Toledo & Ohio Central West Columbus Yard – the 1960s

by James M. Cavanaugh

The T&OC's West Columbus Yard stretched east-to-west for about a mile along the north side of McKinley Avenue between the yard office near Yale Avenue and the B&O diamond on the east and Grandview Avenue and the West Columbus roundhouse on the west. The NYC's Big Four Cincinnati Main bordered the yard on its north side, atop the Scioto River levee. The yard itself was elevated about ten feet above the grade of McKinley Avenue, and appeared to have been laid on fill earth extending the levee southward by about a hundred yards.

Even the oldest old-timers working at West Columbus in the 1960s, including men who had watched the roundhouse being built during World War I, did not know how long there had been a rail yard at this site. Some thought the T&OC's original Columbus switching facility was at South Columbus, near Parsons Avenue; some said Truro and others said up along the East Columbus Branch just south of the PRR diamond, dating from when that was the main line to downtown. But no one really knew.

The yard had 22 tracks holding 40-90 cars plus an engine house lead on the south side. Not all tracks were still in service by the late 1960s. The yard's condition had deteriorated considerably by the time of the New York Central-Pennsylvania merger in 1968, with most of the tracks toward the east (south) end sunk into the ground up to the ball of the rail, ties not visible. It was interesting to watch the joints outside the yard office deflect up and down as yard engines or heavy loads rolled over them. In these last days of the New York Central, "preventative maintenance" was a term no longer among the common vocabulary.

The yard did have an engine house runner on the southern perimeter allowing power (we called the integrated diesel locomotive groups "consists") to move between the roundhouse and the south (east) end of the yard. The T&OC's north end wreck train, an ancient-looking assemblage of yellow Pullmans, flat cars, rusting NYC gondolas and a grimy black-boomed 100-ton steam crane (called "the Big Hook") perched on a short spur just to the south of the runner, parallel to McKinley Avenue close to the yard office. The end of the wreck train spur also served as the "bad order" track where cars needing heavy shop repairs would be collected before being delivered out to be overhauled. The T&OC did not appear to have a fully-equipped car shop between Toledo and the Ohio River, and these functions were outsourced or served somewhere on the Big Four's plant.

The old coal dock from steam days (which ended on the Western Branch in 1955) was still standing alongside the engine house runner midway between the yard office and Grandview, looking good enough to go back in service.

The West Columbus Yard office was on the east ("south" on our north-south T&OC Western Branch) end of the yard, where the switching leads converged into two tracks heading toward the B&O's GN Tower a 200 yards to the east.

Tracks 10 and below on the south side were receiving, classification and outbound tracks for southbound movements. Tracks 8-10 would usually receive southbound road trains such as CN-2, TC-2 and TN-6 arriving from Toledo (Stanley Yard), and the Marysville Turn which switched as far north as Marysville (Western MP 106). From these tracks, Hobson-bound freights like CD-8, TC-2 and the occasional Thurston or Corning Turns or Corning Extras departed.

Tracks 12-22 were receiving, classification and departure tracks for northbound freight. Incoming northbound road trains included NT-5, NT-7, the South Columbus and East Columbus Locals. The incoming road trains were usually all cars from West Virginia as the T&OC had no active on-line freight shippers between Hobson yard at the Ohio River and New Lexington. Of the outbound road trains heading north, NT-5 was a "hotshot train, with few "short" cars (to be set off short of Toledo). Usually NT-5 had a block of 10-20 cars for interchange with the NYC Big Four at Ridgeway. NT-7 was the working train, usually called in the late afternoon or early evening. NT-7 usually had short cars for multiple set off locations between Marysville and Toledo during its all-night run.

The yard would receive perhaps 250-400 inbound cars per day, depending on the season. As veteran railroaders know, north-south lines like the T&OC Western see significant fluctuations in traffic volumes, being affected by variable demand for commodities such as coal and iron ore, crushed rock for construction, as well as factors such as the winter freeze on the Great Lakes, which would not accommodate bulk grain, coal or ore shipping from December to April.

