

A Run on the Panhandle -Thanksgiving 1970

by James M. Cavanaugh

When I worked on the New York Central's Toledo & Ohio Central in the 1960s, we considered the Pennsylvania Railroad's Panhandle line from Columbus to Pittsburgh to be the ultimate in big-time railroading. The Panhandle had every feature of heavy haulage and high-speed operations, plus passenger and scheduled express mail trains that the T&OC lacked. This was 229 miles of double-track (and more) right-of-way from High Street Tower in downtown Columbus to Pitcairn Yard southeast of Pittsburgh, running through Yards A and B past the St. Clair Engine House and Alum Creek Tower over the B&O's four-track main to Newark, through the hills of Eastern Ohio past abandoned 19th Century tunnels bypassed by enormous wartime rock cuts, north up the Ohio River at Mingo Junction, across the River at Steubenville, through the West Virginia panhandle (thence the name) crossing gigantic high bridges on the Ohio and Monongahela. The alternate PRR destination from Columbus was Conway, 191 miles from High Street, up the Ohio River through "Steel Valley" over the PRR's River and Bayard Branches, crossing into Pennsylvania along the north shore, onto the PRR Pittsburgh to Chicago Main Line at Rochester, Pennsylvania, and down into the seemingly endless Conway Yard in the Pittsburgh industrial region. In the rail world, the Panhandle was as big as they come.

The Historical Panhandle

A consolidation of smaller railroads originally built from the late 1840s through the 1870s, the Panhandle dominated and defined Columbus railroading for more than 100 years. Even the City's professional football team back in 1901 (which played the first-ever NFL game in the league's infancy) was called the "Panhandles" because its star players worked at the line's Columbus roundhouse and car shops. The Panhandle ran 89 east-west trains a day at its height, sporting 15-car heavyweight passenger trains double-headed by K-4 Pacifics, including those that ferried Central Ohio troops off to war and back. The Panhandle carried the Pennsylvania's time freights drawn by big M-1 Mountain 4-8-2s that hauled Central Ohio's prime manufacturing output to lucrative eastern U.S. markets and to ports for shipment throughout the Western World.

Impact of the NYC-PRR Merger - The Late 1960s

After our T&OC NYC parent company merged with the Pennsylvania Railroad in February 1968, the PRR remained largely a separate operation for several years. Our only physical crossings with them were at Scioto Tower (LM), 0.9 miles west of High Street on the PRR, MP 132.4 on the T&OC Western branch between West Columbus and Frankfort Street, and on our East Columbus Branch. However, we began to get PRR diesel locomotives in the West Columbus Roundhouse, and short-framed Tuscan red liveried cupola cabooses appeared in the Grandview Avenue cabin car pool track. Our radio channels overlapped with the PRR so we could hear

their towers and trains communicating, sitting in the cab on long nights, or up in Grandview Tower waiting for train orders. We all wondered what it would be like to ride on No. 31 or one of the PRR's trailer-on-flatcar priority expresses, roaring up the Muskingum Valley at 50 miles an hour, non-stop for nearly 200 miles, off duty at the Conway "Y" in six or seven hours.

While the T&OC was a fine railroad, and I would trade my job there for no other, it was decidedly a branch, albeit a high-revenue one, dragging coal and petrochemicals north, vehicles, manufactured goods and empty hoppers south. While we could occasionally run 50 mph, speed did not count for much. No passenger train or piggyback rig was to be seen there. The T&OC was also a moderately seasonal commodities-hauling road, with traffic dropping once the Great Lakes ice cover developed, while the Panhandle coal and freight was a year-round proposition.

Following the post-merger consolidation of the PRR's several lines and NYC's Big Four and T&OC at Buckeye Yard around the end of 1969, we shared a common yard office and engine facilities with the Pennsylvania operations. In contrast to the T&OC, which was run by engine and train crews numbering perhaps 150 men, including the K&M folks who worked the south end to Hobson, the PRR seemed to have easily 1,000. You knew everybody on the T&OC, almost no one on the PRR. But after Buckeye opened, Pennsylvania brakemen and firemen began marking up on the extra boards of the former NYC lines, so we started to get acquainted.

The Human Element

There was also a notable difference in the age profile on the PRR side in the late 1960s. While the T&OC had a modest number of men who were born in the 1890s, the average age of engineers and conductors was probably early to mid-40s, with some having been "set up" (promoted from fireman to engineer or brakeman to conductor) in their mid-30s. In sharp contrast, the Pennsylvania engineers and conductors almost all seemed to be at least mid-to-late 50s, and you met some 50 year olds who had not yet been set up.

