

# MICHIGAN MEMORIES OF THE NYC

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It was inevitable that the New York Central should occupy a large portion of my youthful memories of watching and photographing trains. My grandfather, Don M. Leonard, was employed by the Boston & Albany, the New York Central's lessee, during the first decade of the Twentieth Century. He was secretary to Edgar Van Etten, vice-president of the New York Central and general manager of the Boston & Albany from 1903-07, with an office in Boston's South Station. In those days men were "secretaries," though today we might call my grandfather an "administrative assistant."

As general manager, Mr. Van Etten was the B&A's boss, and when he was out of the office my grandfather was, in effect, in charge of the railroad. Therefore my father, Richard D. Leonard, was raised in Newtonville, Massachusetts with a close acquaintance with this part of the New York Central System. If my memory serves me correctly, he once told of having been taken for a ride in an inspection engine, a 4-4-0 with a passenger carbody built over the boiler. With Mr. Van Etten's departure, my grandfather left the Boston &

Albany; they were, apparently, personal friends, and our family is still in possession of a framed painting that Mr. Van Etten, an amateur artist, presented to my grandparents.

The Central remained my father's favorite railroad into the Penn Central era – though he was never very enthusiastic about the Pennsylvania. My younger brother, David, and I inherited the railroad interest from him. Whereas other dads took their sons on camping trips or to baseball games, our dad took us trackside to watch trains, or let us watch him tinker with his HO scale layout which included an NYC Hudson. These were our "bonding" activities, as we call them today, and in it the New York Central was bound to take center stage.

My own acquaintance with the Central began when we moved from Vermont to Middleville, Michigan, where my father assumed the pastorate of the Methodist church in 1944. Middleville was on the Grand Rapids Branch, and I had to cross the tracks twice every school day. (Even kindergartners walked to school



With Central's short-lived, script-style oval decorating its nose, DPA-1D 4031 leads DPA-5E 4079 to roll train # 17, *The Wolverine*, westward through Marshall, Michigan on June 6, 1958. Photo by David V. Leonard, the author's brother.

back then.) One day, on my way to school, I glanced up suddenly into the huge face of a hissing 2-8-2, with its prominent Elesco feedwater heater, probably an H-7 or possibly an H-10. It had stopped – the crossing flashers were not going – but the experience was startling! The line still had passenger service between Jackson and Grand Rapids, hauled by Pacifics, but we never rode any of those trains.

While living in Middleville, our family visited Mackinaw City, where a pastor friend had a summer cottage. We happened to be there on V-J Day, August 14, 1945, and heard all the locomotives in the joint New York Central - Pennsylvania roundhouse blowing their whistles in celebration. I watched NYC Consolidations switching the railroad car ferry to the Duluth, South Shore & Atlantic at St. Ignace, across the Straits of Mackinac, using idler flats to keep their weight off the dock apron.

Another vivid memory from our Middleville years is of a visit to the Jackson Shops, arranged through an NYC engineer my father had befriended. There we were surprised to find shop personnel assembling *wooden* pilots, which when painted black could have fooled the casual observer. I have since learned that this was standard Central practice for many older road engines. The event was notable, also, as the occasion of my first ride in a steam locomotive, a brief time in the cab of H-10b 2345, during which I was

invited to turn some kind of crank on the backhead, perhaps the reverse gear – a feat I could not accomplish at age seven. Perhaps that was the time I began to have second thoughts about my early career choice of locomotive engineer!

The same engineer who arranged our shop visit, Harry Cole, was later the victim of a collision with a gasoline tanker truck, and was seriously burned. The truck driver, waiting at a highway crossing, apparently assumed that when a switch engine had cleared the crossing he was free to proceed – not realizing that a diesel-powered passenger train was bearing down on him from the other direction. Upon striking the tanker, which burst into flame, Mr. Cole was able to pull the entire train through the fire before stopping, avoiding injury to the passengers. As a result of his burns, however, he was forced to leave railroad service before he could retire, and was disfigured for life. The accident occurred in November 1951, six miles east Kalamazoo; the train was the westbound *Michigan*, No. 355.

