

Farewell, Old Woman

Always marginal, the Ontario & Western finally faded for good on March 29, 1957

By Jim Shaughnessy • Photos by the author

During the mid-19th century, America was infected by a severe case of “Railroad Fever.” Many railroad backers recognized the need to connect the Atlantic Ocean in New York with the Great Lakes basin. The Erie Railroad was the first to accomplish this, reaching Lake Erie at Dunkirk, N.Y., in 1851, but its charter was only one of many granted in this era with the intent of linking the sea and the lakes.

In 1866 a group of investors incorporated the New York & Oswego Midland Railroad to build a 333-mile line from Jersey City, N.J., to Oswego, N.Y., a port city on Lake Ontario. NY&OM completed its line in 1873, but soon found it had drawn the short straw in the Atlantic-to-Great Lakes game. The Midland’s major competitors reached the lakes at or near

Buffalo, N.Y., which, owing to its location on Lake Erie, was far more popular than Oswego because it avoided the navigational bottleneck of the Welland Ship Canal, which bypassed Niagara Falls in connecting Lake Ontario with Lake Erie. Moreover, while other roads tended to follow river valleys, the NY&OM took a cross-mountain route with many bridges, tunnels, and grades exceeding 1.5 percent, all the while avoiding prosperous communities like Utica and Syracuse, which were not interested in subscribing to bonds in the enterprise.

It didn’t take long for the NY&OM to go bankrupt. Its investors formed a new company, the New York, Ontario & Western (NYO&W, or simply O&W), in 1879. However, in the reorganization proceedings, the company got into a squabble and lost its connecting lines be-

tween Middletown, N.Y., and Jersey City.

Now the NYO&W was without access to the Atlantic, one of the principal reasons for building the railroad in the first place. The road convinced the West Shore Railroad to build a branch from the O&W at Middletown 23 miles east to Cornwall, N.Y., on the West Shore’s main line along the Hudson River. From there, O&W trains used trackage rights on the West Shore to reach Weehawken, N.J., across the river from Manhattan. O&W later acquired the Middletown–Cornwall line, and the West Shore became part of the New York Central, but the trackage rights remained until O&W’s demise.

Still, red ink dominated the books, so in 1889, in a desperate attempt to achieve solvency, O&W built a 54-mile branch from Cadosia, N.Y., to Carbondale and Scranton, Pa. This line reached the center of the anthracite coal industry and offered potential bridge traffic connections with other railroads as well. Despite being a latecomer to the anthracite region, this relatively short artery would provide the lifeblood that would sustain the entire O&W well past what any economic logic would have predicted. The railroad’s perennially marginal finances and its herald of an “O” around a “W” inspired a nickname both disparaging and affectionate: “Old Woman.”

The O&W enjoyed a brisk, if seasonal, passenger business. For many years a flood of humanity rode O&W coaches to the Catskill Mountains every summer. They would depart the sweltering tene-



During my first visit to the O&W, on July 8, 1956, I found NW2’s 123 and 113 resting at Cadosia, N.Y.; also in the yard were two wood cabooses and an old company-service combine.

FT cab-booster set 801 rolls over typically weedy O&W track near Apex, N.Y., on July 8, 1956. The train has come from Oneida and Norwich and will be classified at Cadosia.



My second encounter with the Old Woman, in the bleakness of January 1957, included westbound freight BC-3, rolling west of Campbell Hall behind F3 822 and two FT's.



