

## What might have been? A tale of three railroads By Robert McCue

In the book “Listen to the whistle” about the Wallkill valley Railroad it makes mention of its planners original idea to run into Newburgh via the Erie’s Newburgh branch. In my mind and going by what the railroad maps would look like by the turn of the century that would have had it running either where the O&W laid its line below Campbell hall or where the Graham line now runs. It is enough to make the mind wander and the railroad fans heart race a little faster as to what grand railroad schemes could have come about, so let’s take a moment to stand on an empty roadbed in out minds and wonder “what might have been.”

By the 1950’s Orange County’s railroad vine was withering. The Ontario & Western’s once bustling mainline was seeing only a daily freight below the junction at Campbell Hall. The days when the O&W’s coal piers at Cornwall saw miles of loaded coal cars coming down the mainline from Scranton were just a memory now. As local traffic dried up on the O&W, so went a lot of the local business on the New York Central’s Wallkill Valley line, which connected with the O&W at Campbell hall. The Erie’s Newburgh branch, which crossed over the O&W near Meadowbrook, just above Cornwall, had not seen a passenger train in twenty years. The other of the Erie’s Newburgh branches, the “Short cut” from the junction of the two branches at Vail’s Gate to the Erie mainline at Harriman had been abandoned also for two decades now. Like a grim specter of things to come, the bridges of the new highway, the New York State Thruway, were being built over the right of way of the O&W and the Erie. Part of the old roadbed of the former Erie short cut would now disappear under the new highway. It would only be ten years before parts of the O&W’s roadbed would meet the same fate. The only bit of good news, and it looked like talk at best, was Stewart Airport wanting to build a rail link with either the O&W or the Erie’s Newburgh branch.

Erie’s Newburgh branch above,  
O&W below



Now with that bad news said, let us go into the realm of daydreaming. The Erie, O&W, and the New York Central railroad, realizing they are in the same (leaky) financial boat, decide to pull together some of their resources. An agreement is reached where the O&W and the Erie will build a connection where the Newburgh branch and the O&W mainline cross. What few trains the O&W is still running this far south can go into Newburgh to make the connection with the West Shore to run into Weehawken. By doing this the railroad can take at least two bridges off its tax rolls and maintenance lists: The towering Orrs Mills trestle just above Cornwall, and the long since useless overpass over the former Newburgh short cut. The former mainline from Cornwall to the Firth Carpet Mill in Cornwall will survive as an industrial spur.

Now the New York central gets in on the idea: If it can start running its trains out of it's West Shore connection at Newburgh instead of Kingston it could keep it's local business in Walden and New Paltz but at the same time shed two of it's own bridges, one over the Wallkill river and the towering, aging bridge over the Rondout at Rosendale. The Newburgh city father's love the idea. With all this talk of a rail link to Stewart Airport this could be a second chance at the crowds that once poured out of the West shore station and into the downtown shopping district.





(Above) Wallkill River bridge (Right) Rosendale trestle

Sound like all one big pipe dream, let us fast forward twenty years. The O&W closed in 1957 after a twenty year struggle to cut expenses to keep operating. The spur from Cornwall to the Firth Carpet Company was taken over by the New York Central after 1957, but served the carpet company for less than ten years before Firth Carpet moved south. The Erie merges with the Lackawanna in the early sixties to help defray operating expenses on their combined railroads, including the Newburgh branch. Just like a mythical combining of three railroads into Newburgh could have done. In 1976 the now bankrupt Erie-Lackawanna and New York Central Railroads will be combined into one agency, CONRAIL. In 1976. In '77 Conrail closes the Wallkill Valley line, largely in part to safety concerns about the aging Rosendale trestle. What part of the line still survives-the spur from the Erie at Campbell Hall to Walden. The O&W and Erie would join forces, at least in spirit, when a connection track was made in the eighties between the former O&W mainline and the Graham line above Middletown. Now half a century after the O&W closed and a quarter of a century after the Erie's Newburgh branch closed there is one specter from of the past coming back. The Port Authority wants to make a rail connection with the former Erie Graham line which passes over the Newburgh branch. Newburgh hopes the airport is a catalyst for bringing in business to its business district which went through some grim times in the last four decades. A ferry now carries commuters over to the train depot across the river.

All this I just wrote a pipe dream-*hmmmm*



(Left) Orrs Mills trestle  
(Upper right) Rosendale trestle

