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The Bowman's Creek Branch of Lehigh Valley Railroad (1887-1963)

In 1869 the Lehigh Valley Railroad finished the construction of a 96-mile railroad line along the Susquehanna River from Wilkes-Barre to Waverly, New York. Called the Pennsylvania and New York Canal and Railroad Company, the railroad was largely built alongside the North Branch Extension Canal (1856-1872), which connected the Wyoming coal field in Luzerne County to a canal system in central New York to reach the Great Lakes. The canal itself was heavily damaged in an 1865 flood and was closed in 1872, after which the company double-tracked the rail line. But this railroad completely by-passed the rich timber lands of the North Mountain in Luzerne, Wyoming, and Sullivan counties. Prior to the early 1890s, pioneer lumber firms along the Bowman's Creek and Mehoopany Creek lands used splash dams, creek freshets or wagons to reach mills and local markets.

The absence of a railroad through the North Mountain range plagued its major landowner, Col. R. Bruce Ricketts, for a quarter of a century, and blocked his fortune-building from the unbroken forest lands he had acquired in three counties. Without a railroad, the existing lumber merchants in Sullivan and Wyoming Counties were limited to small milling and tanning operations, while the Wyoming Valley mining industry and growing mid-Atlantic cities clamored for lumber.

In time, however, various interests, under the eye of the Lehigh Valley Railroad, planned to connect Towanda with Wilkes-Barre by construction of a substantial railroad through the vast North Mountain forest. In 1867 the independent Sullivan and Erie Railroad opened a 24-mile line between Monroeton, five miles from Towanda, to Bernice, to reach the semi-anthracite mine fields of Bradford County. This coal had a market in New York State. Monroeton was connected to Towanda on the Susquehanna River by the Barclay Railroad, later known as the Susquehanna and New York Railroad, over which the Lehigh Valley would later have trackage rights. The Sullivan and Erie had financial difficulties and was reorganized, after foreclosure in 1874, as the State Line and Sullivan Railroad. In 1884 the State Line and Sullivan Railroad was leased to the Pennsylvania and New York Canal and Railroad Company.

In 1884 the Loyalsock Railroad, corporately controlled by the Pennsylvania and New York, was chartered to build a 32-mile extension from the State Line's terminus at Bernice, to Bowman's Creek near Bean Run (Mountain Springs), which would open up both Lopez and Col. Ricketts' North Mountain lands. This line opened in 1893, as part of the through line between Wilkes-Barre and Towanda. There was additional mileage to the State Line and the Loyalsock lines representing small branches to outlying mill and resort towns. For example, two of the most important on the Loyalsock were the 7.75 mile branch connecting Thorndale on the main track with the lumber town of Lopez, and the 3.85 mile Ganoga Branch connecting the lumber town of Ricketts with

Col. Ricketts' Lake Ganoga resort.

The last important railroad link was the connecting railroad from Ricketts at North Mountain to Wilkes-Barre on the Susquehanna River. This link was the Wilkes-Barre and Harvey's Lake Railroad. The Wyoming Valley mining industry centered in Wilkes-Barre had an insatiable demand for timber to be used for breakers, mine railroad ties, and support lumber in hundreds of miles of mine tunnels. The Wyoming Valley also had main-line railroad connections to haul lumber to Allentown, New York, and Philadelphia markets, where immigration and industrialization pressures demanded lumber for housing factories.

The Construction Years

In 1883 the Lehigh Valley Railroad surveyed at least three different routes from the Wyoming Valley to Harvey's Lake and Bowman's Creek to reach the North Mountain lumber tracts. There also was interest by the Pennsylvania Railroad Company in a similar line, and at least a rumor of interest by the Delaware, Lackawanna, and Western Railroad Company. But no firm action was taken by these major railroads to construct a railroad in the early 1880s, even though the Lehigh Valley had purchased 13,000 acres of Bowman's Creek timber lands in 1876, through which the railroad from Ricketts' lands to Harvey's Lake could be built.

In the background was Albert Lewis, a wealthy self-made lumberman from Bear Creek, near Wilkes-Barre. Lewis grew rich from lumbering along Bear Creek but his lumber lands were exhausted in the early 1880s. He converted his lumbering dams to ice harvesting. He was seeking to expand his lumber empire to the Harvey's Lake region.

