

again to capture Gordonsville; it was a major junction that supplied Robert E. Lee with men and, most importantly, materiel.

After the war, rail continued to play an important role in the local economy, until 1880, when the Washington City, Virginia Midland and Great Southern Railway secured a right of way that bypassed Gordonsville. Now those wagons from the valley didn't have to travel quite so far to unload their bounty. They could meet the train where Routes 33 and 231 intersected this new rail line...Barboursville and Somerset. Both those communities boomed. In fact a whole town with streets and cross streets was laid out, on paper anyway, where Bill Roberts hosts the annual pasture party today. Poor Gordonsville was cut out of the loop, but Orange, which was now on both rail lines, started to see its fortunes improve dramatically.

That marks the beginning of the Norfolk Southern system, a system that today hauls freight over some 20,000 miles of track in the eastern half of the United States. But there were other railroads in Orange County: the Rapidan Railroad and the Potomac, Fredericksburg and Piedmont. In the 1920's, the former hauled timber from Madison County, across the Rapidan near where the Orange water treatment plant is today, down Spicer's Mill to a pond in front of the West Virginia Timber Company where American Woodmark stands presently.

The PF&P, nicknamed Poor Folks and Preachers came to Orange from Fredericksburg in 1877. You can still see the rail bed running roughly parallel to Routes 20 and 621. In the words of Orange County Historian, Frank Walker the railroad was "snakebit," from the get go. It made its final forlorn run on New Years Day, 1938 with its lone laughable engine/car named appropriately, the Doodlebug.

Rail travel through Orange County has had its share of disasters. We all know about the Wreck at the Fat Nancy Trestle, July 12, 1888, where, in the wee hours, the train inched across the rickety trestle, which collapsed, injuring 26 and killing nine. The engineer had to walk into town to telegraph the news as the injured screamed for help in the inky darkness.

But what about the head-shaking ironies of that wreck? On board was civil engineer, Cornelius Cox, killed by the trestle he'd been hired to replace. Gettysburg veteran and amputee, L.E. Cortez, who had stayed late at that battlefield's reunion to fleece the unsuspecting in poker



Local train aficionado, Taff Lawton took this photograph of two classic locomotives at the Pennsylvania Railroad Technical and Historic Society. "They brought in smoke bombs and steam generators to make them look they were hot," he says of the photo op that drew some 35 photographers.



Another self-professed "train nut," Orange artist Todd Brown recently completed this painting of a Buckingham Branch train riding through Orange.

games, was found dead with a boot full of cash. Or, how about the fact that although nine people were killed, ten bodies were found, the tenth being an already dead infant, headed home for burial. Maybe fate wanted to make sure. Or consider that Lee's corps commander, General James P. Longstreet, who had a penchant for arriving late at battles, also arrived late to this disaster. He was in the last car, the only one that didn't plunge into the abyss.

Painting by Todd Brown

Other significant wrecks include a collision at Hatcher's Cut near the Montebello Road bridge between Orange and Rapidan, where a switch may have malfunctioned. The October 17, 1917 wreck, involving three trains in the same neighborhood at the same time, claimed the life of an engineer and his fireman.

And then, many people alive today remember the February 1, 1965 derailment in the Town of Orange. It was cold and starting to snow. The station manager had just closed down for the evening, when a northbound 140-car Southern freight rumbled through town. It almost made it. But four cars from the caboose, a tie-down broke loose. A load of steel bar joists shifted. The ensuing chain reaction and derailment sent 100 tons of steel crashing into the street, even piercing the just closed train station. Martha Joyner didn't see much of it; she was too busy ducking below the dashboard of her car as she waited at the Main Street crossing. She may not have seen the derailed caboose being dragged past her on its side. Miraculously, no one was killed or injured, but forty trains were backed up north and south while they cleared the line.

Taff Lawton says all traffic on the Norfolk Southern is controlled from a central hub in Florida. Train engineers are in direct contact by radio. He explains that the crossings are triggered by the train's wheels "that is effectively shorting a current that's running down each of the two rails and closing a circuit, activating those signals to drop." That closed circuit also tells the controllers in Florida exactly where that train is.

