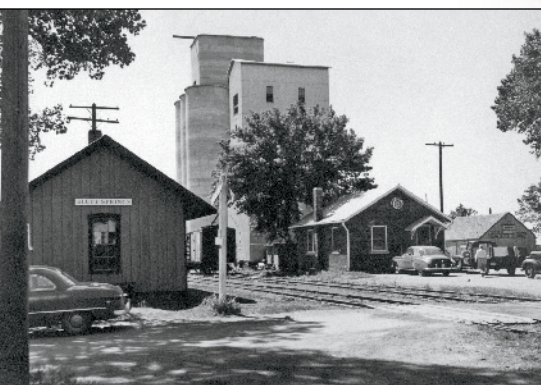


# B&O'S WESTERN OUTPOST

There was a down-home quality about the branch to Beardstown, Illinois, a distant corner of a far-flung empire

By Leigh Morris



Typical of small-town Illinois, the Farmers Elevator dominates Bluff Springs' skyline in a summer 1954 afternoon scene. The elevator, today a larger enterprise, was the domain of Frank Trussell, who orchestrated a special "last passenger run" in 1951, and the town was where the author "adopted" the branch.

Beardstown *Illinoisian*-Star, Leigh Morris collection

**F**all 1957 was when I acquired my first copy of the *Official Guide of the Railways*. Never mind that it was a well-worn, dog-eared survivor from April 1953. For me, it was a fount of priceless information to be studied at every opportunity. School homework could wait.

Through its pages I would join Chico on the *Super Chief*, ride the Water Level Route aboard the *20th Century Limited*, and take *Zephyrs* "Everywhere West." I could catch the North Shore's *Electrolin-*

*ers*; Chicago Aurora & Elgin's *Cannonball*; and even streamliners on the Illinois Terminal. There were also legions of nameless locals and mixed trains.

