

The Toledo & Ohio Central Mine Run - 1968

by James M. Cavanaugh

The "Mine Run" was one of the most interesting assignments you could draw as a brakeman working the "Extra Board" at the New York Central's Toledo & Ohio Central West Columbus Yard in the late 1960s.

The Mine Run was a local switching job manned by T&OC crews, assigned and reporting at Corning, at the southern terminus of the Western Branch (Milepost 197.5), 67 miles south of West Columbus. But most of the heavy work was done at Claybank, a station at MP 189.8 in the green-wooded hollow between the long New Lexington and Moxahala tunnels in southeastern Perry County.

The main job for the Mine Run crew was setting cars up for loading at the Peabody Coal Company facility at Claybank, and assembling the loads into 100-car northbound unit trains. Peabody contracted with the New York Central to move two and later three weekly drags of steam coal from Claybank to a power plant in Bay City, Michigan at a special rate covering over-the-road transport and switching services at both ends of the route. With over one million tons of northbound coal moving over the T&OC annually in Peabody's proprietary fleet of yellow-and-green liveried 100-ton "bathtub gondola" cars, this was one of the premier shippers on our line. The railroad went all out to provide superior service.

Coal had built Perry, Athens and Hocking Counties in the 1870s and sustained their economies mightily for nearly a century. For a time in the 1880s the rich bituminous coal seams spreading beneath the area's hilly overburden of beautiful orange sandstone were the biggest single producing source of this commodity on earth.

Nine railroads tapped this traffic - the T&OC and its predecessors reaching south from New Lexington via Moxahala to Corning, the Kanawha & Michigan pushing north from Athens through Chauncey up Sunday Creek Valley to Corning and the K&M's Buckingham Branch running north from Glouster through Hemlock and Drakes (the K&M was later acquired by the T&OC), the Federal Creek Valley Railroad (also later part of the T&OC) branching east off the K&M just north of Glouster, the C&O's Hocking Valley Railroad reaching in from the southwest off the Athens Subdivision via their Straitsville Subdivision from Logan and their Monday Creek Subdivision from Nelsonville, two Pennsylvania Railroad predecessors, the ancient Cincinnati & Muskingum Valley Railroad (CMVRR) running through Bremen, Junction City and New Lexington, meeting end-to-end the Dresden branch of the Cleveland, Akron & Columbus Railroad, the B&O main line running east to west through Athens, the Newark, Somerset & Straitsville (the NS&S later become part of the B&O) coming south through Junction City with its old line to Shawnee, and the Zanesville & Western (the Z&W was also later absorbed in large

part by the T&OC) reaching south through Fultonham, Crooksville and Sayre, paralleling the T&OC through Rendville and Corning, swinging through its Corning tunnel over to Congo, Drakes and Shawnee. Like intertwining veins coursing over the back of a strong hand, these lines hauled the black diamonds from more than 200 coal mines and production from another 25 clay, zinc and mineral mines to market, and brought in mine supplies, machinery, general freight and sustenance for the population. Their passenger trains carried in immigrant families arriving from Ireland, England, Wales, Scotland, Greece, Sicily, Silesia, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Slovenia and a half-dozen other European principalities that gave Perry County the fascinating names you can still see today on mailboxes, businesses and tombstones. These little trains serving three dozen towns would take sons and daughters off to college, speed couples up to Columbus for weekend shopping and carry uniformed men to war and back.

The connection of people, coal and trains here was remarkable, especially on the T&OC in and around Corning. Early morning and late afternoon miner labor trains shuttled between Corning on the north to Chauncey on the south. Miners would walk down from their houses and hop on, and ride up the hollows to their places of employment, where the train crews picked up loaded hoppers in the morning and dropped off empties in the afternoon. Up through the 1940s there would be a working mine nearly every half mile along the railroad through Sunday Creek Valley. Hundreds more men worked at the K&M roundhouse on the south end of Corning and the T&OC's big coal marshaling yards at New Lexington, Corning, Glouster and Chauncey. Athletic teams of the high school in Corning, producer of many a serious basketball star, including our Mine Run fireman Jerry "Big Daddy" Jones, eventually were named the "Railroaders."

