

A Fictional Day on the Railroad

Written by Jason Lamontagne, November 25, 2018

I arrive at dawn for train service, on this beautiful but chilly day after Thanksgiving. There's a fresh snow on the ground from last night- glistening as it does when lit just so. Walking up out of the parking lot I see today's power has been readied and pulled out in front on the roundhouse lead, nose to the table. How funny, I think, "that power" was built right here, by us. But then so was this entire railroad. Move along, lots to do today.

Walk around the front of the shop into the station. Sign in to the HoS log, check the board, and grab the switch list hard copy for our train. Today we're running the timetable scheduled Mon-Wed-Fri morning mixed; afternoons of the same weekdays carry a second scheduled round trip. This morning's switch list is a record high for us: 2 coaches and a combine (our 3 car set) on our northbound leg to Whitefield. There we turn, add 2 cars of off season maple products, one cheese coop car and one boxcar for express overrun. Head Tide will see two flats of sawn boards, making a 9 car, 165 ton train for the Mountain. It'll be fine. Should be fine, anyway. Top of Mountain sees two more boxes of sawn specialty lumber added, followed by a flatcar of machinery at ML&M, only to be dropped at Sheepscot. No new restrictions, all seems well.

Walking around to the north side of the shop, a splendid sight: the low morning sun lights up our No 11 broadside. The blued jacket, resplendent varnish, and subtle mechanics of the machine blend effortlessly into its environment: the cedar shake enginehouse, graceful yard track curves and tall, snow-laden trees. I consider taking a photo but decide against it as it's just another of 14,000 photos on that poor, silly phone. I start walking again and pause- to take a photo. What's one more?

I thank the hostler for preparing the loco, and doing all that he does for us. He conveys a few mechanical concerns- injectors finally working well but the lubricator eye- well, you know. I meet today's fireman, go over the switch list, and prepare to turn the locomotive. Just then our conductor and brakeman walk in, and we chat about the plan again. No worries- the more the better. The conductor comments on the size of the train we're tasked with. I remind him of that photo showing No 7 hauling about 12 loaded coal cars right up through this very spot. Of course that was down the Mountain, but no matter. They help us turn the loco and ride up to the north yard with us. We back in to grab our 3 car lashup, all made up in car barn bay 1 (thanks to that building's extension some years ago). A brake test and we come down on the main, and back into Sheepscot platform.

We're surprised to be greeted by about 15 passengers, all rail enthusiasts looking to grab some photos of our activities this morning. We depart on schedule at 6:30, and quickly find the fresh snowfall has provided no ill effects. The crossings are negotiated with ease as our track crew keeps well ahead of ice and snow pack with salt. We roll past Alna Center and Top of Mountain stations as no passenger flag is displayed. Down the Mountain carefully, and past Trout Brook Station- again no flags. The river is beautiful this morning- the locomotive is running like a watch, train is handling with ease. Into Head Tide- no passengers waiting. Lots of express is waiting however; that'll get loaded on our Southbound leg. We carry on, working up the Valley and over the Iron Bridge. I'm so pleased we took the harder path and built this bridge exactly as the original. It's a unique structure that sits right at home here. Shortly after we come up along Route 194, relocated a little to the north east to allow our railroad to be rebuilt, cross route 218 and arrive at Whitefield Station on time at 7:15.

We turn no 11 after clearing out the table, then back down on the 4 boxes we are to add to our train. Adding the coaches again, we pull back into the platform. There's another 1/2 mile of track to the north of us- which currently stores a fleet of flatcars which get heavily used come hay season. The station is filling up. Looks we may add 15 or more passengers. The agent says many of them are booking through to Boston, to return tomorrow or Sunday after shopping. As we're talking, more folks file in.

The maple cars are loaded with syrup and candy; that and the cheese car are all bound for Boston via our railroad and the freight ferry. One of the maple cars is loaded from the farm down on Route 218. The other is from the sugar house up on Townhouse Rd. The cheese coop is spread throughout Whitefield and extends to neighboring towns. In summer, our maritime partner uses a schooner, but we appreciate the off season service they provide with the ferry. Every syrup and candy package gets a little tag outlining its journey- over our steam powered narrow gauge railway dating from 1854, and via Wiscasset seaport and the ocean direct to Boston. The narrow gauge, faithfully rebuilt right where it once ran more than 100 years ago, captures the hearts of many- especially when coupled with the final leg of the journey by sea.

