

Montour Memories – The Car Cleaner

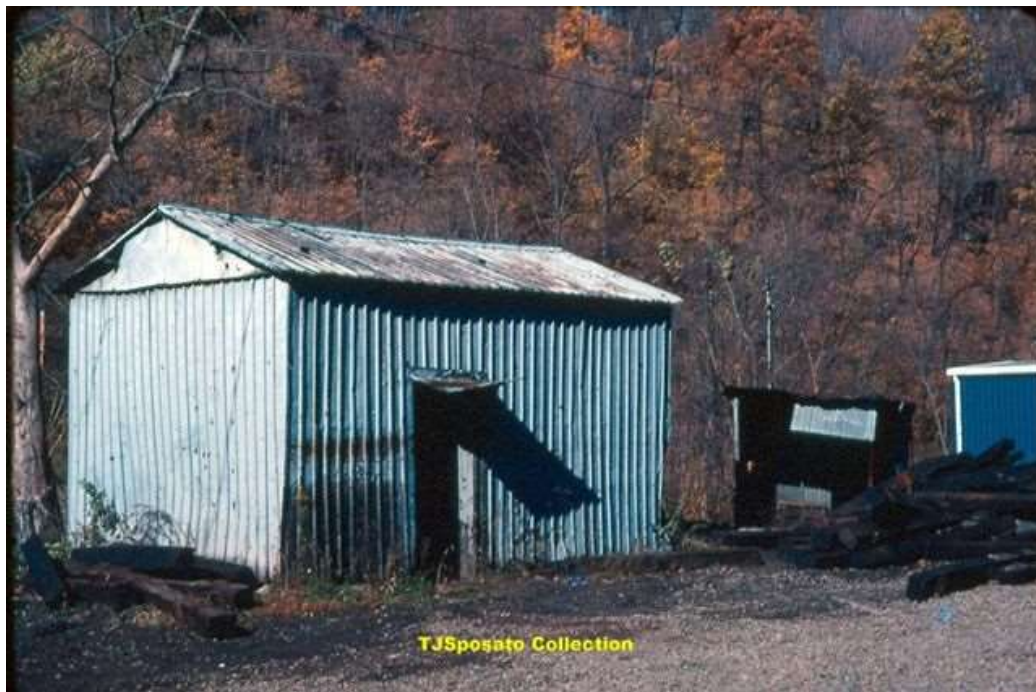
**By Tim Sposato - Montour Railroad Historical Society & former
Montour Railroad employee**

The Montour had numerous job descriptions in its 100-plus year history. We recall the obvious jobs, such as train crews, track gangs, dispatching, etc. I would like to share a story about a little-known job, the Car Cleaner.

This was a bid job usually held by the senior man in the Maintenance of Way Department. The car cleaner's job was to check every empty hopper placed in the yard for foreign material left from previous use. One could find pig iron pellets, iron slugs, chunks of coke, scrap steel, stone, metal stamping slugs and the list goes on.

As a youngster riding my bicycle to Hills to watch trains, I made friends with Warren Aitken, a senior trackman who held the daylight job. Warren enjoyed it when we kids helped clean the cars by opening the pocket doors and climbing in from the bottom. He would supervise and encourage us as we sweated and choked on the dust we stirred up shoveling out the debris.

Warren's "office" was a corrugated steel shed. It had a dirt floor with a large potbelly stove stained with tobacco juice gracing the center. The stove had fire pokers and clothes hangers fashioned for toasting sandwiches hanging on its rim. A battered coffee pot always sat on top, as well as the occasional pair of gloves drying out.



The car cleaner's "office" at Montour Mine #4 sat next to the empty yard where hoppers were delivered for loading coal at the mine tipple. Tim Sposato photo.

Along the shed walls stood wooden benches, derelict chairs, a few lockers and wood shelves holding some coffee, cooking supplies and an old electric radio. Girlie pictures torn from magazines adorned the walls and of course there was the thick musty mixture of smells of oil, coal, cigarettes and dampness which hung in the air year round.

Now, jump ahead several years. I was hired by the Montour and assigned to Section Gang #2, which in those days, reported to the Mine #4 tipple. One winter Monday morning I arrived at work to find that Warren had marked off sick. The next senior man on the gang then has priority on that position. It was very cold and windy that day, with snow flurries abounding and the senior man declined, as did the next and the next until they all looked at me. They preferred staying in the warm truck, occasionally having to get out to sweep a switch or clear ice from rails.

I stepped forward, thinking, sure, I know how to do this and it would be a different pace from track work. But I didn't think about the material frozen in the hopper pockets, not to mention frozen doors and latches, or the ice and snow clogged pathways between the tracks. It was also a day the Coal Run was placing 50-plus PRR cars into the empty yard and they were filthy. I struggled for hours as the mine was loading fast that day and I was falling behind. Knowing several of the miners, they had a little compassion and chipped in to help me keep up. Of course, I had to square up with them later at the Hills Station VFW bar, but it was worth it for me not to hold up car loading operations. I didn't want to hear that Consol had called Montour Junction to report a delay for not having empties.

I was physically and mentally relieved when the veteran cleaner for 2nd shift arrived. I stayed a bit longer to help him get some of the hopper doors closed. The next Coal Run arrived and placed more PRR cars in the yard, but I was marking off, cold, stiff and tired. The 2nd shift cleaner laughed. He wasn't worried, he said. He would get done what he could, that's all.

Warren marked off the rest of that week and I cleaned for him, but now we got mainly shuttle cars from Champion. Nothing to clean since they were captive coal haulers. Life was good. Now I had the opportunity to enjoy that corrugated shed with its glowing red potbelly, simmering hot coffee, toasting my sandwiches and listening to the sounds of hoppers being loaded, the cars dropping in and out of the tipple and of course, savoring those unique shed odors for the rest of that week.

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