You can't see much of it today but older photos reveal the huge extent of the rail layout in this area 75-100 years ago. In the narrow sliver of flat bottomland that makes up downtown Corning there were seven tracks crossing Main Street. Only vestiges of this remain at Corning, with its passing track and a few stub sidings, and all the big yards are long gone. Tracks snaked up every valley and hollow to mine entrances and tipples. The K&M's original lease to the T&OC lists more than 20 miles of sidings between Corning and Chauncey.

Also astounding are maps and charts showing the extent of subsurface mining below Perry County. Scarce is the acre that is not honeycombed with old mine tunnels hundreds of feet down or radically altered on the surface by strip mining. Just as remarkable is the environmental devastation from all this excavation done without regard for the wellbeing of the lands and waters. Claybank was well named, featuring steep walls of eroding yellow and gray mud left by mining activity. Records from the 1920s show at least nine mines active at this one location on the T&OC. Ohio eventually passed strip mine reclamation ordinances in 1972, followed by federal law in 1977. Now slowly the earth heals itself, except for poor Sunday Creek, which I suppose will never recover in our lifetimes due to acidic springs fed by abandoned deep mines in the valley's hillsides.

Eventually the coal "played out" as the locals say. The mines disappeared, usually leaving ghostly foundation remnants and smoldering mountains of slag, emitting a pervasive sulfuric aroma still lingering in the late 1960s. The rusting tracks of the B&O, C&O, the Federal Valley and other short lines, the "Zig Zag & Wobble" (as they called the Z&W in this area), and much of the old Pennsylvania CMVRR and CA&C lines, were all abandoned and pulled up. What must have been several thousand railroading jobs in Hocking, Perry and Athens Counties dwindled to a handful. But the T&OC, having becoming part of the New York Central System by the 1920s, remained and prospered. Through the K&M link running south from Corning, across the Ohio and deep into West Virginia, this railroad tapped lucrative industrial traffic of the Kanawha Valley along its own right-of-way and interchanged other revenue loads along its south end with the N&W, C&O and Virginian. This flow sustained a profitable business on the T&OC after the Ohio coalfields dwindled, starving out the other lines lacking any overhead freight.

I could not find detailed or authoritative volume records, but it appears 600-900 hoppers of coal rolled north daily during the peak mining era on these railroads, moving to Columbus and on to northern industries in Detroit, Cleveland and other cities. (Of course, during the 19th century, deadweight loads per car were much smaller than either the gigantic Peabody gondolas or our standard 1960s hopper cars that each carried 50 tons.) Indicative of traffic volume was the 675-car "heavy side" (loads) capacity of the C&O's Monday Creek Branch yard at Nelsonville. Veteran engineers on the T&OC recounted that the yards at Corning and Chauncey would get so full that inbound empties trains would be held by the dispatcher up at Rendville for an outbound to depart and free up a track for their trains to enter. Overflow coal traffic from Sunday Creek could also be diverted south through Chauncey and interchange onto the C&O at Beaumont, just beyond the T&OC's bridge over the Hocking River.

At the end of this article are links to lists of the producing mines on the rail lines in Perry, Athens and Hocking Counties in 1914 and 1921. During this period, there were at least 55 active coalmines on the T&OC in the 28 miles between New Lexington and Chauncey and on its "peavine" coalfield feeder lines. These included the Buckingham branch to the northwest from Glouster, the affiliated Federal Valley Railroad branching east from Palos, near Glouster, and the short twin-forked Bailey Run, Sugar Creek & Athens Railroad branching west from Chauncey. Interspersed with the T&OC lines, the Z&W served over 50 mines, and the NS&S reached about 20 more. To the southwest, the C&O's Hocking Valley Railroad reached more than 100 mines principally in Hocking County. The HVRR's Straitsville and Monday Creek Subdivisions pulled down traffic from a spider web of small extensions including their Snow Fork, Brush Fork, Sand Run and Lost Run Branches. However, some of these mines were small operations, only employing a dozen men hand-digging coal, producing a few carloads weekly.

