



AN ANTHRACITE COUNTRY SUCCESS STORY

Reading & Northern

BY AMANDA OAKES/PHOTOS AS NOTED

EASTERN PENNSYLVANIA is known as “Anthracite Country” for good reason. Anthracite’s unique properties made this abundant hard coal a preferred fuel and a precious commodity that drove this region’s economy for more than 100 years. Some of the country’s earliest railroads were built to tap this natural resource.

The Reading & Northern spans a 320-mile network of branchlines in eastern Pennsylvania that are steeped in the history of anthracite mining. While most of the trackage is former Reading (the inspiration for the railroad’s current image), sections of former Lehigh Valley, Central Railroad of New Jersey, and Lehigh & New England are also included.

The company got its start in 1883 as the Blue Mountain & Reading, a 13-mile line servicing freight customers and running passenger excursions. Seven years later the company acquired about

150 miles of track from Conrail, and evolved into the Reading, Blue Mountain & Northern (RBMN), popularly known as the Reading & Northern.

Within six years, 100 miles of Conrail’s Lehigh Line, former Lehigh Valley track spanning from the greater Scranton area to Lehigh, was also purchased. Other acquisitions over the next few years included the line to Jeddo Coal Company in Hazleton, track to Delano, the Crestwood Industrial Park, and access to Procter & Gamble’s plant in Mehoopany.

On June 1, 1999, Norfolk Southern came into play with its acquisition of the Conrail lines that connected to the RBMN. Another big change occurred in 2002 when NS and Canadian Pacific gained access to NS’ Lehigh Line to connect markets in Canada and the northeastern U.S., to the greater New York City area via Allentown, Pa.

While the railroad has hosted a

number of passenger excursions off and on over the last 30 years, May 2005 saw the birth of the Lehigh Gorge Scenic Railway (LGSR) passenger operation based in Jim Thorpe, Pa. Weekends and holidays hosted many popular excursions and brought a lot more tourist traffic to scenic Jim Thorpe. Renovations on popular steam engine No. 425, a Pacific from the Gulf, Mobile & Northern, were completed in 2007 and passengers on the LGSR now have a sense of nostalgia on their journey riding behind a steam locomotive.

Crews are currently working out of seven terminals operating a number of RBMN freight trains, as well as passenger excursions under the LGSR banner. There are several interchange points throughout the system. Norfolk Southern has multiple interchange locations including Taylor Yard near Scranton, Penobscot, and Lehigh. The Lehigh Railway interchanges with



OPPOSITE: On January 1, 2016, Reading & Northern assumed the ownership and operation of 7.5 miles of rail infrastructure at the Humboldt Industrial Park in West Hazleton, Pa. The railroad began operating a dedicated train between West Hazleton and North Reading Yard via the Lofty Connection to expedite the movement of traffic. On February 18, WHFF-2 with SD50s 5049-5022 is ready to depart West Hazleton. PAT YOUGH PHOTO

TOP: A mixed consist of power pulls train JTEX over the Lehigh River at Nesquehoning Junction in Jim Thorpe, Pa., on May 20, 2016. JOHN MOLCZYNSKI PHOTO

RIGHT: A pair of GP39RNs lead train QAMC on October 9, 2014. At East Mahanoy Junction the train enters the Reading & Northern mainline and track speed picks up. JIM KLEEMAN PHOTO

BELOW: Train PNMV picks up loads of coal from Reading Anthracite near Minersville, Pa., on October 30, 2014. AMANDA OAKES PHOTO



RBMN in Mehoopany, and the Shamokin Valley Railroad interchanges in Mount Carmel.

While the railroad’s heritage is in anthracite coal, forest products currently make up about one-third of the business, along with food products, plastics, metals, and anthracite to name a few of the bigger commodities hauled.

The company’s latest big announcement is the acquisition of the rail assets at the Humboldt Industrial Park in Hazleton. Four new jobs for train crews have been created since this announcement in January 2016.

The line is divided into two different divisions. The Lehigh Division spans from Packerton to Mehoopany, while the Reading Division is made up of points south and west of Jim Thorpe. Currently there could be up to ten different jobs working out of the seven terminals.