The process harkens from the era of resourceful locals bringing their produce to market in resourceful ways. We've package branded the entire thing "Old Maine," and have engaged partners up and down the valley into our Cooperative. The market: restaurants and shops of Boston- especially Quincy Market- LOVE it. They can't get enough of the romanticism of it- real, old world Maine craftsmanship creating great products, and traveling in a way which honors the past and enriched our lives today.

These products sell at a premium- but there aren't many. In fact, we're asked for more, a lot more. Some basic market studies show the response would be similar in Nantucket, New London, New York, and farther. In short- there is potential market demand which far exceeds any possible ability to supply it. Old Maine Coop has been spreading the word, and folks in North Whitefield, Coopers Mills and beyond have been asking us to continue rebuilding. We're looking into this- what an exciting time to be in.

Back to today- Whitefield's express is all loaded, and we've added a whopping 30 passengers to our train. With but two coaches, there aren't many seats left. We depart on time at 8:00. Easing on down the Valley, following the meandering narrow gauge path through that glistening snow, is a pleasure. The train controls readily, and the locomotive behaves flawlessly (even that lubricator eye!). We arrive at Head Tide to another 15 passengers- all holiday shoppers again, so the agent says. Our conductor helps the agent with the express loading while our brakeman comes with us to add the two flats of lumber.

The express business is another win. We simply asked the local shipping store if they'd be willing to partner with us and run branches out of our stations. We'd provide the staffing, space, and transport to Wiscasset. It gives these customers more drop off and pick up locations, and the greater coverage leads to greater customer awareness.

Our 9 car train is all made up, and our coaches are literally full. We depart on time at 8:25. Normally I hope to see flags up on the flag stops, but today I rather hope to keep this big train rolling right by Trout Brook Station. We hammer it along the river and out beside 218. We wouldn't quite keep pace with traffic, however they slow to match us and wave, preparing to stop at the crossing. Alas- there's a passenger flag on Trout Brook Station. So much the better- the more the merrier, and we're always happy to engage our Midcoast friends. I make a

brake application under full throttle just as the crossing whistle begins. Ease back on the throttle slightly- drop the reverser down a notch at a time- as we let the brakes take hold and take over. Loco just over the crossing we're decelerating nicely, reverser is about 1/4 cut off, I open the throttle back a couple notches to ease our stop. Watching back for a signal, the conductor asks for a stop at the first coach. Three passengers board- they should be able to squeeze onto one of the corner benches. The conductor steps into the station for a minute- I suspect he's asking for another coach at Sheepscot, as we always pick up passengers there.

I tell our fireman to be ready: I'm going to hammer this train hard and try to achieve 20 MPH and full cut off before we hit the grade. Full cut off will give us the most recovery room as we fight the grade. The grade starts right after Trout Brook Bridge- so we have 1000 ft. Move ahead signal from the conductor, fireman indicates he's ready- let's go. No 11's exhaust is rapping hard off the steep hill on our right. I'm sure there's an echo from greater distance- but I can't hear it over this roar right next to me. I cut off regularly, and we pick up speed nicely- coming around the curve at 15- I think we'll get our 20. Over the bridge to LOUD, SHARP exhaust roar, feels about 22 MPH and full cut off.. We hit the grade and start our climb.

We're doing ok by the first Mountain curve- down to about 20, still full cut off. The grade stiffens here, and I have to give the reverser a couple notches less. I'm grateful the Baldwin reverser notches are so small. The train looks good on the curve- lots of faces planted in windows watching. At least that's what I think I see, 9 cars back. There are a few folks on the vestibules watching and photographing. We're down to 2/3 cut off and about 16 by the time we hit the next curve, just south of the old "location 9." Now, I'm worried: 16 now means we'll be playing with the magic 7mph: below 7 and the friction bearings lose their smooth oil film; rolling resistant doubles. If we don't keep the train above 7 all the way up the final 3% into Top of Mountain, we're sure to be doubling. I also don't care for how hard we're working this loco- perhaps next time we'll pay greater heed to the tonnage on the switch list and call for a helper.

