

"Reminiscences of Rail Transportation in Regional Area" by George W. Prance as printed in the Regional Recorder, March 16, 1965

Plainville figures very prominently in the story of the rail transportation which was all important to the area towns north and south of here enroute to wither Boston or Providence. When the Old Colony Railroad decided to build a branch from Norwood to Attleboro including the little H.F. Barrows RR which ran from North Attleboro to East Attleboro, it was found that more space was needed than was available at the No. Attleboro terminus of the Barrows Road. So Plainville was picked as the site for the terminal facilities.

In the spring of 1888, the Boston & Providence had a disastrous wreck when the Bussey Bridge near Forest Hills, collapsed. This ruined the Road financially and the Old Colony took over. Within a year plans were formulated to build the branch line, later known as the Wrentham Brach, from the end of the Morrel Ink Works track between Norwood and Walpole to North Attleboro. Mr. Barrows offered to sell his railroad for \$22,000 or to lease it for \$11,000 per year. The Old Colony chose to lease with an option to buy at a later date. This option was never taken up. Instead, the powers that be on the New Haven RR which had taken over in 1893 decided to build from Adamsdale to No. Attleboro.

At Adamsdale this segment of the Wrentham branch would be connected to the Franklin Branch and the place called Adamsdale Junction. The writer's father was engineer on the last train to run over the line between No. Attleboro and Attleboro and a motorman, names Nick Nerney, rode the engine to acquaint himself with the road as ha was to run the "Gee Whiz" electric car over this piece of track. This provided faster service between the two towns than was afforded by the regular street line. Giving up this line which could have been bought for \$22,000 was a foolish move on the part of the steam railroad for on the Adamsdale route there was not one cent of revenue except for an occasional passenger at a flag stop called Hillside located near the underpass on Hoppin Hill Road. This piece of track was expensive to build and made a heavy haul on the upgrade for northbound trains. On the H.F. Barrows RR there was much freight at Attleboro Falls plus all the coal used at Farmers in addition to many passengers who rode the train between the two towns to get to work at the various jewelry shops and other businesses.

The Old Colony had been very busy buying land for the right of way and in Plainville bought a great deal of property either side of the right of way. This included a large piece of land, which was originally part of the Cargill Farm which extended from the present Wrentham town line to Nearly North Attleboro boundary. When the road was surveyed, it was planned to double the track if the business should merit the expense. It never did, but there was plenty of land available, and every bridge was planned and built to accommodate double iron. no passenger trains were permitted to operate over the line until all street crossings at grade were bridged. When the road was finally completed for passenger service, there were no crossings from Norwood to North Attleboro. On the

Barrows line there had been grade crossings at Chestnut Street, Attleboro Falls, Farmers and No. Main Street at the Simmons Shop.

A fine, large roundhouse was built in Plainville. This could house four engines with ash pits under each stall for cleaning fires and maintenance work. There was a boiler room with a large boiler that furnished steam heat for the brick depot. Beside the round house was a very large windmill, which pumped water for the locomotives. When there was no wind, a stem pump raised the necessary water. There was a freight house with adjacent siding plus a track for storage of cars for the trains, which had terminated here. This track was piped for steam to keep the cars heated while the locomotives were in the round house.

The first passenger train ran over the branch on April 10, 1893. In 1896 another train was added. the writer's father was the engineer who, regardless of his wishes in the matter, was sent to Plainville to cover that job in 1896. It was recorded in the No. Attleboro Chronicle some years ago that 1896 was a cold winter. The writer cannot remember the occasion, but his mother's canary did freeze to death in the kitchen of their home while a coal fire burned in the stove and with a town draped over the cage.

The reason that my dad was sent here from Dedham at that time was that he had fired the work train in 1889 and 1890 which laid the track and the roadbed so that he was familiar with the characteristics of the road. This was cheaper than paying a man to "learn the road" as it is known in railroad parlance. This work train had to bring a large quantity of "fill" to Plainville because of the boggy condition encountered north of the freight house (roughly on a line with the present highway garage). One night this train, which was made up of many small four wheeled dump cars each of which held about ten tons of gravel or fill, was left standing on a piece of temporary track over this bog. The locomotive went to the round house for the night. Next morning the dump cars and the track were gone. To this day they remain beneath the right of way which was abandoned last year.

Eventually enough fill was brought from Sharon Gravel Pit and from Walpole Junction to make a firm roadbed to support the trains, which ran over the spot for the next 70 years.

Passenger service provided by this branch was heavily patronized by people who lived in the towns along the line. They could go to either Boston or Providence or to any station on the New Haven system, quickly and inexpensively and in comfort as compared to the stages, which had provided service of sorts prior to the coming of the trains. At one time there were 25 regular passenger trains through this town every 24 hours. There was also at least one freight train a day and sometimes two. There were theater trains on Wednesday and Saturday evenings so that one could attend the theatre in Boston or Providence and return home on the same night. There were no parking problems in those days.

Some of the patrons of these trains may or may not have attended the theatre, but they had indulged in copious quantities of "giggle water" and many of them were disposed to be reluctant to pay their fares. The management, on investigation of the reports of fights and injuries to crew members and other passengers, picked out a freight conductor who ran the freight train over the branch and promoted him to passenger conductor with the understanding that he was to collect fares and keep the peace.

