

Westland Branch: In the Beginning

By Bob Ciminel - Montour Railroad Historical Society

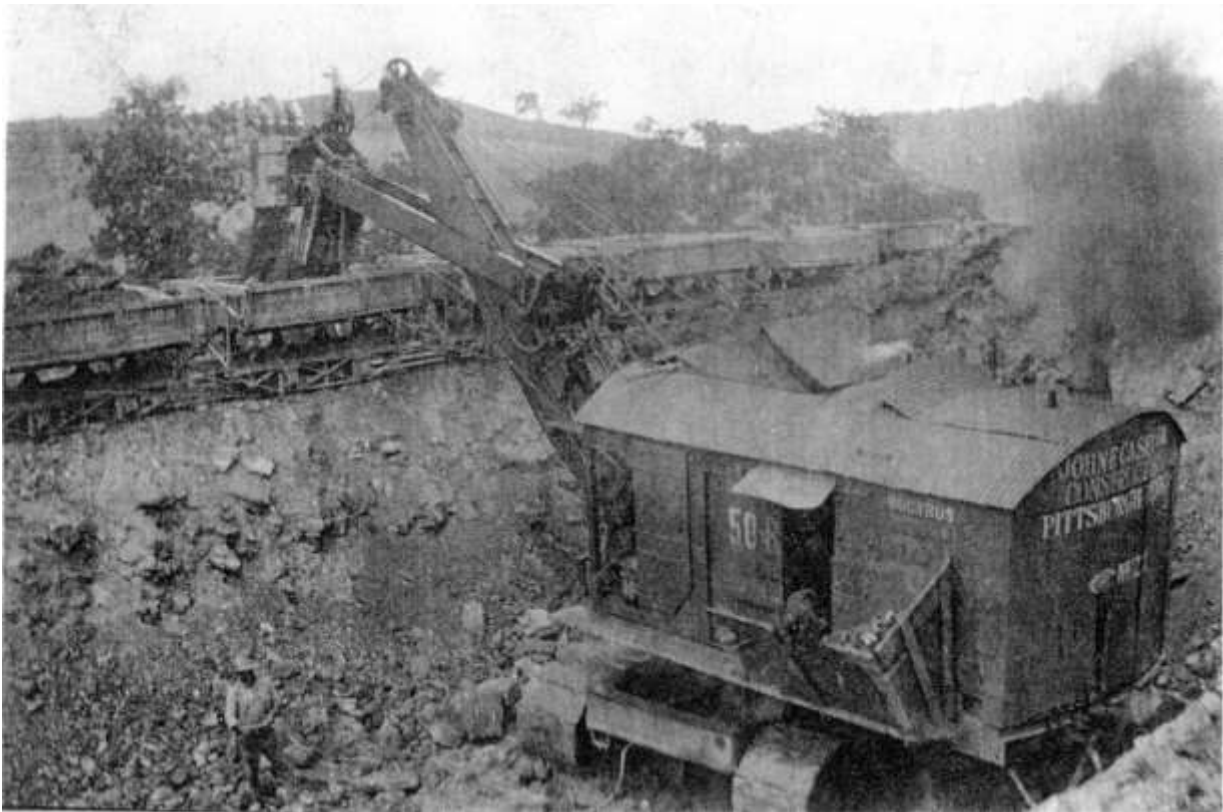
Once again our continuing story of the Montour Railroad takes us back to the Westland Branch. Thanks to a serendipitous encounter between Gene P. Schaeffer, former Montour dispatcher and unofficial official photographer, and Ms. Jean Ferris, current owner of the Hutchinson Farm, through which the new Westland Branch was built in 1927. Ms. Ferris has a collection of photographs taken by Mrs. Esther (Hettie) Cowden Hutchinson, wife of John S. Hutchinson, that she shared with Gene in the hope that today's generation could learn about the early history of the Westland Branch, which is currently being rebuilt by natural gas producer Mark West LLC.

The Westland Branch had an inauspicious beginning as the Midland Spur. In 1922, the Montour Railroad, by then a subsidiary of the huge Pittsburgh Coal Company, installed a switch on its main track near Southview and created Gilmore Junction to service the Gilmore Coal Company's Morris mine on the other side of Route 50 (Millers Run Road).