In the 1960s, the inbound road trains provided most of the flow to West Columbus. In addition to blocks of northbound steam and chemical feedstock coal and coke hoppers, and the everpresent southbound empty hoppers returning for new loads, West Columbus received about 125-150 box and tank cars and covered hoppers of various industrial petrochemicals, polymers, plastics and similar commodities and gondolas full of scrap from the traffic-rich Kanawha Valley in West Virginia on the south, and boxcars and auto-rack cars carrying vehicles and manufactured items such as appliances from Detroit, Toledo and Findlay to the north. The big Honda plant at Marysville, later the Western's premiere on-line shipper, did not appear for another decade. The Columbus locals and interchange traffic off the other four railroads serving Columbus also produced an appreciable volume of arriving cars. The Marysville Turn brought boxcars and covered hoppers of seed and fertilizer from O.M. Scott & Sons and boxcars of food products from Nestle in Marysville. The South Columbus yard job brought in light manufacturing output and distribution traffic from the South Columbus Industrial Track and shippers along the main line between Steelton and Bannon, and the East Columbus Local brought covered hoppers and boxcars from the Landmark terminal elevator at Truro and the shippers north of the East Columbus diamond, mainly the Albers Foods warehouse at the Leonard and Woodland Avenues intersection and Davco fertilizer at East Columbus.

With no hump, all sorting and classification of cars at West Columbus to make up outbound road trains and locals had to be done the old-fashioned way, with switching crews on the south end of the yard manually grabbing blocks of cars with their single or double EMD SW-7 1,200-horsepower yard switcher locomotives. Yard brakemen would bleed off the air brakes so the cars would roll freely, and then pull out cuts of 15-20 cars south and shove them slowly back north past the yard office toward the yard, with brakemen cutting off cars to let them roll into the assigned tracks, all being lined up by a rapidly-moving brakeman farther to the west. You could stay in great physical condition doing this work if you did not mind getting very cold, hot and wet out in the elements. The yard jobs were constant motion on the south end switching leads, except for a lunch break, called their "minutes" when they could get the engine into the clear somewhere for a quarter hour or so for a rest, during which a through road unit train might utilize the leads. There was a slight down-grade from the south end, near the yard office, toward the center of the yard, not quite enough for a standing car to start rolling but adequate for a car with a little momentum to roll steadily down the lead, through the switch into a yard track and couple itself to the cut waiting there.

West Columbus had no dedicated runner track for through trains to go around the classification tracks. Usually the unit trains passing through would use tracks 10-14 for passage after the yard crews cleared a path. Northbound through trains, mostly 100-car coal unit trains such as the bright yellow and green Peabody cars moving from Claybank, near Corning, to a power plant in Michigan, or occasional red and black Consolidated Coal "woodpecker trains" (named after the red-headed bird common in Central Ohio) or other blocks of coal for Lake Front Docks in Toledo or interchange to the N&W, would wait at Broad Street until the yard job cleared out a track. The unit train would stop with engines just opposite the yard office for head end crews to change, and then pulled slowly westward (north) through the yard to let the conductor and flagman change on the roll.

There was a grade uphill going north (west) from the yard past Grandview Tower, but it did not get intense until up around Mounds, some five miles north of the yard. Even the heaviest coal drags, with 100 big Peabody or Consol loads, could start from a dead stop and move right through the yard with relative ease. In the diesel era, no northbound trains used helpers from West Columbus, but during the steam days this was all helper territory. The diesels could not match the horsepower of steam locomotives, but with every axle being powered they could start and sustain momentum on a heavy train without slipping.

Southbound unit trains were almost always empty drags, although occasionally there were incredibly-heavy 100-car iron ore (taconite) unit trains from the Great Lakes interchanging to the C&O for an Ashland, Kentucky mill. Crews on these jobs also changed at the yard office. Normal road power had no trouble starting the heaviest iron ore trains up out of the yard southbound.

The Yard Office

The nerve centers of the yard were the main yard office and the B&O's GN Tower at the south end, and a small subsidiary yard office and Grandview Tower at the north end. The Yard Office was a typical NYC-style wood frame gabled building on the south side of the tracks at the east end of the yard. The north end yard office was a flat-roofed cinderblock building between the engine house leads and the main yard leads, just east of Grandview Avenue. This building housed a yard clerk who took down car numbers from incoming trains, and provided a warm, dry area for crews to get out of the weather. Grandview Tower stood just west of Grandview Avenue in the angle between the Western Branch as it led north from the yard, and the Big Four double-track main line, which crossed the Western via double-track diamonds just to the west of the tower.

