

WM: A latter-day love affair

ALCO FA DIESELS first drew me to the Western Maryland Railway. The year was 1970, and—typical of the WM—the railroad was operating its four examples of these fetching cab units after they'd been retired almost everywhere else.

This is not to say the FAs (or anything else about the Western Maryland) was shoddy or threadbare. Quite the opposite, in fact. It was the road's traditionally first-class maintenance that had kept its diverse bunch of first-generation diesels in service into the 1970's. EMD Geeps, F3's, and F7's, even its two BL2's, along with Alco RS2's and 3's—these veterans still provided most of the horsepower for the railroad I first knew and quickly came to admire.

Looking back at it now, my love affair with the Western Maryland seems shockingly brief. By 1975, only five years after I first trekked to Williamsport Hill, just west of Hagerstown, Md., to catch the FAs in helper service, Chessie System had swallowed WM whole—quickly spitting out much of it by abandonment and transforming the rest.

There was much to like about the Western Maryland, a railroad at once compact and multifaceted, old-fashioned yet successful, efficient yet friendly. It ran through beautiful, rural coun-

try. It was replete with the operating challenge of stiff grades requiring helpers—a challenge met to the end by lashing up considerable numbers of first-generation diesels.

Of all those virtues, perhaps "friendly" tops the list. Fans with proper credentials were welcome on the property. They were even welcome to ride the *locomotive cabs*, for heaven's sake—a priceless opportunity I seized more than once. Setting the tone was George M. Leilich, WM's operations vice president from 1954 until the railroad's demise. A hard-nosed railroader with a reputation for being scrupulously

fair, Leilich signed many a fan's permission form over the years. Perhaps this came naturally, since he himself was an enthusiast—of the fascinating business of railroading, and of his own trim, proud, and personable railroad.

Though I didn't meet Leilich in person until after his retirement, when I was working with Roger Cook on a book about the WM, other railroaders had already shown me Western Maryland's fabled hospitality first-hand. For operators there was Owen Stanley, the operator ensconced in the bay of the gray clapboard office at Williamsport, Md., at the foot of its namesake hill. The genial Stanley, who retired in 1999 from CSX, was generous with information and instantly endeared himself to me by stopping the light helpers in front of the office so I could take a flash picture.

In subsequent months I visited with the loquacious Ace Farris, milker of snakes and relief operator then working at Parsons, W.Va. Later I encountered him at MY Tower, the railroad's hub at Ridgeley, W.Va., just across the Potomac River from Cumberland, Md. More often at MY I'd find Robert



Two decades before author Zimmemann came to know them, two of WM's four FAs assaulted Williamsport Hill with 57 cars September 4, 1951.



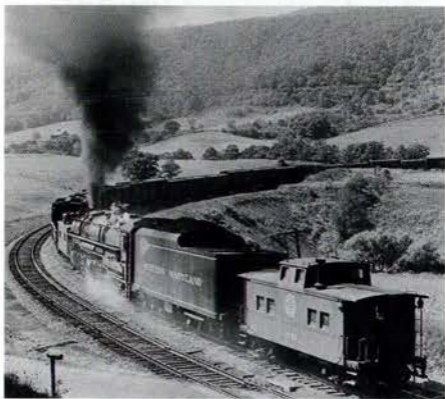
STEVEN J. BENKOVITZ

By Karl Zimmermann

Shockey, the regular second-trick man. And I rode with engineers Russ Hile, Bert Weese, and Raymond Harris.

Western Maryland packed multiple personalities into its relatively short 835-mile length. Opened in 1859 as the Western Maryland Rail Road, it began as a regional carrier—what railroad didn't?—but grew over the next six decades into a significant Class 1 with two distinct functions: high-speed forwarder of “overhead” or “bridge” traffic and gutty coal-hauler, tapping primarily fields around Elkins, W.Va.

Key to the former function was the 86-mile Connellsville Extension, opened in 1912 and generally called simply the “New Line” right up until most of its



WILLIAM P. PRICE

One of WM's 12 M-2 4-6-6-4's helps a westbound Connellsville-bound freight around Helmstetter's Curve west of Cumberland in September 1951.

rails were lifted in 1975. It ran from Cumberland to Connellsville, Pa., where it connected with Pittsburgh & Lake Erie and Pittsburgh & West Virginia. The New Line, which eventually was CTC-equipped, would be a key link in the six-railroad Midwest-Northeast “Alphabet Route” of NKP-W&LE-P&WV-WM-RDG-CNJ (that's the Nickel Plate, Wheeling & Lake Erie, P&WV, WM, Reading, and Jersey Central). This coordinated route became known for expeditious forwarding of merchandise. Clerks routing heavy wartime traffic this way coined the nickname, being forced to write out the imposing string of initials. The nickname was formalized in 1955 when fast freights plying this route became “Alpha Jets.”