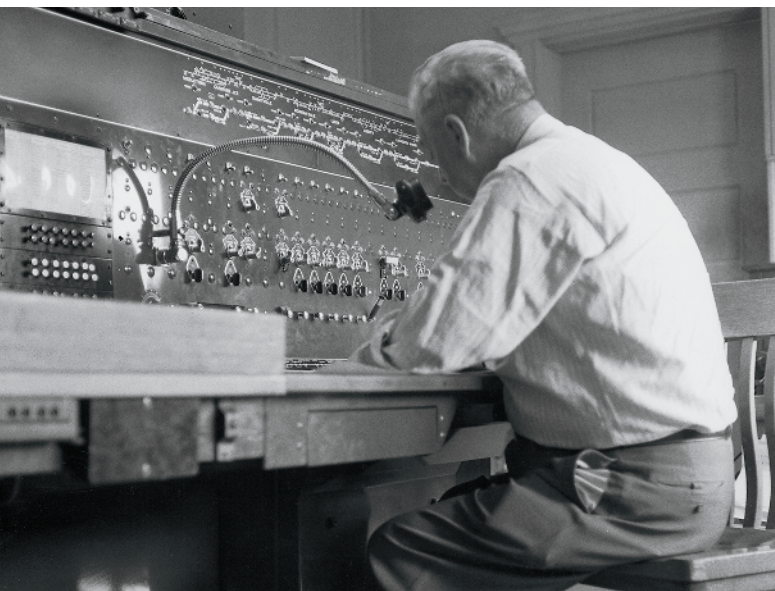
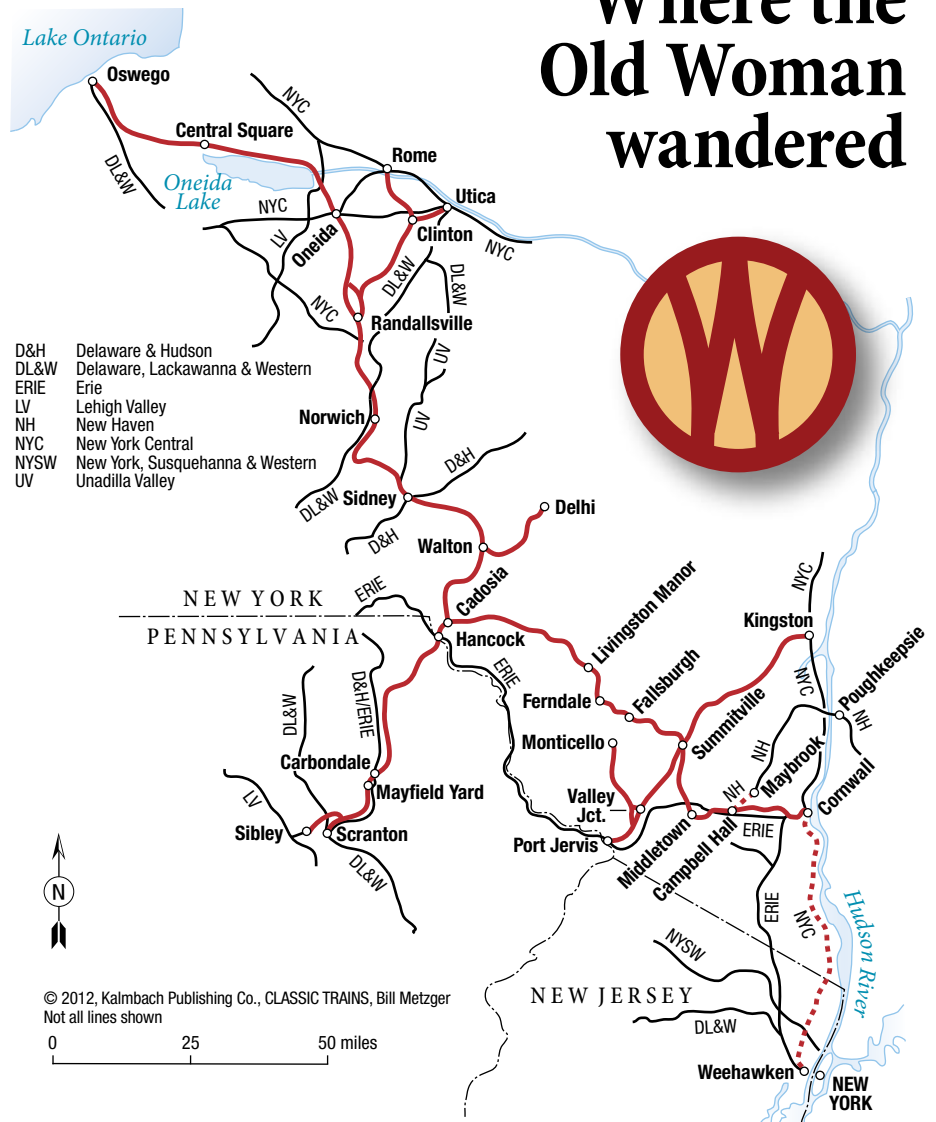
Also in January '57, FT set 808 and a single F3 pass the run-down station at Campbell Hall on their way east to Maybrook Yard with tonnage from Scranton and Carbondale, Pa.

ments of New York, ride a ferry from the foot of Franklin Street in Manhattan, and disembark at the West Shore's Weehawken Terminal. There the throngs would board O&W trains, often pulled by a pair of Camelback Ten-Wheelers, for the trip along the Hudson to Cornwall, then on to "the Mountains" over O&W rails. Passenger service gradually dwindled and ended in the early 1950s with a weekend-only Weehawken-Roscoe train.

