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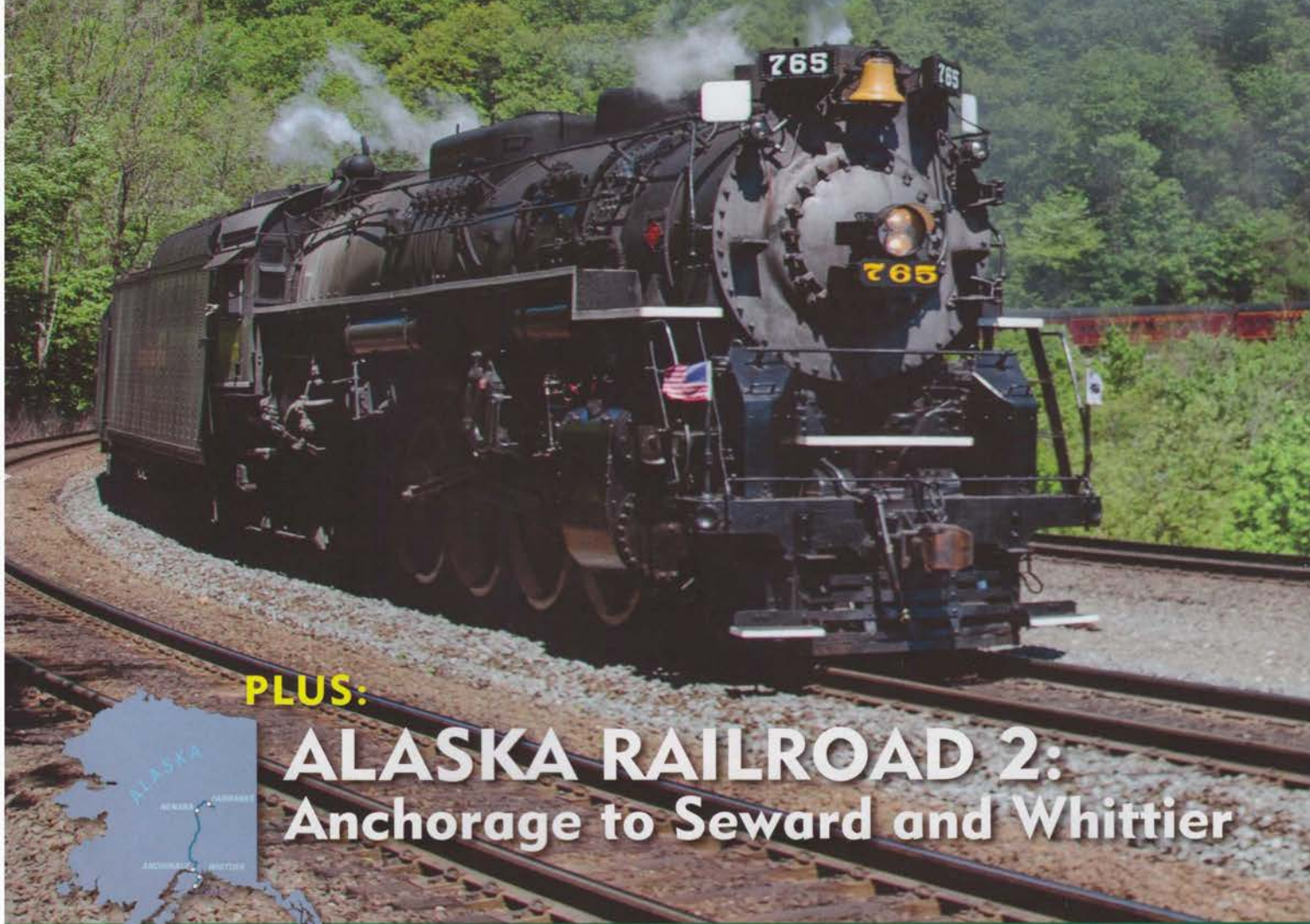


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INSIDE:

- A chance encounter with a New York short line
- Remembering Pittsburgh's last commuter trains

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ALL TOO OFTEN, WE TEND TO IGNORE the local rail sights until it's too late; I did this with the old Lehigh Valley around my hometown of Auburn, New York. But one day in June 1968 I traveled the dozen or so miles from my home to a wide spot in the road known locally as Skaneateles Junction.