Pittston Operations

The Pittston terminal, operating in the former Lehigh Valley Coked Yard, currently has four jobs scheduled.

YJPI (Yard Job Pittston): Early morning call time, Tuesday-Friday. Tasks include setting up PISB and PIME's trains, occasionally servicing Cascade Tissue in Ransom, Pa., and tacking onto PISB's hind end until they reach Old Forge, where they break away and service Mariotti Lumber and Old Forge Warehouse. Afterwards, YJPI will continue north to Taylor for NS interchange.

PIME (Pittston-Mehoopany): Early morning call time, seven days a week. PIME will assemble its own train as necessary prior to heading north to Proctor & Gamble. Cascade Tissue will be serviced on the southbound trip back to the yard. Just beyond P&G, the RBMN receives seasonal salt loads from the Lehigh Railway which runs between Mehoopany and Sayre, Pa.

PISB (Pittston-Scranton Branch): Mid-morning call time, Sunday-Friday. The Keyser Valley Industrial Park operates in what once was the Lackawanna's Hampton Yard. The train skirts NS' Taylor Yard in order to reach

RIGHT: Train MCQA works Mount Carmel, Pa., on April 24, 2015. After reaching yard into the International Paper Co., five loads are pulled out into the sun. The locos were both built for Missouri Pacific bearing the numbers of 5049 and 5033 respectively. DENNIS STERN PHOTO BELOW: Reading & Northern GP39RN's 2530 and 2531 lead TARG south through New Ringgold, Pa., on October 8, 2014. STEVE CARLSON PHOTO

this industrial park to service four Kane warehouses, Azek, 7D, and Quadrant Plastics. A part of the plant at Quadrant actually features one building that used to be a part of the Lackawanna's Keyser Valley car shop.

PIFF (Pittston Fast Freight, NS interchange at Lehigh): Evening call time, seven days a week typically running with two SD40-2s. Monday, Wednesday, and Friday the train picks up empties at Penobscot on its trek south. They will return north light power and work at Penobscot, bringing cars from NS train 37T to Pittston.

Penobscot Operations

Reading & Northern's Penobscot terminal is located in Mountain Top Township, and hosts only the PECW

(Penobscot-Crestwood) with an early morning call time, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. The regularly assigned power is usually an SW-1500 or SW-8. PECW works the Penobscot transload, yards cars dropped off by PIFF, and services I2M, Seally, and AEP.