Signal lights, red yellow and green are triggered the same way. A yellow, for example, tells the engineer "he's got to drop his speed down because there's still a train occupying the next block," says Lawton. "The next block runs

from here to Barboursville." South of the Town of Orange, "once they split here, it's single track." So, it's interesting to note that the place where it goes to double track is that switch right there between the May Fray and Main Street crossings. And some guy in Florida is activating that switch so that trains may pass safely through our fair town, blowing two longs, a short, and a long.



Photos by Phil Audibert

Above, Amtrak's Cardinal sprints across the Rapidan River as it heads to Charlottesville before turning west to its ultimate destination, Chicago. Passenger rail is becoming more popular as highway driving and flying become more and more inconvenient. Below, this switch between the Main Street and May Fray crossings in Orange can shift trains from one parallel track to another. It is controlled from a hub in Florida.

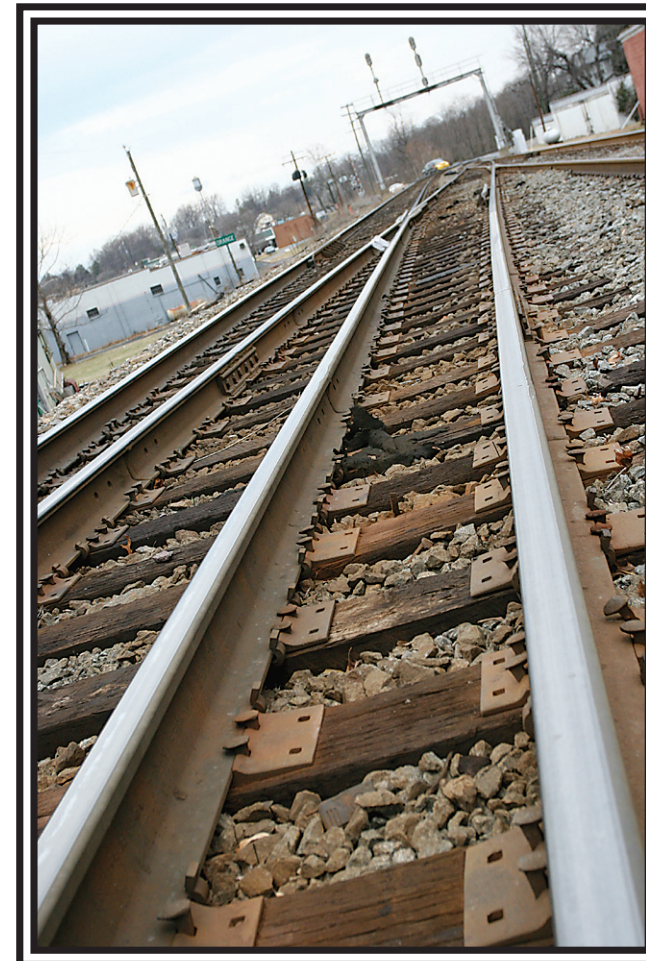
Two longs, a short and a long

Whoooooo! Whoooooo! Who-Whoooooo! "Two longs a short and a long," Taff Lawton explains the typical train whistle pattern at every crossing. For those of us who live in the western half of the county, that pattern has become so much a part of daily life, we don't even notice it. But still, that whistle with its mournful trail off at the end, is a sound that has inspired everything from folk songs to poems. It even sparks emotions, from gleeful joy to abject loneliness to paralyzing fear. The latter, I learned in person one slick snowy morning many years ago when I nearly skidded into a speeding train at Somerset. The ditch saved my life.

Too longs a short and a long is also the law even at 3 o'clock in the morning,

although Taff Lawton adds with a smirk, "these engineers do...get...creative." Take, for example, the guys who run the "hospital" trains, ferrying, not people, but damaged and dilapidated cars to Norfolk Southern's huge maintenance and repair yard in Roanoke. "We've got a couple of sadistic engineers, two of whom I know live locally," continues Lawton. "They run the hospital train through here at 3 o'clock on Sunday morning, and they are sadistic because they'll blow the whistle all the way down the valley from Rapidan. And they'll blow all the way till they get to Montpelier. They figure if they're up, everybody's got to be up."

