

# The Corn Run

By Tim Sposato - Montour Railroad Historical Society

*The Montour Railroad owned locomotives, rails, buildings and equipment, but its heart and soul were the people who made the railroad work. In the early 1970's, there were several local high school aged youths who had an extreme interest in railroading, and specifically the Montour, which ran near their homes. After graduation, a few of them even hired on to work for the Montour, and some are still working on railroads today. One of those youths relates a long-past episode on the Montour.*



This story involved a friend and I back in the summer of 1972. We call it the Corn Run.

I grew up in Bethel Park, near Clifton Road. Whenever the Montour ran to Mifflin on a Friday night, we would venture up after dark to wait for the train that was to pick up loads that had been previously set off at Jewell siding, next to Al's Cafe.

It seemed like an eternity until around 3:30am, when we began to hear that distinctive chorus of Montour engines beginning their climb up the grade as they rocked and rolled through the night. Soon the headlight's glow began to flood the sky as the train rounded the bend at Clifton Road. By this time we were already at the switch, waiting to see who the engineer was and hoping we would be allowed on the train that night. In those days, Montour crews were very accommodating in allowing us kids to ride along and this night was no exception. From the cab window, Big Jim's voice boomed down a greeting, "C'mon up boys, we're goin' ta Mifflin". He recommended that we ride in the caboose.

As we entered the caboose, we were met by a brakeman nicknamed Barney. He told us to make ourselves at home and we stretched out on the cupola seats. For the crew's dinner, Barney was preparing ears of corn for boiling on a Coleman stove. Thus, there was no need to fire up the caboose's big coal burning stove on a hot summer night.

We were soon joined by another trainman and I remember listening to their conversation. The other man made a comment about the upcoming meal Barney was preparing and mentioned the pot he was using. Barney replied that he had borrowed

the pot from his wife and "If anything happens to this pot, my wife will kill me". With that statement, though nobody knew it at the time, the pot was doomed.

After a long, slow passage through the early morning darkness, we reached Mifflin. We watched Barney fill his wife's pot with water and light the stove. We nodded with respect when he asked us to keep an eye on things as the crew began the process of weighing the train of coal.

The engines would run around the train and couple onto the rear of the caboose to start the slow meticulous task of shoving cars over the scale to separately weigh each coal load. Both of us stayed in the caboose as we were shoved back and forth in the process of getting each car over the scale.

Then, the moment which was inevitable came to be. The engines were shoving the caboose ahead of it to couple onto more loads. The corn was simmering nicely and as I happened to look out the open door at the other end of the caboose, I noticed we were coming up on a loaded hopper fast, REAL FAST!

I yelled "Look out, we're going to hit – HARD"! That's exactly what happened. That caboose hit those cars with a WHAM that could be heard for miles. I can still feel that hard coupling that night and see water splashing to the floor, with hissing and a cloud of steam as the flames of the stove were extinguished.

Panic, sheer and simple.

When we recovered, we immediately set about trying to re-light the stove. It sure didn't want to light after the bath it got, but finally the burners took flame. Those flames reached about six inches in length as they burned out of control. What made it worse were huge clouds of black smoke which filled the caboose and did a fine job of blackening that pot to make it look like an old grease bucket.

We finally got the flames under control, but the pot was a definite casualty. It was obvious that pot would never look the same again.

Later the crew all came in to eat and the corn was ready. Barney was beside himself as everyone wondered how the pot could get nuked like it did. My friend and I just sat quietly, a sideways glance every now and then, enjoying some real caboose cookery and wondering how Barney would fare when he gave that pot back to his wife.

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