Tamaqua Operations

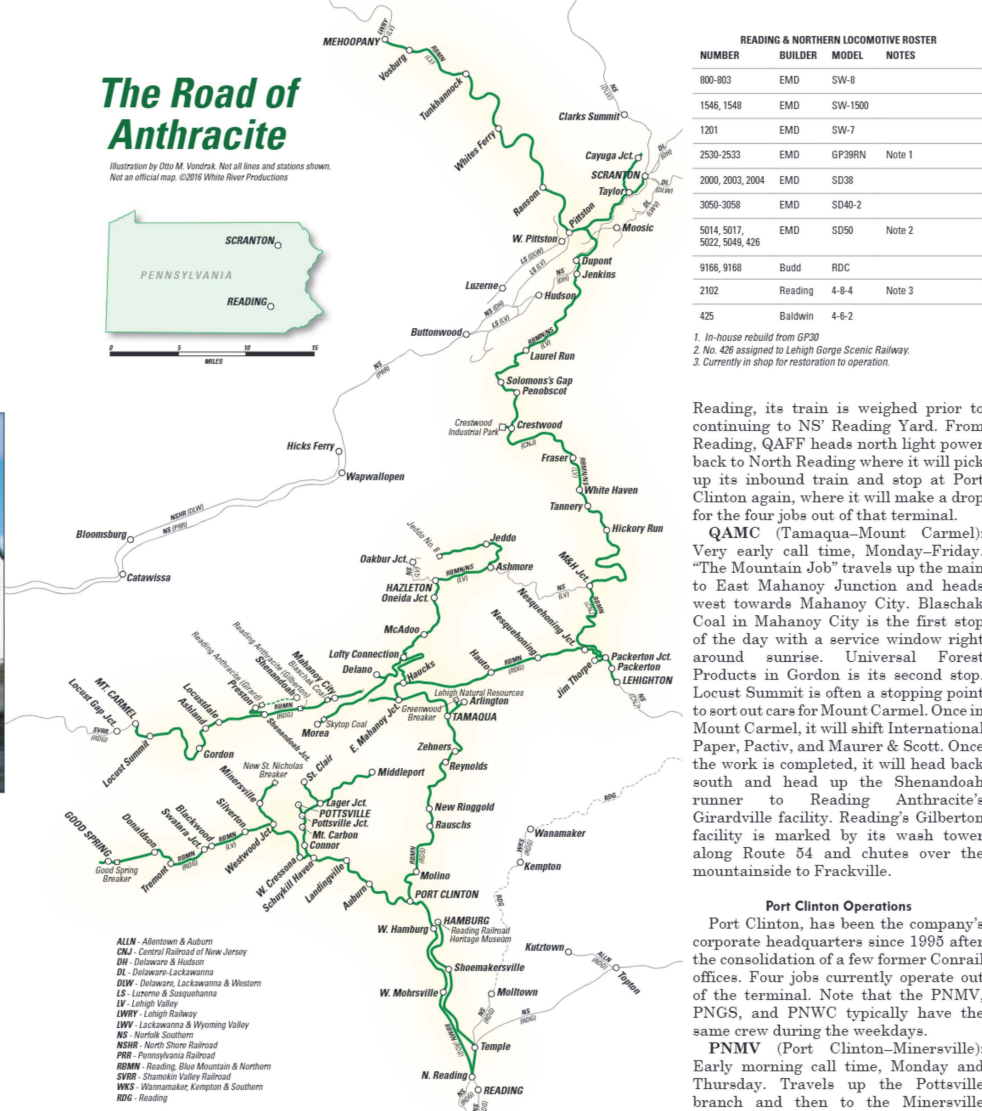
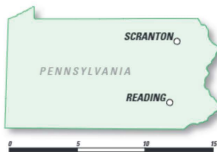
The town of Tamaqua, Pa., located where U.S. Route 209 and State Route 309 bisect each other, is home to another hauloff of regularly scheduled jobs.

QADE (Tamaqua-Delano): Early morning call time, Monday and Thursday. The train runs north to East Mahanoy Junction and continues to Haucks, then on the Hazleton line to Delano Junction, and finally southwest to Delano. Customers serviced are



The Road of Anthracite

Illustration by Otto M. Vondrak. Not all lines and stations shown. Not an official map. ©2016 White River Productions



Reading, its train is weighed prior to continuing to NS' Reading Yard. From Reading, QAFF heads north light power back to North Reading where it will pick up its inbound train and stop at Port Clinton again, where it will make a drop for the four jobs out of that terminal.

QAMC (Tamaqua-Mount Carmel): Very early call time, Monday-Friday. "The Mountain Job" travels up the main to East Mahanoy Junction and heads west towards Mahanoy City. Blaschak Coal in Mahanoy City is the first stop of the day with a service window right around sunrise. Universal Forest Products in Gordon is its second stop. Locust Summit is often a stopping point to sort out cars for Mount Carmel. Once in Mount Carmel, it will shift International Paper, Pactiv, and Maurer & Scott. Once the work is completed, it will head back south and head up the Shenandoah runner to Reading Anthracite's Girardville facility. Reading's Gilberton facility is marked by its wash tower along Route 54 and chutes over the mountainside to Frackville.

Port Clinton Operations

Port Clinton, has been the company's corporate headquarters since 1995 after the consolidation of a few former Conrail offices. Four jobs currently operate out of the terminal. Note that the PNMV, PNGS, and PNWC typically have the same crew during the weekdays.

