

The “Little Giant,” a linchpin of the Steel Age

Pittsburgh & Lake Erie and American big steel were inseparably linked . . . until both succumbed

IF ANY ONE RAILROAD could be identified with the rise and fall of American big steel, it would have to be the Pittsburgh & Lake Erie, “the Little Giant.” For years its 120 route-miles between Connellsville (and Brownsville), Pa, and Youngstown, Ohio, produced cash like a Las Vegas casino. Down its multiple main tracks (four, in places) rolled a steady stream of coal and ore trains, the lifeline of the steel business.

But coal and ore were only part of P&LE’s mix. Its USRA 0-8-0’s and then Alco and EMD switchers prowled the steel canyons of Youngstown, Aliquippa, Pittsburgh, McKeesport, and Monessen for loads of steel destined all over the country and the world. Not just cold steel—P&LE handled it white hot from blast furnace to open-hearth in specially built cars, saving a step in the steelmaking process. It was said that P&LE between McKeesport and New Castle produced the highest gross-tons of freight per mile in the U.S.

The Little Giant also carried passengers. At its apex, P&LE fielded eight through trains to Cleveland jointly with the Erie, plus three round trips to Buffalo in conjunction with parent New York Central. Add to that commuter locals between Pittsburgh and Beaver Falls (College Station), and—after 1930, when Baltimore & Ohio forsook its roundabout line into Pittsburgh for rights on P&LE—the B&O passenger fleet. P&LE was a train-watcher’s Mecca. One could see NYC Hudsons and three types of Pacifics (P&LE K-6’s, Erie K-5’s, and B&O Presidents), as well as



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A trio of EMD SW9’s poses on the Gateway Yard hump east of Youngstown. In steam days on June 22, 1946, at Beaver Falls (below), Pacific 9247 on train 30 meets a 2-8-2 on a northbound coal drag.

the more prosaic P&LE H-10b 2-8-2’s and B&O S-1 2-10-2’s. As late as 1947, 23 westbound and 22 eastbound passenger trains rolled over P&LE between New Castle and Pittsburgh.

Built by the Lake Shore & Michigan Southern as a furtive attempt to gain entrance to Pennsylvania Railroad territory, the line was opened to Youngstown in 1871. Soon afterward, the steel industry began to grow, and by the time my family came over from Wales in the 1890’s, Big Steel and the Little Giant were involved in an economic symbio-

sis. I came from a steel family, and the P&LE was a household word.

My memories go back to the immediate post-World War II era when my mother would pack up my sister and me for a weekend back “home” at Monessen. We always took the afternoon “Pittsburgh train” that left Warren, Ohio (west of Youngstown), as Erie No. 26 around 2:30 p.m. It was a through train, one of the five or so round trips Erie and P&LE collaborated on between Cleveland and Pittsburgh. This was the postwar steam era, before air-conditioning, and I can still smell the coal smoke and recall the cinders in my eyes from those summer afternoons as we rolled along the Beaver River. I remember also the station stops—New Castle, Wampum (change for Ellwood City), Aliquippa, Coraopolis, and then Pittsburgh, the P&LE’s beautiful Carson Street station, part of P&LE headquarters which survives today as a fine restaurant in the Station Square complex. My favorite spot, though, was McKees Rocks, where P&LE had its shops.

For most of its life, P&LE parroted owner NYC in equipment design. It used the same caboose and 70-foot



