

Researching “the Wheeling Way”

By John B. Corns

Short on popularity but long in chutzpah, the old Wheeling & Lake Erie was filled with incongruities and anomalies

AFTER AN EYE-OPENING, three-year fling with giant Norfolk & Western steam locomotives in my birthplace of Ironton, Ohio, on the Ohio River, our family’s move 200-some miles north to Canton, Ohio, might as well have been to the moon, for we did not live anywhere near a railroad. Canton hosted the main line of the Pennsylvania, a Baltimore & Ohio branch, and several Nickel Plate lines, but my encounters with trains were purely accidental, usually when my father drove us over the hump-backed bridge across NKP’s Gambrinus yard on the way to the town dump, or when we waited for a Pennsy freight at a grade crossing.

A 1964 Boy Scout merit badge project introduced me to topographical maps, and I was astonished to “discover” a large Nickel Plate yard in Brewster. Previously, I never even knew Brewster existed, or that its yard contained about a hundred NKP steam locomotives waiting their turn to go to the Luntz scrapyards in Canton. My mother drove me to Brewster a few weeks later, and I rejoiced at the site of wooden passenger cars in the work train, a pile driver under steam, decrepit tenders still carrying “W&LE” initials, and the road’s last 2-8-4 rusting away, sans tender. I watched that lonely Berkshire being scrapped two weeks later by the N&W, Nickel Plate’s new successor.

I was curious to learn more about the old Wheeling & Lake Erie, and the following year John Rehor’s excellent

Impressed with NKP 2-8-4’s, W&LE’s acquired 32 itself; they were called “Cadillacs” by the crews; 6423 is eastbound with hoppers at Harmon, Ohio.



ABOVE, NKP PHOTO BY JOHN D. BURGER; TWO PHOTOS, JOHN B. CORNS COLLECTION

book, *The Nickel Plate Story*, was published by Kalmbach. Its text, roster, and photos answered many of my questions about “the Wheeling,” and provided grist for hundreds more yet to be asked in the coming four decades. I was about to enter into the love affair of my life, but being enamored of a railroad that disappeared in 1949, when I was just 10 months old, meant that I would not “railfan” the Wheeling. Instead, I would research the Wheeling. Recently while doing such work I happily discovered that W&LE had purchased the Central Valley, a 4-mile railroad owned by my great-great-uncle that had supplied coal to his Corns Rolling Mill in Massillon.

Short on popularity but long in chutzpah, the old Wheeling & Lake Erie was a fascinating 515-mile property whose history is filled with incongruities and anomalies. Where else could one find a railroad of this size that built 50 steam engines? How many other roads offered uniformed parlor-car hostesses serving a la carte meals on board wooden

Deep in southeastern Ohio coal country, one of W&LE’s 10 USRA 2-6-6-2’s, 8009, switches at a tipple in 1949. C&O had the only other 20 built.

passenger trains on the eve of World War II? Which 20th century railroad had a safety record that belonged to the post-Civil War era? What other road employed saturated Atlantics on passenger trains, while switching its yards with modern, roller-bearing equipped 0-6-0’s? How many roads went through four bankruptcies in four decades, yet emerged to turn healthy profits each year after 1916? Where else could one find a railroad whose unpainted physical plant was an eyesore, yet which operated a fleet of modern Van Sweringen 2-8-4’s of NKP stamp? How many railroads tested fledgling Timken roller bearings in Diamond arch-bar trucks underneath wooden freight cars?

The Wheeling began in the 1870’s as a narrow-gauge road chartered to reach untapped coal mining areas of southeastern Ohio and deliver No. 8 bituminous to a Lake Erie port city. Before its financial collapse, the road managed to lay 12 miles of track between the Lake Erie fishing village of Huron and Norwalk. In his quest to control the nation’s first transcontinental rail system, Jay Gould revived the moribund W&LE and rebuilt it as a standard-gauge line across



northern Ohio. In 1889 it reached the Ohio River opposite its namesake city of Wheeling, 216 miles from Toledo. Ornate 0-6-6 and 2-4-6 Mason Bogies hauled coal to W&LE's port at Huron for export by lakeboats, and inbound Mesabi iron ore was carried east to the growing iron and steel industry of the Ohio River valley. Huron was the crucial maritime outlet for Ohio steam coal that fueled W&LE's latter-day success.

For its first 25 years, W&LE was financially unstable and took whatever motive power it could afford. Its early fleet of freight equipment was mostly wooden coal gondolas, but unrest in the coalfields severely eroded carloadings, so W&LE acquired boxcars, stock cars, and even some refrigerated boxcars to shore up disparities in earnings.