Interestingly, and not readily apparent from today's maps, the original railroads running north from these coalfields reached toward Cleveland rather than Columbus. The first

Perry County lines built in the late 1860s connected via the CMVRR and CA&C Dresden branch through Zanesville north across the Panhandle at Trinway, up through a tunnel via Warsaw and Blissfield, merging at Killbuck onto the CA&C main line to Cleveland some years before the T&OC or Z&W links to Columbus via Bremen and Thurston were established. Also a great volume of coal that eventually reached Columbus (which was not heavy on “smokestack” industry) was switched onward through the T&OC’s South Columbus yard to move north on the PRR’s (later N&W’s) Sandusky & Columbus Short Line to the big Sandusky Dock on Lake Erie, or over the T&OC or C&O to Lakefront Docks in Toledo or on up to the River Rouge industries in Detroit.

During the peak era of coal traffic on the T&OC from 1900 to the early 1950s, South Columbus Yard played a key role. Its eight tracks had a capacity of 410 40-foot hoppers. Coal traffic was handled and transferred there by the South Columbus yard job. This crew also switched industries on the T&OC double-track main line from the Brewery District to Bannan and on the South Columbus Industrial Track, which branched north off a team track just east of the South Columbus Yard. The area was controlled by the operator at Steelton “Tower”, a small one-floor cabin on the north side of the track at MP 134.9 that was no longer in service by the time I hired on with the NYC in 1967.

Coal arrived at South Columbus Yard via our inbound trains from Corning as well as transfer traffic off the C&O Athens Subdivision and to some extent from the C&O Russell Subdivision main line, and via the N&W. From South Columbus the cuts of black hoppers could proceed north through West Columbus Yard toward Toledo, transfer to the sister NYC Big Four Cincinnati-Cleveland line at Grandview, go north onto the C&O at Frankfort Street or transfer onto the N&W at nearby Bannan.

During the early diesel days in the 1950s, the T&OC would sometimes call crews for a “Stanley Turn” to move overflow coal traffic up to Toledo and deadhead empties back. With a 7,000 horsepower set of four new EMD F9s in the classic "ABBA" arrangement, the crew would run caboose light from West Columbus to South Columbus, where they would pick up a 5,000 ton cut of loaded hoppers. They would speed south across Bannan to Thurston, swing through the wye north onto the Eastern Branch and make for Toledo via Johnstown, Bucyrus, Carey and Fostoria. Arriving at Yard “O” at Stanley, the road crew would cut off their locomotives, and a yard crew would retrieve the caboose. The road crew would receive a southbound train assignment and train orders, couple on, and after the yard crew got their cabin car on the rear end, they would highball south back down to West Columbus, a 307 to 354-mile round trip, depending on the southbound route taken, all in one 16 hour shift.

In the 1960s, Peabody brought coal from Sunnyhill Mine to Claybank via truck and, it appeared, by overland conveyor belt systems. At its trackside yard in Claybank, just east of the T&OC main line, Peabody had erected a huge modern tipple for cleaning and sorting steam coal, moving its finished product output via conveyor belts into large overhead bins. Underneath these structures ran several tracks parallel to our 136-car

Claybank siding. These tracks were used for loading Peabody's unit trains. Moving cuts of cars around this complex was the job of the Mine Run crews.

Peabody was one of the best-capitalized and technologically advanced coal producers in the world, and its railroad logistics division did not disappoint in this regard. For the 350-mile Claybank-Bay City run they commissioned a fleet of about 200 purpose-built gondolas, each with 100 tons of cargo capacity (deadweight) in addition to about 30 tons tare weight of the empty car. Unlike typical standard open-top sloping-end two or three-bay hoppers that moved most of our coal as well as crushed stone and taconite (pelletized iron ore), the Peabodys were just big square-ended steel and aluminum boxes with no discharge doors on the bottom, called "rotary hoppers." At destination, I was told, Peabody had installed an enormous machine that grabbed the entire loaded car, wheels and all, and flipped it over to dump the coal into a bin that fed a conveyor belt to move the load off to the generating station's storage yards. I believe these cars had special rotating couplers on one end that allowed them to be pulled through and flipped at the dumping facility without uncoupling, but I never saw this in action.