Crewing T&OC Road Trains from West Columbus

In the 1960s, Ohio still had a "full crew law" that required five men on each train – engineer, fireman and head brakeman riding the locomotive, and a conductor and flagman riding the caboose. Technically, a train was under command of the conductor. On the small T&OC branches, with the conductor a mile from the engine out of touch, the engineer followed signals and train orders, and was responsible for train movement while under way. When the train had switching work to do, the train crew got out on the ground and the conductor planned the moves and gave the signals. Typically the T&OC road trains switched small cuts of cars from the front of the train only, with the head brakeman (most junior member of the crew) controlling this process, reading off the "list" (a handwritten paper prepared by the conductor before departing which gave the schedule of cars to be set off and picked up at various points, to be certain of accuracy) Historically, especially back in the steam days when switching was a lot more work, road trains with heavy pick up and set off duties carried an extra brakeman on the locomotive, this sixth crewmember known as the "list man."

T&OC road train crews were made up of regularly-assigned engine and train crews, divided into preferred (known as "hotshot") crews and pool crews. Road crews dispatched from West Columbus were also assigned to WIP 1-4, which were local switching jobs at the huge Willis Day Industrial Park just south of Stanley Yard, the Marysville Turn, East Columbus Local which switched local Columbus traffic east of Bannon, Claybank Mine Run and the T&OC's "orphan"

lines, including the St. Mary's Local, Eastern Branch Local based in Bucyrus, Heath Local, and occasionally others.

Enginemen and trainmen could bid to fill openings on these crews, with bids awarded by seniority. Enginemen who had enough service were "promoted" to engineer status, and similarly, experienced trainmen were promoted to conductor status. When freight was slow, usually during the winter, there were fewer crews assigned, so some engineers and conductors who might not otherwise get much work would drop back and bid on fireman and brakemen slots, respectively.

Train crews available for service were displayed on a board at West Columbus Yard Office, where the crew dispatchers worked the telephones to ring up railroaders to make up crews for each scheduled train. The board was a floor-to-ceiling matrix of square slots, looking like a typesetter's tray with hundreds of pockets stood up vertically, open on the dispatcher's side of the board, with thick glass on the side that faced out onto a small crew assembly room. Each train crew was assigned a horizontal row of slots with blocks of wood with the crewman's name painted on both ends, which the dispatcher would slide into the slot so the names could be read from either side.

The crews were divided into the "preferred" or "hotshot" group and the "pool car" group. As a crew was called for a train, the dispatcher moved the rows of blocks up so the crew in line for the next train for each of the two crew categories would be at the top, and as crews came in from the road, the inbound crew would be put in the bottom row of the appropriate hotshot or pool column, to start working its way up to the top to be called again.

The Crew Dispatcher would telephone crews two hours ahead of the time their train was scheduled. In prior days, when few employees had telephones, employees residing in the rectangle bordered by Broad Street, McKinley, Yale and Grandview avenues would get their calls from a bicycle messenger. By the 1960s no one still got these personal wake-up visits.

The "hotshot" crews were called for the first two trains scheduled after 10:00 AM each day. After the two hotshots were called (if in fact both were called), the pool crews got all other trains scheduled until 10 AM the following morning. The trade off between the two classes was that the hotshots always got at least one train per day, but never more than two. Also the pool crews usually got NT-7 north, which meant you worked hard all night but got good overtime pay. Southbound from West Columbus in the 1960s, trains had few intermediate set offs and pick ups or opposing traffic, so they tended to run through quickly without a lot of overtime. There was little point to sharpshooting to the south.

