

A Brief History of the Montour Railroad

By Bryan Seip - Montour Railroad Historical Society

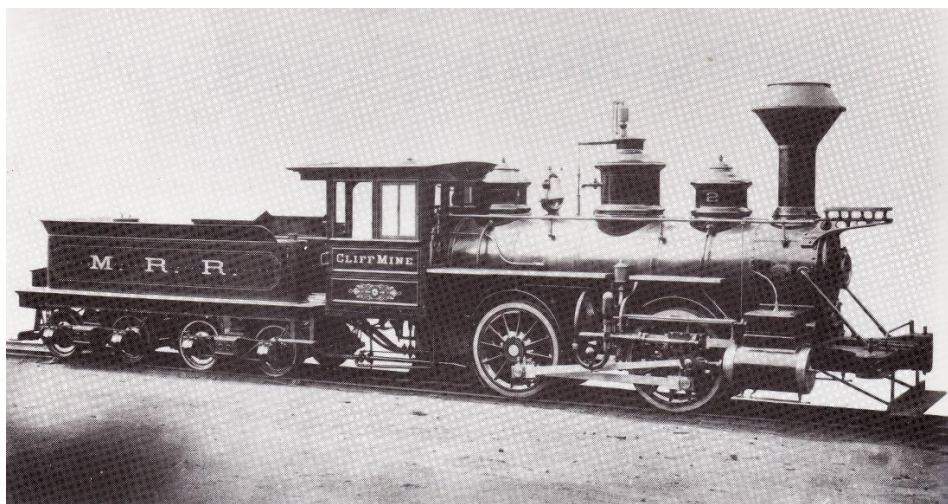
For those new to the Montour Trail or those long-time members who may need a refresher, the following is a brief history of the original builder and namesake of the trail's right-of-way, the Montour Railroad.

The Montour Railroad Company was organized on September 10, 1877, to construct and operate a railroad from the banks of the Ohio River in Coraopolis about five miles to Guy's Mills. The Imperial Coal Company and its officers owned all the Montour's capital stock.

Imperial Coal's first mine was the Dickson Mine, located at Cliff Mine station, with shipments commencing in June 1879. The railroad was extended to Imperial and beyond to the Partridge Mine in Santiago. Shop facilities were built at Imperial to service the locomotives.

In October 1879, a connection was established in Coraopolis with the newly opened Pittsburgh and Lake Erie Railroad which supplied a transfer to the Pittsburgh market. Passenger and mail service were started along the Montour main line.

The Pittsburgh Coal Company was formed in 1899 for the purpose of acquiring many of the independent coal companies in the area. These acquisitions included the Imperial Coal Company and its subsidiary, the Montour Railroad. A large yard and shop facility was built along Montour Run in Coraopolis in 1900 and the shops at Imperial were subsequently abandoned.



The first locomotive on the Montour Railroad was lettered “Cliff Mine”.
Alco Historic Photos.

By 1913, the coal company determined that additional coal mines were needed to supply its customers and an extension of the Montour Railroad was built to reach Mifflin Junction in 1915. New mines were opened along the route and interchange points were established with five major railroads. With additional and heavier trains, more powerful steam locomotives were purchased to handle the increased traffic.

Several branches were constructed to reach new coal mines. The Library Branch reached Montour Mine #10 during 1918 and ten years later was extended to meet the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad in Snowden. The Muse Branch was built in 1921 to service National Mine #3. The Midland Spur ran to Morris Mine in 1922 and was later extended to Westland in 1928. During the 1920's, several realignment projects were undertaken to improve the original railroad main line, eliminating several sharp curves and other problem areas.

Declining ridership and aging equipment needing replacement forced a business decision to end passenger service in 1927.

Pittsburgh Coal Company built the large Champion Preparation Plant on the Allegheny/Washington County border in 1928. Raw mine coal was sent to Champion for cleaning, sorting, and sizing before shipment to its final consumers. Three or four Montour crews worked shifts at Champion and nearby Boggs Yard seven days a week to keep the coal flowing.

The Montour prospered during the 1930's and '40's, reaching its peak during World War II. In 1946, the Pittsburgh Coal Company merged with Consolidated Coal and sold the Montour Railroad operation to the Pennsylvania and the Pittsburgh and Lake Erie railroads as equal partners. Diesel power came to the Montour in 1950 and all steam locomotives were retired by 1953.



Diesel power came to the Montour in the early 1950's. Doug Kroll photo.

During the 1970's, the coal market was declining, and Montour revenues fell. Through bankruptcies and mergers, the Pennsylvania Railroad became Penn Central, then Conrail, which in 1976 sold its half of the Montour to the P&LE.

Consolidating operations to stay solvent, the P&LE began abandonment of several sections of the Montour in the mid-1970's. The east end of the railroad was severed at Mifflin Junction and Longview, eliminating interchanges with two railroads. Another section from Thompsonville Siding in Peters Township to Brightwood in Bethel Park, including the Library Branch and its idled Montour #10 mine, was abandoned in 1980.

During the summer of 1980, Montour Mine #4 in Peters Township suffered a catastrophic failure of a barrier along one boundary of the mine which flooded the mine. Consolidated Coal sealed #4, never to be re-opened. Ten miles of track between Mine #4 and Gilmore Junction, including the Muse Branch, were officially abandoned in 1982.

Coal shipments from the Westland Mine and operation of the Champion Preparation Plant both ceased in 1983 and the railroad was idled. The final Montour train crew was called on duty November 1, 1984, to remove remaining cars and equipment from the Montour Junction shops and yard.

The final chapter of the Montour Railroad came in 1985 when the remaining 26 miles from Montour Junction to Westland were petitioned for abandonment. The ICC officially approved the abandonment of the Montour Railroad effective May 22, 1986, ending over a century of operation.

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