RAILROADS NORTH Tape #035

Program presented by Alden Eugene Livingston, Robert Walling, Ford Ceasar, & David Lehman at a meeting of the Clinton Co. Historical Society 17 Jan. 1980.

Livingston	00:04	I had to do quite a lot to get Ford [Ceasar, author of *Great Northern Ghost*] here. You can see he just got off from the line.
Ceasar	00:09	Boy, that fireman has really put the coal and the wood in the stove. It's getting kind of warm in here. I think I'll take this off.
Unidentified:	00:18	We'll start out with a tape. I wouldn't be surprised if we've played it before but we'll do it again.
		TRAIN NOISES
Unidentified:	02:44	That sounds familiar to some people and not to others. That's not an American train, I don't think. The whistle's a little hightoned for it but that's a little bit like they used to sound when they went through a station.
Ceasar:	02:57	Brings back a lot of memories.
Unidentified:	02:59	Yes it does.
Ceasar:	03:03	Visibly, audibly, and with the nose.
Unidentified:	03:06	We couldn't smell the smoke or the steam, could we?
Ceasar:	03:08	Oh! You could smell the smoke. You bet. I wouldn't want to tell you what it smelled like but we could smell the smoke.
Livingston:	03:16	I thought I'd take you back to the origin of railroading. Start out with that, in the world. Now remember that Ford and I are not quite old enough to remember all these things. Some people think we are, but we are not. So we had to read some. Looking back, the first rails were wooden rails and they were used in Germany about 1700 in the Ruhr Valley. I guess somebody wanted an easier way of moving coal. Somebody hit upon the idea of laying down some wooden track. They laid down wooden track and ran cars on that, transporting the coal from the valley out. They were just straight track, not a great distance. That was, as far as we know, one of the first instances of rails being used. They were pulled with horses and used to mine coal in the valley.

Around 1725--1750, railroad cars pulled by horses were used in England to mine coal and the tracks were on an incline. They loaded the cars back, we'll say away from the streams, and then they went down the incline. In other words, the load was transported by gravity to the ports or to the wharves and they pulled the cars back with horses. So much for around in the 1700's and which it gradually evolved into something more sophisticated. The first steam locomotive [was] used in England about 1815, but still with mostly horses. The Stockton and Darlington Road in England was the first road and that was in 1825. It was the first road to haul passengers, first with horses and then with steam.

So much for across the pond, so to speak. By the way, England did a lot of work with railroads and locomotives and so on. The locomotive originated over there and they built the first locomotives in England that I know about. Do you know, any different?

Ceasar: 05:41

No, I don't, but I was wondering, how many of us knew who it was that was responsible for harnessing steam to give it power?

05:52

I think it's a story and there may be a lot of truth in it. It was a lad by the name of James Watt who was watching the tea kettle over the hearth. As it boiled, he noticed that the steam was coming off the pot and probably out of the spout and a dreamed up a dream of harnessing that power. So that's where it originated. At least that's the story we have of James Watt, and it was in England as you've just been saying here. So that's right in line with our thinking.

Livingston: 06:29

There's a lot more history. We could run this for three hours if we want to on the history about the railroads. I don't think you want to hear that much. The first railroad in the United States was in 1826 and was called the Granite Line in Massachusetts and was used to haul granite. Part of it was used to haul granite for the Bunker Hill Monument. It was hauled from the quarry to the wharves, partly with gravity and partly with horses.

The first passenger railroad in the United States was the Baltimore and Ohio, started in 1828. They didn't haul passengers in 1828 but that was when they started up to build the railroad. They opened it to traffic, the first 26 miles, in 1830. Before they got through they had 380 miles of doubletrack railroad even back in that century, long before some of the others did. It opened on July 4, 1830, a passenger train.

The first steam engine used was a Tom Thumb in 1830 and was used in service around 1832. Because he wanted to promote this, they decided to put on a race between horses and an engine. So on the 28th of August, 1830, they got ready for this race and they ran this race with this engine and they were coming along fine. There were winning all right until a belt came off the drive pulley and stopped the blower that kept the fire going as good as it did and they lost their steam so the horse won.