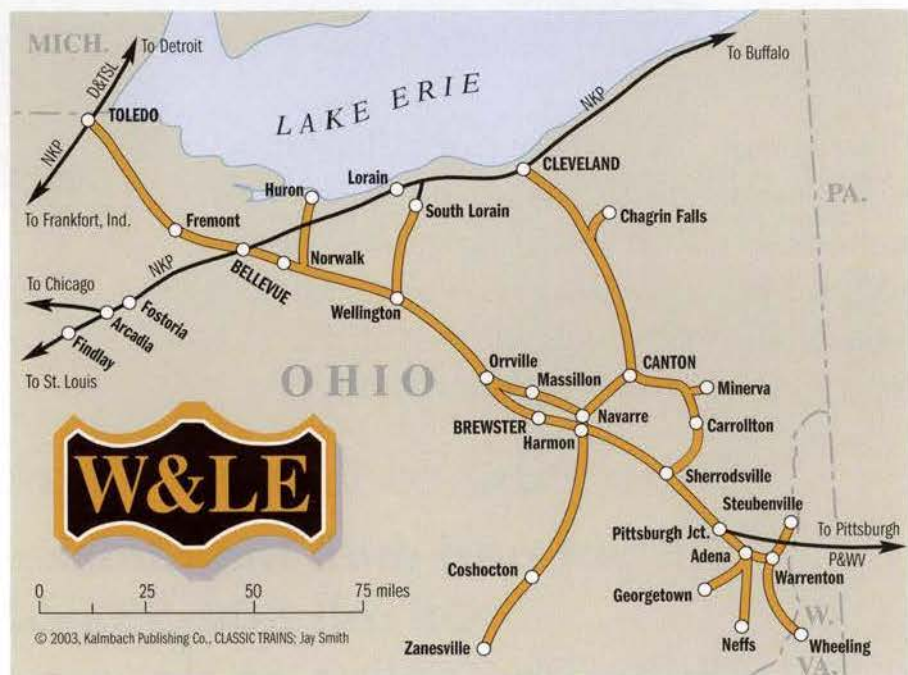
Mother Nature was especially unkind to the struggling road, dealing it blizzards, windstorms, and flooding of Biblical proportion. In April 1901 the western end near Toledo was under 9-foot snowdrifts, while at the same time the eastern end was flooded by Ohio River water 71 feet above normal levels.

Operating with train orders, W&LE's unsignaled lines often were death traps, with an unknown rockslide, washout, or oncoming train possibly waiting round

the next bend. Indeed, wrecks were not rare, and W&LE occasionally suffered multiple head-on or rear-end collisions in one day. After several recommendations by the Interstate Commerce Commission to adopt block signals, a fatal head-on collision between two detouring PRR trains in 1943 finally led to W&LE's first installation of CTC signaling five years later. When asked to participate in National Safety Week, W&LE President George Durham proudly boasted that his road "did not suffer a single fatality during the previous National Safety Week." It has been said that, mile-for-mile, W&LE was the most dangerous railroad in America.

In 1899 W&LE got a second operating division when it acquired the 144-mile Cleveland, Canton & Southern, successor of a former narrow-gauge from Cleveland south to Zanesville. The two divisions crossed at Navarre, and occasionally the village experienced the commotion of a four-way meet when just the right combination of four noon-day passenger trains ran late, early, and on-time. A new cut-off bypassed Navarre and led to the establishment in 1910 of W&LE's locomotive shop, major yard, and headquarters in Brewster.

One W&LE branch in the village of





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Carrollton dated to 1846, and had been mule-powered until the arrival of a 20-year-old locomotive built in 1835 by Robert Stephenson in England. This engine, the seminal *McNeill*, had been built to an unusual wide gauge and served as a pattern for future locomotives built by Thomas Rogers of Paterson, N.J.; it also gave rise to the official railroad gauge of 58 inches found only in New Jersey and Ohio. This branch was built as wide-gauge, converted to narrow-gauge, then rebuilt to standard-gauge. Its narrow-gauge, timber-lined tunnel at Robertsville is in service today.

In the early 1900's George Jay Gould revived his father's dream and used the W&LE in a patchwork of railroads in another attempt to link the Atlantic and Pacific. One of the few segments that needed to be built from scratch was the 60-mile leg between Pittsburgh and the W&LE main line. Thus did construction begin in 1904 on the Wabash-Pittsburgh Terminal, predecessor of the Pittsburgh & West Virginia. Massive fills, high trestles, and many tunnels were hallmarks of this work, including North America's then-longest cantilever bridge across the Monongahela River near Pittsburgh.

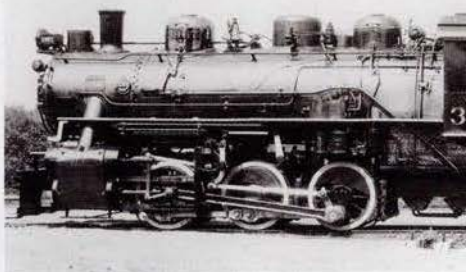
Under the aegis of parent Wabash, W&LE and WPT operations were combined for several years. Joint passenger trains began between Pittsburgh, Toledo, and St. Louis to serve the 1904 World's Fair market, but the routing was 90 miles longer than competing PRR or B&O, and the first fair-bound train left Pittsburgh with just a single

W&LE ran splendid but ancient equipment on its few passenger trains. Atlantic 2301 is south-bound at East 93rd Street, Cleveland, about 1935.

passenger. To outfit these long-distance limiteds, a half-dozen 4-4-2's and 21 wooden passenger cars—including two electrically-lighted diners—were permanently assigned to W&LE. This equipment would serve as the backbone of passenger operations until the Wheeling's last passenger run in July 1938. One of the old diners was used as a portable depot on the Ohio River floodplain at Warrenton, but a rowboat was stored underneath the car for quick evacuation if floodwaters might rise too quickly to move the "depot" to high ground.

