

Tales of the Old Colony Railroad

By THE REV. CANON
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My first brush with the Old Colony Railroad took place at the Duxbury Station when I was approaching the age of 6. My mother had hitched up the horse and carriage and decked me out in my Sunday best in my first grade Point School outfit and we waited for the 2:30 on route to Boston. The train sounded its whistle but from the height of a 6-year-old, the locomotive appeared to be rocking back and forth on the track. I grabbed the only available protection, my mother's ample skirts and screaming in fear and panic waited for the moment to pass.

The 2nd encounter with the railroad was at the age of 13 when the New Haven provided free excursion trains to the 300th anniversary of the landing of the Pilgrims in 1920. The train was so crowded that the even standing room was exhausted and the conductor invited me to sit on the rear platform of the last car with my knees straddling the coupling. Warren Harding was present for the ceremony. He harked back a century when Daniel Webster gave the address - America's greatest orator then and perhaps even now, held an audience of 10,000 people spellbound, as reported by William Ticknor, for 2 solid hours on a chill October day.

My 3rd experience with the railroad occurred sometime later when an error in switching to the freight house, which stood on a siding just north of Alden Street, spilled the locomotive and coal car down the bank beside the John Alden House. I had noted Alice Wadsworth DeWolf, whose husband Russell worked for the Merry Meat Market and I saw her hold her two 12- and 13-year-old boys by the hand. I remember asking her why she brought them here in this place of danger. "I just wanted my boys to see how a powerful machine could be rendered powerless."

Duxbury had been slow to accept rail transportation as the Kingston Stage Coach was in easy reach and the Packet made semi-weekly trips between Boston and Plymouth. A stable stopover had also been set up in West Duxbury forming the key to a flourishing commercial center there with a post office, a department

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store and especially a black-smith shop operated by Harry Winslow that spanned the boundaries of both Duxbury and Pembroke.

A railroad had been built in 1856 as far as Cohasset which gave it its name, until in 1871 when the last leg of the Old Colony was completed in time for 10,000 people to attend the laying of the cornerstone of the Myles Standish Monument. There is much talk today about reinstating a railroad for direct access from Plymouth to Boston, but nothing can really be done to resurrect the Old Colony in Duxbury as it was when I was growing up. It simply can't be done in the manner it was constituted at the time.

First of all it was the town's number one employer after the ship building folded. It was the town's life line to the outside world and got several scores of people young and old involved in the town's activities which in winter was about all that was going on. All kinds of people found meaningful work, even for semi-disabled people.

One task that involved older and often retired people was standing at grade crossings to prevent collisions. The railroad provided 4 by 4 huts with an armchair and a pot-bellied coal stove for the winter months. At the sound of an approaching train the watchman would grab his stop sign, usually on a 6-foot pole and stand in the middle of the intersection between rail right-of-way and the highway.

Bud Goodrich tells of the Millbrook crossing manned by a tall but crippled worker, who nonetheless stood in the way when a double locomotive snow plow roared through a 4-foot snowdrift burying him and filling his little hut solid full of snow.

I think my most disastrous encounter with the Old Colony was on a late fall afternoon when my father had sent my brother Henry and me to Irving Peterson's dairy farm to supplement the supply of milk his cows had given. The area boasted 7 dairy farms at this time.

Now father had the habit of buying high spirited horses he loved to tame. One of these was called Ginger. Ginger was a trotter, in distinction from a galloper. He would stretch out his long legs and pass every other horse on the road. But, he was temperamental and would bolt when occasion required.

We had loaded the 4 40-gallon milk cans on our wagon and heading for home along Tremont Street had

noted that the 5:30 train was just pulling out of the Green Harbor station. We reasoned that with Ginger's speed and his blinders, we could, with luck, beat the train to the railroad crossing.

This we did but as we climbed the hill opposite what is now Barney's Gas Station, he looked around and saw the approaching steel monster and headlight illuminating the track into the Duxbury Station.

That look was enough and he leaped 3 times. The 1st spilled the milk cans. The 2nd dumped the seat and blankets and us out onto the street and dashing around the corner he was long gone.

The Old Colony struggled along with fewer and fewer passengers and freight, private truck companies and cars multiplied and finally in 1959 the announcement was made that it would close down. A gigantic protest arose and a public hearing given by the management was held in South Station in Boston. A vice president called the meeting to order and said he had one question, "Can I have a show of hands of any and all who took the train to this meeting?" Not a single hand went up. "I rest my case," he said and dismissed the assembly.

So the Old Colony of a blessed memory will remain that - a blessed and delightful memory with many tales like these to warm the hearts of those interested in antique recollections.

I can't bring this essay to a close without a personal reminiscence not of Duxbury, but of my first parish in Wiscasset, Maine.

I had taken the day off from parish duties and walked down with my pole over my shoulder to the railroad trestle over a tributary to the Sheepscot River. It was

mid morning so I thought there would be no trains and I took a position 4 or 5 yards off the track. Soon a whistle sounded and an enormous Maine Central locomotive came in view. I could not escape and I had no mother's skirts to hide in. As the engine rocked back and forth the terror of a 6-year-old came back to me and I've never done anything like this again.

So Duxbury is once again planning a railroad commuter train to Boston. The right of way and the reinforcing of the roadbed is well under way, but as in years past there will still be no direct South Shore line to Boston. The Kingston connection will stand for many years to come, as it had before and Duxbury's transportation, like its weather which echoes neither that of the Cape nor that of Boston, will remain.