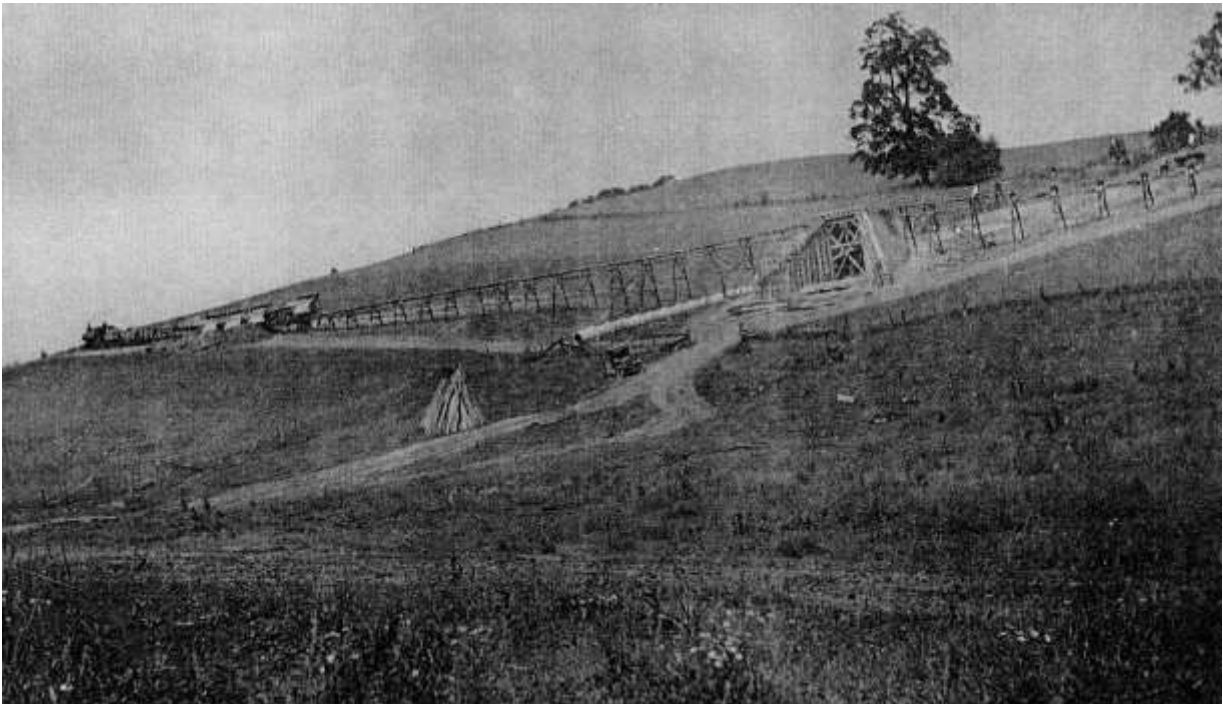
By 1927, Pittsburgh Coal had driven the face and butt entries of its Midland No. 1 and 2 mines at Palanka, located on the east bank of Plum Creek above Houston, 2.5 miles northwest to the Westland Dome, and opened the new Midland No. 3 mine on the west side of Route 519.

The new Westland Branch would allow the coal company to ship coal on its own railroad, the Montour, and stop shipping on the Pennsylvania Railroad's Palanka and Westland Branches. As the Montour began extending the Midland Spur to Westland, its passage through the Hutchinson farm was documented by Mrs. Hutchinson with her fixed-focus box camera, in all probability a Kodak Autographic Junior built between 1914 and 1927.

These are just a few of the photos taken by Hettie, but exemplify her more than passing interest in the goings-on at her farm. The first photo shows a John Casey Construction Company steam shovel digging a cut and filling a train of side-dump cars pulled by a pair of saddle tank locomotives.