Vacancies on crews, created by crew members "marking off" (which they could do at will for personal leave, vacation or sick time), would be filled from an "Extra Board", a vertical column

of trainmen blocks on the right side of the big matrix. Whenever a train was called, if there was an opening on its crew, the man who was at the top of the Extra Board ("first out") would be called for that assignment. Experienced trainmen would "play the board" to "sharpshoot" for preferred assignments, especially aiming to be "first out" when high-paying slots came open on jobs that were certain to produce big overtime hours, such as the crews that switched the Willis Day Industrial Park. The "WIP" crews got paid mileage to drive up to Toledo to report for work, were essentially guaranteed full overtime on most runs, and were also paid to deadhead back to Columbus when they marked off after working the job for some days. Other favorite "sharpshoot" jobs were the St. Mary's Local (which reported at Bellefontaine), East Columbus Local, the Eastern Branch Local (reporting at Bucyrus) and Mine Run (reporting at New Lexington or Corning).

Other plum assignments were work trains dispatched occasionally out to support heavy road maintenance, or better still, wreck trains. These were unpredictable, but if a man went out on a wreck train he got time-and-a half overtime after eight hours, and double-time overtime after 16 hours for the remainder of the assignment. Wreck crews usually slept in dormitory cars and were fed in a diner car – pretty good food and lots of it – for several days until the line was open again.

Frequently due to traffic imbalances, the T&OC would "deadhead" a crew by Greyhound bus to Toledo, Corning or Hobson to man an inbound train. Under collective bargaining rules, a deadheading crew would get a full day's pay for the mileage involved (131 miles to Toledo, 124 to Hobson). Another rewarding anomaly for crewmen was a "make whole day" which could occur if a member of a crew was called to fill a vacancy on another crew when no Extra Board men were available. If the crewman worked that job, and less than a full eight hours (required rest between assignments) occurred before the man's regular crew was called for its next train, the crewman could not report to go out with his regular crew, so he was paid whatever that crew made even though he was not working on it for the time being, until he next caught up with the regular rotation. However, this was quite rare.

When a crew took a road train out, each man's pay (in appropriate grades for engineer and firemen, who were under the bargaining agreement of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Engineers or "BLFE", and conductors and brakemen, under the Order of Railway Conductors and Brakemen or "ORCB" agreement) was based on the mileage of the scheduled run. This meant that for the 131-mile run from West Columbus to Stanley Yards, the crew was paid for 10:31 hours, regardless of how quickly the run went, but if they were on duty beyond 10:31 hours, they got time-and-a-half overtime up to their legal on-duty limit of 16 hours. The run from West Columbus to Hobson was 124 miles, so the pay was a bit less but you went on overtime a little sooner. Switching and terminal runs like the East Columbus Local had different

working agreements, but in most cases, if you worked the full 16 hours (highly likely on many runs) the pay was excellent.

Train crews also picked up their pay checks and pay stubs at the Crew Dispatcher's window at the Yard Office. The Dispatcher also handed out updated timetables, and glue-backed pasteover inserts for addition to older timetables to keep them up to date, as well as the NYC's orange-covered Safety Manual.

The ages of train crewmen reporting at West Columbus in the 1960s ranged from 18 all the way up to 70 and more, including many railroaders from the steam days and even a few World War I veterans who went back to the days when hand-fired single-expansion 2-8-0 consolidations and 30-foot wooden boxcars ruled the land. The first few African Americans were appearing on the West Columbus extra board in the 1960s. Although I did not experience it from the African Americans' side, it seemed to go pretty smoothly. But at the time, no one gave any thought to the possibility of women working out on the line.

Grandview Tower

Grandview Tower was an active and fascinating place, most especially at night. The interlocking plant in the dark recesses behind the operator's brightly-lit desk (which faced out eastward a bay window Grandview Avenue and the yard with the Columbus downtown skyline as a backdrop) glowed with green, amber and red lights and clunked and popped with the sounds of big electrical relays. The venerable NYC telephones, which you cranked to generate a ring tone, and the NYC-PRR radio with more yellow and red lights, were constantly squawking.