In any event, we pull hard by the retaining wall, and then the old "slide," location 4. Down to less than half cut off, about 12 mph. Train still looks good back there. I've had a little light sand kicked on since Trout Brook- I hate what it does to running gear but one slip and we're done. Throttle has been on the pin since Trout Brook as well. We get to Fossil Crossing at 10 MPH- about 1/3 cut off. I drop to just a couple notches up from full stroke. It'll be fine. It'll be fine.

A minute later, seemed like an hour, loco 11 crests the grade at Top of Mountain, at 8 MPH, the train still rolling freely. A stunning scene greets us here: the Christmas tree grove on the East, the sun-filled field on the West. Tonight is the first night of Christmas Tree Train Service to the neighboring farm, here at Top of Mountain. What a lovely tradition this has become- and popular on a world class level. At the edge of the field are two quaint mill buildings, owned and built by the railroad but operated by the Sheepscot Valley Lumber Consortium. In front of them are our two boxcars, one loaded with shingles and the other with full dimension 2x stock. Both loads, along with the loaded flats out of Head Tide, will be trans-loaded to truck in Wiscasset. An intensive marketing campaign for specialty lumber, cut on steam powered mills and hauled on a rebuilt steam powered narrow gauge railroad, has turned up a respectable market.

We make a smooth stop spotting the combine/ first coach joint at the ToM platform- with the safety popping. Three passengers, carrying snow shoes, disembark; I presume they are the ones who boarded at Trout Brook and will hike back. Our train doesn't clear the mill spur switch, so we bring the entire thing over to the doubling spur on the east side. Our brakeman joins us, takes 11 and the two flats into the Mill Spur to grab the boxes. With nary a moment to admire this train, we get a proceed from our conductor and proceed.

Loco 11 accelerates 11 cars out of ToM comfortably but still impressively. I imagine the broadside morning sun on the train along Albee's Field makes for quite a quaint scene; as it is all of our photographers are on our train. We don't run "photo freights" any more- only the real deal. The enthusiast community is still encouraged to take part, taking candid photos of real action. We will regularly arrange a chase train, usually loco 10 and coach 8, to give photographers a chance at historically accurate scenes; Albee's Field is a common one. Runbys are rare- as we usually have passengers to deliver to connections on time. Any sense that we aren't catering to the rail photographer market is balanced by the frequency of historically accurate mixed and passenger trains, run for actual Sheepscot Valley Service. Most photographers, as we as the public at large, appreciate the authenticity of our purpose.

Creating the height of land at Alna Center, we ease down to the platform and stop for the flag. Three more passengers board. Alna Center hosts a multitude of events- evening concerts, family activity events, our free one day Christmas event. As much railroad as we've rebuilt- this place is still special amongst the special.

Off again, it's an easy drift down through Trask and over Humason Brook. Stopping about two car lengths before the ML&M switch, our brakeman cuts us off and has us pull clear. Our brakeman signals the ML&M crew to drop their flat down on the main. After they clear their shop switcher, a 1901 Porter 0-4-0, we shove the train together, brake test, and get underway. 12 cars.

Entering Sheepscot Yard Limits, we pass loco 10 and coach 21 holding in the North Yard. Pulling past Sheepscot platform we spy about 15 more passengers. We stop the coaches at the platform, and our brakeman cuts the train so we can clear the crossing and cut off the flatcar of ML&M machinery, and put it on the siding. Cross Road crossing was built as a double, with the switch just south thereof; we later moved the switch south some 300' for just this reason. Now we can get in and out of town much faster. Sheepscot Station is a hopping place pretty much every day.

By the time we double back onto our train, loco 10 has added coach 21 to the back of our train. We put our train back together right before departure time to minimize our blocking of the crossing. We perform a new brake test, and get a signal to depart right on time at 9:10. Throttle cracked open and cylinder cocks blowing, I ease the brake to full release. The locomotive gives a sharp exhaust blast periodically as we ease into motion; we don't see or hear any slack action. The train vacuum brakes have worked out splendidly. Locomotive 11 digs in to its load smartly, RAP RAP RAP RAP and the train accelerates smoothly.

