

A Quick Run on the C&O - 1968

by James M. Cavanaugh

While working as a brakeman on the New York Central's Toledo & Ohio Central Western Branch extra board in the 1960s, I occasionally got the chance to ride on the Chesapeake & Ohio's Hocking Valley line between Columbus and Toledo. This would occur once or twice annually when our railroad was blocked by a wreck, closed for a major maintenance problem or for other reasons never made clear. Since rerouting a train onto a competing line's tracks was a complicated and probably expensive process, we doubted the NYC did so except in true emergencies. The C&O would also rarely divert a train onto our line, but being a double-track road from Parsons Yard in South Columbus to Walbridge Yard just south of Toledo, they had fewer outright shutdowns.

The typical C&O experience would start with our crew being called for a northbound from West Columbus Yard, usually the 100-car Peabody Coal unit train moving on a "UPE" symbol, bound for Stanley Yard near Toledo and thence north to a power plant in Michigan. Arriving at the West Columbus Yard Office, we expected the usual routine of boarding our train just outside about a half-hour later and proceeding north up the T&OC line. But the conductor would emerge from the office where he had picked up orders, manifest and car waybills, and would say "We're goin' C&O. Crossing over at Frankfort Street." The crew dispatcher would organize a driver and one of the NYC's ever-present green Chevy Suburbans, large enough to seat five big guys with their "grips" (traveling bags or suitcases) thrown in the cargo bay aft.

Frankfort Street Tower was a brick two-story building east of and overlooking the NYC's and C&O's parallel double-track mains in the Brewery District west of High Street. This was on the lower flats along the Scioto River flood plain, just south of the railroads' twin through-truss bridges over the Scioto. Here the C&O and T&OC switched several active shippers on both sides of the tracks, interchanging via a cross-over with north-facing points off the T&OC's southbound main and south-facing points on the C&O northbound track. The bright-yellow Peabodys, with four idling New York Central SD40s purring on the front end, were waiting for us. (The yellow-liveried Peabody hoppers would have looked very stylish with a consist of well-washed yellow-and-navy blue C&O locomotives, but we never got that match up.)

The Hocking Valley Line derived its name from the portion of the C&O south of Columbus, which paralleled the Hocking River and a long-disappeared canal that had only a few stone locks remaining. I heard it was built in the late 1870s, which would mean it predated by some 15 years the T&OC, which pushed north from Columbus to Toledo in the early 1890s. The Hocking Valley was about ten miles shorter than the T&OC Western Branch from downtown Columbus to Toledo, taking a more direct route through Marion, Upper Sandusky and Fostoria while the T&OC swung out to the west to pass through traffic-rich Marysville, Kenton, Findlay and Bowling Green.

After meeting the C&O "pilots," an engineer and conductor who would ride along to guide us over their road and cope with the C&O's unfamiliar signals, rules and grades, we got aboard our NYC engines with the "pilot" sitting down behind the throttle on the right-hand cushion to run the road. The crews and the NYC Frankfort Street operator, using the radios in the tower and on

board the locomotive, pulled this mile of train ahead on the T&OC until the caboose cleared the crossovers. Then we stopped to let the rear end crews change, and for the operator to pull his interlocking plant levers to line up the crossover to let us back our train out onto the C&O northbound main. After we did that and came to a stop with our engines just south of Frankfort Street, the operator reversed the plant and signals to give us a clear block north on the C&O.

Within Columbus city limits, the C&O did not look any different than the T&OC - reasonably well-maintained double-track mains, laid with 130-140 pound rail in excellent condition, with major switches controlled remotely in manned interlockings at the numerous junctions with other railroads. We pulled north across the Scioto bridges toward Miami Crossing, protected by LM (Scioto) Tower, where the two lines diverged, with the C&O proceeding straight northwest up the peninsula between the Scioto and Olentangy Rivers, and the T&OC swinging out to the east and then curving west across the C&O toward West Columbus Yard. Both lines cross the Pennsylvania Railroad's double-track Miami side main at LM Tower.

Similarities between the T&OC and C&O continued here. Like the T&OC, the C&O had a major grind to move a heavy coal train uphill from downtown Columbus. The grade was not much between LM Tower and Hocking Valley Tower, where the C&O crossed the PRR Bradford line (Mile 0.8 on the Hocking Valley, which measured distance north from High Street in downtown Columbus). But the grade really stiffened up as the line passed the West Neil Industrial Area, switched by the C&O, PRR and Big Four, and across Neil Avenue past the Ohio State campus with the hulking Ohio Stadium and Lincoln and Morrill Tower high-rise dormitories on the opposite bank of the Olentangy. This grade continued steeply up through Ackerman (MP 5.0) and Linworth (MP 9.3), with what seemed like one flat stretch in the middle.