Twenty huge, hand-fired 2-8-0's were delivered to W&LE by Schenectady in 1913. A later increase in boiler pressure boosted their tractive effort to 63,000 lbs., putting them among the heaviest and most powerful 2-8-0's ever; producing more tractive effort than even USRA heavy 2-8-2's. They were supplanted four years later by W&LE's first Mallets, 20 Alco-Brooks compound 2-6-6-2's with 84,000 lbs. tractive effort, enough to muscle coal trains upgrade from Huron at a sustained 17 mph. The Wheeling never owned a diesel road unit, just four solid-black EMD NW2 switchers bought in 1940-41 because of the weak Maumee River bridge in Toledo.

W&LE received its first "modern" power at the close of World War I, USRA locomotives in three wheel arrangements. Alco-Pittsburg built five

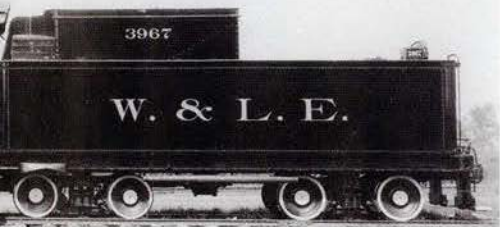


Brand-new W&LE 0-6-0 3967 poses outside her birthplace, Brewster shop, September 28, 1937.

0-8-0's, Alco-Brooks 20 heavy 2-8-2's, and Baldwin 10 compound 2-6-6-2's. Too long for W&LE turntables, all the new Mallets swapped their large USRA tenders for medium-size USRA versions that trailed 10 of the new heavy Mikes.

The highly successful USRA 0-8-0's were to have the most profound effect on W&LE 10 years later when the road began building its own switchers in Brewster Shop. Saving about \$7000 per locomotive by building instead of buying new, W&LE constructed 20 USRA 0-8-0 copies at Brewster during 1928-29, followed by 30 USRA 0-6-0 copies between 1929 and 1940. Beginning in September 1935, subsequent Brewster 0-6-0's had Timken roller bearings on all engine and tender axles, being the first steam switchers so equipped. The sole surviving Brewster-built engine, 0-6-0 3960, was enshrined in a Canton park wearing NKP lettering, but 15 years afterward I restored the switcher back to its original W&LE appearance.

Needing a powerful yet fast locomotive to propel itself out of the drag-freight era, W&LE turned to cousin NKP and borrowed Alco-built Berkshire 704 for over-the-road testing. Impressed with the results, W&LE in 1937 took 10 similar copies from Schenectady, eventually adding 22 more. Though not as famous as their legendary NKP cousins, the 6400-series Wheeling 2-8-4's did a credible job on hotshot "Alphabet Route" manifests and slower coal trains alike. Management loved them, and employees warmly called them "Cadillacs." On the eve of the takeover by Nickel Plate, W&LE in 1948 reunited 10 rough-riding, Roanoke-built ex-



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N&W 4-8-2's after they'd seen hard service on five different railroads. Wheeling management as well as employees despised these wartime wanderers, nicknaming them "Big Uglies."

Impressed with W&LE's balance sheets and eyeing the road's still-modern Brewster shop, Nickel Plate after World War II began buying Wheeling stock, and in 1949 inked a 99-year lease to acquire and operate the road. In 1964 NKP was merged out of existence by N&W, along with the P&WV, the Wabash, and the Akron, Canton & Youngstown, but the Wheeling still corporately existed and continued to earn profits. A quarter-century later, most of the old W&LE was sold to the new W&LE, except for the main between Toledo and Bellevue and the branch between Brewster and Zanesville, which had been purchased by Ohio Central, a regional line whose diesel-powered freights and summertime steam trains continue to polish the rails of my beloved "old" Wheeling & Lake Erie. ■

W&LE fact file

(comparative figures are for 1929 and 1948)

Route-miles: 512; 506

Locomotives: 185; 161

Passenger cars: 66; 0

Freight cars: 11,626; 13,646

Headquarters city: Brewster, Ohio

Special interest group: Nickel Plate Road Historical and Technical Society, Box 381, New Haven, IN 46774; www.nkphts.org

Recommended reading: *The Nickel Plate Story*, by John A. Rehor (Kalmbach, 1965, reprinted 1994); *The Wheeling & Lake Erie Railway*, by John B. Corns (TLC Publishing, 1991)

Source: *The Historical Guide to North American Railroads* (Kalmbach, 1999)