

The T&OC South Columbus Local – 1960s

by James M. Cavanaugh

The South Columbus Local was technically a yard crew job, rather than a true "local" operated by one of the T&OC's road crews based at West Columbus. The South Columbus job left West Columbus Yard (the east end of which was MP 131) with a single SW7 yard switcher, or sometimes a pair of SW7s coupled cab-to-cab, to switch out industrial shippers' plants and warehouses along the Western Branch's double-track main between High Street and the junction with the N&W at Bannon Tower (Western Branch MP 137). It appeared that at times the South Columbus job reported for work at Steelton, site of the old South Columbus yard near Parsons Avenue about a half mile east of the High Street overpass.

On the T&OC, "yard limits" extended all the way east from West Columbus Yard to Bannon, meaning all trains and engines, including through road trains, had to be prepared to stop for any obstruction regardless of signals, and that yard crews rather than road crews would make car pick-ups and drop-offs and switch all local traffic.

There were no apparent active shippers on the Western between West Columbus Yard and High Street (Western MP-134). On this section of the line, the NYC tracks proceeded east from the West Columbus Yard office along McKinley Avenue, crossed the B&O at GN Tower, then veering 90 degrees to the south at Scioto (LM Tower). Here the Western Branch crossed both the C&O Hocking Valley line and Pennsylvania Little Miami main line, with an interchange to the PRR through the long Auburn Track to the west of the junction. After West Columbus Yard closed in 1970, the Auburn Track was the path from the Western into the south end of Buckeye Yard, via a four-mile stretch of the double-track PRR Little Miami main line.

South of the Scioto junction diamonds, the T&OC tracks crossed Broad Street on an overpass, and ran on an elevated section past the Chinese pagoda-style T&OC passenger station (a Columbus architectural classic, reportedly built in 1895, today it is the International Association of Firefighters Local 67 union hall). Past the station, the line ran due south, paralleling the C&O Hocking Valley main line on the east shore of the Scioto River. Here the Western crossed the Scioto River on a massive-girdered double track truss bridge. Historical sources say this span was originally built 1893-95, and both the NYC bridge and the companion C&O Hocking Valley double-track bridge next to it were replaced with heavier gauge Pratt through truss bridges in 1910-20.

On this stretch, T&OC yard crews interchanged cars with the C&O, and could proceed through crossovers onto and across the C&O main at Frankfort Street Tower to an industrial track crossing the Scioto River to a City of Columbus waste incineration site, but it appeared NYC traffic was rare at this location. Just across the C&O tracks between the C&O main and the river was the site of the old Hocking Valley Railway's steam engine roundhouse and their Mound Street Yard which was replaced by the Parsons Avenue Yard when the C&O took ownership of the Hocking Valley. Once or twice a year when the Western Division north of West Columbus was blocked by construction or a wreck, we would pick up the Peabody Coal unit train at Frankfort Street, back through the crossover onto the C&O and then highball north to Walbridge at 50 mph, roaring nonstop along the Olentangy River past Ohio Stadium, up through Linworth, Delaware, Marion, Carey and Fostoria on a nonstop high speed run.

At High Street, the Western Branch turned 90 degrees to the east, paralleling Hosack Street and Marion Road to the north and farther to the east, Refugee Road on the south. South of High Street, just east of the overpass, the C&O veered 45 degrees toward the Southeast into their gigantic Parsons Yard, and then on to the ancient single-track Hocking Valley branch to Groveport, Canal Winchester, Lancaster, Logan, Nelsonville and Athens. From the far end of Parsons Yard, the C&O's newer double-track main line ran due south to Portsmouth across the Ohio River to Kentucky and their main line to Norfolk, Virginia.

Just past the High Street overpass was the T&OC's old South Columbus yard, which ran for about a half mile east beneath the overpass at Parsons Avenue. There were no true yard tracks operating here any longer by the 1960s, but on either side of the Western main were industrial tracks or "team tracks" for switching out shippers' plants and loading docks.

In South Columbus east of High Street near the inactive Steelton Telegraph Office (a one-story cabin which formerly housed a train order station that controlled the block between High Street and Bannon before it was double-tracked) was a four mile strip of dense industry, although plant loading dock rail traffic from some customers had obviously started to drop off by the late 1960s. Shippers' light manufacturing and distribution plants were on both sides of the Western mainline, but mainly on the north side.

Most interesting was the tortuous NYC South Columbus industrial lead. This track, with west-facing switch points, snaked sharply off the team track to the north into a narrow bright green boxelder, mulberry and trash-lined slot, quickly disappearing into a shadowy curve between big industrial buildings. This lead wandered and curved right, left, right and left again through various factories and warehouses to a junction with the mile-long north-south T&OC South Columbus Industrial Track. This switching track, which paralleled 22nd Street, extended all the way north of Frebis Avenue to Mithoff, and dead-ended into a pile of ties on its south end almost back at the Western main. The industrial lead, which joined the South Columbus Industrial Track about halfway along its length, was its only outlet to the rest of the rail world.

