

# Alphabet Route Reborn

BY DAVID KELSCH/PHOTOS AS NOTED

COMPETITION FOR FREIGHT TRAFFIC has always been fierce, especially for railroads that serve the same markets. It would seem that smaller railroads would not be able to compete for the long haul like the major trunk lines, but thanks to innovative operating agreements, short-haul lines were able to join forces and provide competitive schedules and rates. For example, giants such as the New York Central; Pennsylvania Railroad; Erie; and Baltimore & Ohio enjoyed the lion's share of traffic moving between Eastern and Midwestern markets without having to interchange to a competitor.

Starting in 1931, regional carriers including the Nickel Plate Road (NKP), Wheeling & Lake Erie (W&LE),

Pittsburgh & West Virginia (P&WV), Western Maryland (WM), Reading (RDG), Central Railroad of New Jersey (CNJ), Lehigh & Hudson River (L&HR), and the New Haven (NH) formed a cooperative agreement that became known as "the Alphabet Route" for the multiple carriers' initials found on routing cards and waybills. This alternate competitive routing met its demise thanks in part to the overall decline of Northeastern freight traffic, the inclusion of WM into Chessie System in 1973, and the Conrail mega-merger in 1976.

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began their comeback in 2008 when a new agreement between Southwestern Maryland (WM), Reading (RDG), Central Railroad of New Jersey (CNJ), Lehigh & Hudson River (L&HR), and the New Haven (NH) formed a cooperative agreement that became known as "the Alphabet Route" for the multiple carriers' initials found on routing cards and waybills. This alternate competitive routing met its demise thanks in part to the overall decline of Northeastern freight traffic, the inclusion of WM into Chessie System in 1973, and the Conrail mega-merger in 1976. For the generations of railfans and railroaders who grew up after the end of the original Alphabet Route, it is a piece of modern-day folklore. Multi-carrier routings over eastern regional rail lines



ABOVE: With the iconic Buffalo Central Terminal rising in the distance, Buffalo & Pittsburgh Train BKBK rounds the curve at Seneca Street in Buffalo, N.Y., destined for the South Buffalo Railway in Lackawanna on January 8, 2017. The coke will be unloaded and trucked to ArcelorMittal in Hamilton, Ont., because the plant does not have a car-dumper on site. ROB BALL PHOTO

RIGHT: On March 2, 2017, an Alphabet Route coke train emerges from Glenshaw Tunnel on Allegheny Valley Railroad's P&W Subdivision north of Pittsburgh, Pa. This former section of the Baltimore & Ohio mainline serves as a critical piece in the connection between the regional railroads delivering coke from the mine in Pennsylvania and the customer in New York State. DAVID KELSCH PHOTO







ABOVE: Powered by three Wheeling & Lake Erie SD40 rebuilds, the Alphabet Route coke train trundles across Connoquessing Creek in Buhts, Pa., on the former B&O Butler Subdivision on January 6, 2017.

RIGHT: On December 5, 2015, the Buffalo & Pittsburgh's contribution to the joint operation came from sister railroad Wellsboro & Corning. The former Quebec, North Shore & Labrador SD40-2 leads the empty coke train past Bakerstown Siding on the B&P's P&W Subdivision near Valencia, Pa. DAVID KELSCH PHOTOS

Dubbed the "Great Lakes Gateway" by the four railroad companies, railfans and railroaders took full opportunity to bring back the lore of yesteryear and unofficially refer to the routing as "The New Alphabet Route."

#### New Players in an Old Game

The first link in the New Alphabet Route is the "new" Wheeling & Lake Erie Railway which was formed from



lines in Pennsylvania and Ohio cast off by Norfolk Southern in 1990. The main portion of the W&LE system extends from Connellsville, Pa., to Bellevue, Cleveland, and Toledo, Ohio. ArcelorMittal's coke traffic originates on the Matt Branch at Monessen, Pa. The trains are handed off to the Allegheny Valley Railroad at Bruceton, Pa.

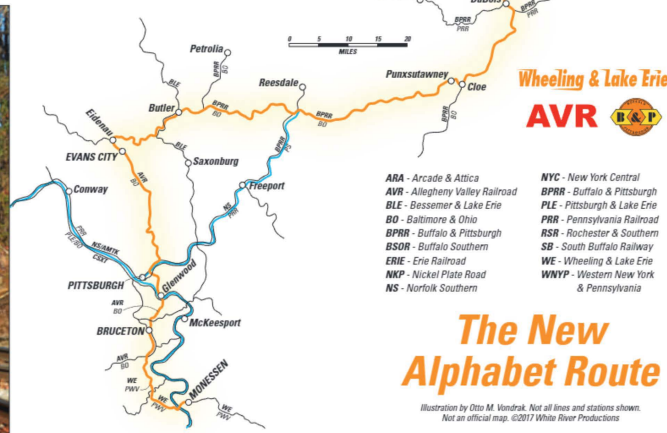
The Allegheny Valley Railroad was launched in 1995 by regional operator Carload Express, Inc., by taking over former Pennsylvania Railroad lines purchased from Conrail running along the east bank of the Allegheny River from downtown Pittsburgh to New Kensington. In 2003, AVR expanded south to Washington, Pa., and north to Bakerstown, Pa., on former CSX track. Current operations are based out of Glenwood Yard, located in the Hazlewood neighborhood of Pittsburgh, leased from CSX. Coke traffic is picked up at Bruceton and handed off to the Buffalo & Pittsburgh at Evans City, Pa.