Why was this? Many offered plausible explanations. T&OC men said it was because the diesels took over later on the NYC, in 1953-55. Under their labor bargaining agreement a lot of T&OC engineers and firemen deferred or even came back from retirement, able to work many extra years on these less physically taxing machines. This resulted in a spike of mid-1960s retirements, opening the way for promotion of dozens of very young engineers.

Others said it was the heavily seasonal traffic on the T&OC, which in the NYC era provided only two regularly-scheduled trains in each direction daily (NT-5 and NT-7 northbound and TC-2 and CN-2 south, plus locals), with other departures being very irregular unit trains of coal, iron ore and empty hoppers.

That lent itself to few regularly-assigned "hotshot" crews, attractive for an older family man, and favored "pool crews" and extra board jobs (filling in crew vacancies for irregular trains), decidedly a younger man's game. The Panhandle was predominantly regularly-called runs, including five passenger and express mail trains daily in each direction, plus their multiple OE, PR, TV and AST symbols (the latter called the "Astronaut"), conducive to longer railroading careers and more normal family life.

No one mentioned it, but I thought the big difference was that the typical PRR run was a through train to Pittsburgh, Indianapolis or Logansport, with little or no switching, and on-duty time of 8-12 hours maximum, while a high percentage of the T&OC runs were all-night 16-hour death marches like NT-7, with a lot of switching out in the elements, harder on the body. My own great grandfather, an engineer on the Chicago & Northwestern in Wisconsin in the 1880s-90s, had to give that life up when he got married.

A Call for the OE8A to Conway

I finally got my chance to see the Panhandle on Thanksgiving Eve in 1970, getting a call off the Western Branch extra board to fill a PRR crew head brakeman vacancy on train symbol OE8A, on duty at Buckeye Yard at 11:30 PM, destined for Conway. ("O" meant Buckeye Yard, and "E" meant Enola Yard, near Harrisburg.) The engineer was Mr. Oltmann and the conductor was Mr. Armbruster. After reporting and meeting the others on the five-man crew, we collected our three 2,500 horsepower GE U25Bs from the engine house and inched down the runner track, and reversed north to couple onto our train in the outbound yard. This train was 73 cars of mixed freight, with eight "short" cars for set off at Trinway, and no pick-ups scheduled. We finished our air test and got underway at 2:50 AM, rolling out the south end of Buckeye. We curved east through the plant at Alton onto the PRR Miami Side main track toward downtown Columbus, across the Big Four at Miami Crossing and the B&O Midland Division at GN Tower. However, instead of our familiar southbound move through the Auburn interchange tracks back onto the T&OC just before Scioto Tower, we roared straight past Veterans' Memorial auditorium and across the PRR's unique combination open pony-truss and through-truss Scioto River Bridge toward High Street. Immediately I could see we were in for some very different railroading.

Running through Columbus

Unlike the T&OC, which more or less skirted downtown Columbus, the Panhandle ran straight through its densest urban and industrial areas. Past High Street, where the PRR Bradford Side branched off to the northwest, and US Tower, that controlled movements into Union Station from the east, the line became the B&O (with the PRR having running powers east to Lake Erie Crossing in Newark). The double track main curved sharply to the right at High Street and then abruptly left up around the

back of Union Station (this place was known as “behind the stack” because at the maximum curvature of the track stood the depot building’s huge smokestack).

Many a B&O and PRR train stalled here due to the significant grade of better than 1.0 percent, but more so owing to the track curvature. In railroading terms, each degree of curvature is equivalent to 0.04 percent of uphill slope. The curve “behind the stack” was a sharp as I ever saw on a main track, easily more than ten degrees, adding to the fairly steep ground rise. The PRR used two unit GP9 rear-end helpers between Union Station and Alum Creek Tower. I heard that heavy eastbound trains occasionally derailed here when lighter strings of cars just behind the locomotives could not hold the rails on this curve with their wheel flanges. Similarly, heavy trains with rear-end helper engines pushing could buckle and derail here. For the same reason, westbound trains were not permitted to use locomotive dynamic brakes descending this curve unless the air brake failed.