Taff is a self-described train nut. Something of Orange's own Main Street curmudgeon, he can often be seen



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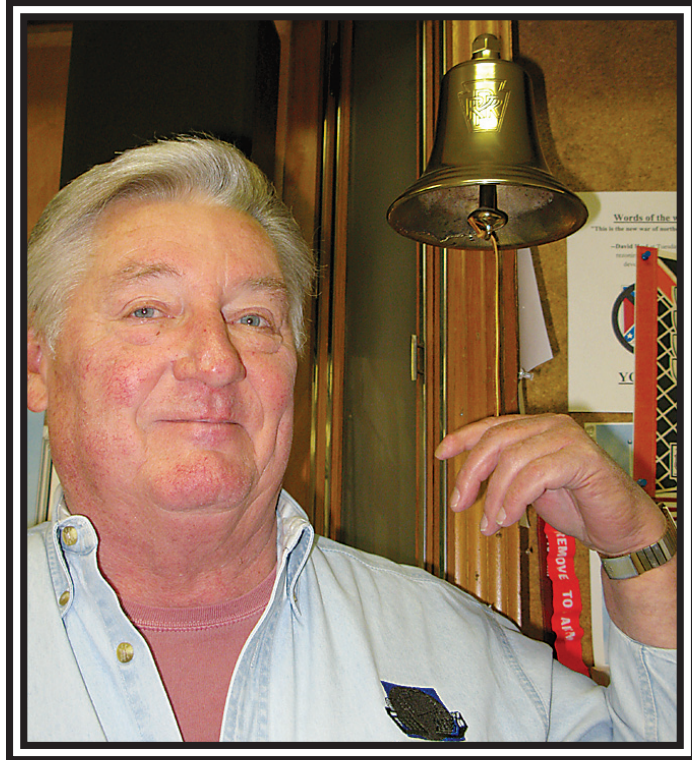


Photo by Phil Audibert

Taff Lawton found this Pennsylvania Railroad dining car bell at an antiques store in Ruckersville. "I wasn't going home without it," he says because this particular bell called passengers to dinner on the Broadway Limited, the railroad's "crack train from New York to Chicago."

standing and smoking on the sidewalk in front of his accounting business. His cluttered office is festooned with train memorabilia and humorous, mostly unprintable signs, like the one that says, paraphrased, "Don't tick me off; I'm running out of places to hide the bodies." He also sometimes packs heat; a semi-automatic rides his belt, "because I can, because it's tax season," he explains enigmatically. The real reason is he loves to target shoot, but on Main Street? Never mind.

Ask this gruff guy about the allure of trains and he softens visibly. "The appeal is it's a train; they're fun," he smiles. Taff grew up around them; a commuter line ran through his back yard when he was a kid. And although he has called Orange home now for 23 years, his heart is still with the Pennsylvania Railroad and the "horseshoe curve" up near Altoona. As soon as he's done with this year's tax season, he'll head up there "to shoot a ton of pictures," of this 180 degree curve in Allegheny coal country. Meanwhile he is recreating this engineering marvel...it was built in 1858...in his basement on his model train set, which he won't reveal yet because "model railroads are never finished, which is what makes them fun. I'm re-jiggering the whole thing. I'm trying to incorporate this horseshoe curve into it. That's the plan."

Taff Lawton also happens to be rather observant. He confirms that if it seems you're hearing two longs, a short and a long more often these days, it's because you are. More trains are running through Orange County ...more than in a long while. Taff currently counts 28 running through the Town of Orange every day now, which is up considerably from the 15 or so five years ago. "They were looking to go to 50, except they didn't expect this economic slowdown," he says of Norfolk Southern's expansion plans. "They've been expanding their

trackage through Virginia because they figured they were going to be running a whole lot more freight volume than they are currently." Fifty trains!

At one point, he continues, "Southern was growing so fast there, that over the summer you would see locomotives pulling long freights through here that were in gray primer with a number stenciled on. They hadn't even managed to get them in the paint shop yet!" he says incredulously. "They had to put them in service."