The Buffalo & Pittsburgh Railroad (BPRR) represents one of the first expansions by shortline operator Genesee & Wyoming outside of its home territory in Western New York. CSX Transportation was looking to sell the former Buffalo, Rochester & Pittsburgh Railway lines operated by Baltimore & Ohio since 1932. Once an important route for hauling coal from western Pennsylvania to the Great Lakes for export, CSX was anxious to shed the excess mileage once coal shipments ended in the 1970s. In 1988, G&W formed the Buffalo & Pittsburgh to operate the line between Buffalo, N.Y., and Eidenau, Pa. In 1997, B&P negotiated a trackage rights agreement that shifted all overhead freights to the parallel Conrail Buffalo Line, and the original BR&P track between Orchard Park and West Valley was abandoned. Coke trains are received from AVR at Evans City, Pa., and run up to Buffalo, where they terminate on the South Buffalo Railway.

Once owned by Bethlehem Steel, the South Buffalo Railway (SB) was sold to Genesee & Wyoming in 2001 after years of inactivity following the collapse of the steel industry in Buffalo. While rostering no locomotives of its own, SB continues to provide switching services around Lackawanna, N.Y. Coke trains terminate on SB to allow for easy transfer to trucks for final delivery.

#### The New Alphabet Route

For several years, the concept remained intact on paper, but it wasn't put into practice until 2014 when ArcelorMittal restarted its Monessen coke plant on the Wheeling's east end in Monessen, Pa. ArcelorMittal would become a prominent unit train customer shipping outbound coke loads to Canada via the WE and Norfolk Southern to be



## The New Alphabet Route

Illustration by Otto M. Vondrak. Not all lines and stations shown. Not an official map. ©2017 White River Productions





**ABOVE:** On March 5, 2017, Allegheny Valley Railroad and Wheeling & Lake Erie units team up to haul a loaded coke train over the Monongahela River Bridge on AVR's W&P Subdivision, as seen from West Homestead, Pa.

**RIGHT:** The Alphabet Route coke train rolling along Streets Run Road just outside of Pittsburgh, on March 5, 2017. This track is former B&O Pike mainline from Pittsburgh to Wheeling, W. Va. Most of the "Alphabet Route" is former B&O trackage that was shed by CSX more than 25 years ago.

**BELOW RIGHT:** Three W&LE "Tigers" lead the coke train through Bryant, Pa., on AVR's P&W Subdivision on March 2, 2017. The photo was taken from a former interurban right of way which crisscrosses the P&W Sub from Bryant to Ellwood City. DAVID KELSCH PHOTOS



transferred to Great Lakes vessels in Cleveland, Ohio. However, the Great Lakes shipping season doesn't last the entire year, and storage space for coke was hard to find in the jam-packed Port of Cleveland. The Allegheny Valley Railroad and the Buffalo & Pittsburgh were ushered into the picture with a new move via WE-AVR-BPRR to the South Buffalo Railroad where the coke would be trucked the remaining mileage to the customer.

The first run of the new routing took place in December 2015, and ended after only five trains. When no Alphabet Route trains ran for all of 2016, area railfans were surprised with the return of several unit coke trains in 2017. The schedule has not been regular, but often enough to allow for some interesting photo opportunities for those lucky enough to be trackside.

The new Alphabet Route utilizes some



**ABOVE:** During the summer of 2017 two runs of the Alphabet Route coke train occurred. The coke train with mixed freight on the head end crosses the Allegheny River Bridge on the AVR P&W Subdivision at 33rd Street in the Lawrenceville section of Pittsburgh, Pa., on June 11, 2017. The Mount Troy neighborhood can be seen in background.

**LEFT:** With the old code line poles following the tracks, the loaded coke train rolls past McCalmont Road near Renfrew, Pa., on Buffalo & Pittsburgh's Butler Sub. The abandoned pole line is a remnant from earlier days when the old Buffalo, Rochester & Pittsburgh line was signaled to handle the heavy amounts of traffic hauling coal from the mines of western Pennsylvania. DAVID KELSCH PHOTOS



of the most notorious pieces of railroad in the Northeast, with steep grades and tight curves throughout. It begins with WE's Matt Branch at Monessen, which swings underneath the former P&WV trestle at Speers, Pa. Wheeling & Lake Erie four-axle power is usually found leading the consist, with at least one engine from each of the partner roads trailing. Trains later climb over this same high trestle on the WE Pittsburgh Subdivision en route to Bruceton, Pa.,

where the Wheeling crews cut off their four-axle power and leave the train in the interchange siding for the Allegheny Valley Railroad crews to take the helm. AVR will reverse the train north and continue on the former B&O W&P Subdivision to Glenwood Yard. The train continues on a section of the old B&O Baltimore-Chicago mainline between Marion Junction and Evans City, Pa., where B&P crews take over for the run to Buffalo, N.Y. The train terminates

on the South Buffalo Railway for transloading and delivery to ArcelorMittal in Hamilton, Ont. There is no car dumper at the final destination, which requires the material to be trucked in from Buffalo, with Tonawanda Coke as the subcontractor.

While there is no set schedule for the coke trains, harsh Northeastern winters would force continued operation to keep up with demand while the Great Lakes remain frozen. However long it lasts, this revived spirit of cooperation among the regionals has brought new excitement to a freight market seemingly dominated by CSX and NS. ■