

Montour Memories - Jim Lane Stories

By Bryan Seip and Tim Sposato - Montour Railroad Historical Society

Jim Lane became a fireman on the Montour Railroad in 1931 and after a few years was promoted to engineer until his retirement in 1976. His brother, a son and a nephew also became Montour engineers.

Jim was involved in several events which lived on in stories he would tell at family gatherings. Tim Sposato married Jim's granddaughter and has related in previous newsletter columns some of the stories he heard from "Big Jim".



Jim and Mary Lane on Jim's last day before retirement in 1976. Nick Jarina photo.

You may remember from past articles that Jim was involved in the wreck of engine 76 when it was hit by a runaway flat car carrying an earthmover. Or the tale of shoveling coal from a steam engine's tender into a widow woman's yard which earned him a discipline of "brownie points" and a suspension. Or the story of the rock slide that closed the railroad for several days. Jim certainly had an interesting career on the Montour and loved to talk about it.

Here are a couple of other tales, as related by Big Jim.

The time era was the 1940's – during the steam era. The Montour Railroad used two terminals, Montour Junction and Mifflin Junction. Locomotives were assigned to each terminal where crews would report, and trains would be sent on their runs.

The Montour had two locals that ran 5 or 6 days a week working non-coal customers. One ran from each terminal. Departure times were close together with each train working local customers as they headed toward one another. They would eventually meet at Cowden or Peacock sidings and exchange any cars that needed to continue further on the line. Each train would then head back toward their starting terminal.



Jim Lane on a Montour steam locomotive in 1936.

On one occasion, Jim was the engineer on the Mifflin local. They had already met the Montour Junction local and were returning east, including a boxcar of lumber received from the other local to be set off at McMurray Supply.

Jim said they had been working steady 16-hour days and everyone was routinely tired. The last stop before Salida in Bethel Park was at McMurray. It was after dark as they approached McMurray with the boxcar just ahead of the caboose. Normal procedure

was for the rear end crew to uncouple the cabooses as they neared the switch and bring it to a halt using the hand brake. The rear brakeman would drop off and signal the head end once the boxcar had cleared the switch. Hand signals and lanterns were the only means of communication in this era.

Well, the caboose was cut off and the signal given, but the train, minus the caboose, continued east. The engine crew had forgotten the stop, and no one looked back as they headed for Bethel Park. The rear end conductor called the dispatcher from the local phone box to report the incident, but there were no signals or manned points until Salida, almost 10 miles distant.

When the train pulled into Salida, the crew waited for the conductor to walk up to the phone box to call for permission to enter the Pittsburgh & West Virginia RR tracks to Mifflin. When he didn't show up, they suddenly realized their error and reported it to the Montour dispatcher. Their orders were changed, their train was set off in Salida siding, and they ran the locomotive back to retrieve the forgotten caboose.

Jim laughed loudly as he recalled this event and the punishment of 25 "brownies" to his record and 30 days off with no pay. He did admit he wasn't laughing then.

Another event occurred in 1960 at the Brightwood Spur at the old Slater's Supply in Bethel Park. Jim was running engine 78, with a pick-up scheduled at Slater's.



A newspaper picture of Montour engine 78 at Brightwood Spur. The arrow points to the location of the derail.

However, when the engine entered the spur off the main line, the conductor failed to notice that the derail was still set. The diesel ran over the derail, which did its job, and 78 was on the ground. The spur was set on the edge of an embankment and as the engine continued to move forward, it went over the edge of the bank and flopped over on its side, sliding partway down the bank. Jim said it was quite a ride and he and another trainman were taken to the hospital to be checked out for what was termed minor injuries. After a few days, the locomotive was recovered and later returned to service.

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