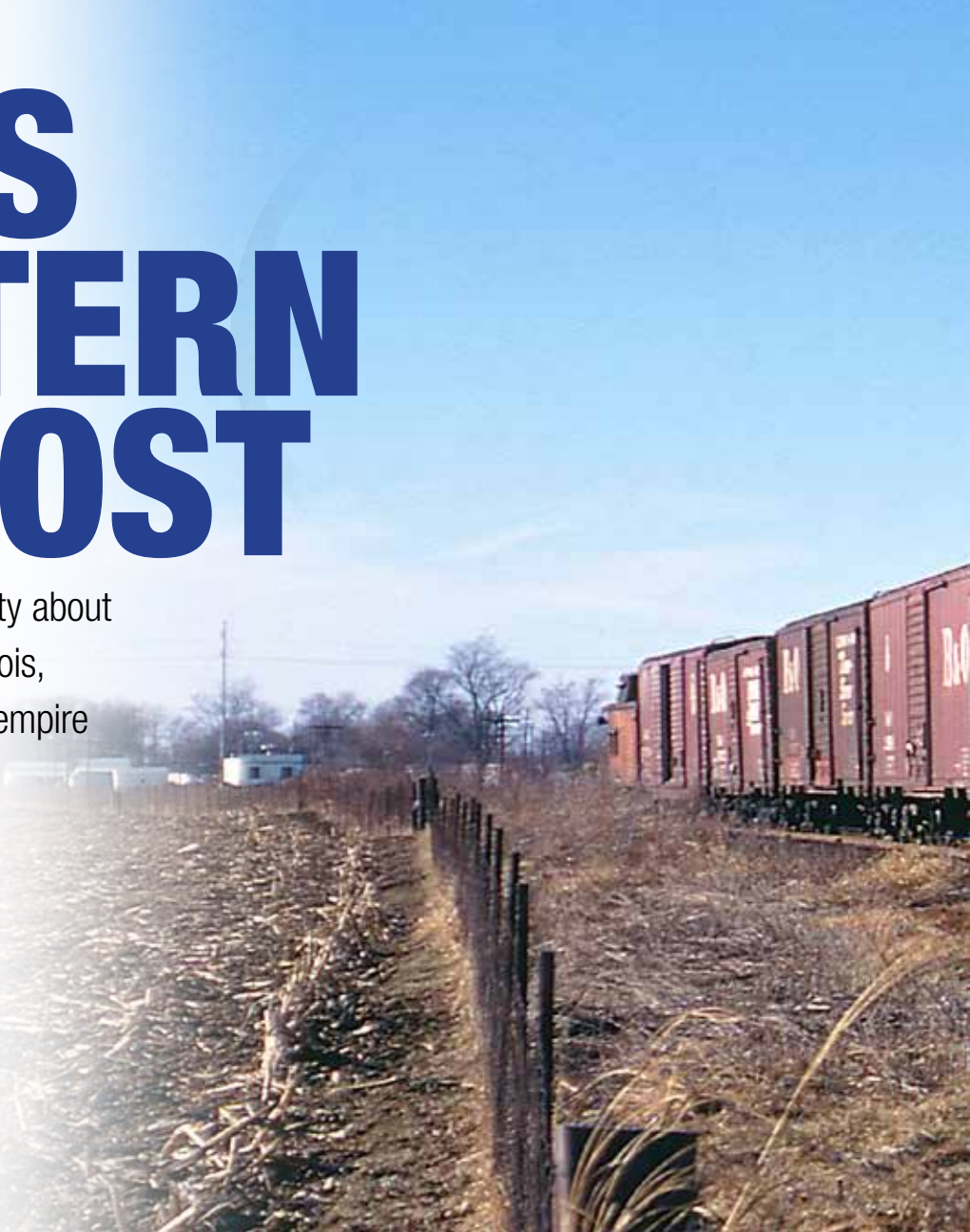
Of special interest were pages 396–397, upon which was the system map of the venerable Baltimore & Ohio. On the right were the great cities of the East, but of interest to me was little Beardstown, Ill., on the left, the unlikely western outpost of the railroad "linking 13 great states with the nation." Flipping to page 421, I would pore over Table 56 — "Beardstown and Flora. Freight service only" — covering 154.1 miles via Springfield, Taylorville, and Pana. The rest of this historic route, the 74-mile segment from Flora south to Shawneetown, was on Table 51 on the opposite page.

B&O's far western appendage, espe-

cially the 45.6-mile Beardstown–Springfield portion, had become my "personal railroad." I listened for the daily local freight at my grandparents' farm near Bluff Springs, just east of Beardstown. I spent untold hours watching the local's Geep switch cars at grain elevators and, in Beardstown, interchanging with the Burlington. I managed to wangle more than a few cab and caboose rides.

There was a down-home quality to this distant corner of B&O's far-flung empire. It had more in common with an interurban or a Midwestern short line than the B&O of awe-inspiring class S-1 2-10-2 and class T-3 4-8-2 steam locomotives, "Sentinel" freights, coal drags, mountain grades, and streamliners such as the *Capitol* or *National Limited*.

When the TV show "Petticoat Junc-







tion” debuted in 1959, its mythical C&FW Railroad branch between Pixley and Hooterville to me had been patterned after the Beardstown–Flora line. Perhaps Homer Bedloe, the sinister C&FW vice president who schemed to abandon the branch, was inspired by a real-life B&O executive.

### CLAMORING FOR A RAILROAD

Beardstown, on the Illinois River just below the mouth of the Sangamon, was growing in importance as a commercial, manufacturing, and transportation center when the Illinois General Assembly enacted the Internal Improvements Act of 1837. Among its provisions was the Northern Cross Railroad, to be built between Danville and Quincy by the state. Illinois was mostly settled from south to

north, and a companion Southern Cross was proposed to link Mount Carmel, on the Wabash River (the Indiana border) with Alton, on the Mississippi, the intent being for Alton to become a primary port. The Northern Cross intersected the Illinois River at Meredosia, 17 miles below Beardstown, and the state’s first train ran east from Meredosia in 1838. (The line reached Jacksonville and Springfield by 1842, Decatur in 1854, and the Indiana state line in 1856.)

