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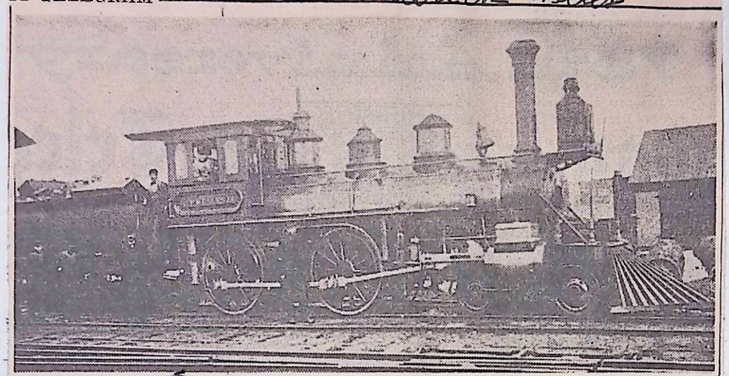
Elmira Telegram

AY TELEGRAM Charles Frederick Welles



THE C. F. WELLS JR. — This Baldwin locomotive made in 1870 was named for Charles ~~Fisher~~ Welles, president of the Pennsylvania and New York Canal and Railroad Co., whose road linked the Towanda coal basin and Waverly. C. F. Welles Jr. was the grandfather of Dr. Elsie Murray of Athens, who wrote this article. He was a great-uncle of Elmira's Nellie Welles Mooers and Prudence Welles Curtis. The early railroad engineered by canal president Welles is today's Lehigh Valley. (Tioga Point Museum photo).

Looking Backward.

Today oil and its by-product, gasoline, have largely superseded coal, thanks in part to Pennsylvania Northern Tier and New York Southern Tier discoveries. Pipelines instead of canal boats convey supplies, and the old towpaths and the fine masonry of the locks have been obliterated by flood control projects. Many stretches of the old "ditch" survive, however, dry or water-filled and in winter servicing skaters.

The automobile, replacing horse and buggy, and the freight truck have brought us surfaced roads, free of dust and mud—though on the debit side gasoline tanks on tire-sheathed wheels cumber the highways, and a plethora of gas stations obscure the scenery; while many picturesque spots (such as the Hemlock Run hairpin turn below Ulster) are lost through straightening of the road.

Gone with the Cinders

The railway coach, diesel-drawn, is free of cinders and air-conditioned. Speed of travel, if not raised to "lightning velocity," is greatly accelerated, with no need of halts for coal or water refills, and with many rustic stops, serviced now by bus or auto, eliminated.

Enhanced speed, equivalent to reduced distance, means that the worker instead of herding in a densely settled area may commute to his factory. It spells also centralized schools for our children, bus-conveyed.

Historic Sites Preserved

Speeding up of transportion means recreational and cultural gains as well—the accessibility of multiplying vacation spots by hilltop lakes or streams affording fishing and swimming; of libraries and museums and bookmobiles. Increased tourist mobility may promote a richer life and a finer type of citizenship, through development of sites linked with our early history and struggle for independence.

Two such projects have of late been launched locally. One is aimed at the exploitation of unique Spanish Hill or Carantouan on the Pennsylvania-New York border (west of South Waverly), the highly scenic site of an ancient Indian stronghold known as the point from which Brule, Champlain's protege, set out in 1615 to explore the Susquehanna. The second, now under the sponsorship of the Towanda Chamber of Commerce, aims at no less than the restoration of the French refugee village below Wysox (west of the Susquehanna), a colony whose brief career from 1793 to 1803 left its imprint on county history, as the names La Porte and Piollet of canal and railroad associates in the narrative indicate.

North Penn Canals, Railroads

By Dr. Elsie Murray

Bradford County (organized 1812), with its wooded hillsides, and alluvial terraces, encircled by the winding Susquehanna, would seem designed by nature for a farm and dairy economy, with a little lumbering thrown in; the confluence of two sizable streams at Te-a-oga offering ready market access north.

The key to its prosperity, however, lay locked in a long ridge in its southwest corner.

Two-thousand-foot Barclay Mountain with its hidden coal veins was to prove the challenge and reward of enterprising citizens. Both North Pennsylvania and New York State's coalless Southern Tier were to share the labor and the profit.

