

Westland Branch Redux: A Story 25 Years in the Making

By Bob Ciminel - Montour Railroad Historical Society

In the tear-it-down, throw-it-away society we live in today, many of us who witnessed the restructuring, downsizing and abandonments that Pittsburgh area railroads have undergone over the past 30 years never imagined that the former Westland Branch of the Montour Railroad could rise phoenix-like from the ashes and become an operating railroad again. At best, we thought the old roadbed between Gilmore Junction and Westland, PA, might make a nice addition to the Montour Trail. The Trail is all that remains of our "Old Friend," thanks to the "rails-to-trails" initiative. Most of us, however, overlooked one thing that could figuratively raise the dead: When there is money to be made, anything is possible.

That "one thing" was a nondescript outcropping of shale 400 miles from Westland near the town of Marcellus, New York.

The MarkWest Liberty Midstream & Resources, L.L.C. cryogenic processing plant on Route 519 near Houston, PA needs the former Westland Branch to allow rail shipment of large amounts of propane the plant will produce as it increases processing the natural gas extracted from the Marcellus Shale in Washington County to 270 million cubic feet per day.

The plans for the new Westland Branch were revealed in December 2010. As I write this article, crews working eastward from Westland have already begun clearing brush from the old right-of-way for the surveyors. Rumor also has it that the Wheeling & Lake Erie (W&LE) Railroad is already planning how it will operate trains on the new branch, where train crews will be based, and motive power needs.

A new interchange will be constructed near Southview, Pennsylvania, west of the original interchange location of the Montour Railroad and the Wabash Pittsburgh Terminal Railway (WPT). As the Montour's Mifflin Extension advanced eastward toward Mifflin Junction in 1914, the WPT, a forerunner of the W&LE, installed a switch and interchange track at Milepost 17.9 on its main line between Pittsburgh and Pittsburgh Junction, east of Hopedale, OH.

This is probably a good point to go over the history of the W&LE track that runs through the area of the new branch. The line was originally chartered as the Pittsburgh, Carnegie & Western Railroad in 1901, along with two other companies formed by George Gould to bring his railroad empire into Pittsburgh.



Left, Topo map showing the Westland Branch. Hornhead Road parallels the Branch after it swings away from PA 50. Right, P&WV track diagram showing George Station. East is up.

In 1904, these three railroads were combined into the Wabash-Pittsburg Terminal Railway (by this time the U.S. Post Office had forced Pittsburgh to drop the “h.”). After several years of mergers, bankruptcies and foreclosures, the railroad re-emerged as the Pittsburgh & West Virginia Railway in 1916.

The P&WV was leased to the Norfolk & Western Railroad in 1964. N&W then became the Norfolk Southern in 1982 and transferred the P&WV lease to the W&LE in 1990.

Interestingly, the original W&LE was around in 1901 and connected to the WPT at Pittsburgh Junction. George was listed as a flag stop on the WPT’s November 1914 public timetable and 14 trains a day went past the station. A flag stop is a station where trains only stop if passengers need to board or leave the train at that location. In the March 1918 public timetable, the bankrupt WPT had been replaced by the P&WV and only nine trains a day passed George. Although the Montour Railroad ended passenger service in 1927, the 1929 P&WV timetable shows eight trains a day passing the passenger platform at George.

According to the 1925 Montour public timetable, George was the P&WV’s name for the interchange; the Montour called it Southview, and by that date Montour passenger trains only operated between the Pittsburgh & Lake Erie Railway station (Station Square on the Southside) and Akleson, three-tenths of mile east of North Star.

However, George interchange remained an active freight transfer point on the Montour and when derailments occurred anywhere east of George the Montour could detour its locomotives by using the P&WV to get around the derailment.

We don't know what the W&LE will name the new connection at George or if the new branch will still be called the Westland Branch, but we know where it will go and how it will be constructed. The Montour built the original spur in 1922 between Gilmore Junction (named after the Gilmore Coal Company) and Morris Mine on the other side of Route 50. In 1922 it was called the Midland Spur, which should have provided a clue that Morris Mine would not long remain the end-of-track. The Montour began building toward Westland, Pennsylvania in 1927 and the new four-mile section of track became the Westland Branch.

It was not any easy section of track to build or operate trains on because there was not a level stretch of track on the entire branch. Leaving Morris Mine at Milepost 0.5, trains bound for the Westland Mine faced a daunting 2% grade for the next 1.5 miles. After cresting the grade at Milepost 2, the trains descended for two miles on a 1.5% grade to Westland Mine. But eastbound trains were pulling empty hopper cars.

Westbound trains leaving the mine with loaded cars had to struggle up that 1.5% grade with 50-ton hoppers full of coal. It will be interesting to see if the W&LE modifies the original right-of-way. The Montour found that four SW 9 switch engines could handle Westland Branch coal trains better than two GP 38-2 road engines. We have to wait to find out if the SD 40-2 locomotives can do a better job with tank cars full of propane

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