

Trains, trains, trains!

The Adirondack railroads that opened the mountains to settlement and tourism were the focus of a conference at the Adirondack Museum

By Lee Manchester, Lake Placid News, October 18, 2002

Railroads through the Adirondacks were more than just a pretty ride; they were indispensable in opening up the mountains to settlement, industry and tourism. Without them, most of the territory within the Blue Line would have been unknown and unknowable to all but a few of the hardest explorers until the mid-20th century explosion of road building.

That's why last Thursday's conference on regional railroad architecture and heritage at the Adirondack Museum was so important, drawing more than 75 participants from all over northern New York state, some of them preservationists, some of them just train fans.

Coordinated by Adirondack Architectural Heritage — also called AARCH — a nonprofit historic preservation society based in Keeseville, the “All Aboard!” conference was the brainchild of Jane Mackintosh, a curator at the Adirondack Museum.

“The railroad was crucial in the development of the Adirondacks,” said Bill Johnston, AARCH president, in opening the conference. “Its role in the development of industry — particularly iron — as well as tourism and the Saranac Lake cures cannot be overestimated.

“Today, with most of the live, working Adirondack railroad lines abandoned, new kinds of activity draw our attention: preservation of the old depots, and redevelopment of the old rights-of-way for scenic train lines and ‘rail trails.’ ”

Mackintosh provided a historic overview of the development of railroad service in the Adirondacks, illustrating her address with a map that some conferees thought was probably the first comprehensive diagram of all the rail lines ever built in the region.

Several early attempts at settling and developing the Adirondacks were either stifled or failed altogether for lack of ready transport. Timbuctoo, a mid-19th century agricultural community of free African Americans in North Elba township, was said to have disintegrated after just a few years in large part due to the farmers' inability to ship their produce to market.

Early efforts to mine pig iron in North Elba, Adirondac and Tahawus faltered and died for lack of a railroad. The mines near Ticonderoga were developed only because a rail bridge was built nearby across Lake Champlain into Vermont.

The iron-mining communities of the Au Sable Valley were not developed to their full potential until extended railroad lines gave them quick access to the lake and the main north-south track built by the Delaware and Hudson Railroad.

Both Adirondack tourism and Saranac Lake's health-resort industry also depended heavily on the building of the railroad into the Adirondacks, Mackintosh observed. The rail line up from Utica, built in 1892, employed “heroic engineering to overcome barriers to railroad construction presented by the land,” the curator said.

When that line was connected with the railroad to Malone, the Adirondacks were as fully connected to the world, from Montreal to New York to Buffalo, as any other American region.

“The railroad connected once isolated towns,” Mackintosh said, “and it gave them trade access to the outside world.”

What remains of the “heroic engineering” work of the Adirondack railroads, in many places, are only the depots that formerly welcomed the trains into our mountain communities. Engineer Michael Bosak addressed last Thursday’s conference on the many varieties of adaptive re-use that have transformed these depots while preserving them as links to our heritage:

- In Plattsburgh, the restored 19th century D&H station contains a passenger platform served by the Amtrak line between New York City and Montreal, but most of the interior space is dedicated to offices.
- In Au Sable Forks, the old D&H depot is now a restaurant.
- Since 1967, the Lake Placid train station has been used as a community museum by the North Elba-Lake Placid Historical Society.

“Of course, there’s nothing that helps the restoration of a historic railroad station like the return of a historic railroad,” Bosak observed.

The creation of the Adirondack Scenic Railroad, both in the southern Adirondack Park between Old Forge and Utica and in the High Peaks region between Saranac Lake and Lake Placid, has spurred the restoration of historic train depots in Thendara and Remsen and given life to the already restored stations on the northern line.

Mary Hotaling, executive director of Historic Saranac Lake, told the “All Aboard!” crew about her organization’s restoration of the 1904 Union Station that now serves as the northern hub of the Adirondack Scenic line.

Passenger service into Saranac Lake and Lake Placid on the D&H and New York Central lines ended in 1965, while freight service lasted another seven years until 1972.

“At that point,” Hotaling said, “the (Saranac Lake) station just sat there and sat there, deteriorating.”