Hart Lot, its original name, is just a fly speck on the map of New York State. Its *raison d'être* was the junction of New York Central's Auburn Branch with the Skaneateles (pronounced "skinny-atlas") Shortline Railroad. "The Shortline," as we referred to it in jest, comparing it to the railroad in the game of Monopoly, was a five-mile line built as the Skaneateles Railroad in 1838. The track left the Auburn & Syracuse Railroad (one of the oldest segments of the New York Central) and ran southward to the tiny community

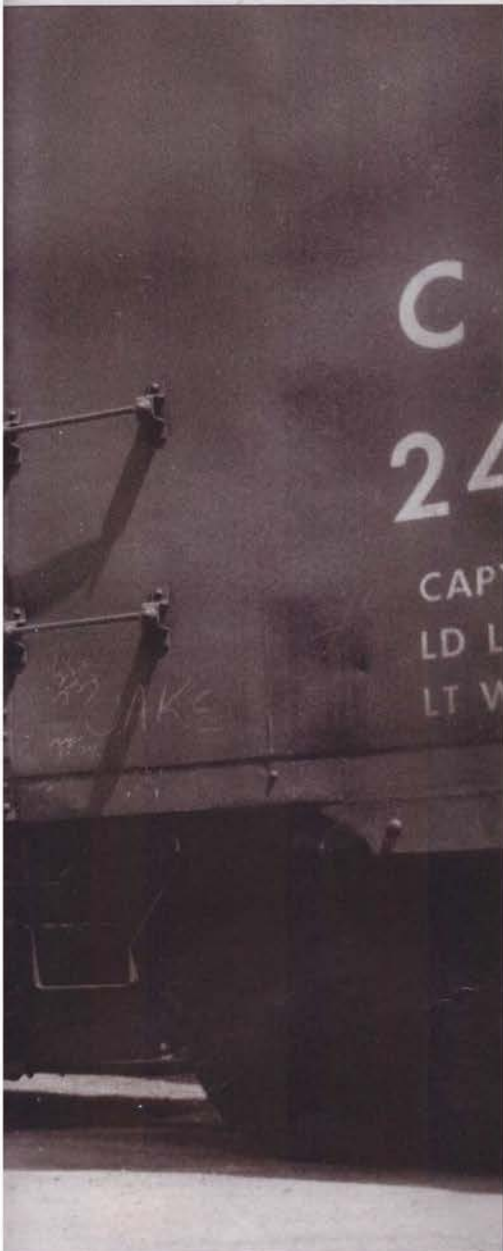
at the foot of the Finger Lake from which it took its name. Horse-drawn cars plied the strap-iron rails until the 1850s when steam locomotion finally appeared. Over the years, Hart Lot became better known as Skaneateles Junction and, much later, the New York Central became the Penn Central.

The Shortline was known for its casual operations and for its collection of unusual locomotives and rolling stock. In fact, the line rostered an 1870-vintage center door baggage car of about 25 feet in length, two or three archbar trucked truss rod flat cars, and an old steam locomotive tender right up until the 1970s. Motive power consisted of General Electric 44-tonner No. 6 and GE 45-ton side-rod No. 7, both in a handsome deep blue paint scheme.

Operations were erratic in later years and when, prompted by a

washout, the southerly 2.5 miles of track to Skaneateles were abandoned in early 1967, movements were dependent on the needs of sole customer Stauffer Chemical Company (they would later purchase the struggling railroad to ensure a reliable connection to the outside world). That was why, on this prime summer's day, it was indeed good fortune to witness the events depicted here that brought the sleepy little hamlet of Hart Lot back to life, if only for an hour.

Penn Central ran a local, officially designated DQ-1, from Dewitt Yard in East Syracuse to Auburn and back. This slow freight wound its leisurely course westward five days a week, usually with one RS-3 and a vintage wooden, offset cupola caboose spliced by an assortment of freight cars. Though the abandoned depot remained at the



A CHANCE MEETING

It Happened at Hart Lot

BY KEN HOJNACKI/PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

Junction, only the Shortline interchange kept this stretch of track from being more than a milepost notation in an employee timetable.

Heading north from the Stauffer plant, No. 7 was encountered carefully stepping up the undulating track to the interchange with a boxcar and a covered hopper in tow. The side rods, an anomaly in the diesel age, flashed up and down, clanking merrily just as her predecessors on steam locomotives had done for decades. It wasn't hard to chase the slow moving train to the Junction, as the highway paralleled the track no more than 60 feet away.

Crossing the highway in front of me,

protected by unique semi-circular wooden crossing signs, we swapped viewing angles until the short train came to a stop along side the Wheeler House Hotel at Hart Lot. Looking beyond the asphalt shingle material that hid the hotel's true character and soaking in the graceful cornice and roof trim of the veranda, one could tell the Wheeler House was once a fine establishment built for the respite of the weary traveler. Ironically enough, the locomotive number and the soft drink sign on the pillar served to punctuate the long relationship between the Shortline and the hotel.

