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Canals and Electric Railways: In the United States, both the vast canal system and the electric railway network connecting many small towns were short lived. The heyday of the canal system pre-dated electric railways in popularity by about 75 years. Steam railroads did in the canal system in the 1840s; automobiles, especially Henry Ford's Model T, did in suburban electric railways in the early 1920s. Of course, there were survivors of both, but these few, such as the Erie Canal and the high-speed Red Arrow Line (Philadelphia), and the South Shore Lines (Chicago), were scarce and of greatly lessened importance.

Starting about 1810, canals were being dug everywhere, usually alongside a major river but sometimes connecting one river with another. A tow path on the canal bank made it easy for mule teams to pull the flat canal boats along their route. Colonials realized the discomfort of stagecoach travel over rough and often impassable roads and preferred coastal sailing vessels and river boats where possible. George Washington invested in a future Potomac Canal. In our area, there was the Delaware Canal, beginning at the head of navigation on the Pennsylvania side near Trenton and following the Delaware River upstream to Easton and beyond. The Delaware and Hudson Canal connected the coal fields of northeast Pennsylvania with the Hudson River near Kingston, New York. The Raritan Canal crossed mid-Jersey from Trenton to Perth Amboy near New York Harbor. In 1845, the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal connected the Delaware River watershed with the Chesapeake, saving hundreds of miles by ship between Philadelphia and Baltimore. This latter canal is still a viable waterway, and remnants of the others survive, often as tourist attractions.

One of the most challenging trips for canal passengers was going over the Alleghenies in Pennsylvania between the East Coast and the Ohio Valley. In the late 1830s, the Allegheny Portage Railroad was completed with several inclined planes to raise the canal boats over the mountains. Stationary steam engines with cables pulled the boats up these planes to the next level, where they would be pulled along level track on rail carts for a short distance, then lifted up the next plane. On the far side, they would be let down the same way. Charles Dickens made this trip on his 1842 visit to America. When the steam-powered Pennsylvania Railroad got across the mountains in 1847, the end came soon to the Allegheny Portage Railway.

The Erie Canal, dug across New York State from Lake Erie to the Hudson Valley, was heralded as one of man's greatest triumphs when it opened in 1825. While still in existence today, the opening of the New York Central and Hudson River Railroads in the 1840s diminished its importance as a relevant carrier of goods and passengers.

Frank J. Sprague is credited with the invention of the first practical American electric street car. With electricity becoming rapidly available in large cities, most street railways were converted from horse power before 1900. Highly successful, the idea was expanded to country districts, especially where no existing rail service was available. Ralph P. Willis, a prominent trapshooter and contemporary of my father, who lived in Penns Grove, New Jersey, told me he once traveled from his home to the Delaware Water Gap on electric railways. Following the route he had to use, the distance must have been 125 miles with many changes and probably took 12 hours. First, he crossed the ferry from Penns Grove to Fourth Street Wharf in Wilmington, then the Wilmington-Chester-Philadelphia trolley. He continued north on several more suburban lines through Bucks County to Easton and eventually on to the Water Gap. It was considerably more reasonable than buying a rail ticket (just as a bus ticket is cheaper today).

“Our” trolley through Yorklyn was nicknamed the “Kennett” trolley. The official name was the West Chester, Kennett, and Wilmington Electric Railway, but during its 20-year span (1903-1923), it didn’t reach West Chester or Wilmington. A passenger could travel on the West Chester-to-Kennett trolley that passed Lenape Park and Unionville Junction (where the rotary exists on Route 82). At State and Union Streets, he could switch to the “Kennett” trolley that followed the East Branch of Red Clay Creek to Clifton Mills and the Red Clay valley on across the State Line north of Yorklyn. It then went southwest to Hockessin and down the Mill Creek valley to the vicinity of Mockingbird Hill, where it crossed a ridge with the steepest grade on the line and joined the present Route 41 near McKennan’s Church Road. Thence it paralleled 41 to Brandywine Springs Park, the end of the line. Passengers could change there to the People’s Railway for the trip through Price’s Corner and Elsmere to Wilmington. At Brandywine Springs, there was a short spur through the Cedars to Marshallton and a seven-mile connection from Kennett Square to West Grove through Avondale.

Originally the “Kennett” trolley was powered by a direct-current generating plant on Birch Street, a few blocks southeast of its Kennett terminus. This being at least 10 miles from Brandywine Springs, there was a considerable voltage drop toward the far end of the line. Normally, two or three trolleys would be somewhere on the line at the same time. If the lights dimmed in a car closer to Kennett Square, the motorman knew one of the trolleys was trying to get over the ridge near Mockingbird Hill, and he would stop until the lights would brighten again, telling him the distant trolley had cleared the hill. In later years the company bought A.C. commercial power, and the voltage delays were things of the past. Unfortunately, so was the trolley line after 1923. The overhead wire and its polls, along with the light steel rail, were removed immediately.

Work Report: On Tuesday, March 17, 15 volunteers worked during the evening session, plus several others who were doing track repairs and painted railroad cars in the afternoon (Linda Herman, Brent McDougall, and Dennis Dragon were here, and probably others). Those in the evening were: Ted Kamen (in charge), Steve Bryce, Anne Cleary, Mike Ciosek, Rose Ann Hoover, Bob Jordan, Jeff Kennard, Mike Leister, Jerry Lucas, Ken Ricketts, John Schubel, Bill Schwoebel, Mac Taylor, Jay Williams, and Dennis Tiley.

The burner for the Mountain Wagon was “put up” and the fitting holes sealed. More railroad ties were pre-drilled and track sections put together. The 10-foot lengths of new rail were stored in the snack bar building. Work continued on the Lionel train layout wiring. The windshields from the Models 76 and 735, both with cracked glass, were put back on their respective cars temporarily, as the “glass man” who was to replace the glass can’t work for a few weeks. The air tank from the Model 740 was returned, after having been tested for wall thickness. It tested out well. The damaged grade crossing at the rear of the property was repaired except for blacktop and a more permanent fix, which will have to wait for warmer weather.

On Thursday, March 19, the following 12 volunteers answered the call: Tim Ward (in charge), Tom Marshall, Bill Schwoebel, Jared Schoenly, Richard Bernard, Eugene Maute, Gerhard Maute, Bob Jordan, Ted Kamen, Mark Russell, John Bacino, and Jerry Novak. Library work continued. The upper frame from the Cretors popper was taken to the back building and sand-blasted. The cast signage was carefully removed and taken off-site where the old paint will be carefully abraded away. The 740’s air tank was hydrostatically tested to 180 p.s.i. The Mountain Wagon was carefully cleaned up and should be ready for service.