In 1994, Historic Saranac Lake decided to call a meeting to see what could be done to restore the depot. The organization’s interest came at just the right time. A new village manager and a new development director for Saranac Lake had just started their jobs; both had loads of energy and lots of fresh ideas.

Rob Camoin, the development director, was familiar with ISTEA (often pronounced like “ice tea”), the Intermodal Surface Transportation Enhancement Act of 1992, which provided federal money to rebuild transportation-related facilities across America. ISTEA gave most of the money for the Saranac Lake depot project, but 20 percent of the project’s cost had to be raised by Historic Saranac Lake in matching funds.

“(State Senator Ron) Stafford kicked in some money from discretionary funds,” Hotaling recounted, “but Historic Saranac Lake had to finance the remaining \$30,000, which was very difficult for us as a small organization.”

The impetus for restoring the depot was more than just the abstract appeal of restoring an old industrial facility. Rumors abounded that the new Adirondack Scenic Railroad, started in 1992 out of Old Forge, was considering the restoration of service between Lake Placid, Saranac Lake, and Tupper Lake, eventually connecting the High Peaks all the way back down the 119 miles to Utica. It seemed important that Saranac Lake ready its historic depot if the train was going to return.

The actual restoration of the depot may have played a part, in turn, in the actual revival of the Adirondack Scenic Railroad’s Sara-Placid run.

“We didn’t know for sure whether the train was going to come back or not,” Hotaling said, “but the fact that the depot was there was evidently a critical part of the railroad coming in.”

“You’ve hit on the \$64,000 question — or the \$64 million question, today,” remarked Bosak to Hotaling, “which is what to do with a restored railroad station once it is restored.”

“I believe that the best use for a restored building is the use for which it was designed,” Hotaling responded.

Steve Engelhart, AARCH executive director, followed Hotaling with a survey of a few recent railroad depot restorations in the Adirondacks, along with a rundown of several depots desperately needing attention.

Engelhart opened his talk with a reminiscence of riding the night train from Italy to Austria once as a child, during which he had one of the most restful night’s sleeps he’s ever experienced.

“It was something about the rhythmic clack of the rails,” Engelhart recalled, “the wonderfully comfortable berth, and the gentle, back-and-forth rocking of the train.

“I think I’ve been trying ever after to recapture that night’s sleep.”

Several of the recently restored stations reviewed by Engelhart are part of overall historic restoration projects, like the depots in Thendara, North Creek and Riparius.

In other communities:

- In Westport, the restored train station has been the home of a small regional theater company since 1979, a function that does not interfere with the depot’s role as an Amtrak passenger platform.
- The Port Henry station, which also hosts passengers waiting for the Amtrak train, houses the community’s senior citizens center as well as part of Moriah township’s mining heritage complex.
- In Dannemora, the 90-year-old train depot was purchased in 1991 by the village government. Situated in the center of the community, as train stations so often were, the converted depot was an ideal candidate for use as the village’s office building.
- Several Adirondack and North Country historic railroad stations, however, were in bad shape and needed attention, according to Engelhart:
- Lyon Mountain had rail service from 1873 to 1970. The existing train depot, built in 1913, needs friends — and friends it has found. A group called Friends of Lyon Mountain has purchased the depot, hoping to use it someday for a mining and railroad museum. In the meantime, the Friends have put a new roof on the structure and restored the foundation to keep it from disintegrating any further.
- In Rouses Point, the old Romanesque Revival brick depot, built in 1877 but moved from its original location, is in need of help.
- The wooden Crown Point station, built in 1868, is “just hanging on for dear life.”

Any amount of energy spent on restoring these structures would be valuable, Engelhart said. Repairing roofs and shoring up foundations would keep the endangered depots from slipping any further toward disintegration.

“Some restorations take years,” Engelhart said, “while others are more modest. There isn’t really any one way of doing it.”

Engelhart said he had one pleasant surprise in his whirlwind tour of existing railroad stations in the area: The West Chazy passenger terminal, built in 1907, which has

been converted into a private home by a pair of real railroad enthusiasts.

“They’ve got a model railroad running through their raised-bed garden,” Engelhart said. “They’ve moved a caboose onto the site, which one of the owners uses for a shop. She calls it ‘The Crystal Caboose.’ ”

At lunchtime, the conferees gathered in the Railroad Room of the Adirondack Museum, which houses a luxurious 19th century Pullman car, the complete railroad depot from Kildare, the train watchman’s shed from Gouverneur, the horse-drawn carriage that met the trains at Raquette Lake and the benches from the Faust station outside Tupper Lake.