C&O Mile Post Confusion

The C&O 1958 Employee Time Table published on the Columbus Railroads website lists mileage figures for the Hocking Valley line running north from CH Cabin, near Mosel and Valley Crossing at the south end of Parsons Yard. In my original draft of this article, I incorrectly used those numbers, listing MP 8.6 for HV, 31.6 for Delaware, 53.1 for Marion, 71.4 for Upper Sandusky, 88.2 for Carey. The 1958 ETT shows Walbridge as being 125.7 miles from the beginning measurement point.

However, C&O mileage and mile posts apparently were redone at least twice over the years. I did not pay attention to their mile posts when riding the line, but I am told there were several different sets in various places which were inconsistent. Helpful comments from readers Jim Evans and Ed Miller, who know the line extremely well, indicate the mileposts northward from Columbus in places later reflected distance from High Street, and that the north-end concrete mile posts are marked with a "C" (plus the mile number) and those to the south on the Athens line are marked with an "A" (plus mile number).

The 1981 "Chessie System" ETT (web link furnished at the end of this article) shows mileposts consistent with this, with HV being 0.8, Ackerman 5.0, Linworth 9.3, Delaware 24.3, Marion 45.6, Upper Sandusky 63.8, Carey 73.5, F Tower in Fostoria 87.7 and VR Tower near Walbridge being 115.0. Jim Evans confirmed that

Walbridge was MP CD-118.

Ed Miller also recalled (and I found them) that the C&O ETTs had warnings not to use the mileposts in certain locations on these lines to figure locomotive speed because there were several sets of conflicting mile markers. The note in the 1981 ETT section for the Hocking Valley between Columbus and Toledo reads:

“In checking speedometers on engines for accuracy as required by CDT-30 all mileposts may be used except between MP H-1 and MP H-3.”

A similar note appears in the Athens Division section, warning not to use mileposts between H-7 and H-8.

The C&O engineer usually remained on the right hand cushion at the controls, being experienced in handling big tonnage through here. Occasionally they would invite the NYC hogger to take some throttle time with the "pilot" standing behind him suggesting what to do here and there. You could see this was a mutual admiration society, with these fellows fawning each other's skills and experience, swapping great war stories. If you got an older C&O man, he would tell you down to the smallest detail how they pulled their coal up this slope using leviathan 2-6-6-6 "Allegheny" class steam locomotives in the 1940s and 50s, with their wide-elbowed Baker valve gear undulating outboard of the rods, and four high-pressure cylinders emitting deafening blasts, each trying to beat the other up the stack. I have seen one of these sitting cold in a museum, and they are monsters.

Up past the grade and across the Franklin County line, the C&O did not resemble the T&OC very much. This was a heavy-gauge double track "big railroad" with ponderous steel overhead bridge signals and meticulously-maintained graded gravel roadbed all the way. It appeared the C&O even policed their right-of-way for industrial junk and litter, something more or less ignored on the NYC as unimportant. We used to hear on the NYC, especially after the PRR merger, that they could not afford to keep yards and right-of-way clean. But I recall W.R. "Bill" Henkle, a C&O senior right-of-way civil engineer (a great fellow, and my scoutmaster at Troop 271) often saying the C&O could not afford NOT to keep its premises clean. I was also surprised to see that the Hocking Valley's passing tracks were in the middle, between the two mains (but where else would they be?) reached by converging turnouts from the main tracks that formed a "W" leading into the siding.

Also in the center between the mains were several hulking tall coaling towers, which would have enabled steam locomotives moving in either direction to pull in to refuel and take on water. While the C&O had dieselized by 1952 and these massive structures must have been idle for at least 15 years, with no prospect of returning to service, the C&O kept them clean, with exterior metal parts well painted, little rust visible. This was in contrast to the NYC's West Columbus coal tower, which had not worked since 1955, and looked like a condemned prisoner waiting for the gallows, though not really in bad shape. (It was eventually dynamited in the 1970s.)

Passing through Powell, the next town northbound was Delaware (MP 24.3). By now, we had the Peabodys on an unaccustomed roll, surging at a steady 50 MPH, not bad for a 10,000-ton, mile-long vehicle. Here the C&O paralleled the N&W (formerly Pennsylvania) Lake Erie line briefly, and crossed a stub fragment of the Big Four's old Galion-Springfield branch. After Delaware, the C&O drifted westward, through the village of Prospect (MP 35.8) and then into Marion (MP 45.6), rejoining the parallel N&W Lake Erie line to Sandusky. Marion was a city of about 40,000, like two dozen other successful Ohio county seats, with some active industry along the C&O right-of-way. For passenger traffic, Marion had (and has) a handsome still-in-use Union Station just southeast of the diamonds where the C&O crossed the joint east-west Erie-Big Four tracks, with its east platform along the parallel N&W tracks.

