

McDonald Transfer

By Bob Ciminel - Montour Railroad Historical Society

The McDonald Trailhead parking area and the section of the Trail between Mileposts 17 and 18, along with the Panhandle Trail Connector, comprise what was known as the McDonald Transfer on the Montour Railroad. During its final years of operation, the Montour used the tracks at McDonald Transfer to interchange coal cars loaded at the Champion cleaning plant with Conrail.

When the Conrail unit trains arrived, McDonald Transfer became a busy place for several hours as cars were pulled off the Conrail tracks and hauled across Noblestown Road and up the 2% grade to the Montour main track at McDonald Siding for delivery to Champion. After loading, the cars were returned to McDonald Transfer, but this time the Montour crews were challenged to maintain control of the loaded cars as they descended the steep grade.

McDonald Transfer was not part of the original Mifflin Extension between North Star and Mifflin Junction when the new line was completed in 1914. All eastbound and westbound trains crossed the Montour Viaduct high above the Pennsylvania Railroad Panhandle Division tracks and continued on to the Montour's termini at Mifflin Junction or Montour Junction. Those high-flying Montour trains operated that way for the next six or seven years until the Carnegie Coal Company offered the Montour a new source of revenue at the expense of the Pennsylvania Railroad.

In 1917, the Carnegie Coal Company (not affiliated with Andrew Carnegie) owned and operated 11 coal mines along the Panhandle main track and its branch lines. Its newly opened mine, the McDonald mine, entered the Pittsburgh Seam in the hillside north of McDonald Viaduct, with the workings eventually extending eastward toward McDonald on a trestle that crossed over the Montour and Route 980 at approximately Trail milepost 16.5. The McDonald mine tipple straddled Noblestown Road north of the old bony pile that marks its location today.

Drainage from the McDonald mine flows down the hillside and beneath Noblestown Road where it enters Robinson Run, which is already carrying acid mine drainage (AMD) from the old Primrose mine farther west. AMD from these two mines causes the bright orange color in Robinson Run and the wetlands beneath the McDonald Viaduct. (Interestingly, Robinson Run AMD was not discussed in the Operation Scarlift studies carried out the 1960s and 1970s. The more recent Chartiers Greenway studies reported Robinson Run as having too many AMD discharge points to be analyzed for mitigation.)

The McDonald mine tipple was served by PRR trains from a connection with the Panhandle main track where the Panhandle Connector joins the Panhandle Trail. Working back east toward the tipple, trains could drop off empty coal cars on three

tracks for loading Lump, Nut or Slack coal. (Lump, Nut and Slack refer to the size of coal.) There was also a Material track used for bringing supplies to the mine that bypassed the tipple on the north side and a Runaround track on the south side that allowed locomotives to access the loaded yard and pick up cars. The mine tracks were on a descending grade eastward from the tipple to allow the cars to roll by gravity into the loaded yard.

The Carnegie Coal Company continued shipping coal from McDonald mine via the PRR until 1920, at which time it asked the Montour Railroad to build a spur from its main track north of McDonald Viaduct and connect to the three tracks in the loaded yard. The spur would also extend westward beyond the tipple to connect with the Runaround track and allow Montour engines to cross over and deliver cars to the empty yard tracks.

The new spur came off the Montour main track where the access ramp from the McDonald Trailhead joins the main trail today, descended a 2% grade to the Noblestown Road crossing and then ascended a 1% grade as it passed beneath the McDonald Viaduct to the tipple, basically following the same route as the Panhandle Connector.



As part of the changes to the PRR and Montour tracks going into McDonald Mine, the Carnegie Coal Company allowed the PRR to install a track that went beneath the McDonald Viaduct to connect with the Panhandle's JO Yard, which paralleled the main track. The aerial photograph from 1939 shows the track arrangement for

McDonald Transfer as well as JO Yard. The designation, JO, were the Morse Code call letters for JO Tower, which controlled movements into and out of the yard for the Jumbo mine, located at present day Gladden Heights west of McDonald.

The relatively quiet and peaceful environment that exists near the McDonald Viaduct and Panhandle Connector today is several orders of magnitude less than the smoke and noise that permeated the area in the 1940s when the Panhandle and Montour tracks were handling multiple trains each day collecting coal, sorting cars, and moving them to their respective destinations.

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