The B&O track rose steadily past US Tower on the east side of Union Station (MP 190.4 - mileage on the Panhandle was from Pittsburgh). Here was a maze of switches heading back to the left (northwest) into the passenger depot, and the Big Four’s small East Yard just north of the B&O where the NYC main line from Cleveland dropped down into the depot complex. Through this bottleneck passed all traffic on the PRR’s four lines that converged in Columbus, as well as the Big Four’s Burt (Cleveland) to Cincinnati Main Line and the B&O’s east-west C&N line.

US Tower was a curious tall thin wooden structure just south of the main tracks near the Fourth Street overpass, with a slanting plate glass air traffic control window on its front (north) side. US Tower had a decidedly cockeyed look, being out of vertical by a few degrees, reportedly having been struck by a derailed locomotive and never set back up properly. Switches and signals in this area included almost every device known in railroading, including little “puzzle switches” with tiny moving chunks of rail that lined up track at three and four-way rail intersections. These were operated manually by crews of switch tenders, an occupation long since gone on our T&OC lines. Nothing here seemed to be automated. The tenders signaled trains through by hand with green and yellow flags, with one color for eastbounds and another for westbounds, to avoid confusion in this area that usually had two or more trains moving simultaneously.

US Tower controlled the eastern access to Union Station off the B&O main track. To the south and west spread a vast expanse of tracks running into the freight houses of most big steam railroads that served Columbus. Most unusual was the N&W’s freight house operation, served via a lightly-built track that rose up an embankment and crossed diagonally over the B&O at the west end of Yards A and B on a trestle and through-truss bridge up toward Ft. Hayes, cutting diagonally across the Cleveland Avenue viaduct over these yards, with trolley lines crossing the track in the middle of the bridge. East of US Tower, between Cleveland and St. Clair Avenues, was a place the railroaders called Red Onion, which provided the western access to PRR Yard A, also manned by additional switch tenders stationed in a

gritty-looking shed. Trains on the B&O's C&N Division between US Tower and Newark were dispatched by the B&O "Train Director".

Of the more than a dozen PRR yards operating in Columbus prior to the Penn Central merger, Yards A and B processed the biggest volume of cars -- over 1,200 per day -- and were the most bustling and fascinating. Yards A and B actually consisted of four yards. Yard A, situated to the south of the B&O main, was the eastbound set of PRR yards, divided into the Yard A receiving and freight house yards between Cleveland Avenue and Joyce Avenue and the Yard A classification yard, between Joyce Avenue and Alum Creek Tower. Yard B, situated to the north of the B&O main, was the PRR's westbound set of yards, the Yard B receiving yard positioned between the St. Clair Engine House and Taylor Street, and the Yard B westbound classification yard between St. Clair Street and the east end of the Union Station leads near US Tower.

These yards, working only with little SW7s and brakemen out on the ground, made up a good ten or more PRR through freight trains daily in each direction, assembled by pulling out strings of cars from either end of the too-short classification yards and pushing them back together on switching leads adjacent to the main track for departure. Yards A and B must have been spectacular assets in the steam era, when 55-car trains ruled the rails, but were a woefully inadequate layout by the 1960s, very cramped for space with no room to expand.

Also here between the two sections of Yard B was the multi-track complex where the PRR's Cleveland, Akron & Columbus (CA&C) line and the PRR Chase Avenue Yard curved off to the north, running up through the gap between PRR Grogan Yard on the west and the PRR-N&W shared Pennor Yard and the N&W's big Joyce Avenue Yard to the east.

In the northwest quadrant of this wye next to the B&O main track sat the PRR's sooty brick St. Clair engine house. In steam days, the PRR serviced an enormous volume of locomotives here and at Spruce Street east of the Olentangy on the Bradford line, but by the 1960s St. Clair had been transformed into a heavy shop for diesels. Just as the Pennsylvania had easily the biggest range of steam engine types and wheel arrangements (more than a dozen active in the 1940s), they also seemed to have bought at least a few of every make of diesel engine ever offered.

Beyond the east end of Yard A, the B&O main ran beneath the elevated N&W viaduct at Alum Creek Tower (MP 187.6), and crossed the T&OC East Columbus Branch at a sharp-angled diamond at East Columbus Tower (MP 186.1). Here were small yards for livestock and for use by the T&OC East Columbus Local to organize its cars for distribution up the branch beyond 5th Avenue. East Columbus Tower was a tall yellow clapboard structure that sat in near-perpetual dingy shadow beneath the Stelzer Road overpass just opposite the Defense Construction Supply Center and Davco fertilizer plant.