In Beardstown, the proposed Northern Cross route was as welcome as a skunk at a Sunday picnic. City leaders feared local development would slow or stall without a railroad. Agitation for one was muted in the 1840s when promoters revealed plans to link Beardstown and Springfield with the Beardstown & San-

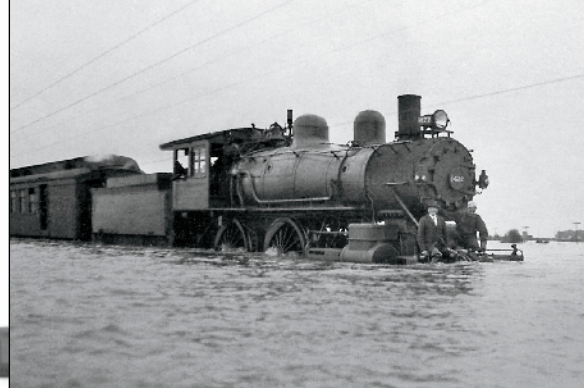
**Prairie loneliness: On December 23, 1967, B&O’s Beardstown local rambles eastward alongside Highway 125 near Pleasant Plains.**

J. David Ingles

gamon Canal, an idea championed by the young Abraham Lincoln. For a lot of reasons, mostly money, the canal idea came up dry, and today Beardstown’s Canal Street is the idea’s only reminder.

The first serious attempt to bring rails to Beardstown occurred in 1852. Charles Chandler, M.D., founder of Chandlerville, on the Sangamon River 16 miles east of Beardstown, thought the ticket to prosperity would be a railroad. His village was growing slowly owing to floods, wetlands, voracious mosquitos, poor roads, and a common belief that river bottoms harbored diseases. Chandler envisioned rails from Beardstown through Chandlerville and on east to Petersburg,





**Twice in the 1920s the Illinois River flooded Beardstown, but the B&O kept running. In 1922, two officials ride the pilot of 4-4-0 No. 1421 (left) into town alongside Burlington's yard, with boxcars carrying crucial supplies coupled behind the coaches. Four years later (above), Assistant Division Superintendent Babbitt (at left) and Road Foreman of Engines Kreager ride sister 1422 through deeper water on the morning train into Beardstown.**

Central Ill. Public Service photos, author's collection



**In later years, Brill motor 6038 was a Flora-Beardstown regular. In 1949, having turned on the wye and backed into town, 6038 and its baggage trailer wait for the 3:15 p.m. departure at the B&O platform, across from CB&Q's depot. B&O in 1925 signed a joint facilities agreement with the Q, using its facilities and employees for switching and maintenance for \$1,000 per month.**

Barney L. Stone, Krambles-Peterson Archive



**Having stopped for the Arenzville Road crossing, GP9 6673, a former C&O unit, leaves Beardstown on March 11, 1970, for Springfield. B&O's Geeps were set up long-hood-forward, C&O's the opposite, but by this time, B&O's Beardstown wye connection to CB&Q was long gone.**

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and the Beardstown & Petersburg Railroad was chartered on February 11, 1853. Nothing happened, though. A similar idea popped up in 1869 with a charter for the Beardstown, Chandlerville & Mason City, but construction never started. Meanwhile, Chandlerville did get the north-south Illinois River Railroad, in 1859. It failed in 1863 and was renamed the Peoria, Pekin & Jacksonville (known locally as the Push, Pull & Jerk). It struggled along and, after several incarnations, was finally abandoned in 1937.