The tower operator ran the interlocking (a system of interconnected switches and signals which mechanically precluded giving opposing trains both a clear block simultaneously) between the Western and Big Four, as well as a number of switches just to the north of the diamond. These included an interchange track between the two lines, a crossover on the Big Four, a 270-degree loop track for turning engines and the south end switch for Grandview siding which began just north of the diamond on the Western. In steam days, the West Columbus Roundhouse was the service facility for both the Western and the Big Four, and all locomotives moving to and from Union Station and the Big Four yards came through the interlocking. The Grandview Tower plant had something like 25 big levers that controlled switches by mechanical rod and roller linkages, plus hand switches that controlled signals on both lines. The operator would get a physical workout during his eight-hour shift yanking these levers.

The operator also relayed signals to trains arriving from the south, which had to double their trains into two tracks on the south side of the yard. The train would pull into a track until the caboose cleared at the south (east) end of the yard. Then the head brakeman would cut (uncouple) the train just clear of the west end switch on that track, the train would pull ahead

and stop, and the brakeman would throw a switch to let the train back into a second receiving track. Due to the curve of the track past the Big Four diamonds and obstacles to vision it was hard to see from the brakeman's point on the ground to the engine, so the tower operator would watch the brakeman's hand signals and relay them by radio to the engineer. Often a yard man would step out of the north end office to relay the brakeman's signals to the tower.

On outbound trains, the crew would get engines from the roundhouse, run up through the Grandview plant, and back down on the train for their air test. The head brakeman would walk over to Grandview Tower to pick up written or typed train orders and wait for the signal to depart. At night, when we got the "go" signal the operator would switch the Western Branch home signal to the green "highball" and the brakeman would come down the stairs and signal an up-and-down highball with his lantern. The engine headlight would go up to high-beam, attracting a bright cloud of flying moths. You would hear the "thrum-thrum-thrum" of the diesels spooling up RPMs followed by the thunder of drawbar slack running out as the locomotives pulled slowly toward the tower. In daylight you might see a puff of soot shaken out of the exhausts of the older units as they came to life. These were the sights, sounds and feel of classic 20th Century railroading, so common at the time we never thought about it, but rare in today's more automated rail world.

The Roundhouse

The 20-stall West Columbus Roundhouse was built on filled-in land in the northeast quadrant of McKinley and Grandview Avenues in 1918. (Details as to this structure and the elegant track layout which served it, which was a state-of-the-railroading-art facility when placed in service, are set forth in a fascinating 1919 Railway Age magazine article which appears on the Columbus Railroads website T&OC section.)

By the 1960s, the roundhouse was still in use for some light repairs on diesels. It appeared the shop men could pull traction motors and do quite a few diesel maintenance tasks in there, and were still making some use of the heavy overhead crane system in some bays. The weeds were starting to get thick in the turntable well and surrounding area, but everything still worked and you would see an SW-7 or Alco carbody-type "covered wagon" nose sticking out open bay doors.

Regular diesel servicing, lubrication, fueling, water and sand, was done on the roundhouse leads just to the east of the structure. Immediately to the east of that was the hostler track where locomotive consists waiting for road train assignments sat idling. These engines were an eclectic mix of F9-class General Motors Electromotive Division covered wagons built from the late 1940s to 1950s, newer EMD hood units including GP-7s and various four and six-axle modern units, mainly GP30s and 35s and SD40s, decrepit Alco covered wagons and older Alco

hood units, and occasionally leased units including classic Northern Pacific orange-liveried ABBA covered wagon consists and yellow Southern Pacific six-axle EMD GPs. The NYC consists would be made up of a hodge-podge of machines, often with a hood unit in front and a covered wagon B unit behind, or with two or three covered wagon A units rigged out "elephant style" with the cabs all pointing forward. However, the hired-in covered wagons, possibly under lease terms, always remained together in the classic ABBA arrangement.

Under collective bargaining rules, the enginemen known as "hostlers" (Teamsters members) had the territory inside a pair of white and yellow-painted rail joint bars on the east end of the roundhouse complex. Road enginemen (BLFE members) could handle engines outside the yellow markers. There was another set of markers about a hundred yards inside the complex, which delineated a territory where both hostlers and road enginemen could handle engines. Sometimes this got complicated, and if an engine was sitting with even one axle in the wrong territory, the Road Foreman would have to call a different crew to move it, or risk paying a "make whole" day to the crew deprived of the work. But somehow things usually went smoothly.