It makes sense, even though \$4 fuel prices have backed off from this past summer. Just look at a statement made on the tiny Buckingham Branch's web site. There it is in bold face type: "The steel wheel on steel rail is the most energy efficient overland transportation."

Taff Lawton heartily agrees. According to him, a new diesel locomotive puts out about 13,000 horsepower and can pull as many as 60 to 80 loaded cars, adding "most of what you see come through here are at least triple headers. I've seen them pulling as many as five." Still, compare that one engine to a 650-horsepower tractor trailer truck, which can only haul one-fourth to one-half of one rail car's capacity at a time. So, something with 20 times more horsepower can haul 120 times more stuff.

"The numbers are obvious; the math is obvious, to say nothing of the fact that the railroaders are not paying all the taxes and road fees that the truckers are. And they're not beating the highway system to death. It's just a whole lot more efficient transportation system. It always has been."

And not only are the trains running more frequently, they're longer too. "I've seen some trains come through here that are probably longer than I've seen in a long time...150, 200 cars."

Riding the crest of this wave is a local railroad company named The Buckingham Branch (BB) which has taken over the trackage between Orange and Gordonsville that was abandoned by CSX. "Regional railroads are coming roaring back," says Lawton, of this Dillwyn-based railroad, owned by the Robert Bryant family. "He's got so much business he's having trouble getting a hold of rolling stock to satisfy his customers," says Lawton.

The Buckingham Branch has come a long way from its 17.3-mile long run hauling wood products, kyanite and road salt beside Route 15 from Dillwyn to Brems. Now, they are hauling everything from Mexican beer to railroad ties from Richmond to Clifton Forge. And, five days a week, that eight-hour

run goes right through Gordonsville. Taff Lawton says "over the course of 2008, they replaced over 15,000 railroad ties in that trackage. They're bringing it back to first-class condition."

Ask Taff Lawton what's being hauled on these longer freight trains, he'll respond, "You name it, everything and anything: electronics out of the far east, shoes, clothing; just about any product you can think of." Orange and white painted cars are carrying perishables, much of it Florida citrus.

"Most of the trains you see come through Gordonsville are CSX and most of them are coal trains, long coal trains," continues Lawton. "They're bringing coal out of southwest Virginia to the docks at Norfolk and loading it for overseas." And then, of course, there are the "intermodals." These are the transportation combos, the double stacks of containers right off the boat, the already loaded truck trailers on flat cars. "That's the vast majority of the volume that comes through here, which is great, because all those trucks aren't on the highway," points out Lawton.

Apparently, in the Occupied Peoples Republic of Northern Virginia, there's an intermodal yard where "they have a huge crane and they just pick those boxes up and set them on a trailer, set them on a set of wheels effectively, and deliver them fairly locally by highway." But the bulk of that journey was by rail.

There's another kind of freight that's turning to trains...the two-legged variety. As highways become more and more congested and as airports bog down with more and more delays, the traveling public is turning to rail. Currently Amtrak's Crescent, the New York to New Orleans run, passes through Orange daily: northbound at about 8 every morning and southbound at about 8:15 every night...if, and that's a big "if," it is running on time. Another Amtrak train, the Cardinal, blows through here Wednesdays and Fridays around midday westbound and at mid-afternoon eastbound to and from Chicago.

None of these trains stop in Orange, but they do in Culpeper.

That may change as early as 2010. Retired General Assembly Delegate and local lawyer, Butch Davies sits on the Commonwealth Transportation Board. Butch is something of a train nut too, and he and others have been working for a decade or better to improve and expand commuter and passenger rail to the metro DC area. While a delegate, he was a big supporter of Virginia Rail Express which operates two wildly successful commuter lines that basically follow the Interstates from Fredericksburg and Manassas to Washington. "Virginia Rail Express has taken off," confirms Taff Lawton. "They can't get enough rolling stock to



Photo by Phil Audibert

The vast majority of train traffic through Orange is freight. Taff Lawton counts 28 daily trains through town nowadays, up sharply from five years ago.

meet their passenger demands. They're having new cars built in Canada right now; double decks."