Albert Lewis and his Lehigh Valley friends were surprised in October 1885, when a group of local investors, generally representing Wyoming Valley lumber, insurance, and ice interests, under the leadership of John S. Shonk, George W. Shonk, and A.S. Orr, incorporated the Wilkes-Barre and Harvey's Lake Railroad Company. They planned to build a railroad from the Wyoming Valley through the Back Mountain community of Dallas, to the newly developing resort at Harvey's Lake. The investors were initially divided as to inviting Albert Lewis to join the corporation. But the capital necessary to purchase the right-of-way and to construct a railroad was heavy. Lewis had both an interest and the financial resources to help Shonk's friends, and Lewis joined the investors. Lewis immediately recognized the importance of controlling the railroad to serve the Bowman's Creek lands which he and his Lehigh Valley Railroad investors had purchased a decade earlier. Within a year, the new railroad found itself \$90,000 in debt to Lewis for advances made by Lewis to acquire the right-of-way through the Back Mountain for the railroad. By June 1886 some original stockholders in the railroad had sold out to Lewis who then installed his own financial and legal friends and advisors as owners of the railroad.

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Lewis employed a large number of East European immigrants, 300 men, to complete the railroad which reached Dallas in December 1886. He planned to headquarter his Back Mountain lumber business at the north corner of Harvey's Lake, which became the village of Alderson, named after William C. Alderson, treasurer of the Lehigh Valley Railroad.

On May 26, 1887, Lewis improvised a flat car for passenger use and ran a special excursion for friends to enjoy a party at his Alderson estate, where he had built a showpiece log cottage near the site of the sawmill he would build the following winter. The cottage was a major attraction for many years and would become the lake home of Adam Stull, Lewis's chief associate in the lake's lumber business. Regular passenger service on the twelve-mile Luzerne to Harvey's Lake railroad began on June 16, 1887.

On August 5, 1887, Lewis sold the twelve-mile Harvey's Lake railroad to the Lehigh Valley Railroad. By August 16, 1887, two trains each way began a daily run to the lake. In October 1887 the Alderson post office was created for the growing North Corner. Edward Bush, the first postmaster at Alderson, was the freight agent for the Lewis lumber company at the lake.

From Alderson, Lewis also constructed an additional eleven miles of log railroad to Bowman's Creek at Noxen. Apparently, the Lewis log train road was the original track for an extension of the Wilkes-Barre and Harvey's Lake Railroad Company from Alderson to the Bowman's Creek timbering fields. But the grades for the log road were too difficult for the heavier trains of the Lehigh Valley Railroad. The Lehigh Valley Railroad instead began to construct a new six-mile rail bed from Alderson to Noxen on a different route more suitable for passenger and freight service.

Lewis maintained the original line of his log train to tap the timbering tracts along Bowman's Creek. The Lewis log train ran west directly from Alderson and would link with the new Lehigh Valley line at Beaver Run immediately below Noxen. From the log train line to Noxen, Lewis built a spur in March 1889 to Ruggles, where Lewis had purchased the J.J. Shonk lumber mill.

The Harvey's Lake railroad began in Luzerne on the west side of the Susquehanna River. Prior to 1891 there was no direct line from Wilkes-Barre to the lake. A separate Lehigh Valley Railroad train had to be taken on the east side of the river in Wilkes-Barre at 10:00 a.m., north to Pittston Junction. There, a transfer was made to a Lackawanna and Bloomsburg train which crossed from the east to the west side of the river. The train then returned down river to Bennett's Crossing at Luzerne before it connected with the Harvey's Lake railroad. As a better alternative, Wilkes-Barre passengers to the lake initially could take a trolley from Public Square and cross the river to Kingston and then take a short ride on the Lackawanna and Bloomsburg railroad to connect to the Harvey's Lake railroad. In either case, the connections were very cumbersome and

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time-consuming. To return on the railroad from the lake, passengers had to leave the Alderson station at 3:00 p.m. This awkward schedule left only a few hours for tourists to enjoy the lake, and service on the Harvey's Lake railroad was not profitable. The railroad quickly planned a more economical route and the construction of a large amusement park at the lake to attract additional passenger service.

An eighteen-mile direct line from Wilkes-Barre to Alderson at Harvey's Lake became available in 1891 when the Lehigh Valley Railroad constructed the Port Bowkley bridge across the river above Wilkes-Barre from Plains to Forty-Fort. Until recently, the piers of this railroad bridge could still be seen from the Cross Valley Expressway which crosses the river below the old railroad bridge. The direct line at Port Bowkley, in 1891, coincided with the construction of mills and tanneries at the "boom towns" of Noxen and Stull, and also with the opening of the picnic grounds at the lake by the railroad.