No sooner had the diminutive

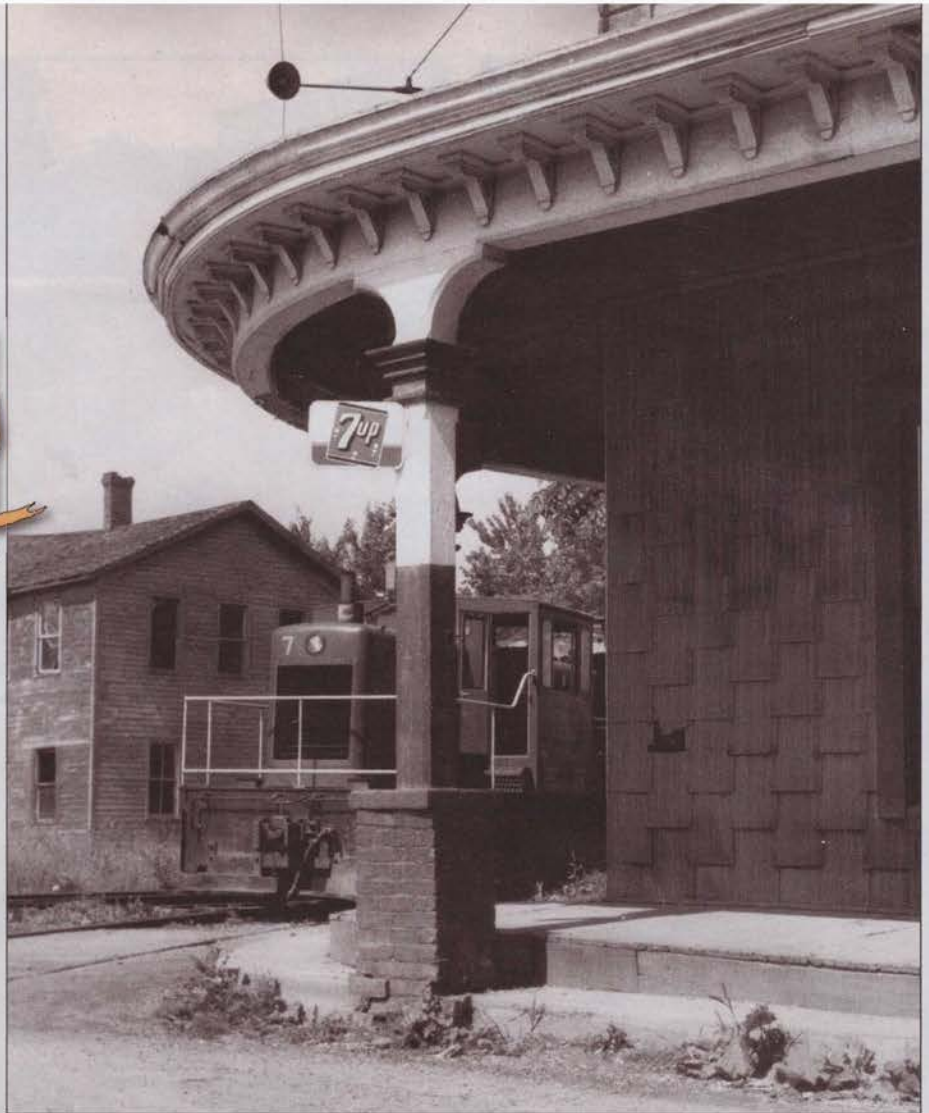
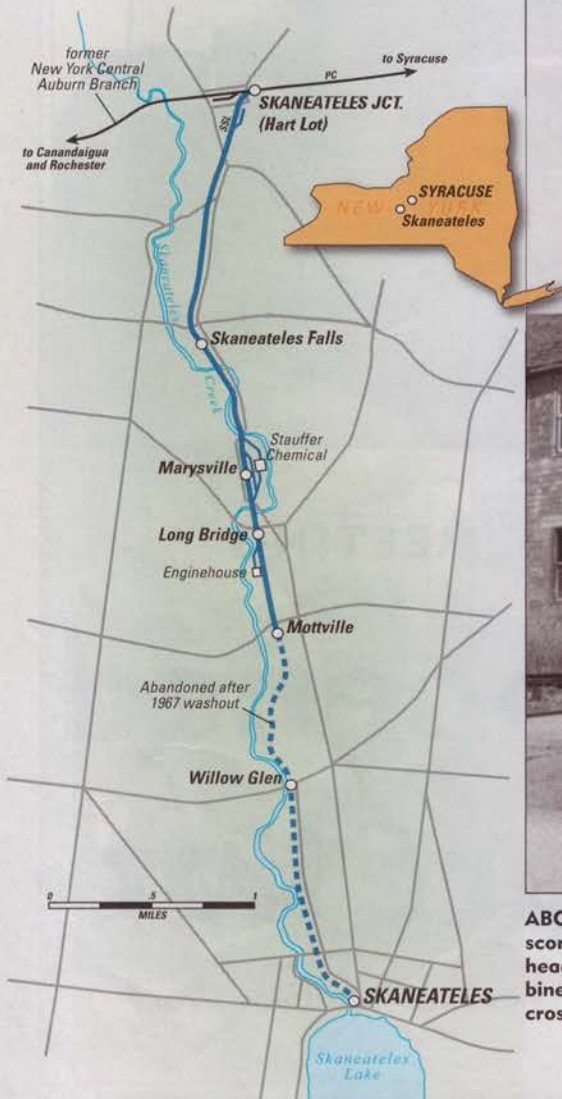
switcher stopped but the *blaaatt* of Alco RS-3 5212, still decorated in New York Central's black livery, disturbed the afternoon calm as she poked her long hood into view in front of the Wheeler House. The Auburn-bound local stopped to leave some cars for the Shortline and pick up the two just arriving. Some cars were left on the main and some on the interchange track. The Penn Central locomotive then pulled ahead and waited in front of the depot until the Shortline had made its exchange.

