

Stewart Tunnel now 100 years old

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BELLEVILLE, WI.-" I see the light," may well have been the shout that went up as crews working on the Stewart Tunnel in the Town of Exeter met each other near the middle of the 1,260-foot long train tunnel which would eventually connect Madison with Freeport and Chicago, IL.

At 6:50 a.m. December 1, 1887, the two competing crews finally saw daylight after working for nearly one year to complete a tunnel for the Chicago, Madison and Northern Railroad.

The Stewart Tunnel, which is named for James Stewart of Lancashire, Pa., was the most ambitious undertaking of the entire 173.93-mile route of the CM&N Railroad.

Work at the tunnel site was plagued with troubles from the beginning of construction. Stewart, who was given the contract to build the railroad line from Monroe to Madison, was killed when he was thrown from a buggy while driving over the proposed rail route.

In what may have been the first workers strike in Green County, laborers went on strike in September 1887 for wages higher than the \$1.50 a day they were being paid.

When CM&N management didn't give in to the workers demands, many left "Tunnel City." New workers were hired at \$1.75 a day, a 50-cent increase over what the first workers received when tunnel building began December 13, 1886.

At the beginning, workers had only hand-operated drills to bore the 14-by-22-foot opening through the solid blue limestone hillside. Initial plans called for the use of steam-powered drills to bore the holes to hold the blasting powder, but this was changed to a compressed air drilling operation. A 48-ton steam shovel, built by the Vulcan Iron Works of Toledo, Ohio, to be used on the north face of the tunnel was hauled in piece-by-piece because of its weight. A smaller 20-ton shovel was used at the south portal.

A small locomotive named "Stella," and six cars each holding two cubic yards were used to pull the limestone out of the tunnel and down to Lynn Valley to make the long fill which consumed 155,000 cubic yards of rock.

On November 15, 1887, a stream of water erupted from the roof of the tunnel, halting work for two days until the stream stopped flowing. Eventually that area of

the tunnel roof had to be shored up with timbers and bricked over to prevent further cave-ins.

An undated clipping from the Belleville Recorder, indicates that an explosion in the dynamite shed occurred at the tunnel site during construction. The CM&N railroad provided bunkhouses in the nearby woods for the workers so that the railroad wouldn't have to transport the workers so far. With the long work shifts the railroad was able to rent each bed twice in each 24-hour period. Due to the extreme drought during the summer of 1887, many area farmers were forced to go to work at the tunnel in order to supplement their income. It has been said that the wages earned by area farmers enabled the farmers to hang on until better times returned.

During the first week of November 1887, 70 feet of progress was made on the north end of the tunnel which the railroad claimed at the time exceeded any previous record for tunnel driving either in the U.S. or any other country. The weather during the winter of 1887-1888 was also a constant problem. The north end of the tunnel had to be boarded up to make the tunnel warmer. On January 21, 1888 the temperatures reached lows of 36-54 degrees below zero, causing oak trees to explode from the intense cold. Between Monticello and Monroe snowdrifts up to 15 feet deep blocked the tracks for several weeks. When the two crews of tunnel builders met near the center of the tunnel, which is built with a two-degree curve, they missed each other by half an inch on one side of the tunnel and by less than an inch on the other side. Finally on January 26, 1888, the final rail was spiked into place on the roadbed.

The first train to complete the run from Freeport to Madison steamed through the tunnel at 10 miles per hour on Wednesday Feb. 1, 1888. The following day a train pulling the private car of E.T. Jeffrey, general supervisor of the Illinois Central Railroad, made the same run. (The year the tunnel was completed the Illinois Central purchased the Chicago Madison & Northern Railroad). A cave-in on April 21, 1888, caused several carloads of rocks to fall from the center section of the tunnel. Another cave-in damaged the engine and derailed one car and nearly injured the engineer and fireman.

It was not until August 1888 that regular train service was started on the newly completed CM & N Railroad.

Mrs. Matis Chrisler Ross was thought to one of be the first, if not the first passenger to regularly ride the train.

Ross, who lived near the tunnel was teaching school at Morehead School north of Belleville and would ride the three miles each day with no fare charged. The train would not come to a complete stop at Morehead School but would slow down and Mrs. Ross would get off with the help of the brakeman. This went on

for about a week until someone reported this to railroad officials who then discontinued the Morehead School slowdown.

The second crossing north of the tunnel is still known as Ross Crossing and there was a small depot near the crossing. At the first crossing south of the tunnel was a station known as Exeter Station, which was an old IC boxcar that was pulled off the rails and placed near the tracks. One area resident recalls that the station has a stove in it and a bench. "If you wanted heat you built a fire."

The trains, which used to pass several times a day through the Stewart Tunnel, have gone nearly extinct except for occasional attempts by various short line operators to restore train service to the area.

An engineer on one of the short lines, which operated through the Stewart Tunnel, told the story about his conductor. "He was a good conductor and he was a good Catholic. Each time when we stopped before entering the tunnel he would cross himself. And when we made it through he would give thanks to God for allowing him to make it through safely."

The tunnel before its completion was a popular spot for sightseers on weekends. Now the tunnel wall artists tell us in large blaze orange letters "Pabst is Best," "Ronette loves Darren Forever," and "Brookfield East is the greatest."

***Writers note—As with so much railroad lore there is always the romance of the rails but as it was with every major railroad project there was a human toll taken. The Stewart Tunnel was no different. Several workers died on the project including an unknown Italian worker buried at St. James Cemetery near Belleville. He was buried as Italian Worker #206. And somewhere a mother was waiting the rest of her life for word from her son who had gone to his grave unknown. A Negro worker also died while working on the Stewart Tunnel. It was thought at first that he and another Negro worker had gotten into a weekend fight. It was learned that he died of a lung infection. The neighboring Wallace School located in Irish Hollow allowed the Negro workers to use the school on Sunday's for their church services.

Early April 1982-The boys are in bed and sound asleep. I walk the former Milwaukee Road right-of-way near New Glarus. It's a still night. Nothing is stirring except a great horned owl. I pause on the bridge as my grandfather and I did 30 years earlier. The smell of creosote still permeates the evening air. I walk south half-a-mile. In the distance something breaks the silence. Listening closer I hear the sound again. It's a train pulling the grade to the south portal of the Stewart Tunnel. It all comes back in slow motion. Walking this same right-of-way with my grandfather. He telling me that when you hear the trains on the grade at Stewart Tunnel we will have rain or snow within 24 hours.

I stopped and listened to the lonesome train whistle again. It was than that I

realized that this was the sound of a species soon to be extirpated from this part of Wisconsin. I suspected that it must have been much the same feeling as a farmer in Lincoln County must have felt that February night in 1957, as he returned to the house from the barn, pausing for a minute to take in the frigid beauty of the full moon light night and hearing for the last time the mournful howl of the last timber wolf in Wisconsin.

The sound of a train whistle in the night is supposed to be a comforting sound. This was the sound of an impending death. A death we could not prevent. We are a poorer people for not being able to share with our grandchildren the sound of the train whistle in the night...

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