Port Columbus Airport was north of the tracks about two miles east of East Columbus. Near the old (abandoned but preserved) 1929-vintage airport control tower there was a small PRR passenger platform (MP 184) long since removed. Here back in the late 1920s, passengers on express trains from New York and Philadelphia transferred from rail to Ford Trimotor aircraft en route to California in an early experiment in multi-modal high-speed transcontinental service.

Eastward from Columbus

Moving east (and uphill) from Port Columbus, with three and even four tracks in places, the B&O passed Taylor Station, Blacklick (elevation 955 ft.) and Pataskala on its way to Summit Station (MP 177.4, elevation 1,085 ft.) up a grade ranging from 0.8 to 1.0 percent. The Pennsylvania ran helper territory here before the advent of the diesels. The right-of-way was dead straight uphill for five or six miles at this point, but running over a series of ridges and dips so that the headlight of an eastbound coming up from Blacklick through Summit Station viewed from a westbound cab at Outville disappeared and re-emerged several times.

The B&O double track main curved to the north at Outville (MP 169.2) and then ran past Heath Tower (crossing the T&OC Eastern Branch at MP 161.9), past ND Cabin (MP 158) into Newark. Here the B&O had an old virtually unused branch (originally the Newark, Somerset & Straitsville RR) off to the south around the east shore of Buckeye Lake to Junction City and Shawnee. This line must have hauled holiday passengers to the Lake and moved coal during the heyday of the big Perry County mines. A few miles south on this B&O line, just beyond Interstate 70, sat a rusting collection of streetcars, interurban equipment and small industrial locomotives.

At Newark, the B&O main line forked into a northern route to Sandusky via Mt. Vernon and Mansfield, and an eastern line toward Zanesville, Cambridge, Bridgeport, Wheeling and Pittsburgh via Benwood Jct. on the Ohio River. In downtown Newark the Panhandle veered south off the B&O main, swung back over the B&O diamond at Lake Erie Crossing (MP 157.4), protected by a classic old B&O up-and-down semaphore signal, bridged the Licking River and headed east, now on its own PRR right-of-way. Until the unthinkable demise of the Panhandle and abandonment of portions of the B&O in the 1980s, Newark was a lively railroad town, featuring as many as 25-30 combined PRR and B&O trains daily.

Past Newark the landscape became decidedly rural, remote and Appalachian. The Panhandle's brown gravel-ballasted 140-pound ribbon rail (with welded joints) double-track main was generally straight for the next 20 miles, easily accommodating 70 mph passenger trains. We met several high-speed PRR trailer-van and mixed freight trains doing 45 or better. The sensation of storming past an oncoming train wobbling and rocking sideways only three feet away with nearly 100 mph in speed differential takes some getting used-to.

Trinway, Coshocton and on into the Hills

After passing a long siding at Licking, through Hanover (MP 149.6) and the narrow vertical-sided Sand Cut, the line ran past Bricker Tower (MP 142.8), and east through Frazeysburg to Trinway (MP 136). Here at what was originally called Dresden Junction, adjacent to a handsome Victorian-era catslide-overhang roofed brick passenger station with a sandstone foundation and granite sills and lintels surrounding leaded-glass windows, the Panhandle crossed the former route of the ancient CA&C Dresden branch. This CA&C track ran north from Trinway to Killbuck up on the CA&C main line via the 1,500-foot Noland tunnel, crossing at Warsaw the long-disappeared Toledo, Walhondling Valley & Ohio Railroad (which originally ran 43 miles from Loudonville on the PRR Pittsburgh-Chicago Main Line to Coshocton on the Panhandle). Bored through a soft sandstone ridge, the tunnel and its approaches kept collapsing, causing this portion of the CA&C to be abandoned in 1936. This left what was long known as the Dresden Industrial Track off the CA&C from Killbuck to Blissfield, and a short stub northward off the Panhandle at Trinway ending south of the tunnel. The CA&C remnant southward from Trinway was still active in the 1960s down through Dresden to Zanesville, where it joined the PRR line originally known as the Cincinnati & Muskingum Valley, by then renamed the Zanesville Branch. That line ran south to New Lexington and Bremen (the 11 miles between these two stations doubling as the "Sheepshank" portion of the T&OC Western Branch) then on around westward through Lancaster, Circleville and Washington Court House to Morrow.