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Though its yield was semi-bituminous only, and ran thin within 50 years (after a total output of 10 million tons), the Barclay coal field had played its part. In 1854-55 it had commandeered the construction by private enterprise of a 20-mile "Junction Canal" between Athens and Elmira, to link with the Erie—a bold, far-seeing project to effect which C. F. Welles Jr. of Athens (grandson of pioneer George of Tioga Point), his father-in-law Judge John La Porte of Towanda (son of the Azilum "emigre"), and George M. Hollenback of Luzerne County (son of Matthias, whose chain of trading-posts and Durham boats at Wilkes-Barre, Wyalusing, Tioga Point and Newtown were notable pioneer features) joined forces with John Arnot and others of Elmira.

North Branch in 1856

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In 1858 Northern Pennsylvania capital, a company representing Wilkes-Barre, Towanda and Athens (G. M. Hollenback, treasurer, C. F. Welles Jr., president, Judge John La Porte, Gordon F. Mason, H. M. Fuller and H. B. Wright) purchased the North Branch Canal for one and a half million dollars; disposing shortly of the Northumberland section, and retaining only the 100-mile stretch from Wilkes-Barre up.

The canal office was located in a brick building (still standing) on a corner of the Athens property on which Col. Welles had erected his residence in 1854. From this vantage point the canal in spite of annual freshets could be operated profitably—and was, until the flood of '65.

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The Western traffic pre-visioned by the three Baltimore partners (George and Ashbel Welles and Richard Caton) who bought Tioga Point in 1798 was off to a start.

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In the late 1860's, however, after nine years canal service throughout the critical period of the War with the South, the great St. Patrick's Day flood of 1865 forced transition from canal to railroad to meet the fuel demands of Southern Tier industry and the Erie Railroad.

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The work was financed by an $800,000 mortgage on the Canal Company president's controlling interest in the North Branch stock, underwritten by Asa Packer of Mauch Chunk and Bethlehem, president of the down state company the Lehigh, and its guiding spirit. Welles' sudden death in 1872 was to provide the Lehigh with a northern link and a right-of-way of inestimable value through an era of industrial expansion and three wars to come.

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PIOLLET HOUSE—Located at Wysox, Pa., this home was built 100 years ago by the well-known Piollet family, which pioneered in canal and railroad development in Bradford County. The early Piollets were members of the Napoleonic exile group which followed ~~settled~~ Azilum. ~~settlers~~ this area

the rivers. With the transformation of canal into railroads, Athens gained also a bridge repair shop. A young man named C. N. Kellogg, equipped with a portable saw, and a patent on wood and iron bridges, had been employed on the Lehigh Lines to the South, and on the Wilkes-Barre to Athens stretch of the Pa. & N. Y. To induce him to locate at Athens, land for the shop was donated by Col. Welles near the railroad depot. Out of this modest start grew the enterprising Kellogg & Maurice Bridge Works of the 1870's, which by a merger in 1884, taking on four new partners, Charles MacDonald, T. C. Clark, Edmund Hayes and G. S. Fields, became the Union Bridge Works. The firm speedily acquired an international reputation, building steel spans across the Niagara chasm, and sending an offshoot presently across the State line, the Elmira Bridge Company (headed by Kellogg); to which in the course of years much of the machinery, the staff and the business of the Athens firm were transferred.

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Charles W. Tidd was Erie agent on the Barclay mountaintop: and here his son, the late George N. Tidd was born in 1874 and spent his early youth.

Romance of Canal Trips

The canal, though not officially discontinued till 1872, after 1869 played a minor role. Oldsters who only lately passed away were full of tales of the charm of canal trips. A light boat, the Gazelle, turned out at Stoneport, Athens, conveyed passengers up and down from Towanda to Athens—distinguished visitors and firemen on all-day picnics. Some recall the "Low Bridge" warning, uttered just too late by volunteer assistants, and the resultant tragedy of high hats swept off into murky canal waters. Others remember the night trip up the Valley, stowed in shelf-like quarters, listening to the owls hooting, the mule drivers arguing with their steeds, and the rhythmic purr of crickets.

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Along with the southern line, two branch railroads running up into New York State were sponsored by the Pa. and N. Y., of which Col. Welles was the first president. There were the Geneva, Ithaca and Athens, and the Southern Central (via Auburn to Fair Haven on Lake Ontario). They were built in part to service industrial coal needs, in part to meet the pleas of Ezra Cornell and Henry Wells of the Wells-Fargo Express, founder of Wells College at Aurora, for student transportation.

Built Niagara Bridge

Across the border in Pennsylvania, coal (plus canal) had spurred the location of tanneries and boat-building yards along

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