

Section Gangs: The Montour Railroad's Unsung Heroes

By Bob Ciminel - Montour Railroad Historical Society

A major facet of railroad operation involves the constant maintenance of the track, roadbed and ballast that allows heavily loaded trains to run without derailing. The Montour Railroad used Section Gangs to keep its track operable, which by the mid-to late-Seventies was a major challenge because of deferred maintenance.

Tim Sposato, a former Montour employee and Section Gang member, now Chief Mechanic with the Age of Steam Roundhouse in Sugarcreek, Ohio, describes the duties and activities of the gangs when he worked for the Montour:

The railroad was divided into two sections: Section 1 encompassed Montour Junction to Westland. Section 2 [included] Gilmore Junction to Mifflin Junction, Snowden and Muse Branch. Each section gang consisted of 4 Laborers, 1 truck driver and 1 foreman (sometimes only 3 laborers.) The foreman reported to the MRR Track Supervisor. The Supervisor reported to the MRR Superintendent and the P&LE Chief Engineering Supervisor.

Section gang truck drivers had to be currently Pennsylvania State licensed and generally went by seniority. Lots of times the older guys didn't want the job so it fell down the rank. I was about the middle man on the #2 gang seniority list, so I saw a fair amount of driving. Once you started driving you [earned] a higher pay rate.



Tim Sposato provided this 1976 photo of his Section Gang replacing ties at what was known as the Turkey Farm crossing. Section Gang truck MH-2 is behind the crew. Jim Beaver is on Tim's right and Bobby Dengler is to his left. Tim is the shirtless fellow in the middle.

As for other job descriptions, one could also bid on a machine operator position, such as adzer [an adze is a tool used for cutting wooden ties], spike puller, spiker, rail machine, bolt machine, tamper and so on. I was a machine operator as well as the welder, so again a different pay rate depending what I did that day. If several job titles were done in the same day, I would get the highest paying rate for the entire day. Usually the welding rate was the best rate.

In the mid to late 70s there were 4 extra gangs as well. [At] Montour Junction push cart [the push cart carried tools and was shoved by hand along the track] only, mainly worked in the yard. [At] Champion push cart only, mainly worked Champion & Boggs yards. [At] Gilmore Junction, motor car. [At] Cowden motor car and then push truck, after motor car broke down. One in a while a company truck or van supplemented the extra gangs, [sometimes] personal vehicles were used, and the gangs liked the mobility of their vehicles [as opposed] to being strapped to the rails shoving a cart. Each of these gangs averaged, 1 foreman, 5 Laborers. The Gilmore gang worked Westland Branch a lot, and a little on the main line west of Gilmore Junction to Champion. The Cowden gang worked a lot from Gilmore Junction to Hendersonville/Hills and was assigned for a summer on Library Branch.

[In the] event of a call out on O.T. [overtime] on either Section, that Section's gang would be called first, then the nearest Extra Gang and so on down the list. In other words, if we needed help on Section 2, Section 1 gang would be called, then Cowden, Gilmore, Champion, Montour Junction. Most times, the hooligans that comprised the M of W [Maintenance of Way] Department didn't always answer the call, so it took all the gangs to get a decent crew together for larger wrecks and such.



The maintenance trucks were Ford hi-railers [a truck that can operate on both highway and rail]. Gene Schaeffer provided this 1975 photo of RH-1 taken at Montour Junction, which was used by Section Gang 1 and kept at the Champion Yard. Tim Sposato's RH-2 was kept at Hills Station. Photo courtesy of Gene P. Schaeffer ©2012

Gene Schaeffer, whose photographs often appear in these articles, began his career with the Montour Railroad on June 25, 1976 as a Section Gang member.

Section Gangs worked long hours and were subject to call out in the event of a derailment, no matter the day, the time, or the weather. Sixteen-hour days were not unusual. Beginning a railroad career on a Section Gang provided the new-hire an opportunity to learn the railroad from the ground up and to become intimately familiar with every mile of track

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