Along about that time in some reading--I don't remember where it was-- I ran into another little anecdote I thought was kind of interesting. There were three companies in the east that had decided to pool their thing and call it one company. They were separated by several miles. They conceived of the idea of connecting these three businesses with a railroad. They had an engineer for this company so they sent him to England--that was about 1825--to buy some locomotives for them. He spent six or eight months over there looking over several locomotives and finally bought three, two of one kind and one of the other, and had them shipped to the United States. They arrived and they just picked the first one to arrive. He went down to supervise its unloading and setting it on the tracks. Then they wanted to see it run so he proceeded to fire it up and took off with it. I don't think they had any of the company with him, but he took off with it over the four or five miles of rail they had and he took off a pretty good speed, I guess, took it down and took it back. They never used the engine again. That engine was left for display, but the other two rested down somewhere in New York City and they were never used again. Why? I don't know.

Ceasar: 09:58

The only thing that I wanted to say here in the beginning is that we think of a steam engines on railroads as having an elongated cylinder for steam and the fire bed and the whole works. I think that is standard with us. Many of the very early engines, however, used a vertical fire and steam piping. The Westinghouse people were very popular ones in some of these and they even have some on display yet today.

Livingston: 10:28

I believe the Tom Thumb and the DeWitt Clinton--weren't they both verticals?

Ceasar: 10:33

Verticals, right. I suspect that probably they didn't have the fly wheel big enough on those vertical engines to get the power that they wanted.

Livingston:	10:43	In general, some of the time they were run with a crank, an axle with a crank on it, instead of going right directly to the drivers.
Livingston:	10:53	So much for the United States and then we get to Michigan. April 22, 1833, the first charter was issued for the Erie & Kalamazoo and on November 21, 1836, the first railroad car would run from Port Lawrence to Adrian, pulled by horses on wooden rails. In 1837 strap-iron rails were added and a steam locomotive was used. Now, that was the start of the Michigan railroads. Do you know of any?
Ceasar:	11:35	Well the legislature, I believe it was, gave permission for three routes to be established across southern Michigan. There was a southern route which took in mostly down through Hillsdale County, Coldwater, and Niles and in through that area. Then there was a middle route and then a northern. I think the northern one would be the one that we'd be interested in discussion here today. That started over on the St. Clair River and moved westward across the state and it included the area of what is now Ovid Township and Bingham into the very southern part of St. Johns. This is in 1837, the year that we became a state. The road was to go on across to the west coast over to Lake Michigan. The route was laid out. It was surveyed in 1838 and a great deal of the grading had been done in 1839 but there was a financial panic in the state at that time and money became very scarce. They had overspent their budget so that the project eventually was just dropped but very early, you see, 1837, right here in Clinton County it was proposed to build a road.
Livingston:	13:07	Then we get up to the start maybe of the what is the Grand Trunk now, which was known then as Detroit & Pontiac. Isn't that correct?
Ceasar:	13:16	Right. Well, there were several names given to it, but the one that we know mostly, the Detroit & Pontiac, and then of course it had other names up to the present time.

Livingston:	13:27	The second charter was approved March 7th 34 by the legislature for Detroit & Pontiac Railroad. $50,000 was the starting figure on it; the work to commence in two years and finished in six years. The principal men running that were named Williams and Stevens of Pontiac. By 1838 they had wooden rails, a few steel, laid to Royal Oak. Cars pulled by horses ran over that route until the fall of 1839. It extended to Birmingham and cars pulled by steam engines; two trips per day and connecting with stagecoach to Detroit or to Pontiac and Flint and twice a week to Lyons.
Ceasar:	14:24	Mostly these rails were wood and a fairly green wood because everybody was burning wood at that time and wood was, to a degree, rather scarce. They put these wooden rails down and, of course, they warped. As they warped, it caused great many difficulties in transporting the coaches and whatever across those tracks and it was necessary to do something about it. So they put up a piece of metal over the top, strap-iron, and this strap-iron did probably help to some degree because it lasted a little while. That too had its handicaps because wood will warp.
Livingston:	15:06	The trouble with the strap-iron was the nails came loose sometimes and they'd curl up and it did cause some trouble. Sometimes the train crew had to stop, get out their hammers, and nail down the strap-iron again.
Ceasar:	15:18	What did they call those the--
Livingston:	15:19	snakeheads.
Ceasar:	15:20	snakeheads. I could think of snake eyes but that goes with gambling. Snakeheads. That's correct.
Livingston:	15:27	In 1840 the road was sold at a sheriff's sale. 1844, they kept on going but it had its troubles financially and the road reached Pontiac and for 10 years went no farther and had poor and rather irregular service. Also they said once in a while the engineer would stop and shoot a little game, so I gave them all--