I could imagine Warren G. Harding boarding the Pullman cars here 50 years earlier, heading for Washington during his term in the United State Senate before being elected to the White House in 1920. I recall now organizing a high-school history paper, reading everything published about Harding, some of it not too complimentary. I recall hearing that railroad police tried to charge the senator regarding some alleged irregularities in the Pullman upper berths, but he cited a federal statute making unlawful to detain a member of Congress on his way to or from a session, and there was nothing they could do. The goings-on aboard the premier trains and at stations like Marion in the prohibition era must have been quite interesting.

North from Marion, the C&O main ran more or less straight up through the centerline of the State of Ohio, through Morral and Harpster (MP 54.8). On-line industries here seemed sparse but where found, they looked active. The line crossed the PRR Pittsburgh-Chicago main line at Upper Sandusky (MP 63.8).

As we roared north through the hot late summer day at full track speed, the two engineers would run a lively conversation, comparing differences in the two companies' equipment, train handling techniques, maintenance programs, relative merits of their various signals and operating rules, all shop talk. They would have to shout a bit above the high-pitched "zhrrrrrr" of the turbochargers feeding manifold air to 12,000 horsepower of thirsty diesels, keeping up RPMs to maintain speed with the big load.

We occasionally overtook what looked like a C&O switching locals parked in the passing tracks, but given our ability to run right at maximum track speed, nothing passed our Peabodys. Meeting southbounds coming at us at 50 miles-per-hour was a little unnerving. The speed differential would be right at 100 mph, and the oncoming locomotive seemed inches away. Fortunately the C&O maintenance was of such high standard that the train cars did not rock sideways, which was often the case in places on the T&OC by the later 1960s.

I only once rode a caboose on the north end of the C&O. Back there in the relative quiet of the clackity-clack of the wheels and slightly abrasive spinning noise of the NYC standard belt-driven alternator that charged her batteries, it was pretty calm gliding along at 50. Our big 40-foot long NYC cabins were built for easy riding at speed.

While enginemen (engineers and firemen) were frequently garrulous, train crews (conductors, brakemen and flagmen) were notoriously just the opposite - taciturn if not completely silent. You could board a unit train at Columbus, and after getting under way, many a conductor would

say nothing at all for two hours, broken by "Ridgeway coming up, get your train order, son" or maybe "Here's Dunkirk, want some coffee there?" about an hour later, and then silence until we heard the air brakes set at Toledo, where he would say "Yep, pretty good run." You could sit there not talking with most conductors for a hundred miles, and never exhaust the things not to talk about.

Next came Carey (MP 73.5), where the C&O crossed the NYC Big Four's Bellefontaine-Clyde Branch, which by the late 1960s was named the NYC Columbus Division's "Eastern Branch," linking with the T&OC's old Eastern Branch at Berwick and thence to Stanley Yards. The C&O also crossed the Akron, Canton & Youngstown Railroad here. While this was an active railroad, in my years of crossing it at Arlington on the T&OC and at Carey on the T&OC Eastern Branch or C&O, I do not recall ever once having seen an AC&Y train pass there.

Some 15 miles north of Carey was Fostoria and F Tower (MP 87.7), a truly fascinating layout accommodating the crossings of no fewer than five railroads. Here in a pair of acres-wide interlockings, the C&O crossed the east-west N&W (formerly Nickel Plate) Railroad, the B&O Chicago main line, and the T&OC's north-south Eastern Branch, and the by-then inactive Lake Erie & Western. Roaring up through here at the in-city Time Table speed limit of 35 miles an hour with our Peabodys, I could close my eyes and imagine blasting up this line slamming across all the other roads' diamonds on a red-hot Allegheny or one of C&O's giant 2-10-4 Texas-types pulling a hundred rattling hoppers loaded with black diamonds.

Fostoria also was a favorite place to get a close look at other railroads' equipment and operations. This was especially true of the C&O. Unlike the B&O and N&W, which the T&OC crossed at right angles four or five places long its route, so you could only see their trains speed across the diamond a hundred yards up, the T&OC and C&O were almost cousins, paralleling each other in a number of places all up and down the line in Ohio and West Virginia. These companies had miles of closely adjoining right-of-way at Fostoria, in Columbus from Miami Crossing to South High Street, at Armitage near Athens, and shared a single track from Hobson to the Kanawha & Michigan Bridge across the Ohio River at Gallipolis. At the southern terminus of the T&OC in Swiss, West Virginia, the line continued into the Nicholas, Fayette & Greenbrier Railroad. This was a peavine of mine hollow tracks jointly owned by the NYC and C&O, which had no equipment of its own, using NYC and C&O engines and rolling stock. The NF&G ran down along the Gauley River through colorfully-named coal country places like Carnifex Ferry, Rainelle Junction and Clearco, connecting the NYC's industrial traffic-rich Kanawha Valley route to the C&O's big tidewater main line in southern West Virginia.