In 1853, Beardstown physicians Charles Sprague and V. A. Turpin got a charter to build a railroad from Rock Island to Jacksonville via Beardstown. This idea faded quickly, but on February 15, 1855, Sprague, Turpin, and others chartered the Rock Island & Alton to run from Rock Island through Macomb, Rushville, Beardstown, Arenzville, Winchester (but not Jacksonville), and White Hall. This dream also soon evaporated.

Beardstown finally got its railroad on March 1, 1870, when the Rockford, Rock Island & St. Louis opened with fanfare as a decorated locomotive pulled three flatcars fitted with chairs across the new Illinois River bridge. This line became part of Chicago, Burlington & Quincy's coal-hauling route from Paducah, Ky., and far southern Illinois points, and remains active under today's BNSF Railway, with a crew-change office and yard on the southern edge of Beardstown.

## **B&O BRANCH ORIGINS**

The Pana, Springfield & Northwestern was chartered by the state February 16, 1865, to build from Pana northwest via

Springfield to Beardstown. In December 1869, PS&N and the Illinois & Southeastern, chartered to build from Pana to Shawneetown, on the Ohio River, were consolidated as the Springfield & Illinois Southeastern. Service to Beardstown began on March 27, 1871, securing at last a direct link to the manufacturing centers and markets in the East. When completed, the S&IS stretched 228 miles in linking the two navigable rivers.

As with many early railroads, construction costs helped slide S&IS into receivership in 1873. It was sold at foreclosure and on March 1, 1875, was acquired by the Ohio & Mississippi. Connecting Cincinnati and East St. Louis, the O&M went into the Baltimore & Ohio Southwestern in late 1893. Seven years later, B&O absorbed the B&OSW.

The Beardstown line was a boon for area farmers, who gained access to important new markets. Grain elevators were built at many spots, and other on-line businesses sprang up. At one time, millions of pounds of fish were shipped over B&O from Beardstown to big cities in the East for elegant restaurants or to be used in making gefilte fish.

Beardstown-Flora passenger service by 1900 was two daily trains, plus one daily-except-Sunday, in each direction; Flora-Shawneetown service was similar. The line also saw baseball, state fair, and other event specials. Although slow in speed, the trains were an improvement over horse-powered travel on rutted roads that became quagmires when wet.

### UNDETERRED BY HIGH WATER

Throughout its history, the line across the prairie to Beardstown enjoyed an unremarked, routine existence, with two high-water exceptions during the 1920s, the first in 1922. It had been thought that Beardstown, though on the Illinois River, was reasonably safe from flooding, the high-water record of 22.4 feet having been set in 1844. Subsequently, waters had reached or surpassed the 20-foot mark only six times. Then on April 20, 1922, the river crested at 25.1 feet.

