

Hills Transfer Track

By Bryan Seip - Montour Railroad Historical Society

At Montour Mine #4 in Peters Township, tracks diverged from the Montour main line and ran along the hillside about a half mile to connect with the Pennsylvania Railroad at its Boyce Siding. This was the Hills Transfer tracks, used to interchange freight cars with the PRR.

The east switch at the Montour main was located about where the X1 railroad crane currently sits beside the trail at mile 30. From the east switch, the transfer track ran parallel to the main (trail) until the main curves left to cross over Valley Brook Road. At this point the transfer continued along the hillside and split into two tracks. They joined again just before they met the PRR Boyce Siding. (The PRR tracks were later Penn Central, then Conrail and currently the active Pittsburgh and Ohio Central Railroad.)



Engine 76 pulls through the east switch of the Hills Transfer Track onto the main line near the Mine #4 tipple on a snowy 1980 day. Photo by Roy Parkinson courtesy Gene P. Schaeffer.

The two transfer tracks were called the Creek and Hill tracks. Running along the bank of Chartiers Creek, the Creek Track was used to receive freight cars destined for the Montour and the Hill Track (against the hill) was designated as the delivery track to the PRR. Each of those two transfer tracks would hold 55 cars. The single lead track at the Montour end would hold 30 cars and could be used for cars headed in either direction if additional space was needed.

Boyce Siding ran from Chartiers Creek north past Boyce Road toward Mayview. Montour crews could access Boyce Siding directly from the transfer track without going onto the PRR main track and thus pull hopper cars left on the siding onto the Montour.

Most of the cars exchanged at Hills were coal hoppers destined for Montour #4 or #10 mines, but non-coal freight for other businesses was interchanged as well. Lumber, building supplies, chemicals, furniture and other freight went to local businesses along the Montour. A bill box was placed at each end of the transfer tracks to provide the exchange of waybills and paperwork between conductors of the two railroads.



This view shows the two transfer tracks. A caboose and hoppers sit on the main line in the background beyond the loaded yard. Note the bill box on a post between the main and transfer tracks.

Photo by Roy Parkinson courtesy Gene P. Schaeffer.

The transfer tracks needed constant maintenance as track gangs battled Mother Nature. Rocks and dirt from the hillside would slide down, especially onto the Hill Track, and could cause derailments. Water running off the hillside would occasionally wash out the road bed on the Creek Track and in winter the water runoff would freeze into ice patches thick enough to cover the tracks, which could also cause derailments.



Engine 76 shoves freight cars on the Hill Track in 1980. Note rocks lying between the tracks and dirt filling the area between the rails. Photo by Roy Parkinson courtesy Gene P. Schaeffer.

When the Hills shaft at Mine #4 was dug in 1914, coal was screened and cleaned at the mine tipple, loaded into hoppers for shipment and set out on the transfer and/or Boyce Siding. After the Champion Preparation Plant was built in 1928, raw coal from the mine was taken to Champion to be screened, sized, cleaned and custom mixed for final shipment. Since the PRR's Panhandle Division tracks at McDonald were much closer, most PRR coal from Champion was delivered there instead of being brought back to Hills. Thus, after 1928 most of the incoming cars at Hills were empty hoppers to be filled with coal at Mine #4 and shuttled to Champion for coal processing.

At its peak production, Montour #4 was loading over 100 cars each day. The empty and loaded yards at the mine would each hold about 75 cars, so Montour train crews were kept busy delivering empties and pulling loads out of the mine yards. Near-by Thompsonville Siding, east of Rt. 19, could be used to store up to 68 empty or loaded cars if additional space was needed. Loaded trains were typically about 44 cars and several trains a day would be needed to keep the coal moving.

This column appeared in the September-October, 2018 Montour Trail Newsletter.
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