Butch Davies is now focused on a project called Trans Dominion Express (TDX) that would provide daily service (northbound in the morning, southbound late afternoon) from Lynchburg to Washington, with stops at Charlottesville, Culpeper, Manassas and Alexandria...but not Orange...not yet. "I am convinced that they ultimately will be persuaded to stop in Orange," says Davies, adding each stop adds about eight minutes to the schedule.

The target audience here is the institution of higher learning; there are several institutions along that route from Liberty University to UVA. It has been shown that students and educators alike prefer train travel because they can work and play on their computers while they ride.

Actually it makes perfect sense for all of us to let someone else do the driving. "People are finally wising up to the fact that Interstate 95 is a nightmare," shudders Taff Lawton. "It's amazing the number of people who live in this area who go to Washington five days a week or Northern Virginia...I don't understand that; two days of that and I'd be in a rubber room!"

Even flying, with its cutbacks, security delays, and weather glitches is becoming unbearable. "I don't know why anybody in their right mind would get on an airplane today," says Lawton, who served 10 years in the Air Force. "I love to fly, but it's the aggravation factor; it's just beyond belief!" he exclaims.

The problem with Amtrak is reliability, and Butch Davies hits the nail on the head when he says "short run commuter trains will not be successful if they are not reliable." Recently

Amtrak's promptness has improved, but horror stories abound. Hot weather is the worst culprit. "It just creates havoc with equipment," explains Butch. And ice and snow don't help any more than they do at the airport, where even worse horror stories abound. Over Christmas, a jam-packed Amtrak was three hours late in our area, but at least it departed and arrived!

Davies adds that if Amtrak doesn't make it through certain sections of track within a specified time window, then it must yield to scheduled freight. Taff Lawton counters "as far as I know, Southern doesn't run any scheduled freight through here. Most of them are what they call 'hot' trains; they're as needed." In fact he's seen them wait for a late Amtrak train at the double track just beyond the May-Fray crossing. "I've seen them set up there for as much as 35, 40 minutes. I've seen them bail out and send one of the guys to McDonald's to get lunch while they're waiting on a northbound."

He better hurry though, because that northbound is coming soon, as well as that southbound that takes the right fork at the Town of Orange and goes through Somerset and Barbourville on its way to Atlanta and New Orleans, or the one that goes straight and forks left at Gordonsville to go to Richmond and Norfolk or forks right on its way to Charlottesville and Bristol.

The rails are busy around here. By the looks of it, you'll be hearing a lot more of two longs, a short, and a long. That lonesome whistle is finally getting some company; it's starting to sound less like a mournful hoot owl and more like a cash drawer "ka-ching."

A brief history of rail in Orange County

Gleaned from the pages of *Remembering, A History of Orange County, Virginia*, by Frank Walker

You can make a valid argument that roads determined our economic, political and social future. Without them there would be no way to transport the riches extracted from our fertile soil, be it tobacco, timber, produce, feed, or livestock. The very location of a road, and that includes the railroad, could make or break a community.

Take Gordonsville, for example. When the Louisa Railroad arrived in 1841, the town was transformed into a bustling economic hub. It was the connection point for the bountiful produce of the Shenandoah Valley which was "trucked" here by horse and wagon over today's Routes 33 and 231, and delivered to rail cars in Gordonsville. By the time of the Civil War, that rail line had already been stretched from Gordonsville, to Charlottesville, through a tunnel in the Blue Ridge Mountains, and over to Staunton. By that time it had changed its name to the Virginia Central which became the Chesapeake and Ohio, which is today's CSX. How's that for the humble beginnings of a railroad empire?

In 1854, the Orange and Alexandria came into the county from Rapidan and continued through Orange to Gordonsville, and connected to the Virginia Central line. In fact at one point there may have been two depots in Gordonsville. This explains why the federals tried over and over

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Photo by Phil Audibert

A restored caboose sits on a siding near the Orange Town shop. It's owned by the Buckingham Branch, a small regional freight railroad that recently took on the abandoned trackage between Orange and Gordonsville.