A straight an easy shot down about a 1/2 mile out of Sheepscot and we begin an easy climb up to Verney Pond. Another magical place- the ice skating rink here had grown very popular. We provide transportation to the rink Friday evening through Sunday Afternoon from all points on our line. We reconstructed our railroad over the pond with a combination of rip-rap causeway and trestle; the resulting look of a lit pond rink full of skaters against the backdrop of a steam train on a trestle is pure quaintness. The skating rink is part of our Winter Service, which also includes the trails at ToM and Trout Brook, and sledding just above Head Tide. Winter Service begins right after Christmas on the same basic operating plan as the Christmas Tree Train.

About a mile across level causeway and trestle, then a little climb up to the last height of land before Wiscasset. As we crest and begin easing down, a little brake application to be ready for the S curve at the town line. Meandering through another perfect example of narrow gauge

theory, we're lined up for the Rt 218 crossing. There's quite an amount of traffic stopped for us here. We drift down past Old Sheepscot Road, and ease around the sharp curve and top of grade at Clark's Point Road. This was historically a sharp curve and grade peak, however our relocation to avoid the large house has worsened it some. We are grateful the owners tolerated our proximity here; their welcome has been critical to everything we do.

Down along Mill Brook, the morning sun is dancing off the bay, reflecting right at us. It's a lovely sight. The Brook opens into Sheepscot Bay, as our track holds tightly to the shore, twisting first west, then east around Jailhouse Point. This is followed by 20 degree S curves and then the former ball field, which was the narrow gauge yard before that. Always the source of uncertainty, we came to a nice agreement to the town to build a new sports facility on route 27, in place of the ball field here; we also agreed to limit our infrastructure here to a main track and a passing track, then creating a park out of the remaining space. Just as well- we've kept all of our terminal facilities down in what was historically the "lower" yard.

The trestle we've rebuilt between the former upper yard and Cow Island is the only Wiscasset trestle for us now. As iconic as the 1/2 mile of trestle was for the WW&F, it's construction and maintenance costs, as well as the physical barriers such as the treatment plant outbuilding and the elevation of route 1, caused a practical relocation. As the track approaches the standard gauge crossing, it swings gently west, crosses on a diamond and comes parallel to the standard gauge. We share a double crossing over Route 1 and continue down along the wide gauge until we swing East toward Wiscasset Harbor on the new Railroad Wharf, just south of the Town of Wiscasset's Commercial Pier. The partnership with MDOT was a tremendous boon as it allowed us two critical elements: the crossing of route 1 (otherwise dis-allowed) and the crossing of the Rockland Branch. These are critical as it gives us lineside access to the Sheepscot River and maritime trade. The WW&F has always been about the restoration of Wiscasset as a maritime port- our reconstruction effort is absolutely founded upon this.

We've pulled to a stop adjacent our wharf station, a reconstruction of the turreted structure built here by the WW&F in the 1910s. There's a small array of tracks- one adjacent the tie-up side of the wharf, which runs northwest/southeast. A parallel track to that allows switching of freight cars. Then there's space for the station, followed by the main line and a passing track. There's a fully decked turntable on the wharf. Passenger ferries dock on the north/south running edge, off of the end of our main track. Express is exchanged direct to FedEx and UPS trucks right on the wharf, as is Maine-bound specialty lumber. Passengers readily exchange to Amtrak, passenger ferry or Concord Trailways busses, which all stop here.

As we sit at our station stop, the conductor walks up to discuss our switching plans, and the mid-morning scheduled northbound passenger train, which will largely take tourists coming in off the passenger ferry. This afternoon will see the southbound passenger train, following by an early evening mixed. The Christmas Tree Train, also on our Time Table, will run separately, though our mixed will certainly provide service to SeaLyon Farm at Top of the Mountain.

After a successful operation, I take the time to ponder just how special this thing that we've built truly is. We're not just running trains. We're connecting a community, promoting its prosperity, and doing so in a unique manner which honors our heritage and looks brightly at the future, all at the same time. As great a story this has been- I am unspeakably grateful that there is so much more story yet to be written.