End of the West Columbus Yard Era

For a time after the NYC-PRR merger in 1968, West Columbus continued as before. The only notable difference was that the consists on the hostler track started to include PRR E and F covered wagons and sometimes the twin-engined PRR E8s and E9s passenger units (lots of horsepower per locomotive but not our favorite starting a heavy train due to the higher gearing ratio) and PRR EMD GP units, all in black livery with the distinctive bittersweet-colored Pennsylvania "Keystone" logo on the front. West Columbus continued to make up its 250-400 cars per day and serve the locals and road trains. Traffic increased a bit as the Penn Central sought to move more of its East Coast to St. Louis and Cincinnati traffic over the old NYC "water level" route through Buffalo (Enola) down to Columbus instead of over the old PRR Allegheny Summit lines and the Panhandle; eventually an NT-1 train was added out of Columbus. However, we knew that West Columbus Yard's days were numbered as the new Penn Central Buckeye Yard of epic proportions west of Columbus was under construction.

Buckeye was possibly the one largest consolidation project of the Penn Central, designed to combine and replace yard all operations of the Pennsylvania Railroad, NYC Big Four and T&OC, making obsolete some nine older yards that had served Columbus since time immemorial, including NYC's T&OC West Columbus and South Columbus yards, Big Four's Grandview and Fairgrounds yards, and the PRR Yard A, Yard B, CA&C, Pennor and Grogan yards, as well as the West Columbus roundhouse and PRR St. Clair engine house and Spruce Street facility. The concept was that Buckeye would not only produce big operating efficiencies, but would also free up a thousand acres of developable Columbus city-center real estate from which the PCRR

would harvest a rich yield of badly-needed capital. This was true in theory but the ill-fated PCRR did not survive long enough to realize this gain.

West Columbus was shut down without much ceremony in early 1970, when Buckeye was fully commissioned. Unsentimental railroads quickly demolish unused structures to avoid injury to trespassers (and lawsuits), so the yard office, coal station and roundhouse and other old familiar buildings gradually came down. Only some through unit trains continued to use the original Western main between the Buckeye interchange at Darby (MP-123.6) and Scioto Tower (MP-131). T&OC Western southbound trains started to leave the old main at Darby to enter the north end of Buckeye before they reached Mounds crossing, and at the south end Western trains used the old Auburn track interconnection with the PRR Miami side just north (west) of Scioto Tower and running on the double-track PRR to the Alton interchange into Buckeye. The old dreaded Highway Siding at Scioto-Darby road, where T&OC north end inbound train crews spent calculable percentages of their lives waiting for a West Columbus yard track to open up, was no more.

The opening of Buckeye Yard also had profound effects all over the Columbus Division. Like a big box store with unbeatable low prices that quickly drives local retailers out of business throughout a wide radius, Buckeye ended most of the switching jobs at the Big Four's Bellefontaine yards and substantially changed operations everywhere from Stanley yards in Toledo to Collinwood in Cincinnati, with impacts as far as Indianapolis, Cleveland and Buffalo. This represented painful personal change for many railroaders, but progress and new opportunities for others. By late 1970, the Penn Central died in the U.S. Bankruptcy Court and the Congress, but Conrail was born of it and successfully led to the CSX (the merged successor to the C&O and B&O railroads) and N&W alignments that serve Columbus today.

Buckeye was and is a beautiful modern rail facility, with anything a well-run railroad could want. There were elegant track layouts with fly-overs that avoid congestion on all conceivable inbound and outbound moves, well-maintained running tracks around both sides, well-spaced long receiving and outbound tracks that never required doubling of trains, a hump and classification yard, all fully automated with central control and signaling. No more relaying of doubling signals through the Grandview Tower operator from a yard man swinging a newspaper (visible for a great distance) watching a brakeman 50 cars down the narrow gap between tracks throwing a fusee into the night air. But for all Buckeye's slick "we thought of everything" look and feel, to a railroader it lacked the old-home comfort of the too-small, manual-labor intensive, historical museum-piece eyesore facilities like West Columbus that it replaced.

(The foregoing is from memory and notes dating back nearly five decades, and I apologize for any gross inaccuracies. Corrections, comments and additions from readers are most welcome.)