In the summer of 1946 we moved to Adrian, Michigan, where my father was to become a professor at Adrian College. Our temporary living quarters was the college's "country campus," a former sanitarium south of the city on the site of the present airport. From that vantage point we had an across-the-fields view of traffic on the Old Road of the former Lake

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While living in Adrian, Michigan, Richard's father, Richard D. Leonard, photographed the Toledo Union Terminal depot complex under construction well before its grand opening in 1950. The station is still in use by Amtrak trains calling at Toledo.

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Shore & Michigan Southern. The line still had two passenger trains in each direction, which my brother and I looked for daily. We had pet names for these trains; the longer one, always pulled by a J-1 Hudson, we called, for reasons unknown, “the Witsie”; the other, always with a Pacific and three cars, we called (obviously) “the Three-Carred Train.”

In another Adrian memory, Dad drove us down to Delta, Ohio, on the NYC main line (originally the Air Line of the LS&MS), where we parked by the station and watched the parade of speedy east-west limiteds on this long stretch of tangent track, 68.5 miles west of Toledo without a curve. There is nothing in my memory to equal the sight and sound of onrushing NYC Hudsons and Mohawks – whistles wailing, rods flailing, smoke trailing low over the cars. A visit to Lenawee Junction, where the Old Road diverged for Blissfield and Toledo, yielded a view of a G-43 2-8-0 on the Monroe Branch; this one-train-a-day operation based at Adrian had the Consolidation running backwards on alternate days, probably Tuesday-Thursday-Saturday.

One evening there was a wreck on the Air Line, and when my father learned about it he drove us to the Adrian station where we watched the *New England States* and other varnish detouring over the Old Road. I know this occurred in late summer, because while watching the trains I also spotted a meteor, part of the annual Perseid shower. The Wabash and the Detroit, Toledo & Ironton also served Adrian, af-

fording occasional views of the Wabash’s 4-6-4’s on passenger, 4-8-4’s and 4-8-2’s on freight, and DT&I Consolidations on the Tecumseh Branch local that I might find switching lineside industries while I was walking home from junior high school. Once I dared to mount the ladder of a boxcar standing on the track near the sidewalk while the locomotive was switching a nearby siding, but I quickly ran off when a crewman shouted at me!

While we were living in Adrian, the New York Central, along with other railroads, built the new Toledo Union Terminal, still the Amtrak stop there. My father took us to the grand opening event, which included an excursion around the Toledo Terminal Railroad hauled by double-headed NYC Pacifics. At some point before the opening, my Dad took a photo of the depot complex under construction.

Sadly, there are no train photographs to document my early years of railfanning. My father, though a regular train-watcher, had endured the Great Depression on a minister’s meager salary and rarely spent money on luxuries like film or developing. A rare exception had occurred in the late 1930s, shortly after I was born, when he photographed two of the new Drefuss-streamlined J-3a Hudsons at Chicago’s Englewood Station, probably heading the *20th Century Limited*. For many years after I inherited my father’s small collection of railroad photos I did not realize he had taken these pictures, but when I showed one of them to a late uncle, he verified that he was the young man in the foreground intently examining the locomotive’s pilot – proving that my father was the photographer.



The author’s father visited Chicago’s Englewood Station late in the 1930s and photographed two of Central’s streamlined J-3a Hudsons, 5446 and 5450, both possibly leading eastward sections of the *20th Century Limited*. Three individuals, including Richard’s uncle near the pilot, appear in the photo of the 5450; Richard digitally removed them to create this splendid image of an as-built J-3a in service. Part of the original image, showing Richard’s uncle, appears in the inset.

