

# From Henry Ford's lab to a key connection

Detroit, Toledo & Ironton was a primary outlet for the Motor City's products



Left, Jim Hediger; above, H. G. Goerke

**Spanning the eras: Concrete arches from Ford's 1925 electrification frame a DT&I "Rouge Puller" from Flat Rock, clearing N&W's ex-Wabash main at Oakwood Junction in 1967 and trailing wood caboose 96 with the 1955 emblem. GP7 973 (right) is in the shadow of the Rouge Plant.**

Ask most Midwestern railroad historians about the Detroit, Toledo & Ironton, and they'll likely mention one era: ownership by Henry Ford. Under the progressive auto magnate's stewardship, expansion was proposed, an electrification project undertaken, and the property modernized.

The Ford era, though, lasted only a decade. When he was building his giant River Rouge steel and auto complex in eastern Dearborn, Mich., the dredging of a river channel for Great Lakes boats to access it required a new moveable bridge, but DT&I couldn't afford to build it, so in 1920 Ford bought the railroad! By 1929, he was so fed up with the increasing government regulation that went against his innovative, entrepreneurial spirit that he sold it. The new owner was Pennroad Corp., an arm of the Pennsylvania Railroad empire, but DT&I stayed independent, visually and operationally, for six more decades.

DT&I served the cities in its name, Ironton being a small town on the Ohio River 365 miles from Detroit. The railroad's origin was the May 1905 merger of two bankrupt short lines, Detroit Southern (formerly Detroit & Lima Northern) and Ohio Southern; they formed the Detroit, Toledo & Ironton Railway. To reach Toledo, the new road bought the Ann Arbor Railroad, which cut diagonally across lower Michigan.

Strapped for money, though, DT&I sold the Annie in 1910 and later got its own Toledo branch. AA went under the Wabash banner in 1925 ["Fallen Flags Remembered," Fall 2008], but DT&I would have it again four decades later.

The 1905 DS-OS merger created a single carrier wandering southwest out of Detroit into Ohio, then south through Lima to Springfield and southeast through hilly country to Ironton. DT&I moved raw materials, mainly coal and coke, north to the manufacturing behemoth that became the Motor City, but its trump card was one Ford envisioned—serving as an outlet for automotive products because DT&I crossed every trunk line in the Buckeye State. For example, DT&I and the railroad of Goodyear's Frank Seiberling, 169-mile Akron, Canton & Youngstown, regularly would interchange auto tires, made in Akron, at Columbus Grove. These trunk-line connections, which for Ford traffic enabled DT&I to secure the originating road's cut of the rate division, served it well through World War II and the booming postwar period until deregulation and the 1980s rail merger era combined to halt old routing practices. (DT&I had 34 interchanges in 1905, and in 1950, 55 with 13 Class 1's.)

I became a member of the DT&I family as a teen in 1956 when my father, having been in the rail supply industry for a decade, wanted to get fully vested in his Railroad Retirement from earlier Illinois Central years and was hired as DT&I's Chief Mechanical Engineer. The offices occupied the second floor of a building in downtown Dearborn at Michigan Avenue and Schaefer Road, a mile from the nearest track (the business-car spur at the "rip track" near Schaefer Tower, by the Rouge Plant).

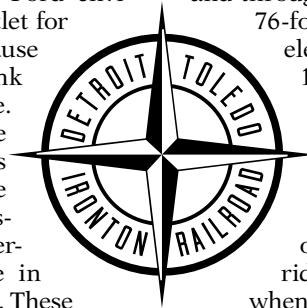
DT&I was a freight carrier through and through, although Ford tried two

76-foot, 66-ton Hall-Scott gas-electric cars on locals. By

1945 DT&I operated only one passenger train, a daily-except-Sunday turn from Jackson, Ohio, north 109 miles to Springfield. And even though I was the son of an official, I would not ride a mile of DT&I until 1983,

when the property was owned by Canadian National's Grand Trunk Western and the Bluewater Michigan NRHS Chapter ran an excursion to Maitland and Dayton, Ohio.