By July 1891 the new Lehigh Valley track at Harvey's Lake was carried an additional mile along the lake shore from Alderson to the picnic grounds where a small Harvey's Lake substation was located. By April 1892 the track was completed to Bowman's Creek at Noxen. Nearly seventeen miles to the west was Ricketts, another lumbering "boom town." Ricketts was connected to Towanda by 43 miles of track operated by the Loysock Railroad and the State line and Sullivan Railroad Company, subsidiary lines of the Lehigh Valley Railroad. Only eight miles of additional railroad between Noxen and Bean Run below Ricketts was acquired to connect Wilkes-Barre with New York State through the North Mountain.

Lewis constructed the missing link in the summer of 1892. By September 1892 there was a direct rail line between Wilkes-Barre, Harvey's Lake, and Towanda. However, the direct line between the Wyoming Valley and Towanda was not in use. There was a dispute between Lewis and the railroad company over the purchase price of Lewis's vital link, and also over the rates the railroad would charge Lewis to use the line to haul timber.

In the meantime, a critical telegraph line needed to manage two-way traffic on a single-track system was not constructed. Negotiations were slow and a hard winter with high snow delayed the telegraph line until later spring. Freighters and the general public in the Wyoming Valley berated the company and Lewis and clamored to have the new railroad opened. By May 1893 the Trexler and Turrell Lumber Company had opened their mill at Ricketts and had cut five million feet of logs which were ready to be hauled out by railroad, and 7,000 tons of bark were piked for shipment to the Noxen tannery. In late June 1893 Lewis and the Lehigh Valley finally reached an accord and the line was ready to open, but not without incident.

On June 24, 1893, a special excursion train ran over the new line from Wilkes-Barre to Towanda. In addition to Lewis, the train carried officials from the Lehigh Valley Railroad

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and Reading Railroad, the latter for a time operating the Lehigh system. Twenty miles beyond Harvey's Lake the excursion collided with a log train operating for the Trexler lumber firm. Lewis Hunsinger, a train hand for Trexler, was caught between falling logs and had leg severed. The lumber train had been warned to switch off to a siding until the special passed, but after waiting a time, the log train reentered the main line and attempted to reach another siding further along the line when the collision occurred. The two locomotives were badly damaged and the train officials were delayed until another engine could be brought to the scene.

Finally, on July 1, 1893, the Lehigh Valley Railroad acquired the complete line which provided direct rail service from the Wyoming Valley through the booming timbering fields of Luzerne, Wyoming, and Sullivan counties, and on to Towanda. The 79-mile railroad was named the Bowman's Creek Branch of the Lehigh Valley Railroad. Closed circuit telegraphs were used by the railroad and its train dispatchers to manage operations - particularly important on a single-track operation like Bowman's Creek.

By agreement with the railroad, Western Union services were also available on the same telegraph line, tying together the rural villages with each other and with larger cities. Money transfers, too, were available by telegraph. Stations had their own distinctive telegraph call letters: Wilkes-Barre (WD), Dallas (D), Alderson (DR), Noxen (NX), Stull (UX), Ricketts (RI), and Lopez (OZ). Towanda had two wire service designations: DP for freight, and DA for the passenger office.

Harvey's Lake Ice Industry

An interesting sidelight to the history of the Albert Lewis Lumber and Manufacturing Company and the Bowman's Creek Railroad is why the Lewis company did not develop a major ice-cutting industry on the 658-acre Harvey's Lake, where Lewis had manufacturing facilities and access to a railroad. In fact, Albert Lewis did attempt ice-cutting at the lake, but he was thwarted by a peculiar land issue involving the bottom of Harvey's Lake.

In the fall of 1870, Hendrick B. Wright, a Wilkes-Barre lawyer, mine owner, and local congressman, who was attracted to the lake and later built a home there, and Charles T. Barnum, a local judge who also lived at the lake, applied to the state for ownership rights to the land underneath Harvey's Lake, which had not been included in any previous state grants. Land grants to areas under rivers and lakes in the state were not uncommon, particularly to support mining rights. The lake bottom was divided into two large parcels, and on October 13, 1870, the state granted Wright a warrant for 285 acres and Barnum a warrant for 329 acres. The lake was surveyed on November 3, and the state patents were issued to Wright and Barnum on February 20, 1871.