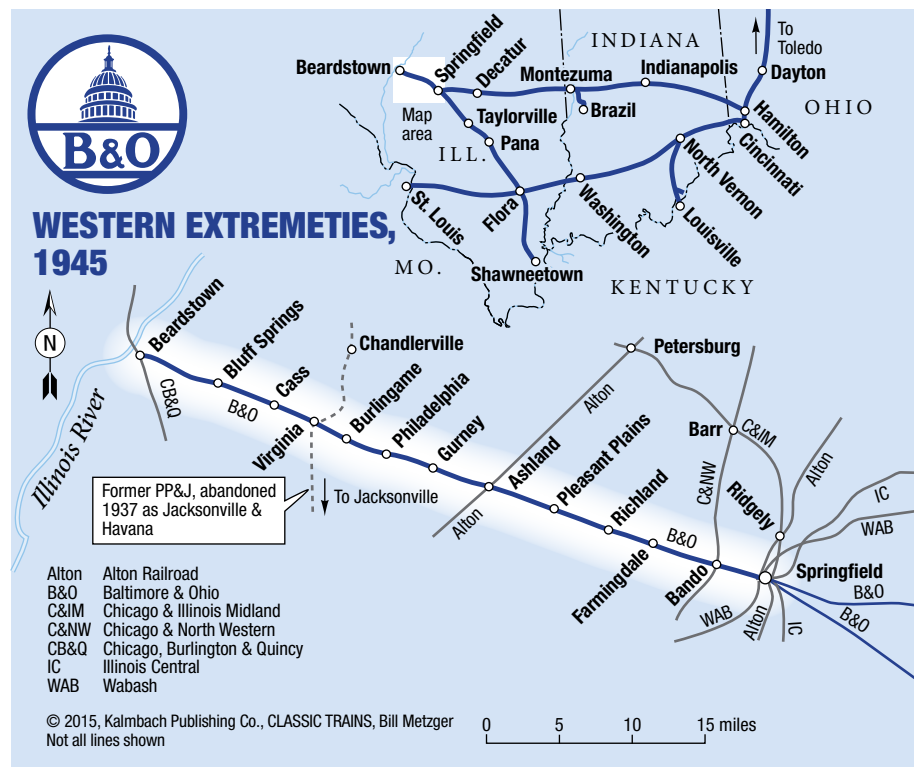
Conventional wisdom held that major flooding took place in spring or summer, but in fall 1926 that flew out the window. Unrelenting rains began in September, and on Tuesday, October 12, the Illinois reached a record 26.6 feet at Beardstown, surpassing the 1922 crest by 17 inches. Most of the town was under water.

Days before the crest, track washouts and concerns about the safety of CB&Q's Illinois River bridge forced the railroad



**B&O's depot at tiny Philadelphia, Ill., 18 miles east of Beardstown, was almost exactly 1,000 miles west of its station in Philadelphia, Pa., measured on B&O lines via Ellicott City and Cumberland, Md.; Winton Place in Cincinnati; Hamilton, Ohio; Indianapolis; and Springfield, Ill.**

Walt Peters, R. R. Wallin collection



to suspend all service. Beardstown residents feared the town would be unable to receive shipments of food and essential supplies. There was talk of evacuation.

However, local B&O men had other ideas, and they set out to prove the iron horse could navigate high water across nearly 2 miles of flooded track. Under the stubborn leadership of B&O Trainmaster K. S. Pritchett, scheduled passen-

ger-train service never stopped. A man named Babbitt, the assistant division superintendent, rode the pilot of every locomotive into and out of town during the high water, often joined by the road foreman of engines, named Kreager. Although B&O did halt freight service until the water receded, Pritchett made certain that boxcars loaded with medical supplies, food, and other essentials were





**A ubiquitous B&O E-27 2-8-0 passes GM&O's Ridgely Tower in Springfield in 1954 to begin its trek to either Beardstown or Flora. B&O moved to Ridgely Yard after it bought the Alton Railroad and used rights on C&IM into the central part of town to reach home rails.**  
Walt Peters, R. R. Wallin collection



**Bluff Springs' Frank Trussell (far right in photo above), several dozen area schoolchildren (among 153 total), and their teachers and chaperones pose by a coach before re-boarding the last B&O passenger train out of Beardstown on March 24, 1951. Conductor G. O. Shinefield is in the center, surrounded by youngsters. In the close-up photo at right, Conductor Shinefield and Beardstown Police Chief Turner Antrobus flank Trussell.**

Both, Beardstown *Illinoisian-Star*, author's collection



added to the passenger trains, whose express cars and RPOs also kept running.

The Illinois began to recede on October 13, but it did not fall below 20 feet until the 29th. Water rose again in late November, reaching 20.3 feet at month's end. While flood-weary residents kept one eye on the sky and the other on the river, the danger of flooding had passed.

### **MODEL T'S AND THE TERRAPIN**

Although the B&O conquered floods, Henry Ford's affordable Model T and hard roads posed a more formidable foe. By the mid-1920s, both were taking a toll on local rail travel, and the Great Depression made matters worse. B&O eliminated two of the four daily Beardstown-Flora passenger trains and re-

placed their steam locomotives and conventional cars with gasoline-electric motor cars. Electro-Motive cars were tried first, but they were found wanting and replaced by Brill Model 250 cars. In April 1933, service was cut to one schedule each for Flora-Shawneetown and Flora-Beardstown.

