

Jewell Siding

By Bryan Seip - Montour Railroad Historical Society

The coal hauled by the Montour Railroad was known as black diamonds, but there was also another jewel on the railroad. Jewell Siding ran along the main line in the area on either side of Clifton Road near Al's Café in Bethel Park.

Built during the 1914 Mifflin Extension project, the siding was named for a local landowner, N. Jewell, whose property was bisected by the railroad. The double-ended siding ran for 4,100 feet and could hold 82 cars. The west end switch was near the present Limestone Drive, behind the Vision Center office. The siding crossed over Clifton Road (listed as Jewell Road on some old maps) and ended at the east switch, across from the current site of George Washington School. The bridge over Clifton Road was actually two separate spans placed side-by-side, one carrying the main line and the other the siding track.

In the 1950's, the west end of the siding was removed, including the rails across the bridge, although the bridge span itself was left in place. The east end became a 1,000 foot spur that could hold 20 cars, with a steel bumper post installed near Clifton Road.



Crossing the Clifton Road bridge in 1975, the bumper on Jewell Siding can be seen ahead on the right. The bare bridge span for the original siding is to the right of the train. Gene P. Schaeffer photo.

In earlier days, across from the bumper post location was a short commercial spur that ran along what is now the parking lot at Al's Café and Rite Aid. This was an open "team

track", where a wagon with a team of horses or a truck could be backed up to a rail car to unload merchandise.

At the end of 1980, railroad operations ended in this area and the rails were removed a few years later, although the steel bridge spans were left in place.

In 1989, Clifton Road was realigned to improve the intersection with McMurray Road. The two bridge spans and the east side concrete abutment were removed. The west side abutment was left in place as a gas line and utilities ran underground at its base.

When the Montour Trail was constructed on the old railroad right-of-way, the trail led down ramps to an at-grade crossing of Clifton Road. In September, 2011, the new 210 foot J. R. Taylor Memorial Bridge was constructed by Century Steel Erectors to carry the trail over Clifton Road.

Tim Sposato grew up in the area, watching and riding Montour trains as a teenager in the early '70's. He hired on with the railroad after his high school graduation and shares some thoughts of Jewell.

Jewell Siding and Al's Café. Like bread & butter, they fit together well. The nights of waiting for the eastbound train in an old automobile behind Al's, watching the patrons coming out at closing time, was always entertaining. This helped pass the time as we waited for "our train" to arrive. Al's was more of a local type lounge in the 1970's & 80's. Many Montour men made stops here for the great fish sandwiches and beverages.

We loved hearing the train laboring upgrade around 2:00am. There was the thrill of seeing the headlight illuminate the light fog or the tree tops long before we saw the source. By this time we had made our way to the switch, our lanterns lit. It helped that we had also called the dispatcher earlier, asking if a Coal Run had been called for the Mifflin Turn. If the reply was "yes" we would inform him that we would check the switch to ensure it was lined for the train's movement. To this day, I believe the dispatcher would casually mention this to the train crew, thus allowing the "flag stop" to occur.

The accompanying picture was taken in 1981, just a few years before the rails were removed. The old farm house is seen where the parking lot is now. The old garage that housed the auto we hid in was to the right, out of the frame. Today a small portion of the top of the west end abutment is visible as the road slices its way past the old bridge location. It's nice to stand on this abutment and remember the view pictured here, remembering the happy times.....



This 1981 view towards the old Al's Café was taken from the Jewell Siding bridge span. Tim Sposato photo.

This column appeared in the November-December, 2020 Montour Trail Newsletter.
For more information on the Montour Trail – go to www.montourtrail.org