Ceasar:	15:59	You have to remember, you see, that Michigan was just a raw woods area, lots of timber. The only openings would be where there'd be a cabin and a person would perhaps do a little farming, Mostly it would just virgin timber down through there and the wood was available. Now the trains used wood for fuel and oftentimes would buy cords of wood and have them brought to the railroad and stacked up. Since talking with you last, Alden, I found that there were some unscrupulous characters that would go along and they'd either steal the wood or set it on fire. When the train came along, there was no wood there. Then the crew would have to get out and cut some more so they can get onto the next stop.
Livingston:	16:45	I was reading in this Michigan history back where this goes--I jumped ahead of the story a little bit--but anyway, Grand Trunk was advertising for 500 cords of wood, at $2 a cord, dry hardwood, or if they would deliver it to St Johns, $2.50 a cord, piled by the railroad. That was an ad in the papers.
	17:02	They had financial troubles there, some. So the road was then leased for 10 years by Gordon Williams who later sold to a company headed by H. N. Walker. Under his management, why they changed the rails. They started changing the rails to what they call the, “T rail” which is the present-day rail and the road or put in better shape. Oakland-Ottawa Railroad was talked about from the west and that was 1848 and they were going to build west to Lake Michigan; construction to begin in five years; complete in 15 years. In 1850 they were had an act passed to connect Detroit portion to Oakland. Ottawa work started in 1852. H. N. Walker bought steel in England, 2,600 tons, to get this railroad to continue on west from Pontiac so from ‘52 on is when things started really to really move.
Ceasar:	18:25	The state of ours was involved in what we call, “railroad mania” where everyone at the beginning of think you that perhaps they could get rich by getting in on the deal and small railroads were formed. Larger ones continued to develop. Almost anyone could buy shares of stock in railroads. Some of these were fruitful and some of them were not. The fruitful ones probably still are existing to some degree, especially the one goes through St. Johns.

Livingston:	18:59	In 1855, an act approved by the governor to form the Detroit and Milwaukee road that year, the road reached Fentonville and July 1, 1856, the railroad reached Owosso and January 16, 1857, the road reached St Johns. In September it reached Ionia. So you see, they really were stepping along compared to what they had been doing before, that they were really going.
Caesar:	19:28	Seems that they were just dragging their feet to begin with.
Livingston:	19:30	I think it was financial and they probably didn't have any income from it much, few passengers and probably not too much freight or anything like that. That made quite a lot of difference. Then it got to Grand Haven in November 1858. 1860 they had some financial trouble again. See, there was a purchase, bond holder's mortgage. 1878 it became the Detroit, Grand Haven & Milwaukee which later became the Grand Trunk. That kind of brings you up to date on the Grand Trunk. A lot of other things that happened with that.
	20:15	The station. I got a few notes here about the station in St. Johns. The first one was built of slabs and then later here in 1868 D & M built a new depot, 32' by 70' at the foot of Oakland, and it was brick. In August 1865, they built a new water tank here in town to water the things. Of course, then they had another problem. In 1920 there was a tornado that destroyed both the freight station and the passenger station and both those rebuilt with the present station we have now. The freight station burned. So much for [bringing] the Grand Trunk up to date.

Caesar:	21:10	The only thing that I would want to add to that particular railroad is that it has held its own for several years now. The stations have been pretty much located in the same approximate area ever since the beginning of the railroad. The water tanks that you mentioned there used to be a real identification mark. When you were traveling along, you could see that water tank from a distance, whether with the horses or with the train. It was a necessity for the trains because they had to have water and the water would be drawn up into these tanks and then the engine would usually back around and get onto a switch track and would take on a quantity of water. This might be probably with several hundred gallons of water to be utilized until they would get to the next town. Almost every town had a water tank. My dad worked for the Grand Trunk Railroad. He was a one of those that worked building trestles, building water tanks, and building depots, particularly where they used wood, lumber, and that kind of thing. I always had kind of a fascination for the trestles and the water tanks themselves.
Livingston:	22:32	One of the reasons for the water tank would have a large volume of water that they could get very quickly. These spouts-- I know some of you would remember them--but they were big spouts. They can take on a thousand gallons of water in just nothing flat. It didn't take any time at all to take on quite a bunch of water. They had their coaling stations too which they'd dump those too very fast.
	22:56	At one time I think there were six passenger trains each way on this road at St Johns. There was a flyer and the other smaller towns only had four because of the flyer. There were twelve trains a day through the town as recently as 1920.
Caesar:	23:21	I can remember one vicious accident that happened. It must've been about 1933, '34. An automobile driver was attempting to cross the Grand Trunk tracks in Fowler, right in the city or the town. Whether he had tried to beat the train or whether he was unaware that it was coming or not, but that passenger train hit that car broadside and carried it east. The train must've been traveling to the east towards St Johns. The man was killed but the car was just a total piece of twisted junk. I never saw anything that was so destroyed as that was. He must have been totally unaware that the train but yet he was a resident of that town. He should have known, you know, the hours of the train coming through. People often set their watches by the train as it would come into town, as it would leave.