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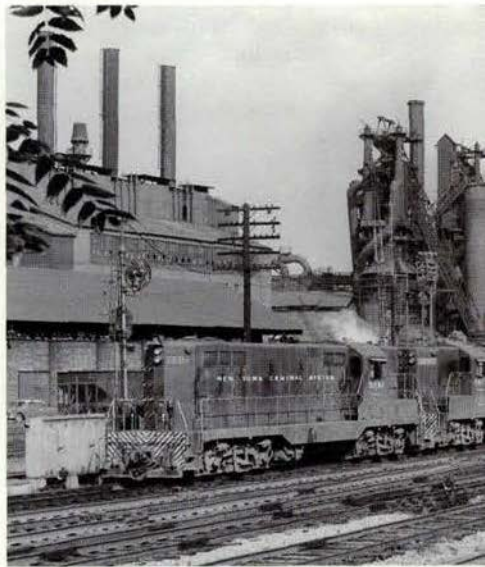
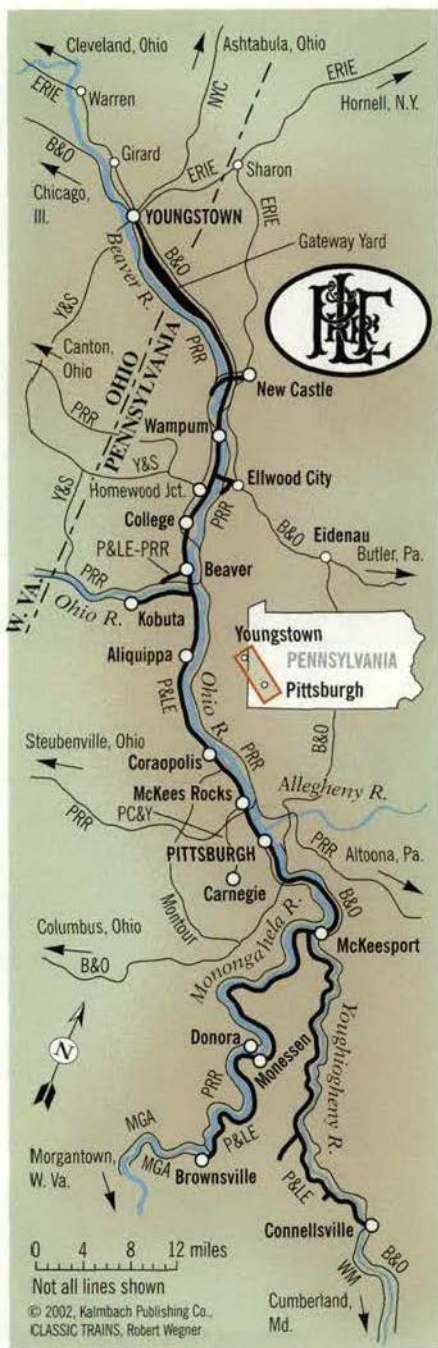
coach, and its locomotives for the most part were variations of NYC examples. There was always horse-trading among NYC subsidiaries, though. P&LE's new K-5b Pacifics of 1927 were sent to the Big Four, and P&LE inherited Boston & Albany's K-6's, which in turn had been displaced by J-2 Hudsons.

Until P&LE's A-2a Berkshires came in 1948 (the only 2-8-4's on the system west of the Boston & Albany), P&LE's immense traffic was in the hands of Mikados: 22 H-10's and 30 H-9's. Mystery still surrounds why the A-2a's even were ordered. They were notable, however, for being the last steam locomotives built by Alco and the last built for the NYC system. They were also unwanted orphans. The 2-8-4's stayed only until 1955 when they were donated to the Big Four, where their success was less than brilliant. They were gone by '56.

The steam-diesel debate must have been alive even in 1948 as P&LE experimented with all-weather cabs and smoke-consumers. Obviously the issue of diesels on a road which carried coal by the boatload was a sensitive subject. P&LE first received diesel switchers in 1947, and by 1953 orders for 35 GP7's eliminated the remaining 2-8-2's. By the end of 1954, steam was gone. That summer I watched a USRA 0-8-0 make up the "Detroit Steel" in Monessen; it was the last NYC steam engine I ever saw.

P&LE diesels were numbered amid their NYC siblings, although they wore a distinctive olive green and had the word "System" after "New York Central," plus small P&LE initials to help identify them. The green was a concession not given to any other NYC subsidiary, and after early Boston & Albany switchers, only Peoria & Eastern and Cleveland Union Terminal Geeps outdid P&LE units in wearing distinctive I.D.

As diesels were arriving, P&LE passenger trains were declining, although most local service had been pruned before the war. Six Alco PA's replaced the K-6's on the Cleveland trains, but the passenger-train-off notices were one step ahead, and by 1960 even the PA's were almost out of work. The Alcos were gone to the parent or into storage by 1962, with the remaining trains covered by five boiler-equipped GP7's.



The 1960's P&E was epitomized by a pair of olive-drab GP7's, duly lettered for NYC System, working a steel mill along the multi-track main.

ance it was, toward the end. I'd ridden the B&O to Pittsburgh one winter day to ride the trolleys, and returned west at night on that train. The ride along the river at night, with the signals dancing on the rails, the *clickety-clack* muffled by the snow, and the occasional glimpse of a white-hot heat of steel as we glided past the steel castles of the American Ruhr, was as magical a trip as I have ever taken. As it turned out, it was also my list ride on the P&LE.