In 1951 a drop in college enrollment caused by the Korean War draft required Dad to return to the Methodist pastorate. A move to Bellevue, northeast of Battle Creek, put us within a few blocks of the mostly steam-powered main line of the Grand Trunk Western. Easy access to trackside finally awakened in my teen consciousness the possibility of rail photography, using the Kodak folding cartridge camera my father had bought used in Vermont for \$3.00 during the 1930s. Somehow I managed to acquire an occasional roll of film. The ancient apparatus had a leak in the bellows, and a few of my best shots were ruined by streaks of light. But it was all I had to work with, and the large-size 116 negatives still yield

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L-2d 2967 was less than two years away from retirement when photographed by the author at the Lansing, Michigan roundhouse in August of 1953. Built by Alco-Schenectady in November 1929, the beefy 4-8-2 will be retired in March 1955.



NYC 5367 pauses at Gaylord, Michigan in August 1953 with train 336, the Sunday-only southbound *Timberliner*. This class J-1d was built for the Michigan Central as MCRR 8222 in December 1929 and was renumbered in 1936. This may be one of the last photographs of the 5367 in service, as she will be retired in October. Photo by Richard C. Leonard.

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good digital copies today despite the shutter speed limitation of 1/60th of a second.

One day while I was watching the GTW local freight switching at Bellevue, the engineer invited me into the cab of the 5030, a GTW class J-3-a Pacific substituting for the usual Consolidation. That was my second ride in a steam locomotive cab. Such memories are treasured because they are nonexistent in today's safety and litigation-conscious environment. My photo of the 5030 is, I believe, the earliest of my railroad photos. She had been involved in the famous Grand Trunk "Knights Templar Special" wreck of 1923; the storied engine survives today, displayed at R. A. Greene Park in Jackson, Michigan.

Although my first rail photos are from the Grand Trunk Western in 1951, I later managed to get some New York Central images. My parents had acquired a summer cabin on Lake Louise, between Boyne Falls and Vanderbilt in the northern Lower Peninsula, so vacation time periodically brought us back to the Mackinac region. A few times Dad drove us to nearby Wolverine to watch the northbound *Timberliner*, train # 339, meet the southbound *Northerner*, train # 338, at 10:40 p.m. Both were steam-powered, one by a Pacific and the other by a Hudson. We might occasionally encounter NYC power while traveling to northern Michigan in daylight; in August 1953 I photographed L-2d Mohawk 2967 and U-2g 0-8-0 7538 at the Lansing roundhouse, and J-1d 5367 on the southbound *Timberliner* at Gaylord. Dieselization had overtaken the lines east of Buffalo, but, by

and large, steam still ruled in Michigan.

In 1953 we moved to Detroit, where Dad took a teaching position at the Detroit Institute of Technology, a YMCA school that wanted to put the "C" back into the curriculum. The move would place me back into New York Central territory. (In Bellevue, we had been not far from the former Michigan Central through Marshall and Battle Creek, but we rarely went there.) In September we made an exploratory trip to the terminal facilities downtown, and that may be the occasion when I photographed a set of R-2 C+C boxcab units, 304-305, while standing on an overpass near the Michigan Central Station. The R-2's, having come from the Electric Division in the east, had supplanted R-1 electrics in Detroit River Tunnel service. The tunnel electrification was discontinued shortly after I took the photo.

Another memorable event occurred in October 1953 when my maternal grandmother died. From Detroit we traveled to Butler, Indiana for her funeral and interment. The coffin was shipped by rail to Butler, on the Central's main line. The Chicago-Toledo local, train # 232, came into town behind a Niagara. I had no recollection of having encountered a Niagara before. In my excitement I burst out, "Now I've seen one!" My mother's relatives, I am sure, did not regard my outburst as particularly appropriate to the solemnity of the occasion. The following summer I was able to snap Niagara 6003 at Chicago's Englewood Yard.

A visit to the terminal in Detroit in March 1954 yielded photos of several steam locomotives in the dead line, including U-3c 0-8-0 7718 and J-1d Hudson



Visiting the engine terminal in Detroit in March of 1954, Richard photographed H-5j Mikado 1306 resting between transfer or local freight duties. This was one of twenty H-5's orphaned off the Boston & Albany following total dieselization of the New England carrier in 1948. She was built as B&A 1202 by Alco-Schenectady in December 1913, renumbered to NYC 1306 in April 1951, and will be retired in March 1955.