Early DT&I steam included 20 1909–10 Alco 2-8-0's and 15 1918 Russian 2-10-0's. Ford insisted on a sparkling clean and neat property, so DT&I steam locomotives shone, complete with nickel-





Robert A. Hadley

All “spit and polish,” with silver paint here and there and nickel-plated cylinder covers and raised emblem and numerals, DT&I 2-8-0 111 leaves the Rouge Plant for Flat Rock in 1939.

plated, raised numerals on their cabs and emblems on the tenders. Ford modernized them in his Fordson Shops at the Rouge Plant; his touches were seen in steel cabs that replaced wooden ones and engineers getting cast aluminum chairs in the cab. Ford tinkered, too—for a while, 2-8-0 79 was converted from coal to oil, and 2-10-0 312 was equipped to burn pulverized coal. His locomotives had nickel-plated pipes, valve gear, and trim. Fordson Shops did the engine work, and Ford modernized the 1906 shop down in Jackson for car repairs.

Post-Ford, Pennroad brought in 18 ex-PRR 2-8-0’s, and two each 2-8-2’s and 4-4-2’s, and all engines again were shopped at Jackson. To support its faster freights hauling auto products south, DT&I in the late 1930s ordered from Lima Locomotive Works six 2-8-4’s; they worked well but were almost too big, so DT&I went for a dozen large, modern Lima 2-8-2’s during World War II, its last new steam.

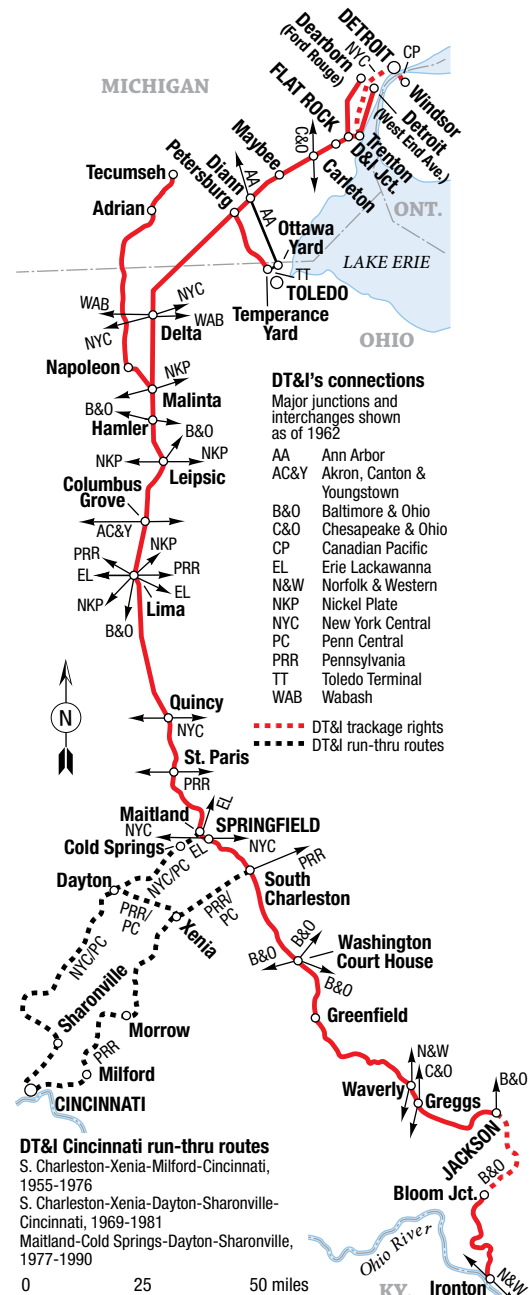
### Wires, other improvements

During 1925–29, Ford built the Dearborn Branch from the new (1926) rural Flat Rock Yard north to his Rouge Plant, straightened the mainline route into Ohio, and proposed bypasses around Springfield and the forever troublesome Summit Hill, west of Jackson, in whose 16 miles were 2 percent

grades and 22-degree curves. The tortuous line had been opened in 1878 by the 108-mile, underfunded narrow-gauge Springfield, Jackson & Pomeroy (standard-gauged in 1880). Ford even proposed building onward to a link with the Virginian Railway at Deepwater, W.Va., envisioning an electrified Detroit-Tidewater (Va.) through route!