Although access to Harvey's Lake was limited by a three or four-hour stagecoach ride,

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public interest and access to the lake for fishing and resort purposes was important to Wyoming Valley residents. The lake patents drew the anger of local residents who protested to the legislature. The legislature responded with a law declaring Harvey's Lake and Harvey's Creek to be navigable waters.

The effect of the state law was not to challenge Wright and Barnum's ownership of the land under the lake, but to assure access to the lake waters by adjoining property owners. In fairness to Wright and Barnum, they never intended to exclude public use of the lake. Wright and Barnum planned to engage in ice-cutting on the lake in the winter, and the lake patents arguable provided a legal basis to support the business. Wright and Barnum exchanged half interests in each other's lake patents, and they built four large ice houses in the Alderson corner for their ice business. Wright and Barnum did exercise a proprietary interest in Harvey's Lake by stocking it with 300 black bass, a new game fish, in late August 1871.

Wright and Barnum, however, did not enter the ice-cutting business themselves in any serious way, and the patents for the most part were not exercised. Wright died in 1881, and Barnum in 1887, and the patents fell to their estates and heirs to manage. In January 1888, the heirs of H.B. Wright and C.T. Barnum granted George R. Wright and Benjamin F. Barnum, sons of the original patent owners, a license to cut ice on the lake. The license, however, was then leased to Albert Lewis who planned to cut at least 6,000 tons of ice annually at the lake, with a royalty to the heirs of Wright and Barnum.

From 1888 to 1893, the Albert Lewis Lumbering and Manufacturing Company cut ice at Harvey's Lake. The ice houses were in Alderson on the corner near the Alderson church. In March 1889, for example, the Lewis company had fifty men at the lake working in the ice industry there. Ten to twenty railroad cars were loaded daily, each with twenty to thirty tons of ice. Older Wright and Barnum ice houses were filled, and two new houses, 40 by 80 feet, were also being filled while still under construction, each holding 15,000 tons of ice blocks.

The Lewis ice operations at Harvey's Lake only lasted a few years. The Wright and Barnum heirs were not pleased with their business arrangement with Lewis. Their royalty from the Lewis ice contract in 1893 was only \$60.75, and they had an undisclosed dispute over his business methods, which probably shaved their royalties to a meaningless venture. In November 1893, the license with Lewis was cancelled. Lewis quickly developed a new ice industry at Bean Run (Mountain Springs) and was expanding his ice business at Bear Creek.

The Wright and Barnum heirs leased the ice rights to Theodore Renshaw of Plymouth in the 1894 and 1895 seasons. Afterwards the heirs unsuccessfully sought to sell the lake patents. They abandoned the ice-cutting business, and seemingly, too, a claim to the patents, and in February 1900 the uninsured Barnum and Wright ice houses were

destroyed by fire. For the next 45 years, small individual firms cut ice on the lake, ignoring the lake patents.

The Village of Alderson

Alderson was an extremely active village on the north corner of Harvey's Lake from 1887 to 1912. The Lewis sawmill in Alderson was operating by April 1888. The railroad depot served countless tons of freight in addition to passenger traffic. Steamboats provided passenger service from the Alderson station to hotels and boarding houses, which were dotted along the lake. Particularly well-known were the Rhodes Hotel (1855-1908), Lake Grove House (1881-1897), and its successor, the magnificent Hotel Oneonta (1898-1919), all located at the Sunset section of the lake. Alderson had its own school and church on lots contributed by the Albert Lewis Lumber Company. The Lehigh Valley picnic grounds, later known as Hanson's Amusement Park, were a mile down the lake from Alderson and the railroad passed through the park grounds.

W.H. Rauch was the foreman at the Alderson sawmill. Sawmills were initially equipped with huge circular saws, about six feet in diameter, to cut timber. In 1889, the bandsaw was generally introduced in American sawmills. A bandsaw was an endless band of steel with cutting teeth on one or both sides. The bandsaw was draped over a lower and upper wheel. A bandsaw forty-feet long by nearly a foot wide was installed in the Alderson mill in the early 1890s to replace a circular saw. A bandsaw cutting path was only one-eighth of an inch wide compared to the three-eighths of an inch path of a circular saw, saving one inch of board for every four cuts of a bandsaw. At Alderson, Joseph Trutchler was the chief sawyer responsible for the 400 razor-sharp teeth of the bandsaw. Broken teeth were quickly cut out by Trutchler, who, aided by red-hot tongs, clamps, and silver solder, would add new teeth to the bandsaw. At any one time, thousands of logs filled the boom on the lake by the Alderson mill.