Although B&O varnish plied P&LE rails on rights west of Pittsburgh until Amtrak began, by 1965 P&LE's trains were gone except for the Beaver Falls commuter, which had more lives than a cat and lasted until July 12, 1985. But P&LE was still a busy railroad by any standard. In 1966 I was working a temporary train-order office on the PRR low-grade line on the other side of the Ohio River. I hardly saw a PRR train, but on the P&LE they ran like clockers.

Those were heady times as John W. Barriger, savior of the Monon and the Katy, took the throttle. CTC signaling came in the late '50's, and much of the four-track main was slimmed. The Brownsville line was single-tracked, but little else changed. Many of the old interlockers were closed, but several

By the time I went to college in 1959, the only trains left were the Pittsburgh-Cleveland *Steel King*, one Youngstown local, a Beaver Falls commuter, and the *Buffalo Night Express*, which by ICC edict still plied between Pittsburgh and Buffalo via Youngstown, with a through sleeper for Toronto. A forlorn convey-



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stayed open as P&LE telegrapher agreements precluded train dispatchers operating their own CTC. P&LE thrived even as NYC headed into increasingly rough seas. This was the era of the "Serves the steel centers" billboard boxcar fleet, the Barriger-commissioned Howard Fogg calendars, and sufficient confidence in continued industrial prosperity that P&LE opened its new pushbutton Gateway Yard near Youngstown in 1954.

When I was home from school, I would drive down on summer evenings to watch trains at Gateway. A footbridge crossed over the B&O's parallel main line, and from it I could watch both the hump activity and take in the ambiance of a B&O "QD" freight doing 60 mph on its urgent trek eastward. On several occasions, P&LE's terminal trainmaster invited me into the hump tower. We all thought it would last forever.

In 1967, I joined NYC and sort of lost track of P&LE doings. I visited Gateway only once, as part of a traffic study, but new jobs in different places took me far away from P&LE country. P&LE survived the Penn Central holocaust, though, and new U28B's handled most of the freight traffic while a new CTC machine in Pittsburgh spelled the end for the remaining interlockers.

There was still optimism about the future, so when Conrail was formed in 1976, a group of Pittsburgh business



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owners bought P&LE outright. It turned out to be a bad investment. In 1980, the steel industry collapsed. After a long, fruitless fight to relax work-rules, P&LE was finally sold to CSX in 1992, which promptly abandoned most everything that was left—except, of course, the New Castle-McKeesport main line. A P&LE without coal, ore, and steel mills had lost its *raison d'être*. I was working for the BNSF at the time so was not around for the death rattle.

After my father's death in 1996, I had reason to "go home" for the first time in years and took the opportunity to renew memories of my younger days. I discovered that Warren and Youngstown looked like Dresden in 1945. Monessen was little better; it was indeed "the rust belt." I drove to Gateway Yard to find only a field and—atop the decaying, vandalized hump tower—remnants of that big red neon sign I knew had once spelled out "P&LERR" to the world. Alas, the Little Giant was dead.

The steel mills that lined the rivers from Youngstown to Donora are ruins of another time, of little interest now to anyone save an occasional industrial archeologist. The great age of Industrial America is over. But I am lucky. My family played a part in the success of the American steel industry, and I grew up witnessing the last of the golden epoch of steel, smoke, and steam.

So let us raise a glass to those Steel City fallen flags—not only the P&LE but

P&LE replaced most of its GP7's with 22 U28B's, later added a few GP38-2's. At the time of this 1981 photo at McKees Rocks shops, "The Little Giant" stabled 95 diesels including 40 SW1500's.

also the Monessen Southwestern, the Montour, the Aliquippa & Southern, the Pittsburgh, Chartiers & Youghiogheny, the Pittsburgh & West Virginia, the Donora Southern, and yes, even the mighty Pennsylvania and Baltimore & Ohio. And those short lines' owners, too, the steel firms themselves—Republic, Pittsburgh, Jones & Laughlin, Bethlehem, U.S. Steel, Youngstown Sheet & Tube. We shall never see their likes again. ■

P&LE fact file

(comparative figures are for 1930 and 1991)

Route-miles: 233; 404 (change reflects Conrail trackage rights to Ashtabula, Ohio)

Locomotives: 266; 39

Passenger cars: 158; 0

Freight cars: 33,196; 3174

Headquarters city: Pittsburgh, Pa.

Special interest group: New York Central System Historical Society, P.O. Box 81184, Cleveland, OH 44181

Recommended reading: *Pittsburgh & Lake Erie Railroad*, by Harold H. McLean (Golden West Books, 1980)

Sources: *The Historical Guide to North American Railroads* (Kalmbach, 1999); P&LE statistics booklet, 1963.