PNMV (Port Clinton-Minersville): Early morning call time, Monday and Thursday. Travels up the Pottsville branch and then to the Minersville branch at Westwood Junction. Tredgear Film Products is serviced in Marlin, and Reading Anthracite farther up the line in Minersville.

PNGS (Port Clinton-Good Spring): Early morning call time, Tuesday and Friday. The "Goodsbringer" runs northwest along the Pottsville Branch and heads west at Greenwood Junction. Customers serviced are Penn Ag in

Skytop Coal Co. and Poly Plastics. Upon returning to Tamaqua, it uses the Greenwood Runner to service Lehigh Natural Resources and Tanner as needed. Occasionally, it will run south of Tamaqua to shift Maurer & Scott in Zehners.

QAJT (Tamaqua-Jim Thorpe): Early morning call time, Tuesday and Friday.

After assembling its train, it travels up the mainline to Haucks and heads east to work Air Products, Reynolds, and Ametek.

QAFF (Tamaqua Fast Freight): Late afternoon call time, Sunday-Friday turn job to Reading. Cars and engines are often picked up and dropped off at Port Clinton along the way. At North

Donaldson, Summit, and SMI, which receives refrigerated box cars at the end of the line.

PNWC (Port Clinton–West Cressona): Early morning call time, Wednesdays only. Works Sapa, Cressona transload, Kaytee, and WRC, and will clean up the yard as needed.

PNRB (Port Clinton Roustabout): Early morning call time, Monday–Friday. Heads north on the Pottsville branch if it is going to work Sapa and the Cressona transload facility, both in Cressona. Omnova in Auburn, Koremart in Hamburg, and Cambridge Lee Industries in Laureldale are three other customers to the south of Port Clinton.

Hazleton Operations

The new Hazleton terminal has created three new jobs for RBMN crews.

WHHB-1 (West Hazleton–Humboldt): Early morning call time, Monday–Saturday. The crew is responsible for servicing the following customers within the Humboldt Industrial Park: Graham Packaging, Quad Graphics, Karchner Logistics, Freedom Corrugated, Cargill, and Vitaline.

WHHB-2 (West Hazleton–Humboldt): Mid-morning call time, Tuesday and Thursday. Responsible for servicing First Quality Non-Wovens and Office Max but will assist the WHHB-1 if necessary as well as service the Stockton

RIGHT: No. 2012 was built by the Reading Railroad in 1945. In 2010, the 4-8-4 was on display outside the enginehouse at Port Clinton. At the beginning of 2016, the railroad announced it would be restoring the locomotive to active service. KEVIN MADOSE PHOTO
BELOW: Reading & Northern 425 passes No. 426 at Jim Thorpe, Pa., the home of Lehigh Gorge Scenic Railway. GARY PANCAVAGE PHOTO



Mine east of Hazleton.

WHFF (West Hazleton Fast Freight): Mid-afternoon call time, Monday–Friday. WHFF is the new road train responsible for bringing the Humboldt cars to Port Clinton. Afterwards, it goes to North Reading and picks up cars for Humboldt and returns there.

YJNR (Yard Job North Reading): Morning call time, Sunday–Friday. With the establishment of the Hazleton terminal in 2016, this additional yard job is needed to handle the excess traffic. Two local customers can be serviced in addition to a ballast ramp located in Temple.

Other Operations

Aside from the regularly scheduled jobs, there is always the good chance of running into some sort of extra train somewhere on the system that could be doing many tasks. Extra unit coal trains to Jeddo or other mines, work trains, and crews shifting stored tank cars for



NS along the property are most common. High-and-wide movements can be seen around three to four times a year. The dimensional loads originate from Air Products in Wilkes-Barre where the Luzerne & Susquehanna brings the loads to NS interchange at Hudson. NS will interchange with RBMN at Dupont where the train runs to Lehighton to once again hand it over to NS. Crews start their day in Jim Thorpe in the early morning, taxi to Pittston, and typically get moving around 9:00.

In 2010, RBMN acquired the six-mile Towanda–Monroeton Shippers Lifeline, which runs between Towanda and Monroeton. This operation is isolated from the other lines, and only a handful of cars are interchanged to the Lehigh Railway for relay.