In contrast to my home T&OC lines, which were largely manual-block train order territory with pole-mounted signals with a single red-yellow-green light, the PRR sported massive steel overhead signal bridges, with a pair of targets over each track with rows of three yellow lights -- both up and down was a "clear" block, both diagonal was an "approach," upper diagonal and lower horizontal was a "slow approach," meaning you should expect to stop at next signal, and double horizontal was a "stop" and so on. PRR locomotives had in-cab signals on the bulkhead above the windshields, displaying a mini-version of the signals outside. These must have been a godsend when the fog and snow obscured the real ones. The PRR engines also featured a "deadman" system, in which the engineer had to touch and release a metal object such as the throttle or brake handle every few minutes, or else there would be an annoying air whistle warning. This would make sure he was alert!

Our Thanksgiving Eve run on the OE8A had one set-off, eight Zanesville-area cars at Trinway. These would be left in the interchange track off the Panhandle to the old CA&C branch, running southeast of the depot. Being uncertain about this move in a strange place on this dark wet night, I dropped off, made the cut and signaled the engineer ahead to the switch, which I threw, but before backing the cars in there I walked 100 yards down the track with my light to make sure there was nothing in the way and there was no misaligned switch or derail. I then signaled the engineer back with a circular motion of my lantern but steadied him up at a very slow speed. After the drop, it took a few minutes to pump off the brakes as I had "dumped" the

air, not closing the brake line angle cock on the train when I made the cut, being unsure what standard practice on the Panhandle might be. (In places on our T&OC line, if you “saved the air” in the train while dropping cars, the train might not be where you left it when you returned, earning you a serious chewing out from the conductor who had to set the brake from the rear end when he started to slip back.) All this got me a mild rebuke from the engineer, noting as how “We like to move a bit faster over here” on the big railroad. He meant it constructively I could see.

Past Trinway the Panhandle main converged onto the west bank of the Muskingum River, passing Adams Mills and Conesville, crossing the Muskingum on a big set of through-truss spans at Tyndall (MP 127) and turned straight north, rolling into Coshocton (MP 122.2). The Panhandle paralleled the west edge of an N&W (former Nickel Plate and before that the Wheeling & Lake Erie, originally the Cleveland & Canton RR) single-track right-of-way that runs up through Coshocton County from Zanesville via Trinway. Diverging from the N&W and bisecting the downtown, the Panhandle passed the old depot and a scruffy little industrial area with quite a few sidings and active light industrial shippers of paper and concrete products (enough to support a local yard job). North of the depot, the Panhandle swung sharply east in a 90-degree curve at the old Walhondling Valley RR junction where the latter line bore westward crossing the small isthmus where the Tuscarawas and Walhondling Rivers form the Muskingum. Here the PRR rejoined the N&W, whose close parallel right-of-way was just to the south of ours. At Morgan Run Tower (MP 118.1) the N&W swerved south away from the PRR line and then swung back sharply northward, crossing the Panhandle at a 60-degree angle.

About here on our run we met the sunrise of Thanksgiving Day, illuminating a hilly and wet Eastern Ohio landscape devoid of leaves, but glowing bright brown, red and yellow in addition to the general grayness.

There was so much more to see on this trip! Rolling at 50 mph past West Lafayette, the OE8A roared into Newcomerstown, crossing the PRR’s Marietta-Cambridge-Cleveland Branch at Town Tower (MP 108.1), opposite the crumbling old PRR depot. Next came Port Washington (MP 101.6) and across the Tuscarawas River on a one-span through-truss bridge at the historical early Ohio German settlement of Gnadenhutten (MP 97.0), and then the eastern limits of the Penn Central’s Columbus Division at Urich Tower. Here the line crossed the B&O north-south CL&W line just west of Urichsville (MP 91) and passed the big Dennison freight station (MP 90.3).

Rolling onto the Penn Central Railroad’s Central Division portion of the Panhandle here, the OE8A slowed a little, moving onto more heavily-graded stretches of track, weaving between low ridges via steep-sided cuts through the sandstone and limestone. The Pennsylvania had invested in these cuts in the early 1940s to bypass single-track tunnels (visible by the right-of-way but with their gaping entranceways bricked up) and in some cases following the original tunnel route with removal of the tunnel roof overburden prior to widening the track bed below.