There was enough lumbering in the Harvey's Lake and Bowman's Creek region to support both the Stull and Alderson sawmills until the Stull mill burned in 1906. The Alderson mill continued at least until 1912 when the last tract near the lake was cut. Lewis and Stull, the partnership which ran the mills, was dissolved in late 1912. Thereafter, the Stull interests continued at Harvey's Lake and Bowman's Creek in the farming, ice, and land business. The Alderson sawmill was dismantled about 1918.

The Railroad's Decline

Twenty years after the Bowman's Creek Branch opened to traffic, a number of factors were quickly ending the profitability of the railroad. A trolley line to the Sunset section of Harvey's Lake (1898-1931) drew away passenger service from Alderson, except for train excursions to the lake's amusement park. After World War, young people

increasingly moved from the farms to cities and were drawn away from country living. The automobile age also had arrived; cars were quicker and more convenient than scheduled trains. Not only passenger service, but also freight service declined. The old State Line and Sullivan Railroad was dependent on haulage from the semi-anthracite coal industry in Bernice, which increasingly lost its market. By 1913, the major lumbers business was over at Ricketts, Stull, and Alderson. The Lopez mills, too, were closed between 1905 and 1907. Any further lumbering was limited to small lots, particularly for mine props, which were hauled by truck. The ice industry at Mountain Springs and the tannery at Noxen continued, but mechanical refrigeration, artificial ice, and leather substitutes were making severe in-roads into these industries.

By the mid-1920s, there was little passenger traffic on the Bowman's Creek Branch. The twice daily passenger trains were reduced to one train each way daily on December 19, 1928. A passenger train from Wilkes-Barre to Towanda left Wyoming Valley at about 8:00 a.m. A similar train from Towanda to Wilkes-Barre left at 10:00 a.m. During the middle of the day, a local freight train running west to Bernice would place cars at sidings along the route and unload freight. The return freight train picked up ice cars in Mountain Springs, and local freight arrived in Wilkes-Barre about 8:00 p.m. Yet, the Bowman's Creek line was the only substantial transportation available to handle passenger and freight service for tiny villages along the creek between Noxen and Ricketts Glen. Roads were few and crude. Separate passenger and freight trains to Alderson were discontinued on April 2, 1934, and the last advertised passenger service, even to the resort to Harvey's Lake, appeared in March 1936. In 1938-1939, the tracks between Lopez and Mountain Springs were removed.

For another dozen years, the Lehigh Valley Railroad sought to close Bowman's Creek and its other marginal railroad lines, but community pressure often kept smaller lines open. Finally, however, in 1948, the Interstate Commerce Commission permitted the Lehigh Valley Railroad to close traffic above Noxen on the Bowman's Creek Branch. During the next fifteen years, after the ice industry closed at Mountain Springs, the Bowman's Creek Branch limped along, with one freight train daily in its last years. In fact, the entire Lehigh Valley Railroad system was in severe trouble.

In July 1963, the Interstate Commerce Commission authorized the Lehigh Valley Railroad to abandon the Bowman's Creek Branch line between Dallas and Noxen. The railroad had been in severe financial difficulty for years, and passenger service along the entire Lehigh Valley Railroad system had ended as a practical matter in 1961. Mechanical refrigeration had ended the ice-cutting industry after World War II and eliminated the hauling of ice cars by the railroad, although the railroad had continued to haul hides to the Noxen tannery. The tannery, however, had peaked in 1941 when it employed 217 persons. When the tanner closed in 1961, it ended the last remaining freight service of any consequence along the Bowman's Creek Branch, and the last freight service on the Back Mountain line typically carried only a single boxcar. The

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Alderson station had already been removed in May 1958. Governmental approval to close the railroad line between Luzerne and Dallas was granted to the Lehigh Valley Railroad in September 1963. On Sunday, December 22, 1963, at 12:01 a.m., the Lehigh Valley Railroad formally abandoned the Bowman's Creek Branch from Luzerne to Dallas.

In 1970 the Lehigh Valley Railroad sought reorganization of its collapsing financial and operations structure under federal bankruptcy law. On April 1, 1976, the federal government's sponsored Consolidation Rail Corporation (Conrail) absorbed the Lehigh Valley Railroad.

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