Such motor cars often were called "doodlebugs," but many folks locally said "puddle-jumpers." On the branch's west end, at least, another label took hold — "Terrapin," a type of turtle. The name was appropriate considering the cars averaged 28 mph on the road. The Terrapin carried riders, brought the mail, provided express service (usually towing a second car), hauled cans of fresh milk, took watermelons and other locally grown produce to market, and even delivered fresh bread from Springfield.

In the capital city, incidentally, B&O — plus Illinois Central and Chicago & Illinois Midland ancestor Chicago, Peoria & St. Louis — used Union Station until after B&O bought the Alton in 1931, whereupon B&O moved to Alton's depot (today's Amtrak facility). After GM&O took over the Alton, B&O in 1947 moved back to Union (B&O Indianapolis trains had been cut back to Decatur in 1940).

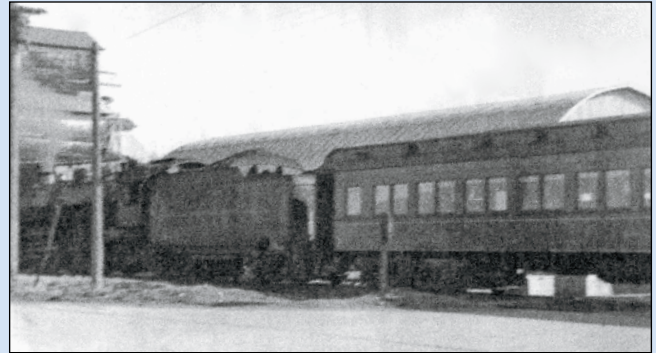
Economical or not, the Terrapin's fu-



# CONSOLIDATION OR PACIFIC?

**One mystery about** the last B&O passenger train to Beardstown, on March 24, 1951, has remained. Although I had not been able to locate a photo of the steam locomotive B&O assigned that day, I assumed it must have been an E-27 class 2-8-0. B&O had more than 400 of them, mostly built by Alco during 1905–10, and they held down Beardstown branch freights clear into 1955. Such a Consolidation type was ideal for the Beardstown line, with its 85- to 90-lb. rail and numerous bridges with weight restrictions.

Duane Carrell, a friend and fellow B&O historian from Springfield, Ill., agreed. (Carrell's 30-page history, "B&O's Springfield Sub-Division," thoroughly covering the entire Beardstown–Shawneetown line, was published in the Second Quarter 2015 issue of *The Sentinel*, the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad Historical Society's magazine.) Our assumption went up in a cloud of coal smoke one morning, though, while I was rummaging through old photographs at Roy French's Caraway Seed antique shop in Virginia, Ill. There it was, this photo of that final B&O train eastbound at Virginia. Though blurred, the locomotive is clearly not a 2-8-0 but a 4-6-2, probably either a P-3 or P-5 class. Carrell



Leigh Morris collection

confirmed my identification, and since the equipment for this last run ran north from Flora, on B&O's St. Louis main line, it is likely the Pacific and the three cars were sent over from B&O's yard and shops in Washington, Ind., for the occasion. A clear photo or a written description of the locomotive, however, has not yet turned up. — Leigh Morris

ture remained tenuous until America's entry into World War II. First came the suspension of civilian auto and truck production, plus the manufacture of most vehicle replacement parts. With the Japanese in control of a lot of the world's rubber sources, the U.S. enacted tire rationing. To further reduce the need for tires, the government then imposed gasoline rationing and a national 35-mph speed limit. The Terrapin was a reliable if not speedy transportation alternative.

