:25 A.M. It stopped at all local villages and at 7:47 stamped into Woodsville, another of those wonderful northern New England junction towns that came alive at certain hours of the day when the “big” trains roared up for an engine change of a tank full of water. This same 6:25 train wound up mid-morning at Berlin, New Hampshire, a town then so impossibly remote as to defy access

by any other route but the train. But the important train at Woodsville was the “Alouette”, a Canadian Pacific high-stepper that came with a brightly-painted small Pacific and on the tail end a magnificent Canadian Pacific broiler-buffet car with a brass open observation platform.

Back at White River Junction, 300-class Boston & Maine 2-10-2 “Mudhens” lumbered up and down with anywhere from 20 to 100 cars, doing local and mainline work without caring greatly which. Modern 4100-class Mountain 4-8-2s came in to do the fast freights, with an occasional 4000-class Berkshire 2-8-4. 3600-class Pacifics worked most of the ordinary passenger trains. The Central Vermont used massive 2-10-4 railpounding monsters, supplemented by 2-8-0 Consolidation types, for freight. There was a variety of passenger power, ranging from ten-wheel 4-6-0 types through Pacifics and Mountains. Then as now, Canadian National and Grand Trunk power circulated freely. On the River line north, bridge restrictions necessitated the use of medium-heavy B&M Consolidations and Canadian Pacific ten-wheel types, often double and even-triple-headed south of Newport, VT.

On a typical weekday, there would be six passenger trains bound for New York (and two or three extra trains in summer), four for Boston, two for Woodsville, and three for Montreal. There was a story that Edward S. French, the B&M president who hailed from Springfield, VT, provided an extra excuse for good service, but people then were travelling by train. Remember too that most of the passenger trains carried milk, mail, newspapers, express, perishables and all manner of fast freight that rumbles night and day over public highways today. There were night sleeper and milk jobs that would head out of town with two big Pacifics and 14 or 15 cars regularly.

Train No. 77, which originated in New York at 8 A.M. daily except Sunday, was called “The Dartmouth”. It carried the unusual mixture of New Haven and B&M coaches, a parlor-broiler-buffet car winters and a full length diner in summertime. If “The Dartmouth” was on time, it required seven hours for the trip, but this involved engine changes at New Haven and Springfield, plus stopping to offload mail at any settlement busier than a cowpasture. In fifty years, the B&M had made little improvement in road time, preferring plenty of slack in the schedule considering the hazards of floods, snow drifts, time lost at meets and so on.

The “Washingtonian” and “Montrealer” were Queens of the Fleet on the River line, and it was almost worth staying up all night to see them roar in and out of a station such as White River Junction. The train carried sleeping cars from Montreal to Washington and New York, and St. Albans to New York. There were deluxe coaches and also a lounge car. The train carried the reputation as quite a ballast scorcher, and the fact that it ran at ghostly hours of the night merely added to the magic. It left Montreal at 9 P.M. sharp, making stops at only the larger towns en route, arriving at WRJ at 1:38 A.M. Inevitably there would be some fast-paced switching, adding a car of express or mail, and a lightning change of motive power. Sometimes it would be a great greyhound such as the 6039, a modern Mountain-type 4-8-2 with Boxspok drivers, lightweight rods, and roller bearings throughout (you can see 6039 at Steamtown today, and someday she will run again). The B&M engine might be one of the giant P-4 Pacifics, such as the 3713, which you can see today at the Boston Museum of Science. Below Springfield, MA, the New Haven would tack on one of their speedsters, possibly the 1376, which often drew the Washingtonian about this time. At New Haven, the high-drivered Pacific would chug away smartly, to be replaced by one

of the New Haven electrics for a quick run to pace the commuter rush into New York, arriving generally on time at Penn Station just before 8 A.M. Minutes later, the train would hum effortlessly out of Penn Station and through the Hudson tubes behind a Pennsylvania Railroad GG-1, and you would watch the scenery flash by at 90 miles per hour from the safety and comfort of a PRR diner. At noon, you would be in Washington.

Exciting? Practical? Effortless? Yes, the train trip was all of these things, but remember that we are talking here of an era 30 while years ago. In the intervening years, more has happened technologically than in all history beforehand, but today, the railroad industry faces a fearful future. It can continue to run downhill, forced into oblivion by unequal regulation and the strangling of trade union and motor lobby groups. Or, it can revive under equal treatment, become profitable, rebuild its track and equipment, and restore service on the basis of contemporary demands for comfort, convenience, and availability.

With an amount of money comparable to what the Department of Defense spends in a matter of minutes, the New York to Washington mainline has been improved, and a fleet of Metroliners installed. The result is a reduction of time from four hours and 40 minutes to an even three hours, and this could be improved with better track. From White River Junction to Montreal in three hours, Boston in two and New York in less than five hours could be done. But it would have to be achieved through up-to-date thinking, and not with the oxcart rules and regulations hampering today's vanishing American railroads.

*Edgar T. Mead (1923-2001) was a railroad advocate, Wall Street businessman and one of the premier railroad historians of the Connecticut River Valley. He authored 14 books, among them "The Woodstock Railroad", "Over the Hills to Woodstock", "The Claremont & Concord Railroad", "The Upcountry Line: Boston, Concord & Montreal Railroad", and "Busted and Still Running: The Famous Two-Foot Gauge Railroad of Bridgton, ME".*