The Old Woman's prosperity, little that she ever enjoyed, was tied to anthracite traffic off the Scranton branch, which amounted to more than 6 million tons in 1936. But as demand dropped with the change to other fuels for home and industrial use, so did the coal business, and O&W carried only 307,521 tons in 1955. Other income sources—milk, mail, and passengers—took to the highways, which left little else on the rails. By July 1948,



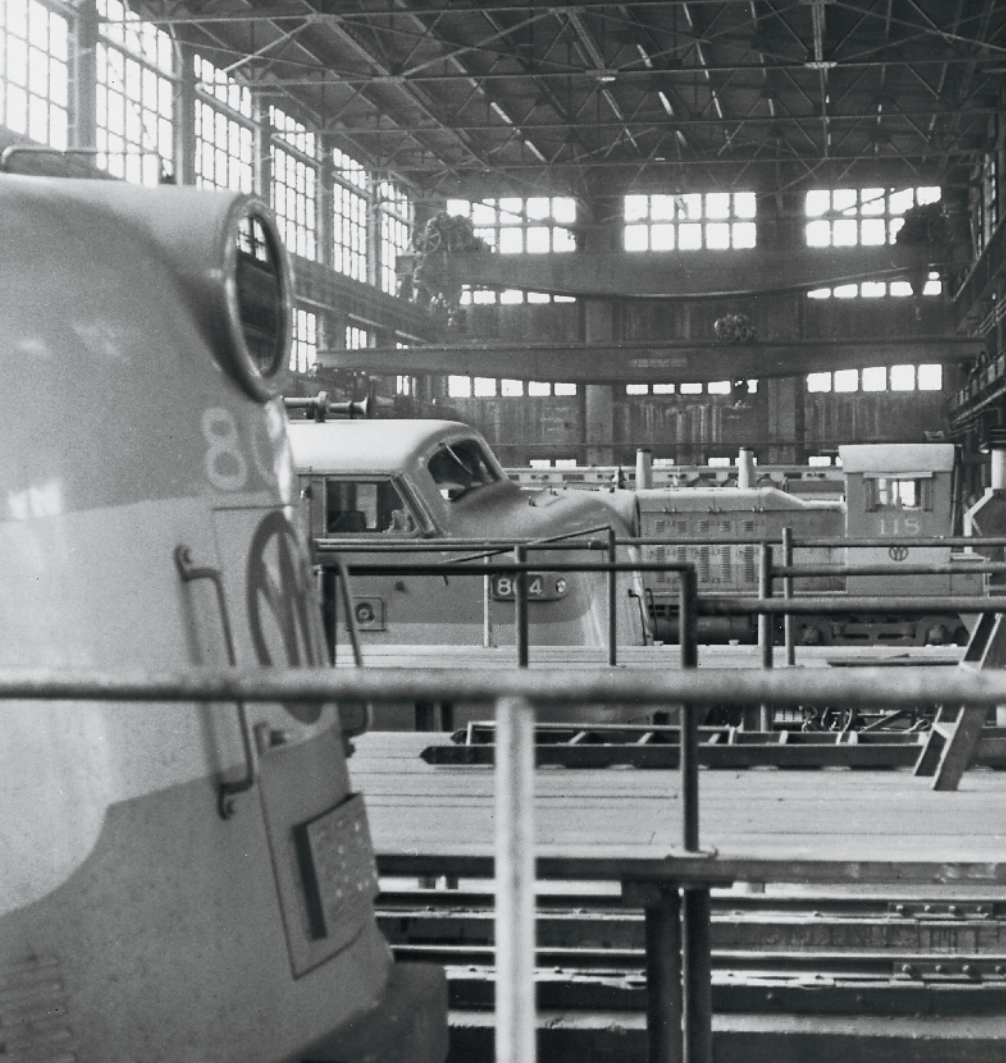
Where the Old Woman wandered



Dispatcher H. T. Dixon works the CTC machine at Middletown, N.Y., on March 23, 1957—six days before time caught up with the O&W.