Now in Appalachia, we covered this up-and-down profile at 35-40 mph, roaring through Jewett, Scio (MP 75.0), past Custer Tower (MP 71.0) to Cadiz Junction. Here a Wheeling & Lake Erie line paralleled the Panhandle for a few miles, just off to the north of our tracks with its own smaller cuts through the ridges. At the junction, an old single-track PRR branch off to the south to Cadiz and the Hanna mine, some 14 miles distant, slowly hauled massive amounts of Ohio steam coal out for Columbus and Pittsburgh power plants and industries. Next came Hopedale (MP 63.8), the NYC Alliance branch line (formerly the Lake Erie, Alliance & Western) that crossed above the PRR at Carmen (MP 61) and the Acre complex (MPs 56 through 58.4) at Broadacre, with its strangely-named control points of West Acre, Acre (and Acre tower on the south side of the tracks), Mid-Acre and East Acre, and on to Gould.

Mingo Junction and down into Steel Valley

With the sun rising higher in the sky, our OE8A time freight sped past several remote industrial and quarry areas, and then down a narrow ravine into the Gould Tunnel. This tunnel then had the rare feature of gauntlet track (double track overlapping laterally with each track having its inside rail between the rails of the opposing track so only one train at a time could pass). Emerging from the tunnel, I was surprised to see us switched onto the left track, running opposite what one would think of as the correct eastbound side. The reason for this was soon apparent as we sped through another narrow ravine along Cross Creek past the small Gould yard and the Wheeling & Lake Erie's Adams and Coen Tunnels which punched through steep ridges just off to the south, after which we hurtled into an open field of cinders appearing to dead end into a steel foundry. Here, at Mingo Junction on the western bank of the Ohio River, our Panhandle route diverged sharply to the north toward Steubenville, while the right-hand track veered off to the south through a big yard onto the PRR River Branch toward Brilliant, Tiltonville, Martin's Ferry and Bridgeport, and thence to the more distant PRR Powhatan and Omal Secondary Tracks.

After curving around this wye northward past the big foundry and a row of towering idle furnaces, with the old PRR roundhouse far off to the south, the OE8A jogged to the right at Mingo Junction Tower (River Branch MP 20.2), dropping off the Panhandle through a descending crossover onto the parallel PRR River Branch. Here the turbulent brown Ohio River came into view. Immediately I could see this would be yet another very different railroading experience. On the Ohio River, active shippers were nearly end-to-end. These were heavy industries, unlike those in Columbus. Served by fleets of barges and towboats plowing up the Ohio River, there were blast furnaces and converters requiring vast quantities of iron ore, coking coal and lime, next to casting, stamping and rolling mills with blazing furnace doors and yellow hot pigs of glowing metal being hauled around inside on rail cars or by overhead cranes. In one place there was a massive black steel cantilever-truss bridge across the Ohio, not for common carrier rail but just connecting the internal rail layout of two affiliated steel plants on opposite shores. Here were power plants with 300-foot stacks receiving coal by barge or rail, slaking their hot condensers

with river water. The PRR ran along the alluvial shelf at the valley bottom about 25 feet above the river at normal crest, sandstone retaining walls on the uphill side. There were team tracks on the water side of the main, feeding onto industrial leads sometimes in two or three places each mile, but in other places we had an unobstructed panoramic view of the river.

On the uphill side and on the opposite shore were clusters of mill town houses, bungalows and shotguns in neat rows, generally painted blue and pastel yellow, grayed with soot, some with awkward additions and improvements, but with the well-kept look of owner-occupied structures. In the rising sunlight on this sacred American Thanksgiving holiday there were people driving into plant gates, going to work to man maintenance shifts. While this area had a growing reputation of being a "Rust Belt" of fading manufacturing capacity and declining employment, these Ohioans, West Virginians and Pennsylvanians were not giving up on Steel Valley.

Also most interesting were the big barge tows on the Ohio River. Carrying as much or more tonnage than our train, but with no rails to guide them, less horsepower per ton and no brakes, they had to fight swift currents, avoid fog banks, shoals, moored vessels and each other. I could see their Army Corps of Engineers navigation targets and lights along the shore, but had no idea how their system worked.

Several miles north from Mingo Junction, the River Branch crossed the parallel Wheeling & Lake Erie via a sharp-angled diamond at Rockville Tower (MP 19.6). The W&LE seemed to be everywhere here, shooting straight across the Ohio from the Coen Tunnel to Follansbee, West Virginia on a monstrous cantilever bridge, but with a track veering off to the right just before the bridge, looping back to the left (north) under the bridge and then continuing northward along the west shore, serving the mills behind the Panhandle wye at Mingo Junction, then continuing upriver alongside the PRR River Branch, crossing to the inside of the River Branch at Rockville, tapping another big mill in Steubenville, and then looping back across the Ohio on another huge bridge to Coketown on the West Virginia side.