Number 7 moved out onto the branch with her cars and began seesawing back and forth between the inter-

OPPOSITE: The Skaneateles Short Line prepares to enter the Penn Central Auburn Branch to exchange cars with the local freight on a sunny summer day in June 1968. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Soon after the Shortline and the Penn Central local convened to swap cars, a Penn Central hi-rail truck carrying officials commanded the right-of-way. The 999 prepared to depart for its less-than-record-breaking run to Syracuse.

Skaneateles Short Line '68

Illustration by Otto M. Vondrak. Not all stations shown.
Not an official map. ©2013 Carstens Publications, Inc.



ABOVE: The historic bonds between the railroad and the old Wheeler House hotel were underscored by the harmony of the engine number and the soda sign on the porch as the locomotive heads for home. BELOW: Exotic motive power, quaint markers and a bucolic atmosphere combine as No. 7 approached the junction at Hart Lot, near Elbridge, New York. The unique railroad crossing sign is currently in the collection of the Rochester & Genesee Valley Railroad Museum.



change track and the depot to get all the cars in the right places. Had this been a normal day, it would have been an easy switch for the crews and a pleasant interlude for a railfan. But no, today would be a little different.

In the midst of these maneuvers, up drove a non-descript baby blue and white Dodge van with tiny lettering on the door revealing its identity as a Penn Central conveyance. Doubtless some wag thought it cute to number this vehicle "999" in a sarcastic counterpoint to that famous record-setting New York Central steam locomotive that spent many years hiding in the old East Syracuse engine shed, only 20 or so miles away. Complete with special headlight, air conditioning and two-chime air horn, this modern cousin was taking officials on an inspection of the branch and would the crews please help get the hi-railer wheels down and



LEFT: Penn Central 5512 (still wearing New York Central dress) passes No. 7 at Skaneateles Junction on its way to Auburn. **ABOVE:** The conductor on the rear of the Penn Central local ponders the unusual delay as they depart the junction. Caboose 18576 is completely "street legal," note the New York license plate hanging off the ladder. **BELOW:** The conductor casts a wary eye on the photographer as the SSL crew switches cars at the junction. He began his career on the New York, Ontario & Western as a waterboy, and normally performed track work on the SSL. Such was life on a short line with few regular employees.



clear the track so they could proceed east to Syracuse?

The Shortline was obliged to tuck its cars in the clear on the interchange track and then run up the passing siding to dodge the Dodge. The Penn Central crew backed down to put its train together in the proper order and headed west, an exasperated conductor no doubt contemplating these events from the back platform of the wooden crummy as they left town. The van straddled the rails and prepared to leave. When the 999 had cleared the track, consuming over half an hour of the crews' time, the Shortline backed down to finish its chores.

Number 7 picked up its car and sneaked back around the Wheeler House, off into the weeds and on south. The Junction became quiet again, with only the smell of creosote, the clicking of rails expanding in the sun, and the chirp of beetles left to stimulate the senses.

The carloadings became fewer and fewer and the movements became nearly impossible to catch. This would be one of the last times I would see the Shortline in operation and the only time I saw a meet at Hart Lot.

The Shortline closed for good in 1981, the locomotives sold off, the rails removed. The Auburn Branch rails passed on to Conrail and were later sold off to Finger Lakes Railway in 1993, which keeps them polished with passing freight to this day. The old depot became the home to the Central New York Model Railroad Club, and trains pacing cars on the highway to Skaneateles became just a memory. **R**