These big gondolas were distinctive for both their bright yellow and green colors -- and an odd engineering design flaw. Being tall and longer in the wheelbase than other cars carrying dense loads, their interaction with the 39-foot rail joints tended to produce a weird harmonic effect at speeds just below 20 miles per hour. This caused them to rock violently side-to-side and (rarely thank heavens) to tumble sideways off the rails. We wrecked a number of them in several unpleasant accidents between Truro and Thurston. As one engineer said, "Other than tipping over, they run real nice."

On any given day, 100 of these cars would be at Claybank being loaded or moving north through Columbus on to northern Michigan, and the other 100 would be at the power plant being dumped and made up into an empties unit train to deadhead back to Perry County, or en route southbound. These unit trains carried NYC designation "PCC," and later "UPE," together with a number that I presumed signified how many such trains had run that calendar year. Per universal T&OC practice, northbounds had odd numbers like UPE-75 and the next day's southbound would be UPE-76.

The Peabodys usually rated a hefty foursome of six-axle EMD SD40 locomotives. This assemblage of some 12,000 horsepower was overkill for the southbound empties run, which faced only gentle downward grades over most of the route. But it would be needed coming back north up over the 1.1 percent grade on New Lexington hill leaving Claybank, and then getting up from Grandview Tower past Mounds, at Lunda north of Marysville and again at Kenton hill (Western Branch MP 69). I assumed the locomotives must have been based and serviced up in Michigan because they never were uncoupled from the train at Toledo or West Columbus as far as we could see. At Claybank or Corning there were no fueling, sand or maintenance facilities.

Naturally for a very lazy young brakeman such as myself, the Peabody road trains were a

favorite run. No getting on or off to uncouple cars, no pick ups or drops in the rain, just a nice dry warm ride in the locomotive or the cabin car. Conversely the Mine Run, while really interesting, was a lot of hard work out in the elements.

When the southbound Peabody empties from Michigan reached the West Columbus division point, we did the crew change by means of a very quick stop at the yard office, or occasionally at Frankfort Street Tower. This crew could be called as either a Corning Extra, meaning we were going to drop the train at Claybank and then go take rest at Corning, returning to pick up the loads to go back toward Columbus the next morning, or as a Corning Turn or Claybank Turn, on which we would do it all in one 16-hour shift. Corning Extra crews usually would sleep overnight in five small neatly appointed bunkrooms in the back of the yard office. This overhanging-gabled gray barn of a building on the east side of the main track just south of Main Street had been the NYC freight house, a service long since discontinued, and also housed the Corning operator's office on this manual block line. The crew residence area featured a large brightly lit spic-and-span lavatory and shower room with sensational steaming hot water.

The way the Corning Extra road crew bringing the train down and back interacted with the Mine Run crew was fascinating but all very logical. The southbound road crew would pull the downbound empties into Claybank siding, cut off the engines and pull out the south switch of the siding back onto the main, run back north to the rear and pick up the conductor and flagman, along with the NYC road caboose. Finally they would proceed south to Corning to go off duty after parking the engines and caboose in the clear off the main in one of the short remaining switching tracks just north of Main Street. The Mine Run crew, who might reside locally at Corning or drive down from Columbus via Routes 33, 37 and 13, would come on duty and take over the road crew's "consist" of big SD40s, and run north back up to Claybank. While the road crew was on its eight hours' rest, the Mine Run crew would use the road power to run back to Claybank and pull cuts of empties off the inbound unit train from the siding and shove them back into the shorter mine loading tracks. The empties would be dragged slowly underneath the loading facility, and one-by-one the Peabody tipple crew would drop 100 tons of coal into each. By the end of the shift, the Mine Run crew would have loaded 60-70 cars. Combining them with another 30-40 loaded the previous day, the Mine Run would set up the 100-car outbound unit train out on the siding or, if there were no conflicting through trains, out on the main track, now with the locomotives on the north end.

Around this time, the road crew came off rest, and would take the Mine Run's power, a pair of reliable 1,750-horsepower GP9s and their long-platform NYC switching caboose, and would shuttle back up to Claybank. They would get the road caboose on the south end of the loaded train, trade engines with the Mine Run again, and after picking up the NYC onionskin paper train orders from the Claybank operator, they would get the green signal and highball for Columbus.