WM stressed this side of its person-

ality with its "Fast Freight Line" monicker and graphics. First came the eye-catching "fireball" logo introduced in 1940 on the tenders of a dozen elegant 4-6-6-4's delivered by Baldwin, followed in the mid-'50's by the dramatic "speed lettering" that supplanted the fireball to become WM's final image. The steam-era WM, chronicled so well by photographer Bill Price and others, was before my time, as were some early WM diesels including Baldwin switchers and road-switchers. In the steam era, WM progressed from ever-heavier 2-8-0's and 30 2-10-0's through 25 2-8-8-2 Mallets and ultimately the Baldwin Challengers. WM also bought a dozen 4-8-4's, also from Baldwin, for the Alpha Jets in 1947; they were called Potomacs, not Northerns. WM's modest passenger trains were in the charge of immaculately maintained Pacifics. Today, an ex-Lake Superior & Ishpeming 2-8-0 from Michigan, used on the former WM main of tourist line Western Maryland Scenic, is dressed up as the fictitious WM 734 and looks credible.

Although I fancied the diesel Alpha Jets, particularly pounding up Williamsport Hill, strung across Salisbury Viaduct, or wrapped around Helmstetter's Curve (where 734 now steams), it was WM the coal-hauler that most captivated me. Substantial coal tonnage came off the Gray Secondary Track, a disconnected branch in Somerset County, Pa., and from a cluster of mines



KARL ZIMMERMANN

In a view from the caboose, a quartet of WM red-white-and-black F7's switches their train at Hickory Creek on the Webster Springs line in 1972.

around Chiefton, W.Va. (near Fairmont), all reached by trackage rights over B&O. But the real coal artery was the line southwest from Cumberland to Elkins, originally the West Virginia Central & Pittsburg. Here muscle was the name of the game, particularly on Black Fork Grade in scenic, remote Blackwater Canyon, with 10 miles of unrelieved 3.05 percent against loaded trains (and short stretches of 3.75 percent). The Elkins-Ridgeley East Local was generally a long string of oxide-red hoppers piled high with coal, plus a few pulpwood cars and wood-chip hoppers. Often it drew two sets of mid-train helpers, which when I visited in the '70's were mostly F's, as was the road power. Formerly, this had been Alco RS country.

Coal was gathered at Elkins from Hickory Lick, Bergoo, and Webster Springs on the Greenbrier, Cheat & Elk Subdivision and from the Belington Extension. (Other branches reached to Dailey and Durbin.) This was elemental railroading. It was also train-order railroading, which meant encounters with operators, who provided not only information about train movements (invaluable in those pre-scanner years), but also sociability and context. From WM men I learned the railroad's operating patterns, along with an appreciation for poor (but rich in humanity) Appalachia.

WM had still more personalities, including salty. At tidewater in Baltimore, the Port Covington terminal opened in 1904, providing for decades the all-important Atlantic outlet for coal, grain, and other commodities. This traffic generally moved over the Main Line Subdivision through Union Bridge, Md., once WM headquarters and today the home of the Western Maryland Historical Society. To the north, the "Dutch Line" fed traffic up to York, Pa. Hagerstown, where WM later had its general offices, was the hub for all this, with major classification facilities including a hump yard worked improbably late by the two BL2's tethered to slugs.

About the only thing the WM of my era didn't offer was scheduled passenger trains. Never much of a passenger road, WM discontinued its last modest offerings—coaches-only accommodation trains, bolstered by Railway Post Office revenue—in the 1950's. (The last

pure passenger train was the Cumberland-Elkins local, dropped in January 1958; the Durbin-Elkins mixed lasted another 15 months.) WM's only venture into the long-distance, luxury passenger trade came with the opening of the Connellsville Extension, allowing WM to team with P&LE, Erie, and New York Central to offer overnight Baltimore-Chicago service—called, unimaginatively enough, the *Chicago Limited* and *Baltimore Limited*. These trains lasted but four years, coming off in 1917.

Sixty years later, most of the WM west of Hagerstown was gone, a disappearance that happened with breathtaking, heartbreaking speed. The die had been cast in 1967 when the Interstate Commerce Commission approved the Chesapeake & Ohio-Baltimore & Ohio bid to control WM. But "Chessification" of WM came in earnest in 1973, with operational changes plus a request to the ICC to abandon 125 miles of WM main between Hancock and Connellsville—all trackage parallel to the B&O's main line. Permission was granted two years later, and scrapping began immediately. Before long, the line north of Elkins through Blackwater Canyon was lifted, too. By the end of the decade, traces of the WM were almost as hard to find as a needle in a haystack. ■

KARL ZIMMERMANN, of Norwood, N.J., with Roger Cook wrote The Western Maryland Railway: Fireballs and Black Diamonds (Howell-North, 1981).

Western Maryland fact file

(comparative figures are for 1929 and 1982)

Route-miles: 878; 1152 (change reflects B&O trackage rights)

Locomotives: 259; 109

Passenger cars: 78; 0

Freight cars: 11,481; 6836

Headquarters city: Baltimore, Md.

Special interest group: Western Maryland Railway Historical Society, P.O. Box 395, Union Bridge, MD 21791; <http://trainweb.com/mvmra/wmrhs/index.htm>

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