Livingston:	24:24	They expected the passenger trains to be on time.
	24:25	Now we're getting careless about railroads… Probably some of you remember that there was an accident in 1923. The Knights Templar were headed east--I believe to Detroit--and the train was wrecked near Durand. 67 people from St Johns on that train.
Caesar:	24:45	That was quite a wreck.
Livingston:	24:46	They had a defective rail and the locomotive left the track, plowed along on its side. I don't remember if anyone were seriously hurt or not, but I can remember some of the people that were on that train, going at that time. It was Knights Templar thing.,
Caesar:	25:01	I'd like to switch now over to some of the smaller railroad enterprises that took place in our county. It's always kind of fascinating to me that we had this big line that ran east and west through the central part of Clinton County. Of course, there will be years and years that there was a dream of running a line north and south through the county starting perhaps in Lansing, moving through DeWitt, up to St Johns, and then moving on north up into the Mount Pleasant and even on up to Mackinaw City. That didn't develop quite as soon as some people thought. There were several railroad ventures and they all seem to fail for one reason or another. Probably the closest that ever came to it was, of course, the interurban which came about in 1904. That wasn't geared for freight nearly as much as it was for passenger traffic. I'd like to bring us up to probably the very first railroad that traversed in our county. That was over in the southeast corner of the county and it was known as the Amboy Lansing & Traverse Bay Railroad. This took place around 1860 to 1861. It sorta hopped, skipped around. It didn't always run in a straight course. You'd think that they would build and continue to build lengthwise on the same path. This never did happen. They just seemed to hop, skip, and jump. The one that we're interested in was basically fostered by Owosso people. Many of the Owosso men were on the board and some of them actually worked on that railroad. Now the initials, A L and TB were often, by the riders, quipped about. They said it was "awfully long and terribly bumpy." It was also a nicknamed the "ram's horn railroad" because it had so many curves. To verify that, they had accidents on that road very early in which even the handcars jumped off the track. They'd get going pretty fast!

One of the things that I was attracted to was--we know about Chandler's Marsh here in our county. Chandler bought a lot of that land from the government at a very reduced price. He was able to persuade the railroad to come through right where they did on his property there, north of East Lansing, and he would build the station, which he did. He built the railroad depot and station there and it was known as Chandler Station for many, many years, a popular spot for that. It is said that a train or a person could leave on this train--now, this was years ago, and think compare it with today--you could leave the Lansing area at half past four in the afternoon and you could travel north and east and move towards Detroit. You'd have to change several trains but you could get to Detroit the next day by about 10:45 A.M. Today, one hour's time will pretty much get you there, you know, but here they had to do this all night, part of two different days. The railroad initially did not go into Lansing. It started out from Owosso, as we said, and moved south and west. When it got within about a mile of North Lansing, they terminated the track, probably at the county line. People would ride that far and then they'd have to get out and walk. It's said that some of the ladies didn't particularly like this because their heels would sink into that soft dirt. They didn't enjoy that at all.

Livingston: 29:07 You don't think they had a boardwalk for them there?

Ceasar: 29:09 No. They didn't for a long time. The Ram's Horn Railroad was the first railway to reach Lansing from any direction, very first one.

Then there was another railroad that we want to speak about. That was over on the southwest corner of the county, known as the Lansing Ionia Railroad for a long time and later became a member of the Michigan Central family. It cut across the corner of Eagle Township from Lansing across to Grand Ledge and then from Grand Ledge off toward Portland and then from Portland to Ionia. One important gentleman whose name appeared on much of the literature was--I've forgotten his name now. I'll get it in just a minute, but anyway, the railroad, as I said, traveled across the very lower part of Clinton County. I remember when I was teaching there. That in ..

[tape ends]