The grade from the mine up to New Lex tunnel was challenging, but the SD40s, with a combined 328,000 pounds of tractive effort, were easily up to the task even on wet rail. While we pulled out many a knuckle or drawbar grinding up these hills with other heavy trains, I do not recall this ever happening with the very new Peabodys. Once over the New Lex summit, the line was fairly flat for 55 miles until north of Grandview Tower (MP 130.1), although during steam days the T&OC used helper engines all the way from Corning to Thurston. The T&OC's north end hills were not as steep, although the 0.5 percent grade up past Mounds, also helper territory during the steam era, was very long and required steady maximum horsepower for a good 20-30 minutes.

After the unit train departed to the north from Claybank, the Mine Run crew would use the GP9s to move more empties around at the mine, and on occasion would go to New Lexington for some switching activity there, then proceed back to Corning to go off duty. They would return the next day to set up the remaining empties at the loading facility, and have them filled and ready for the next arriving road crew to take back north the second following day.

To accommodate the frequent Mine Run switching moves, the T&OC main track was posted as "Yard Limits" from Western Branch MP 184, a train length north of New Lexington, to Southern Branch MP 2.4, a train length beyond the south switch on the Corning passing track. "Yard Limits" meant that switching trains cleared into that "block" of track could occupy the main track without flagman protection against other trains, and through trains entering that block on a yellow (approach) signal had to operate on restricted speed (20 mph) and be prepared to stop for opposing trains and engines not "in the clear" (i.e., off the main track with switches aligned for main track through moves). This 15-mile stretch of "Yard Limits " territory worked well. Usually the Mine Run was in the clear and through trains could get a green (clear) signal to proceed through this block. However, this designation had the odd effect of placing the T&OC's two longest tunnels technically within a "yard".

Peabody also shipped substantial loads of steam coal to Dayton over the T&OC and Big Four via Columbus, but the boxy yellow gondolas bound for Michigan dominated the NYC manifests during this period. We also occasionally got Consolidated Coal unit trains of black and red-liveried tub gondolas on the Western Branch, but I am not sure what their final destinations were.

The Mine Run had some non-Peabody duties. During the later 1960s there were still several small local mines producing in this area, including the J.T. Mine reached by several spurs with north-facing switch points branching to the west off the main track between the south switch of the 80-car New Lexington siding and the north portal of the New Lex tunnel. I also remember setting out cuts of empty coal hoppers off southbound trains in the old wye track in New Lexington (Western Branch MP 185.0). There was episodic coal traffic from the Congo mine some ten miles up the Buckingham Branch, which forked north and west from the Southern Branch off the T&OC main line

in Glouster, MP 8.0 on the Southern Branch. There was also the tiny J. Cook mine just north of Corning. As I recall, this miscellaneous traffic was not combined with the UPE northbounds but was consolidated by the Mine Run in the siding at New Lexington for pick up by NT-7 or other regular northbound T&OC road trains. I do not remember any NYC non-coal local traffic in this area, and NYC had no active shippers at all south of Glouster until points deep into West Virginia. Thus there was no need for another T&OC local south of the Mine Run's service territory.

However, this additional tonnage beyond the Peabody loads was but icing on a rich Western Branch cake for the New York Central. The rule of thumb then was that a rail line would be economical if it generated 35-40 annual revenue cars per mile. The 10,000 annual northbound loads from Peabody on the Western more than covered this "nut" for the Central. Add the 4-6 daily "overhead" trains moving freight to and from West Virginia on the Columbus Division, and you had a nice little earner of a railroad here.

The Mine Run crews seemed to like the work and pay. This job also seemed to be predictable hours close to home, rare in over-the-road railroading.

[Written from memory from events 47 years ago - corrections and additions welcome.]

Coal Mine Map - New Straitsville OH:

<http://www.ohiomemory.org/cdm/ref/collection/p267401coll36/id/17572>

Lists of Coal Mines in Perry, Athens, Hocking and Meigs Counties:

1914 list: <http://genealogytrails.com/ohio/athens/coal.htm>

1921 list: <http://littlecitiesarchive.org/2011/09/09/coal-mines-on-the-t-ohio-central-and-zanesville-and-western/>

Map of Ohio Coal County Railroads - 1918

<http://www.railsandtrails.com/Maps/OhioRRCommission/1918/1918RailroadMapSE-100.jpg>