Outside Dixon's office in the landmark Middletown depot/headquarters building, four FT's amble past with an anemic three-car BC-3.



Although the entire railroad would shut down in less than a week, all appears normal inside the Old & Weary's big shop at Middletown, where diesels congregate for routine servicing.



Another March 23, 1957, scene finds the Wisner Avenue crossing watchman protecting FT set 601, just in on train NE-6, in the Middletown yard. The yard office is at left, the shops at right.

with the help of the Reconstruction Finance Corp. and money from scrapped steam locomotives, the O&W had obtained 9 FT A-B sets, 7 F3A's, 21 NW2 switchers, and 5 GE 44-tonners, making it one of the first railroads in the country to be completely dieselized. All were painted gray with a yellow stripe plus orange on the front. It was projected that this decisive move would be the key to survival, but it was only a colorful postponement of the inevitable.

Visiting the Old Woman

I had visited the O&W twice with my parents on two of our wonderful Sunday car rides, once in July 1956 to the Cadosia area, and in January '57 to Campbell Hall, N.Y. On that first visit I found Scranton-bound freight BC-1 with four FT's east of Cadosia and a southbound down the main line from Norwich, as well as some switcher activity in the yard. Campbell Hall was also exciting, with freights coming in and out the south end of Maybrook Yard and the operator there handing up orders as they passed the weatherbeaten station building at the diamond crossing with the Erie. It had been rumored for some time that the whole 541-mile railroad would close early in 1957. This threat had been floated on several previous occasions, but somehow it had been avoided.

Finally, an abandonment date was set: March 29, 1957. So on Saturday, March 23, I returned for a more extensive, and probably final, look at the Old Woman. A friend, Roderick Craib, a technical writer for GE, drove his pea-green 1955 Chevy station wagon, and we arrived at the Middletown station about 9 a.m. On the second floor we found dispatcher H. T. "Hup" Dixon sitting in front of a good-size CTC machine, going about business as usual. Rod and I wondered, "Was this a railroad that would go out of business in six days?"

We chatted with Hup about the pending action and reminisced about his many years of service there at the CTC board and other agencies on the system. As we departed the dispatcher's office, freight BC-1 from Maybrook rolled past the once-busy station. Four FT's led just three boxcars and a caboose—surely a sign of the O&W's hard times!

Not far away was the road's shop and servicing complex. Here too it was pretty much business as usual, as F units and NW2 switchers were all around, some being fueled, sanded, and otherwise readied for duty. Inside the great shop



With my pal Roderick Craig, I followed train BC-3 of March 23 on its journey northwest from Middletown. About 38 miles out, the train flies over the 97-foot-high, 979-foot-long trestle at Ferndale, a structure emblematic of the tough, cross-valley course the O&W followed.

building, men in oil-stained coveralls were busy with the usual chores related to a shop on a functioning railroad. Were they all in a dream world, hoping an 11th hour reprieve would save them again?

Out at the north end of the yard, train BC-3 was being assembled for its regular afternoon departure for Carbondale. Considering the circumstances, the dozen cars formed a decent consist, easy for two FT's to handle on the saw-tooth profile ahead. In talking to the crew, I found surprisingly little negativism in their comments. Perhaps the long-time threat of abandonment for the O&W had numbed their minds, and they'd learned to treat each day the same. Rod and I left the crew to make their brake test and headed west to photograph the train at various points, the most spectacular being the bridge at Ferndale, one of many such structures on the hilly route.

However, my most lasting memory of the Old Woman was formed earlier in the chase, at Summitville. Standing near the station, we heard the distant rumbling of



BC-3 curves past the Summitville depot, making a run for the climb out of the Neversink Valley. It's late in the afternoon of March 23, 1957—and nearly midnight for the dear Old Woman.

the train as it descended from High View Tunnel. The FT's appeared in the distance, flashed by at 40 mph, and hit the grade on the west side of the valley. The drone of 32 EMD cylinders and squealing freight-car flanges gradually faded as one of the last trains to climb this hill

and pass through Fallsburgh Tunnel continued onward. Today silence prevails in the mountains, except for the chirp of crickets on what's left of a few weed-grown embankments and the sound of water dripping into puddles on the floor of the abandoned Fallsburgh tunnel. ■