The bypasses and extension didn’t happen, but his electrification project did get as far as building one locomotive, electrifying the Dearborn Branch (34 track-miles, plus yard tracks for a total of 50, with 365 catenary support arches), and installing support posts as far as Carleton, with bases set south to Diann (the Ann Arbor intersection where Ford built an interchange yard). The arches and posts were made of reinforced concrete, also used on bridges and viaducts during Ford’s modernization binge. All were built to last—and the arches sure did, as most of them on the Dearborn Branch still stand, too expensive to take down.

The locomotive, designed with Westinghouse and built in Ford’s Highland Park plant north of Detroit, was a four-unit, 372-ton machine. It was really two D+D units, Nos. 501A and 501B, which operated separately for most of their short careers. Outshopped in 1925, they ran from 1927 to February 1930, when they turned over in a minor derailment,



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### DT&I crossed all major east-west trunk lines in Ohio; the map mostly reflects circa 1962.

after which they were parked, never repaired, and scrapped. The units did fine but drew too much electricity from the Rouge’s power plant, affecting factory operation.

Ford’s other completed construction project was the 55-mile Malinta Cutoff,





Jim Hediger

**Stylized decal emblem adorns GP40-2 424, leading 407 and 211 on DC-9 at Springfield in 1980.**

a 20-mile-shorter direct line to that Ohio town from Maybee to replace the original circuitous route via Tecumseh (on NYC trackage rights) and Adrian. That line became a branch and gradually was cut back to Napoleon, site of a Campbell's soup plant that benefited from 400-plus yellow 40- and 50-foot insulated boxcars, some delivered on Dad's watch. DT&I ran on B&O trackage rights in two places, south from Jackson for 14 miles, and after 1966 on 26 miles of the parallel Toledo-Cincinnati route between Leipsic and Lima.

When Dad joined DT&I in mid-'56, it had been dieselized for six months and was topping off its fleet, with its last three GP9's on order. Ironically for an old Ford road, DT&I was all-GM (EMD), and those last Geeps, Nos. 990-992, would join a dozen switchers, two dozen GP7's, and 10 earlier GP9's; its first diesels, two 1941 SW1's, had been sold. The SW1's were black when built, but for grade-crossing visibility, bright orange became DT&I's color in 1948 with the NW2's. Despite being repainted, the switchers kept the mounted, nickel-plated emblems of a circular outline enclosing the initials they had inherited from steam-locomotive tenders.

DT&I had coined its "We Have the Connections" slogan, with a new compass emblem, with the first GP9's in 1955, but Dad felt the small black em-

blem undersold the marketing aspect and obtained approval for large "billboard" initials to grace the flanks of Nos. 990-992. The font was singular, being an enlarged version of the lettering on DT&I's by-then only passenger car: former PRR 70-foot business car 1907 *Dearborn*, acquired in 1954, rebuilt and painted an odd shade of dark green and numbered for the birth year of DT&I President David E. Smucker (also ex-PRR), of the Orrville, Ohio-based fruit-preserves clan (coincidentally, 1907 was also Dad's birth year). The large initials—which spread to most types of freight cars (some coded by paint color for assignment)—lasted as long as DT&I did. The last incarnation was a smaller, modernized version with a slanted compass "cross," an expensive star-monogram Scotchlite decal, which was applied to diesels beginning in 1979 with the delivery of GP40-2's 422-425, DT&I's last new power.