At Rockville, the Panhandle tracks just uphill to the left diverged westward and inland from our riverside right-of-way. At the north end of lower Steubenville, the Panhandle made a soft right turn eastward and crossed the Ohio on an imposing black cantilever bridge set atop ponderous sandstone piers. On the far West Virginia shore, the line disappeared up a draw toward Weirton, alongside US Route 22. Through Panhandle trains headed that way over through Burgettstown and Oakdale, Pennsylvania and across the Ohio River again running near downtown Pittsburgh and over to Pitcairn Yard, a single-crew 229-mile run from Columbus. However, the OE8A stayed on the riverbank curving along the north shore of the Ohio on its less direct route toward Conway Yard, passing beneath the Panhandle bridge and along the shore 400 feet below the cliff-top campus of Steubenville College, later to become Franciscan University. Little did I suspect that 35 years later I would have a son (Thomas) studying theology there on his path to ordination.



The Steubenville Bridge over the Ohio River that leads to the Pitcairn Yard. OE8A stayed on the west bank of the Ohio River following as the river looped north, east and then south leading to Conway Yard. Photo courtesy of Bridgemeister.com. More photos are available at <http://www.bridgemeister.com/pic.php?pid=1586> (starting at the 16th photo.)

The PRR River Branch double-track line hugged the Ohio shore up through Toronto (MP 8.7), parallel to the huge Brown's Island, past Croxton, Empire and Port Homer, Ohio (MP 2.4) and atop a sturdy under-deck truss bridge over Yellow Creek. Terminating in a junction at Yellow Creek Tower, the River Branch merged onto the PRR Bayard Branch. The Bayard was a PRR alternate main line that ran westward from Yellow Creek to Canton, where it rejoined the Pittsburgh-Chicago Main Line. Next came Wellsville (Bayard Branch MP 23.4), where the River turned eastward, and East Liverpool (MP 18.3) stretching for several miles along the north bank opposite a big river barge fleeting area. From there the railroad ran past Laughlin (MP 16.5), due east across the state line into Pennsylvania (MP 14.6), turned with the River north to Glasgow, past tiny Georgetown Island, and then southward for the home stretch toward Pittsburgh. From Glasgow, the line ran between the town of Midland (MP 10.5) and a big steel complex of at least 200 acres on the riverbank, and on to Industry (MP 7.9), Vanport (MP 3.0), across a through-truss bridge over the Beaver River and on to Rochester Tower, where Bayard Branch ended, joining the PRR Pittsburgh-Chicago Main Line at MP 25.9 (distance from Pittsburgh). The westbound Chicago Main Line veered to the north and west back toward the Ohio state line; the eastbound Main Line tracks followed the River southward. Four miles down was the town of Freedom and the north end of Conway Yards (MP 23.6), adjacent to the city of that same name just uphill to the east.

Conway Yards

Arriving at Conway yard at 9:40 AM, we were switched into OE8A's receiving track without stopping, with the operators lining things up electronically and with some help from a switch tender on the ground. Conway was a huge complex occupying the flat alluvial plain on what was now the east bank of the Ohio (which flowed due northward here). Conway was over 35 tracks wide, stretching for about three miles along the eastern bank to MP 20.5, with a big classification yard in the middle and an old steam roundhouse on the east edge.

We dropped our train in the receiving track, took our locomotives to the engine house, marked off duty around 10:05 AM and headed for the Conway YMCA. Here the accommodations were tiny "roomettes" with gaps beneath the doors, in contrast to the small hotel-type rooms we had on the T&OC, but it was warm and very clean. The restaurant was more of a cafeteria, rather than the T&OC-type "Y" diner or lunch counter arrangement. The staff had gone all out this Thanksgiving to provide the railroaders with a full turkey dinner. They had it all, white or dark meat at your choice, stuffing and potatoes with gravy, yams with brown sugar melted marshmallow on top, green beans and hot drinks. That really hit the spot.

After 12 hours off duty and a great sleep, we were called for PR-17, a mixed freight westbound to Columbus. Our train got right out of the yard, but was held up for more than an hour at the Main Line-River Branch junction in Rochester. With good power, again three well-maintained EMD SD35s, but no short cars to be set off, we rolled through the dark across the Chicago Main Line, Bayard and River Branches and the Panhandle and B&O to Buckeye in about eight hours. This run was virtually non-stop, marking off at 9 AM on the Friday following Thanksgiving.