5314, but also H-5j Mikado 1306 (former B&A 1202) resting between transfer or local freight duties. By this time I was resigned to the thought that I would have to photograph diesels, and captured an idling EMD F7 A-B-A consist, 1782-2436-1882. However, the notable non-steam find was a string of R-1 B+B third-rail electrics awaiting disposition after being withdrawn from Detroit River Tunnel service.

Occasional visits to Chicago, where my mother's mother and brother lived, had provided the opportunity to watch trains at Englewood Union Station, not only those of the New York Central but also of Rock Island long-distance and commuter trains and those of the Pennsylvania, which paralleled the NYC east of Englewood. I was too young to photograph on our earlier visits. On one occasion, during the month of September after school had started in Chicago, my brother and I were on the platform alone because our parents had left us there while they went elsewhere – something, again, that would not be happening today! A woman approached us and asked if we knew what time it was. Hastily, I explained that we were from Michigan and school had not started there yet. Of course, that was not her concern at all! On a later 1954 visit I captured photos of two E8 units, 4059 and 4076, on the point of eastbound trains in the “Great

Steel Fleet.” My vantage point, as I later realized, was the same as that of my father in the late 1930s, photographing the bullet-nosed *Century* Hudsons.

The summer of 1954 brought about our departure from Michigan, when my father assumed a professorship at Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington. That move put us into Peoria & Eastern territory, as well as that of the Illinois Central and the Gulf, Mobile & Ohio's former “Alton Route,” but that's another story.<sup>1</sup> Our encounters with the far-flung Central were not over, however. An August 1955 trip to New England permitted me to photograph NYC Alco RS and FA-B units and the rare Baldwin DR 4-4-1500 “Baby Face” model at Pittsfield, Massachusetts. We returned home through Canada, providing an opportunity for several good Canadian Pacific steam photos, and passed again through northern Michigan where I caught L-4b Mohawk 3137 resting outside the Mackinaw City roundhouse. Bumped by diesels from its main line dual-service duties, it was working out its last days on this remote extension of the NYC system.

Thus my Michigan New York Central saga ended almost where it began, at the tip of the Lower Peninsula on a line that would not even be included in Conrail.

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A lightning-striped A-B-A consist of EMD F7's, NYC 1782-2436-1882, represents things to come at Detroit in March 1954. Things to come are shaping up in New York City at this time also, as the proxy fight for control of the New York Central is in high gear. On June 14, President William White will announce Robert R. Young's victory, Alfred J. Perlman will assume the presidency, and the Central will cease to be a Vanderbilt interest. Photo by Richard C. Leonard.

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Today there are no rails to Mackinaw City, nor to some other places where I have watched and photographed trains through the years. But I have the memories.

All my New York Central photos, with commentary, can be found in my Steam Locomotive Archive, [www.railarchive.net/rlsteam](http://www.railarchive.net/rlsteam), or my New York Central Collection, [www.railarchive.net/nyccollection](http://www.railarchive.net/nyccollection), plus a few placed elsewhere in my Rail Archive web site. That site includes all my photos from those early days of

railfanning in Michigan, Illinois, or elsewhere, plus many I have taken since then or which others have provided to me.

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<sup>1</sup> For the record, when my Dad died in 1976 he was buried in Bloomington's Evergreen Cemetery, within sight of the P&E right of way – a New York Central System trackside fan to his dying day. Additionally, he was founding president of the Central Illinois Railroad Club, and one of three who signed the incorporation papers for what eventually became the Monticello Railway Museum.



Also in March of 1954 Richard photographed a string of R-1 B+B electric motors awaiting disposition after being withdrawn from tunnel service in Detroit.



Passing through northern Michigan after a trip to New England in August 1955, Richard photographed L-4b Mohawk 3137 outside the Mackinaw City roundhouse. A Lima product of December 1943, this "war baby" will be retired in March of 1956 after only thirteen years of service.