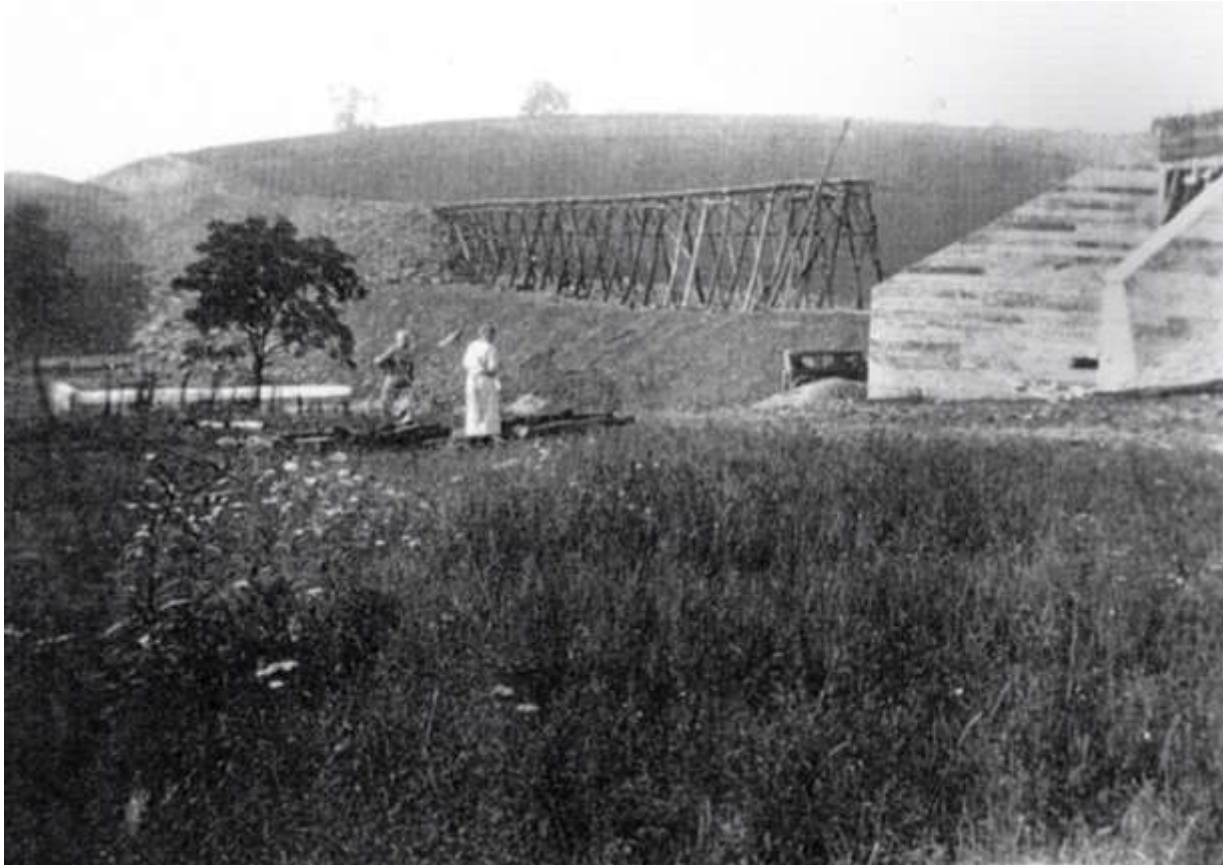


After the train of side-dump cars was loaded, it was hauled to the Hutchinson farm where it was used to create a high fill to keep the grade as level as possible. Note the flimsy looking temporary trestle used for the dump train. The timber was left in place and buried under the fill.



Esther (Hettie) Cowden Hutchinson was born on February 16, 1865 and passed on September 12, 1952 at age 87, and probably watched thousands of tons of coal moving on the branch she photographed in 1927.

This photograph, taken in August, 21, 1927, shows Hettie and possibly a Ms. Blanche Cummins Prevost observing the construction trestle and new concrete abutments.



The entire collection of Hettie's photographs will soon be accessible on the montourrr.com web site thanks to Ms. Ferris, Gene Schaeffer, and Ken Caine. For readers who use Facebook, there is a Facebook group on the Montour Railroad that contains many photographs and other historical information. The group is growing and new content is added almost every day.

This column appeared in the May-June, 2012 Montour Trail Newsletter.
For more information on the Montour Trail – go to www.montourtrail.org