## A MEMORABLE LAST RUN

After the war, ridership and passenger revenue on the branch kept declining. Flora–Shawneetown went freight-only in April 1949, and the diamond crossing with B&O's Cincinnati–St. Louis main line at Flora was removed. The Flora–Beardstown "Terrapin" was running on borrowed time, and 80 years of rail passenger service on the branch ended on a cold Saturday, March 24, 1951.

But this last run would be special, thanks to Frank Trussell, manager of the Bluff Springs Farmers Elevator Co. from 1923 to 1968 in that hamlet five miles east of Beardstown and known locally as "Mr. Bluff Springs." His elevator was a good B&O customer, and he had a close working relationship with the railroad.

Moreover, he made up his mind that March 24 would be a memorable day for everyone along the B&O, but especially for youngsters from the Bluff Springs area. Although motor cars had handled the passenger schedule for 20 years or so,



**A sizable crowd is on hand at Virginia, Ill., as a westbound B&O train pulls up to the depot in the early 20th century. The station still stands, modified, as part of The Depot restaurant.**

Leigh Morris collection

Trussell thought the last run should feature a steam locomotive ahead of a Railway Post Office and a passenger coach. His niece, the late Phyllis Reichert of Bluff Springs, recalled that B&O initially resisted the idea, but Trussell persuaded the road to see it his way. Not even TV's sinister Homer Bedloe could say no.

So when that last westbound train No. 41 pulled to a stop at Bluff Springs' depot at 10:49 a.m., Conductor G. O. Shinefield, a 40-year Beardstown–Flora line veteran, helped Trussell, teacher Ada White, and parents serving as chaperones to usher 153 excited children onto the big blue cars for the short ride into Beardstown. (Owing to the Bluff Springs

crowd, the train had a second coach.) Likely for many of the kids, it would be their only train ride. Once in Beardstown, Trussell led his charges to the Masonic Temple on State Street, where the youngsters enjoyed a sack lunch, Rink's soda pop, ice cream, candy, and bubble gum, before marching north to the Gem Theater to watch cartoons.

While the children were being entertained, RPO clerk Cloyed E. McGhee was busy canceling covers with the final RPO postmark on this historic line. McGhee also, of course, had sacks of mail to handle. Meanwhile, the engine crew was preparing for the trip back to Flora; the locomotive was shuttled over to CB&Q's





**This trestle east of Pleasant Plains, crossed by GP9 6592 with the eastbound local on April 19, 1965, makes obvious why Geeps were the heaviest power allowed on the line. Visible beyond is the Highway 125 bridge.**

J. David Ingles

roundhouse to be turned and serviced.

After the cartoons, Trussell's entourage marched back to the station to pose for a photo and board the train. Shinefield gave the highball, and at 3:15 p.m., the last B&O No. 40 left Beardstown for Springfield, Taylorville, Pana, and Flora. About 11 minutes later, it stood in front of the Bluff Springs depot.

Those present that day recalled the engineer was especially generous with the whistle and bell as the train pulled into and out of Bluff Springs. A few days later, Bluff Springs resident Ursula Payne bid farewell to the train in Beardstown's *Illinoian-Star* newspaper: "... Good-bye, small train, fondly called the Terrapin. Your days of usefulness are over. You will be put to pasture like a worn-out plow horse. We will miss you." On Monday, March 26, a Star Route truck took over carrying mail to towns along the line, which settled into a freight-only life.

## END OF THE LINE

As the ubiquitous 2-8-0s gave way to equally ubiquitous EMD GP9s, traffic on the branch held steady through the '50s. Elevators at Bluff Springs, Virginia, Philadelphia, and Ashland were reliable sources of business, and B&O did a decent amount of interchange with CB&Q.

