



Lehigh Gap Bridge Was An Impressive Railroad Project

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February 01, 1993 | by RALPH KREAMER, The Morning Call

The most ambitious railroad construction project of this century in Carbon County was the building of the Lehigh and New England Railroad Co. bridge at Lehigh Gap in 1911-12.

The completion of the lofty 1,076 foot long span marked one of the railroad's most important expansions. It directly linked Panther Valley coal fields with New England markets. More than a year and a half's work was required before the bridge was officially opened.

VALUABLE ALBUM

Many interesting pictorial details of Lehigh Gap, its roads and progress of the bridge can be found in photographs taken by the late F.W. Gilcreast, division engineer. His album was the most valued possession of William Beibleheimer of New Ringgold R.2, a veteran section foreman for the L&NE. It is believed to contain one of the most complete pictorial records of the project.

The old Lehigh Gap dirt road is shown in the right foreground. At the time, the road, the predecessor of Route 29 and now Route 248, ran east of the Central Railroad of New Jersey's main line and crossed under its tracks then ran for some distance between the Lehigh River and the Jersey Central. Today the present route is entirely east of and parallel to the tracks. The present roadway is a far cry from the smooth, blacktopped road now running through Lehigh Gap.

The photograph also shows some fine details of the construction in the background. Four large piers are visible as well as the two completed steel sections of the top span. The "traveler" used to erect the beams is in the middle of the lower framework. In the extreme background, on the mountain top, is the renowned General Marshall mansion, which overlooks Palmerton.

The construction of the bridge interrupted a rather unusual enterprise run by a Slatington barber, Charles Semmel. When the rock formations were blasted away for eastern abutments, considerable damage was done to a fine deposit of stone used to hone razors and other sharpening purposes.

The deposit of this gray stone, owned by Semmel, was said to be of excellent quality. He sold the stone as a venture in addition to his barber trade. When Semmel claimed damages from the railroad, he was awarded a \$10,000 settlement for his loss of a large portion of the stone deposit.

DERAILED TRAIN

After the bridge was completed and the first official cars passed over the span, a rather amusing incident is recalled by veteran L&NE men.

On July 24, 1912, the first train carrying railroad and company officials went over the 106-foot high bridge. This initial run was destined for Tamaqua, but never got that far. A short distance from the bridge, the train jumped the newly laid track.

The chagrined officials were forced to leave the train, and with much less enthusiasm than on the start of their journey, walked to Bowmanstown, and took a Jersey Central passenger train back to the main offices in Bethlehem.

About 10 days later the second train crossed the bridge and made a successful run to Tamaqua. William "Jesse" James of Lansford was conductor for that historic trip.

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