

Pitcairn and the Railroad

Contributed by Administrator
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Pitcairn Borough: Third Largest Rail Yard East of Mississippi Bruce Kish The clanging bell, the squeal of brakes and the dull roar of diesel exhaust as freight trains pass by unremarked are all that remain of Pitcairn's heyday as the third largest rail yard east of the Mississippi. They are sounds that momentarily drown out the traffic, the blaring radio and the conversations on the street. To the generation that came after Conrail shut down the rail yard late in 1979, the sounds are foreign. Not so to David Cutshall, a resident who worked as railroader from 1941 to 1985. "Mondays and Tuesdays are usually quiet," he says. "Then the number of freight and passenger trains gradually picks up on Wednesday and Thursday. By Friday, they're hammering through town. Whenever I hear the trains, I think back to the old days." Pitcairn was indeed a company town. Many a son followed in his father's footsteps, working in the machine shop, roundhouse, or office. In Cutshall's family alone, his grandfather was a conductor, his father and brother engineers, and his uncle an air brake foreman in the steel ship. Cutshall worked as a clerk for most of his career as did his sister for 10 years. Working as a railroader was more than just a job. Every employee, from mechanics, machinists and foremen, up to office types, worked six and a half days per week including holidays before the legislation of the 40-hour work week. It was a lifestyle that demanded sacrifice, but the Pennsylvania Railroad took care of its workers. The company town's history intertwines with that of the PRR and the city of Pittsburgh. On April 9, 1846, the state legislature incorporated the PRR and assigned it the task of linking the Philadelphia-Harrisburg line to a second going to Pittsburgh. For six years, Irish immigrants attacked the wilderness, armed with axe, spade, pick and wheelbarrow. By Nov. 29, 1852, the 249-mile stretch was completed and a route from Pittsburgh to Philadelphia started. The demand for train transport impacted upon society, killing off the stage coach line, the Northern Pike and other toll roads, and the private businesses that supported them. Pittsburgh became a hub in the PRR, but the city yards at 28th Street were too small to accommodate a large number of trains. In 1874, a Scottish philanthropist decided to find open space to relocate the yard. Known to his friends as "Mr. Railroad," Robert Pitcairn, like his childhood friend Andrew Carnegie, had risen to the top of his profession. Starting as a telegraph boy at age 12, he gradually advanced by his wits to positions of head clerk and eventually divisional superintendent of Pittsburgh. By age 46, he attained the title of Resident Assistant to the President of PRR. He was deeply devoted to religion, family, railroading and various civic organizations. In Pitcairn's 75th anniversary program, author Margaret Russell described him as "a rugged individualist who considered himself the aristocrat of the labor world.