The 1960s were not as kind. A slide in traffic became painfully apparent as the



**Caboose C2040 on the westbound local of April 4, 1973, crosses ICG's "Jack Line" at Ashland. In years past, the joint depot included a two-story interlocking tower facing the diamond.**

R. R. Wallin collection



**GM&O shared its Ridgely Yard facilities, including the enginehouse, with B&O, as seen in this June 10, 1973, post-ICG-merger scene with B&O GP9 6465 plus GM&O F3 806B and two GP30s.**

R. R. Wallin, J. David Ingles collection



elevators began the switch to trucks, and interchange traffic declined. The future looked bleak for three of the stations that still had agents: Virginia Rohn at Bluff Springs, R. G. Allen at Philadelphia, and Tom Cantrell at Pleasant Plains. Why these three? Those depots never did get electricity, although their agents had kerosene lamps should a need for light arise (heat was obtained by dumping a scoop of coal into a pot-bellied stove). Air conditioning? You opened a window and prayed for a breeze. Time was kept by a traditional wall-mounted, eight-day pendulum Regulator clock.

Those three depots were closed in late 1962 with barely a whimper. Allen and Cantrell stayed on with B&O at new locations, while Ms. Rohn retired. Meanwhile, B&O kept agents at the more “modern” Beardstown, Virginia, and Ashland stations, the latter a joint depot at the crossing of the former Alton “Jack Line” branch. The Beardstown run, a daytime turn based at GM&O’s Ridgely Yard in northern Springfield, where B&O migrated after it absorbed the Chicago & Alton in 1930 (and renamed it Alton Railroad), usually rated one GP9.

From a daily-except-Sunday schedule in the late 1950s, service had slimmed by the early ‘60s to Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Trains typically ran 15 to 20 cars, mostly interchange traffic, with longer consists in grain-harvest season. In Springfield, B&O trains used trackage rights on Chicago & Illinois Midland from Ridgely to Avenue interlocking, where they gained home rails, swinging west toward Beardstown, southeast toward Flora, or east toward Decatur.

In 1963, Chesapeake & Ohio gained control of B&O, which continued as a separate railroad although many services were gradually integrated. Nine years later, the two roads, plus Western Maryland, were grouped under the “Chessie System” name. Equipment began appearing in Chessie’s eye-catching combination of blue, yellow, and vermilion with the sleeping kitten logo. Legally, the three roads still were separate, so “B&O” still appeared on Chessie locomotives.

Not even Chessie, of course, could lure freight back to the Beardstown branch. During 1971, the line handled only 800 cars, 59 percent interchange traffic (only 322 cars originating or terminating), down from more than 1,100 in each of the two previous years. Sometimes the train ran only twice a week. After protracted abandonment proceedings with the Interstate Commerce



**Beardstown-bound, GP9 6434 leaves C&M trackage at Avenue interlocking on November 10, 1962, to enter joint B&O-IC trackage as far as 3rd Street, where IC’s ownership share ended.**

J. David Ingles



**With two GP9s, the Beardstown run crosses GM&O’s main at 3rd Street November 14, 1971. It has just passed Union Station, used by B&O until 1931 and from 1947 until the last run in 1951.**

J. David Ingles

Commission, also involving Springfield–Flora and Flora–Shawneetown, 108 years of Springfield–Beardstown B&O service came to an end on January 28, 1979 . . . in a blizzard, when the train, despite having interchange cars for Burlington Northern in Beardstown, was forced to retreat back to Springfield from Virginia. The BN cars went home via a different route, and the rails lay dormant until they were pulled out in summer 1980.

Short segments of the Beardstown–Springfield right of way remain visible, although most of it, especially next to Highway 125, has been reclaimed by

farmers for corn and soybean crops. The only structure left is the Virginia station, modified and serving as The Depot restaurant at the intersection of Highways 125 and 78. In a final case of irony, today’s Bluff Springs post office stands on the site of the B&O depot. Of course, it was the Post Office’s decision to switch from RPOs to Star Route trucks that led to the cessation of the passenger trains. Soon, small post offices like Bluff Springs may well themselves fall victims to progress in “the electronic age.” Somewhere, the ghosts of the B&O’s western outpost must be smiling. ■