Passenger Excursions and Steam

Aside from the freight operations, the Lehigh Gorge Scenic Railway is another source of revenue for the Reading &



Northern. Basic trips from Jim Thorpe to Old Penn Haven along the Lehigh River are a common weekend occurrence from May through November. Many specials are run, including Santa trains throughout the month of December, Easter Bunny trains in spring, autumn leaf excursions, and bike trains to name a few. Excursions also run over the Hometown trestle to the west of Jim Thorpe and various towns throughout the territory.

A secondary operation has developed in Pottsville, departing from the new Intermodal Transit Center. The last regular passenger trains to serve Pottsville were Philadelphia commuter trains operated by Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) in 1981. Reading & Northern operated a limited number of Pottsville excursions in 2014, using the same Budd RDCs once operated by SEPTA. This schedule has been expanded in 2016, with several dates throughout the year.

There are also two operating steam engines frequently used on excursions as well. No. 425 is a Baldwin locomotive built in 1928 for the Gulf, Mobile & Northern (later Gulf, Mobile & Ohio). It was owned by four different railroads prior to RBMN purchasing it in 1983. The locomotive headed a number of excursions throughout the system until fires were dropped in 1996. After nearly a decade in storage, the locomotive was rebuilt and steamed up in 2006, resuming a regular schedule in 2007. The “Four-and-a-Quarter” was taken out of service for the 2011-12 season to allow for minor repairs to be completed, including conversion to roller bearings, the addition of a more powerful blower, and rebuilding of the pilot and tender trucks.

Perhaps the most well-known steam locomotive in the fleet is former Reading T-1 4-8-4 No. 2102. Constructed in the Reading Shops in 1945, the 2102 enjoyed a second career as a popular excursion

LEFT: Two R&N switchers head back to Tamaqua Yard after loading 19 cars at Lehigh Natural Resources’ Greenwood Breaker on former Lehigh & New England trackage. The loads will move via Norfolk Southern to the MOL-DOK transloading facility in Leetsdale, Pa., where the coal will be loaded in barges for final delivery. PAT YOUGH PHOTO
BELOW LEFT: Reading heritage meets Delaware & Hudson heritage in Taylor Yard, outside of Scranton, Pa. Train PISIB passes the Canadian Pacific crew on the return trip to Coxton Yard on October 19, 2014. With Canadian Pacific’s sale of the south end of the D&H to Norfolk Southern, scenes like this are no longer possible. AMANDA OAKES PHOTO

engine for the famous “Reading Rambles” of the 1960s. Acquired by RBMN in 1985, the beefy Northern ran a series of trips until the mid-1990s when the locomotive was sent to Steamtown in Scranton, Pa., for display. No. 2102 was brought back to Port Clinton in 1998. After years of speculation, RBMN announced in January 2016 that the locomotive will be rebuilt to steam once again. While repair efforts are already underway, no date has been announced for the completion of the project.

Privately owned Central Railroad of New Jersey 0-6-0 No. 113 was built in 1923 and primarily used for yard service. The Philadelphia & Reading Coal Co. (currently Reading Anthracite) purchased No. 113 from CNJ in 1953 to service a colliery in Locust Summit where the current line to Mount Carmel runs. Purchased by Robert E. Kimmel, Sr., in 1986, the privately funded rebuilding project began in 1999. The locomotive made its public debut in 2013, operating a limited excursion schedule in Minersville in cooperation with RBMN.

Visiting Anthracite Country

A day spent trackside anywhere on the Reading & Northern will not be a day wasted! Most jobs are easily accessible and crews are very friendly and helpful. The scenery and rich history of the line are undeniable, and one thing that stands out most about the company is its pride. The crews are proud of the area’s rich history and heritage, and many have an interest in the railroad outside of their daily work. From local switchers to mainline steam locomotives, the R&N has something for everyone. ☐

Amanda Oakes is a railroad enthusiast and photographer from Binghamton, N.Y., whose primary interest is railroads of the New York / Pennsylvania region.