The industrial complex served by the South Columbus Industrial Track was just outside the Columbus city limits in the 1920s. Locating their then-new plants here probably saved businesses the cost of Columbus city zoning, taxes and utilities assessments, but with sites close to workers' homes and streetcar lines. Columbus annexed this part of Franklin County into the city during the 1950s. This old T&OC track and the complex is easily visible today on Google Earth, looking like a huge dagger piercing north from the Western right-of-way up into the quiet old residential blocks of South Columbus. Like most industry in Columbus, which grew more on the strong backs of intellectual capital, insurance and financial services, university and government activity rather than "smokestack" manufacturing, these factory sites were light industry, clean with no foundries or pollution-belching mills. The one heavy manufacturing location was a big glass plant just to the west of the lead where it joined the team track paralleling the Western main. Other businesses seemed to be lighter, mainly engaged in processing and distribution of packaging materials, parts and equipment and foods.

Among the businesses on the South Columbus Industrial Track was the fascinating Fritz Rumer Cooke Co. This is a railroad construction and maintenance contractor which had built parts of the T&OC, C&O, N&W and other lines in Central Ohio from the 1870s forward (and still operates there in 2012). The Fritz yard sat in the northwest quadrant of the fourth curve of the T&OC industrial lead just before its switch onto the South Columbus Industrial Track. In the yard in the 1960s reposed a vast collection of new and old museum-quality rail equipment, a gritty but operational 90-year old railroad steam crane, stationary steam engines and winches, track cars and hand-cars, piles of spikes, joint bars, ties plates, ties and rails, and old yellow Pullman coaches used as dormitories and offices. In spite of venerable age these would be mobilized for jobs from time-to-time.

The Fritz yard gate was at 635 E. Woodrow. The house of its supervisor William Hoffman Sr. stood just outside the gate. Born 1904, Mr. Hoffman was a quiet career railroad man with neatly-combed white hair and a good sense of humor who liked being around us young people. I recall that he would tell us about the geometry of laying out a track curve and tangent, using some mathematics we later recognized as something like the calculus. Mrs. Hoffman, who also ran a small grocery store just across the Fritz gate parking area, was easily the most cheerful person I ever met.

On to the east, past the Industrial Track lead, there were more modern and bigger shipper facilities all the way to Bannon mostly on the north side of the Western main. The NYC interchanged traffic with the N&W at Bannon, where NYC yard limits ended.

Up through the mid-1960s, some big blocks of Lake Erie coal hoppers came across to the T&OC at Bannon, bound for the Lake Front Docks in Toledo via the Western Branch. However, as part of the NYC-PRR merger in 1968, the federal Justice Department antitrust authorities had forced the PRR to divest to the N&W its Sandusky Branch which ran up past Attica Junction to an enormous marine coal terminal on Lake Erie. After that the N&W could move coal to destination over its own lines.

The former PRR Sandusky Branch was one of the last Ohio railroads remaining under steam, using ponderous 2-10-4s to lift 100-car coal drags north to the Lake and rattle southbound empties back to Columbus. I recall so clearly one day as a small boy riding in the family car on a road parallel to this track watching one of these big engines down on her hands and knees inching 5,500 tons up the hill out of Columbus, rods banging, steam exhaust pounding up her stack, sweating and heaving like a massive plow horse. I read that these big PRR "J" class engines were built from C&O plans during the War. They did not share the distinctive belpaire-firebox look of the regular stable of Pennsylvania locomotives you would have seen in those last days of steam at the St. Clair engine house or awaiting their scrap voyages at the Chase Ave. yard.

The South Columbus job handled the remaining N&W interchange traffic at Bannon in the later 1960s, dragging a dozen or so boxcars cars daily back to West Columbus with its SW7s. For N&W cars destined for points way south, the T&OC would interchange down at Deepwater, on the Kanawha River south of Charleston, so the NYC could retain a bigger division of profitable ton miles of revenue.

Through the Penn Central merger and bankruptcy, West Columbus Yard's eventual demise and movement of the nerve center of the T&OC over to Buckeye Yard, the Conrail years and eventual spin-off of the T&OC to Norfolk Southern and CSX, the South Columbus job seems to have remained a constant, faithfully serving the line's loyal shippers on this traffic rich patch of railroad. It looks like the operation continues to this day.

(This is from memory and notes from 45 years ago, so I would appreciate any corrections or comments from readers.)