### New diesels, new routes

Second-generation diesels first came in 1964, eight GP35's (350's); they were joined in 1966 by seven GP38's (200's), a canceled Maine Central order with dynamic braking, which DT&I otherwise did not order. Eventually the new fleet totaled 67 units, adding 22 more GP38's, 25 GP40's (400's), and 5 SD38's (250's). The SD's, which had Pacesetter controls



John S. Ingles

**First of the final GP9 trio at Jackson; the photographer suggested adopting large initials.**

for Flat Rock Yard's hump, were also used on DT&I's new (1967) trackage rights through New York Central's Detroit River Tunnels, which had steep approaches, for Canadian Pacific interchange in Windsor, Ont. DT&I's Windsor-Cincinnati train was borne of CP's frustration with spotty NYC service.

Ann Arbor re-entered the picture in 1963 in the run-up to the 1964 Norfolk & Western-Wabash-Nickel Plate merger when, unwanted by N&W, it was foisted onto DT&I, which shed AA after Annie went bankrupt in '73. Both stayed out of Conrail. Pennroad's DT&I stock went to Pennsylvania Co., which became a Penn Central subsidiary, but in Conrail's creation, PC had to divest its rail holdings, so DT&I was put up for sale. Several roads nibbled, but GTW won it, in 1980.

Meantime, DT&I in 1955 had begun a run-through, DC-9, to Cincinnati, over PRR from the Springfield area. A decade later, it would go directly to yards of Louisville & Nashville and Southern Railway, via ex-NYC after PC was created and later using Erie Lackawanna out of Maitland via Dayton en route to CSX's Queensgate Yard in Cincinnati.

Big benefits for GTW were short-lived as deregulation and the 1980s mergers took place. GTW abandoned DT&I's south end, first over Summit Hill and south of Jackson, in 1982, then Jackson-Washington Court House in '84. GTW had merged DT&I in '83, and in 1990 sold the railroad south of Flat Rock to short line Indiana & Ohio. CN kept, and still has, Flat Rock Yard and north, while I&O runs Flat Rock-Washington Court House. A few ex-DT&I GP38's and 40's still work for CN.

For many of us, DT&I memories remain larger, perhaps, than a road of its



Jim Hediger

**Ford-era nickel-plated emblems lived on;  
SW7 922 is at Napoleon, Ohio, in fall 1964.**

size deserves. My friend of 55 years Jim Hediger, whose father, Norm, was in marketing and purchasing for DT&I, joined the staff of *MODEL RAILROADER* in 1972, a year after I joined *TRAINS*. Through his HO-modeling with a DT&I-inspired layout, Jim has kept the spotlight on the prototype. Dad handed down to me a nickel-plated emblem off an NW2 he obtained as the switchers were being sold; I also have a heavy "DT&I Private Driveway" signpost, a replica of the Ford-era cast-steel way-side signs. And of course, for all to see between Flat Rock and Dearborn, the concrete arches of Henry Ford's electrification remain standing as a monument to the changes he wrought. **T**

## DT&I FACT FILE

(comparable figures are for 1929 and 1981)

**Route-miles:** 517; 623

**Locomotives:** 67; 72

**Freight cars:** 2,879; 3,778

**Passenger cars:** 11; 0

**Headquarters city:** Dearborn, Mich.

**Special Interest Groups:** Grand Trunk

Western Historical Society, Box 214,

Durand, MI 48429, [www.gtwhs.org](http://www.gtwhs.org); DT&I

modelers Web site: [www.dti.railfan.net](http://www.dti.railfan.net);

historical Web site: [www.cg-tower.com/dti](http://www.cg-tower.com/dti)

**Recommended reading:** *Detroit, Toledo &*

*Ironton, Henry Ford's Railroad*, by Scott

Trostel (Cam-Tech Publishing, 1988); *Henry*

*Ford: When I Ran the Railroads*, by Scott

Trostel (Cam-Tech, 1989); *Detroit, Toledo &*

*Ironton Railroad In Color*, by David H. Hick-

cox and Dale A. DeVene, Jr. (Morning Sun

Books, 2001); *DT&I Cabooses*, by Dwight

Jones (B&O Caboose Publishers, 2008)

**Sources:** Books above; *Historical Guide to*

*North American Railroads* (Kalmbach, 2000)