

Montour Memories – The Rock Slide

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

[This story was related by long-time Montour engineer Jim Lane to Tim Sposato as he was riding along on a Montour train in the early-1970's.]

I recall a story Jim Lane related to me that happened in 1962 or '63. Jim was engineer on a short train eastbound to Mifflin Junction. The consist was 2 diesels, 2 boxcars for Brookside Lumber and about 18 loads of Bessemer & Lake Erie coal, with a wooden caboose bringing up the rear.

The train drifted downgrade in the late afternoon, over the open deck bridge spanning Chartiers Creek, passing into Greers tunnel and emerging into the evening shadows. As the engines started around the curve east of the thru-truss bridge over the PRR, the fireman called a warning to Jim to "Big Hole Her"! Jim quickly "wiped the clock" and the train, with squealing brake shoes and emergency sanding creating a small dust cloud, came to a halt.

[Ed. - A couple of railroading terms: "Big Hole" meant to send a train into emergency stop. "Wiping the Clock" was the action of moving the air brake controls from its running position to full stop and adding emergency braking, thus causing the pressure gauge indicator to swing completely around the dial to zero, like the circular motion of wiping an analog clock face]

There directly ahead was a massive boulder, along with several smaller boulders lying on the rails and shoulder. The large rock Jim estimated at 50 tons and was of solid sandstone. Several smaller ones were equally impressive.

The conductor came forward from the caboose and took in the scene and then proceeded on foot to West End of Hills to report the problem to the dispatcher.

[Ed. – Before radio communications were started in the early 1970's, Montour train crews would contact the dispatcher using trackside telephones placed at various locations. The closest phone booth to this site was at Montour Mine #4 along Valley Brook Road, about a mile away.]

Seeing that clean-up crews were needed, and the train could not pass, it shoved back west the 5 miles to Cowden where the cars were dropped into the siding, and then the engines and caboose returned to Champion.

The Montour Railroad was shut down for two days at the slide site, and dynamite was used to reduce the boulder into smaller pieces for bulldozers to shove over the hill toward the pond below. The excess dirt was also shoved over and grooming of the loose material still above the tracks formed a flat area between the tracks and bank.



This is the site at trail mile 28.8 where the boulders came down onto the tracks. Rockslides still occur along this section and must be dealt with as part of Trail maintenance. Tim Sposato photo.

Today you can walk from Greers crossing [*Trail Mile 29*] a few hundred yards or so to the west and look up to see where this boulder had broken loose. It has been a few years since I last viewed the rock out-cropping, but in the early 70's, as Jim pointed it out to me, it was very evident.

I hope to visit this place soon, now that I'm thinking about Jim's story and I still recall the day he told it to me, as we drifted downgrade with yet another train, Jim pointing out the window, talking over his right shoulder to me as I sat on the engine isolation cabinet behind his seat.

After this section of roadbed was opened as a trail, the pedestrians now pass the site of another of a thousand stories that could fill volumes. Unfortunately, most of those stories have passed on, forgotten, never repeated to those of us that can still retell them.

Thanks, Jim, for taking the time out of your workday to share your memory for those of us who care years later.