

“GONE, BUT NOT FORGOTTEN”

By Frank W. Santucci

The smoke, steam, and whistle are gone now, but our little town of Verona has memorialized the black steam engine, even adopting and proudly displaying this sooty steam engine as its town logo.

Prior to our dependence on the railroad, the horse, the horse and buggy, and the Allegheny River provided the methods for travel and transportation. All over Western Pennsylvania these travel channels promoted the commerce of the river communities. But in 1837 a dramatic change was on its way to ignite a fire that would burn for 100 years. The tracks that carried the “Iron Horse” went from Pittsburgh up to Kittanning. The rail company was known as the Pittsburgh Kittanning and Warren Railroad. In 1852 it was renamed the Allegheny Valley Railroad. With the tracks coming through Verona, four railroad stations were put within the town’s limits: Iona, located in the Sylvan area on West Railroad Avenue presently behind the Giant Eagle store; Verner, currently where the Verona Municipal Building is standing; Edgewater, just past Plum Creek; and, finally, Hulton. At this early stage Verona’s acreage covered land from Sandy Creek to Blacks Run near Hulton Road. Blacks Run is the name of a water run off spilling into Allegheny River originating by the Oakmont Country Club located approximately one-half mile north of Hulton Road . The name of Verona was a combination of Iona and Verner stations. Verona officially became a borough in 1871.

The railroad was a great convenience for the populous, but not very profitable for the company. But the fortunes changed in 1870 when Drake’s Well in Titusville began to emit gallons of oil. Since rail cars were needed to ship oil to Pittsburgh for refinement, the tracks were completed to Oil City. Carrier vessels were large wooden barrels on flat rail cars. Oil was first discovered in 1859. One interesting side story of this oil boom was that John Wilkes Booth, President Lincoln’s assassin, was in Pennsylvania and invested money in an oil well that exploded. He left Pennsylvania and went to Maryland. Fate played a hand in this scenario. What if Booth’s well had been profitable and not exploded?

The Verona railroad yards grew because of the ideal flat land surrounding the Plum Creek area. In 1876 an engine house with 44 stalls was erected at the bottom of Center Avenue allowing this large roundhouse to repair passenger and freight cars simultaneously. In 1879 a new passenger railroad station was built in Verona. Approximately 200 men were working for the railroad around this time. Along the tracks close to Plum Creek a water tower was built for the steam engines. New repair shops sprung up along Plum Street. Hotels, restaurants and churches grew due to this boom. On Sunday mornings, a “church train” originated at Sandy Creek came to Verona Churches in the morning then several hours later returned to Sandy Creek.

The completion of the main line went from Pittsburgh to Erie to Buffalo, New York. At one time around 45 passenger and freight trains came daily through Verona. By the 1940's a commuter train service began originating in New Kensington through Verona thus providing convenience for those who worked in the East Liberty and Pittsburgh area. By the 1970's the yearly ridership had diminished to 156,000, thus bringing a decision by the merged Pennsylvania Railroad and the New York Central to discontinue their commuter train service. An announcement was published the commuter train's last run would be the end of June 1970. That's when I decided my 9 year old son, Frankie and I would be on that last ride from the Pittsburgh Pennsylvania Railroad Station to Verona. Excitedly we boarded the Blue Ridge Bus from Verona to Pittsburgh early in the afternoon. It was a short walking distance from the Pittsburgh bus station to the Pennsylvania Railroad Station all the while viewing the commanding presence of the stately Pennsylvania Railroad Station with its huge colossus entrance. Being early we were able to take in the sights and size of its grand lobby. After getting a drink of pop we boarded the 4:05 P.M. train for a 4:55 P.M. scheduled arrival back in Verona. We found good seats on the right side of the passenger car so to enjoy the best views as we whistled through East Liberty. There were a few others on the train, only three passenger cars and those not completely full. A diesel engine lead the last commuter train through Verona with no caboose attached. When we arrived in Verona, we disembarked along with a few other Verona residents. These were the regular riders. The twelve mile ride just did not seem quite long enough to commemorate the end of an era.

January 28, 2001 a new optimism arose for train ridership. The Federal Government proposed the sum of one quarter million dollars for a mag-lev experimental train study. Pennsylvania submitted a bid for a line from Greensburg to Pittsburgh. Several other states put forward proposals also.

A friend and I decided to attend the January 2001 meeting held in the Plum High School Auditorium where animated films were shown with suggested routes including Verona. Stations were proposed for Greensburg, Monroeville, Pittsburgh and finally the Greater Pittsburgh Airport. The overhead track was to follow the Plum Creek Valley from Monroeville to Verona and, where the new Verona Municipal Building is currently situated, make a sharp left heading south along the old rail tracks. The magnetic levitation tracks would be twelve feet above the ground. Sad to say, the Federal Government canceled this experimental idea, leaving the Verona Municipal Building intact today. The future may someday make Verona a major rail line again.

April, 2018