It was in that setting, with train-whistle sound effects echoing melodically in the background, that the keynote speaker gave his address. J. Winthrop Aldritch, the state’s deputy commissioner for historic preservation, said, “With only the D&H line along Lake Champlain running now, it may seem that railroads are things of the past here, but it need not be so.”

Aldritch noted that registering the entire line used by the Adirondack Scenic Railroad as a historic district, along with several other old depots and two antique railroad bridges along the Au Sable River, had helped more people become better aware of the railroad’s significance to the Adirondacks, and had also made it possible for restoration funds to flow to projects that needed them.

“There is so much more out there that could benefit from such listing and from the associated documentation,” Aldritch said, “I want you to consider this a call to you all.”

Several kinds of restoration grants are available to properties that are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

“These grants have proven, time and again, to be the lever by which these projects have been started,” Aldritch observed, “but we can’t make these grants if you don’t apply for them.

“My advice to you is, seize the day. You have people in office now who are sympathetic to your interests. Do not let this opportunity pass without using it to your advantage.”

When the conference reconvened in the Adirondack Museum auditorium, the program shifted gears. Where the morning’s agenda focused on historic restoration, the afternoon’s speakers considered the actual operation of the Adirondack’s railroads, both historic and contemporary.

The first afternoon speaker, northern New York social historian Amy Godine, introduced an oral history project she has been researching, “Working on the Railroad.” She and museum curator Jane Mackintosh have been traveling around the Adirondacks over the last few months, talking with people who’ve actually worked on the railroads running through the North Country.

“Most railroad histories focus on corporations, economics, big wigs,” Godine said. “You’ll look in vain for stories of the gandy dancers who pounded down the rails.”

Godine spoke lyrically of the lives of the men (primarily) who worked the railroads that opened up the Adirondacks — including the rigid pecking order that prevailed on the trains and in the yards.

“Engineers all wore black suits and chewed cigars and were older than Christ,” Godine said, recounting what railroad workers had told her, “and thought they were God

himself.”

Godine introduced a panel of three railroad old-timers: Bud Bentley, a brakeman on the D&H; Gene Corsale, a retired D&H conductor who now volunteers on the restored Upper Hudson River Railroad; and Larry LaFarr, a former engineer and current Upper Hudson River volunteer.

“Sometimes it was just work, but sometimes it was something more,” Godine said about working the railroad. “It was thrilling.”

The men, however, recalled their careers in rougher, more utilitarian terms.

“My foreman used to tell me, ‘Just because you bring your lunchbox don’t mean this is a picnic,’ ” recalled Corsale.

Finally, four people responsible for rebuilding three historic railroads in northern New York talked about how they did it:

- Peter Gores, general manager of the Adirondack Scenic Railroad in Thendara;
- Ron Crowd, founding director of the Batten Kill Rambler in Cambridge;
- Tim Record, general manager of the Upper Hudson River Railroad in North Creek, and
- Wayne La Mothe, Warren County’s assistant planning director, who’s put together a multi-county, multi-community program to develop the entire corridor along which the Upper Hudson River Railroad runs.

“Running a restored railroad is the hardest job I’ve ever had, bar none,” Gores said.

All four discussed the operations of their railroads, much to the delight of the portion of the conference audience made up of railroad enthusiasts.

By the end of the day, “trainheads” and preservationists alike had a much better sense of the full scope of their subject, thanks to the conference Mackintosh had put together.

Would there be another?

“I certainly hope so,” Mackintosh replied, enthusiastic applause following quickly upon her response.

More on the Web about Adirondack railroads

- A Web site, *ny.existingstations.com*, contains pictures and descriptions of all existing railroad depots throughout New York state.
- Web sites for some of the organizations that contributed to last week’s Adirondack railroad conference include:
 1. adirondackmuseum.org
 2. aarch.org
 3. historicsaranaclake.org
 4. northcreekraildepot.org
 5. adirondackrr.com
 6. upperhudsonriverrr.com
 7. nenyrail.com