To such a man, the adventure of taking a fiery iron horse over the Alleghenies and around Horse Shoe Curve was as dangerous and exciting as Lindbergh's first flight across the Atlantic, or the astronauts' first trip to the moon. Pitcairn gazed eastward toward the sparsely wooded upper Turtle Creek Valley where lay the farmlands of the McGinnis, Brinton, Wall and Toohill families. In 1874, he purchased 215 acres of this land, about 15 miles from Pittsburgh. The tract would serve as the new home for the Pittsburgh rail yard and its workers. For the next 20 years, the neighboring hillsides resounded with the thud of axes and the pounding of hammers as the forests yielded to a growing company town its residents called Wallurba. A depression briefly hampered the town's development, closing the rail yard from 1893 to 1895. Dissatisfaction with Patton Township caused the residents of Wallurba to petition for their charter. With the influence of PRR's top brass, a charter was granted and the borough of Pitcairn established. The new rail yards gradually evolved. The first receiving and classification yards were completed by 1892. By late 1905, the Westbound Hump in Pitcairn was opened; two years later, the Eastbound Hump near the site of the old wall farm was finished. A series of four tracks ran up to each of the humps and fanned into 35 others in the receiving yards. "Uncle Robert" Pitcairn died at the age of 73 in 1909, beloved by everyone from business associates down to the men in the machine shops. Yet he lived to see his company town flourish. In the early years, classification towers guided the cars down into the yards. After chugging to the top of the hill, the cars were released and allowed to roll downhill into the proper receiving area. The brakemen struggled to control the car's momentum as it slowly squealed downhill. The job was hazardous and, after a number of brakemen died or lost limbs, retarders were installed on the east hump in 1929 and on the west in 1946. From the west, trains pulled into the loading docks from Chicago, St. Louis and Cincinnati to drop off grain and agricultural products. Loading crews refilled the cars with manufactured goods and sent the trains back to the Midwest. The buildings surrounding the yards bustled with activity. Gray plumes of smoke rose into the sky. The air reverberated with the hum and whirl of machines and the pounding of sledges. Pitcairn handled virtually every aspect of train travel and maintenance. In the vast network of machine shops and factories were roundhouses used for repairing passenger and freight cars. The town was self sufficient, having its own electrical plant. Surrounding the rail yard were the workers' homes. Churches for all denominations sprang up throughout the town. In their free time, the workers could relax at the stores, lodges, gun club or the company-sponsored YMCA. Athletic facilities and teams provided other social outlets. For those who wished to get away, the PRR ran a special train to nearby Idlewild Park. During the prohibition years, certain activities forced other residents to leave town for a few hours. "There were no saloons or beer joints in Pitcairn and all the beer drinkers had to go to Wilmerding," former resident and railroader Emmett Jones wrote in the Pitcairn 75th anniversary program. "They would stay all evening and catch the last train to Pitcairn." "For those of us who lived in Pitcairn, the noise of the trains was no problem," recalls Cutshall. "But when relatives came to visit, they couldn't sleep for two nights." During the World War II years, Spanish accents were heard on the sidewalks. The draft claimed the lion's share of young men and the PRR had to import Mexican workers to help with repairs. Resident Amelia Shipley remembers those years. Her father worked in a cabinet shop in one of the

roundhouses. She ran a tiny luncheonette next to the Broadway Hotel. "The town was so crowded with workers, railroad crews, passengers and soldiers who were coming and going, you couldn't walk on the streets for eight hours a day. "Every eight hours, a railroad crew would stop for a shift. They came from Altoona, Enola and Columbus. After they ate at the restaurant, they went to the Broadway or one of the boarding rooms to get some sleep. "They paid a 10-cent deposit on the room and the company picked up the tab. When it was time for them to go, two calling boys covering the shift would leave their rooms at the "Y" and knock on their doors." When the war ended and the young men returned from the service, the town began its slow decline. By 1955, the PRR transferred the steel car and repair shops to Hollidaysburg. The freight classification yards moved to the town of Conway in Beaver County. During World War II, the work force employed 4,700; by 1959, it fell sharply to 1,350. Train fares were slashed drastically. Trips to Pittsburgh went for 73 cents one way, \$1.25 round trip, \$5.85 per week and \$21.05 per month. Businesses slowly vanished, followed by chain grocery stores Kroger's and A & P. The wartime population of 6,000 dropped to 5,400. Yet the problems were not limited to Pitcairn. PRR was deteriorating and had to sell off several parcels of land to the borough to cut its losses. The rail yard's eastbound lanes shut down in 1964. Two years later, PRR converted that property into an unloading zone for General Motors and American Motors cars. The move was too little, too late. In 1967, PRR was forced to merge with New York Central, creating Penn Central. Yet the new company was shaky at best and in 1975, it merged with several other Northeastern railroads to form Conrail. All across the country, however, railroads were losing business to truck fleets. Pitcairn continued to unload cars at the docks until the practice of shipping them by train was stopped after 1978. The end was near. By 1979, only 75 workers remained. Conrail decided later in the year it couldn't afford to keep the Pitcairn yards open. It was a bitter decision that many a veteran employee protested, recalling years of service and company loyalty. A few workers managed to find jobs at Westinghouse. Others weren't as fortunate. The private businesses suffered, but those that had been around longer, like Mrs. Shipley's luncheonette, managed to keep the doors open. But the atmosphere around town wasn't the same. "The railroaders were my friends. After you serve those guys for 20, 25 years and see them every other day, they become part of the family," she says. "PRR employees were a close-knit family," remembers Cutshall. "If you went to the bank and said you worked for the railroad, you never had a problem getting credit or a loan. I was proud to be a railroader."

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