Disappearance of the Panhandle and Resurrection in the Columbus & Ohio River Railroad

The Panhandle was my earliest railroad memory. My mother would sometimes fill an afternoon when it was too cold or wet to play outside by piling us toddlers into the family's black 1949 Chevrolet and driving up to the N. Cassady Avenue grade crossing to sit in the car watch the flashing crossing lights, followed by the diesel horn (and in earlier days I recall a steam chime whistle), and then the train itself.

After moving away from Columbus in 1971, I would sometimes plan the route of car trips back to cross the Panhandle, hoping for a glimpse of a train but mainly just to see the big railroad and stir up memories. I had a shock in the 1980s crossing the line's broad right-of-way at Pataskala, seeing it reduced to a single track. A bad sign for sure. But there was still a railroad there, and the track was in good shape.

Conrail, formed in 1976 by the U.S. government to take over financially-failed railroads after the Penn Central bankruptcy, had consolidated its operations, rerouting everything from Pittsburgh to Columbus up over the Pittsburgh-Chicago

Main Line to Crestline and then down the old NYC Big Four into Columbus and over to Buckeye. Conrail gave up on the Panhandle line, offering it for sale after pulling up most of its tracks, signals and other infrastructure.

In 1988, the line was taken over by a newly-formed short line operator called the Ohio Central, headquartered in Coshocton. The OC put together a 445-mile system including the Panhandle route and parts of the old B&O system in Newark and Eastern Ohio, and part of the old Trinway-Zanesville-Morrow track. It appeared that the OC ran this as a local service line, with through trains serving the original shipper points, and switching out the bigger plants along the route.

The Ohio Central was acquired by the Genesee & Wyoming Railroad in 2008, reportedly for \$219M. G&WRR is one of America's premiere short line railroad operators, and has obviously found a way to make the Panhandle line through the rich counties of eastern Ohio pay for itself. Sadly many of the landmarks such as the stately Trinway Depot (how could anyone possibly bring himself to demolish that?) and the classic train operator towers such as Heath, Morgan Run, and Urich seem to have passed into the ages, but the line lives on.

[Written from memories of a single day 43+ years ago - comments and corrections most welcome.]

Additional Reading

Columbus Panhandles Football references:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Columbus_Panhandles/Tigers

Also a good read: *The Columbus Panhandles - A Complete History of Pro Football's Toughest Team, 1900-1922*, by Chris Willis

PRR Panhandle Main Line Track Chart, showing grade, curvature, interchange points and sidings from Columbus Union Depot via Steubenville to Pittsburgh:

<http://www.multimodalways.org/docs/railroads/companies/PRR/PRR%20Track%20Charts/PRR%20PH%20ML%20TC%201950.pdf>

PRR Bayard Branch, River Branch and Walhondling Valley Track Charts, showing grades, curvature, interchange points and sidings:

<http://www.multimodalways.org/docs/railroads/companies/PRR/PRR%20Track%20Charts/PRR%20Eastern%20Div%20TC%201-1-1943.pdf>

Newark, Ohio - Conrail switching map & shippers:

<http://www.rr-fallenflags.org/cr/cr-z83-06m.gif>

<http://www.rr-fallenflags.org/cr/cr-z83-06t.gif>

Excellent images of the Trinway Depot:

<http://www.west2k.com/ohpix/trinway.jpg>

Views of Noland Tunnel on the CA&C Dresden Branch north of Trinway:

http://www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WME491_Noland_Tunnel_Coshocton_County_Ohio

<http://railsandtrails.com/PRR/CA&C/Tunnelhill.htm>

Coshocton, Ohio - Conrail switching map & shippers

<http://www.rr-fallenflags.org/cr/cr-z83-09m.gif>

<http://www.rr-fallenflags.org/cr/cr-z83-09t.gif>

<http://www.rr-fallenflags.org/cr/cr-z83-10m.gif>

<http://www.rr-fallenflags.org/cr/cr-z83-10t.gif>

Photos of Mingo Junction, Panhandle and Steel Valley Industry:

<http://www.flickrriver.com/places/United+States/Ohio/Mingo+Junction/Deandale/>

Ohio Railroad Stations Past & Present - Database with Photos of Former Stations along the Panhandle and Intersecting Railroads:

<http://www.west2k.com/ohstations/stations.htm>

View eastward through Coen Tunnel on the Wheeling & Lake Erie RR at Mingo Junction (note bridges over Cross Creek, the PRR River Branch and the big W&LE cantilever bridge over the Ohio River):

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/chrislokey/5569305421/in/photostream/>