Most fascinating to see at Fostoria was the parade of C&O cabooses. While the NYC had only its smooth-riding faded green bay window models and mostly decrepit long-platform local run cabins, no two C&O cabooses seemed alike. They had a bay window versions nearly identical to the NYC's but with more windows, and easily different ten cupola models, ranging from ancient wooden-sided local freight cabins to longer-frame cars with a tiny cupola set all the way at one end, and various short-frame models with small cupolas in the middle with either slanting-in side windows or cupola sides perpendicular to the main side walls, to more modern varieties on which the cupola sides extended about nine inches outboard of the main body (for a better view of the train if you could handle watching an oncoming locomotive on an adjoining track coming right at your face). These latter models had an array of window arrangements, some with all

square windows, some with a mix of square and round-cornered panes, and with two, three or four side windows down below the cupola. Older C&O cabins on the Hocking Valley were done in bright yellow livery, but the pop-out cupola models were usually a combination of navy blue and yellow, and there were a few dingy red C&O cabins sitting idle on weedy side tracks.

Northward from Fostoria, the C&O shot dead straight up through Rising Sun, Bradner (MP 99.6), Pemberville (MP 105.5) and LeMoyné (MP 111.5), covering the remaining miles to its Walbridge Yards (MP CD-118), passing a handful of country elevators and warehouses. There were no more crossings of east-west lines. The C&O crossed the same ten railroads the T&OC Western Branch intersected between Columbus and Toledo, but on the C&O they were bunched together with three at Fostoria, three at Carey and two at Marion, leaving a lot more free running in between.

Arriving south of Walbridge, our Peabody train would halt in a passing track just south of a road crossing, and we were told instructions would follow. I always hoped we would pull through Walbridge Yard and onto the Toledo Terminal Rail Road, and then west toward Stanley Tower where we could interchange back onto the T&OC north toward Michigan. But that was left to others.

The Toledo Terminal RR was an interesting operation. In contrast to the NYC, C&O, B&O, N&W, AC&Y and other roads mentioned here, which are line-haul roads, the TTRR was a terminal & switching railroad. T&S roads make their money by charging a per diem car fee for interchange traffic and fixed tariff rates for switching and spotting cars at shipper facilities, car weighing, cleaning and other tasks, but they do not share in the big railroads' division of line-haul revenues calculated on a ton-mile basis. Many Midwestern cities had these belt lines (including places like St. Louis, Cincinnati and even Zanesville, but not Columbus), offering a route around congested downtown junctions, attracting shippers to locate alongside with the promise of cheap switching charges and multiple daily switch-outs. The TTRR makes a wide loop around the south side of Toledo, interchanging with 16 lines of six different railroads, passing just north of Walbridge and Stanley Tower, snaking west, crossing the Maumee River, turning north and then east all the way around the city across the Maumee again past the depot and Lake Front Docks, and completing its circular path back near Walbridge.

I entertained an even bigger fantasy that the Peabody train, with us aboard, would pull on west past Stanley around the TTRR toward the interchange with the Ann Arbor Railroad (the oncarrying route to the destination power plant in Michigan) via Air Line Junction, or north up the NYC Toledo Division past Swan Creek Tower. These were legendary places we constantly heard mentioned on the NYC engines' radios late at night, breaking the boredom while sitting waiting at Oregon Road for a relief crew, or for a red signal to come up green. But more typical of railroading, having gotten from Frankfort Street to Walbridge in a very impressive four hours, we then usually sat there baking in August humidity for another four to six hours waiting for a new crew to take over. Finally the unfailing NYC green Chevy Suburban would show up and shuttle us over to the Stanley Yard YMCA hotel. Yes, everyone hated that endless sitting around, but it could not take away appreciably from the fun experience of speeding up the C&O.

[Written from memory from 45 years ago - corrections, comments and additions welcome.]

Chessie System (C&O/B&O) 1981 Ohio Division Employee Time Table No. 3

http://www.columbusrailroads.com/new/pdf/CS_Ohio_Division_3_ETT_8-1-1981.pdf

Toledo Rail Map (1968-9):

<http://www.columbusrailroads.com/new/pdf/T&OCSouthboundsMaps-toledo.pdf>

(revised August 2014)