George Willis was amply qualified to do just that -- and he did. After the first theatre train he conducted, no one cared to dispute his authority. The writer was this man's engineer on his last run prior to his retirement some years ago.

An incident occurred on December 20, 1896, which is worth recording. My mother was at the Plainville Station waiting to take the 9:23 am train to Boston and was chatting with the mail and express man, the late Edward C. Barney, on the station platform. Mr. Barney had just informed mother that he had become a father that morning. Just at that moment the train came in sight heading down the grade from North Attleboro. Unfortunately, some one had forgotten to line up the switch for the main line and the engine and train headed for the turntable which was lined right so the whole outfit went through the roundhouse and out the back wall and into the hill which made the approach to and held abutments for the West Bacon Street bridge. No one went to Boston that day on that train. The engineer, Mr. William Parsons, was laid off for nearly a year as punishment for not seeing the switch target in the wrong position. During that time he manufactured a brass polish, which he named Slumberline. This he sold to engine crews, who at the time had to keep their engines clean and the brass scoured and polished. Mr. Parsons lived in Mansfield for many years and the writer fired for him over the Wrentham Branch just prior to World War I. He was always called Slumbo because of the incident.

Many salty and/or humorous incidents happened on the Wrentham Branch, a lot of them within the memory of the writer. Many would be better told than printed. Perhaps a few names among the many who worked at or out of the local terminal should be mentioned. The first regular engineer was Charles Palmer who lived with his wife and stepson on Walnut Street in Plainville in the house now owned by Willard Ayer. My father, B.J. Prance, was the second engineer. Two brothers, Walter and Al Dodge, owned houses on Dodge Avenue, now Maple Avenue, North Attleboro, near the present Homer Alden Company. Walter was an early conductor but was promoted to trainmaster when the New Haven took over the Old Colony. His brother, Al, was a conductor in passenger service and worked for this branch for many years. Another old time conductor was Chet Read, who lived in the house on the corner of School and Spring Streets, more recently the property of the late Esther Bennett. Walter Ames lives right across from the North Attleboro depot and was baggage master on one of the tow passenger trains out of Plainville for many years.

The baggage master of the other job was Al Swallow. He lived near the railroad adjacent to the underpass on Fletcher Street. He had a large family of boys and one girl, some of whom still live in the area. The writer still has a fine chest, which Al made for

my father to carry tools on the engine. Al was a good cabinetmaker. As a small boy I had one night cajoled my dad into letting me ride the engine with him on a Saturday night theatre trains to Boston. As was to be expected, I became sleepy and was put into the baggage car under Al's care. He put me on a pile of mail sacks to sleep. On the return trip, Al lit up his T.D. pipe and stuck a board for a seat between the steam pipes on the side wall of the car. Evidently he went to sleep for when the train went over the crossover at Walpole Junction, the jounce sent Al a bit off the board and it sprang back and spanked him smartly where his pants were the tightest. He jumped up and pulled the emergency cord and everything stopped. When Al was asked what the trouble was, he said the cars should be inspected that something had hit the bottom of his car with a heck of a wallop. The jounce had had waked me and I can testify that it was Al Swallow's bottom which was a "heck of a wallop". His son, Earl, lives in Plainville having retired from the Post Office after serving many years in North Attleboro and Plainville.

Another old time brakeman lived in Wrentham. "Doc: Hamilton had been educated to be a dentist, had traveled extensively and finally would up a brakeman. Train service over the Wrentham Branch was a power for good in the territory it served. Many scholars who graduated from local schools went on to study at institutions of higher learning in either Boston or Providence. Being able to commute by train made this education possible for them. Many of these students rode trains I fired or ran. There were many residents of the various towns, which this branch served who worked in either Boston or Providence or another towns along the line. Without the railroad they could not have done so. When passenger service was discontinued, there were 125 regular riders picked up each day between North Attleboro and Bird Mills. At Norwood the train was loaded to capacity and was express to Back Bay and Boston.

In the late twenties the New Haven held meeting at Walpole, Wrentham and other places to tell people that the New England Transportations. Co. would be better because the busses would run right through the centers of the towns. Ironically, when the surveys were made to layout the railroad, these same towns had screeched to high heaven about trains coming through these centers where they would be handy. The proposed site of the Plainville Depot was just south of Plainville Pond about where the Whiting and Davis inside parking lot is now. At that time there was a big barn about where the proposed station would have been. The New Haven promised that they would provide steel coaches equipped with electric lights on the passenger trains if the towns would grant an exclusive franchise to the New England Transportation Co. to pick up bus passengers. Oddly enough, it was Walpole and Wrentham where the depots were only a short distance from the center of town that the enticement of busses running through the center carried the day – even though folks in Plainville and North Attleboro had a long walk to their stations, especially on cold mornings.

The busses got their franchise. To this day only the Short Line, most recent successor to the N.E. Transportation Co., can pick up passengers in this territory. This was the beginning of the end for rail passenger service on the branch. I fired the last passenger train over the branch in 1934. There is a good deal more that could be written,

but the transition from steel wheels to rubber tires is nearly complete. Soon the cheapest and perhaps, the best means of mass transportation will be just a memory from the past.