

## Chapter 2: Railroad Days

There was a time when the quiet streets of Pitcairn, Pennsylvania rang with the clanging of bells, the scream of shrieking whistles of mighty steam engines, and in time the haunting call of the low diesel whine.



### 4. The Pitcairn Yards - The Prized Jewel of the Pennsylvania Railroad

Puffs of steam rose up in great clouds from mighty locomotives that chugged and roared like mindless jungle beasts as they went about their daily business in the massive switching yards along the Turtle Creek. It was the age of steam: the Pennsylvania Railroad reigned supreme across the state, and the Pitcairn yard was its prized jewel.

**Don Waite**, a retired railroad engineer, recalled the era when the land between Pitcairn and Wall rocked to the sounds of steam locomotives, screaming whistles and rivet guns, that could have been a chorus of Gatling guns for all the racket they made. Day and night. Twenty-four hours a day. Waite remembered the time:

*We had some people come here to stay from Philadelphia. They said, 'How do you sleep with all that noise?' We said: 'What noise?' It was just like music. You got used to it. Those were days that had no beginning or ending, at least -- not ones defined by the sun -- when the Yard was roaring with activity.*

*When I was a youngster, I'd go down to ride the trains. Every Saturday, I'd go to Pittsburgh. It was exciting. The big steam monsters would be hissing. There was dirt all over the place. The sights and sounds were something you never forgot.*

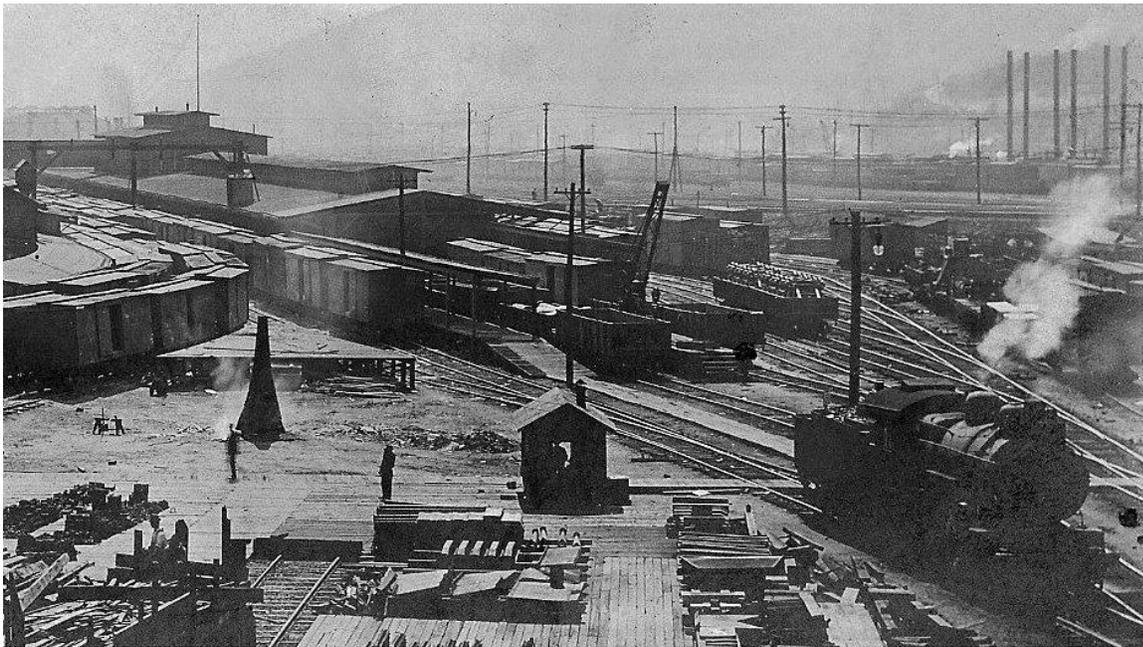
In their heyday, the yards bustled with activity. **Bruce Kish** continues the story:

*From the west, trains pulled into the loading docks -- from Chicago, St. Louis and Cincinnati to drop off grain and agricultural products. Loading crews refilled the cars with manufactured goods and sent the trains back to the Midwest.*

*Gray plumes of smoke rose into the sky. The air reverberated with the hum and whir of machines and the pounding of sledges.*

*Pitcairn handled virtually every aspect of train travel and maintenance. In the vast network of machine shops and factories were roundhouses used for repairing passenger and freight cars. The town was self-sufficient, having its own electrical plant.*

**Paul Kogut** of the Gateway Newspapers gives a picture of the beehive of activity that was the railroad yard in those days:



### **5. The Yard was a Beehive of Activity**

*The plant's brick smokestack, the highest point in the Yard -- loomed over everything; the stack thrust hundreds of feet into the air and spewed gray/black smoke almost continuously.*

*There were two roundhouses. On the Pitcairn side of the valley freight and passenger cars were repaired at in a roundhouse that resembled a giant donut.*

*The other roundhouse, on the Wall side, was used for repairing locomotives. Like most of the Yard's buildings, it was a busy place. During one 24-hour period, 200 engines were serviced and repaired at the Yard. There was also a chain of shops where cars, including private ones,*

*were built and painted. It was there, during the Yard's heyday, between World Wars I and II, when workers turned out some 55 cars a day.*



**6. Workers Turned Out Some 55 Cars a Day**

*They mainly built gondolas—flat, open-topped cars usually used to carry lumber and machinery—and hoppers—also open-topped cars that were used to haul materials such as coal. The sides of a hopper are higher than a gondola's, and there is an opening in the bottom to empty the material.*

*During World War II (1941-1945), more than 200 trains passed through each day. At one point, about 7,000 people from all over the valley, were earning their paychecks at the Yard.*

Years later, when only the ghost of the old yard remained, long-time railroader **David Cutshall** told his story.

*Mondays and Tuesdays are usually quiet. Then the number of freight and passenger trains gradually picks up on Wednesday and Thursday. By Friday, they're hammering through town. Whenever I hear those trains, I think back to the old days when Pitcairn was a railroad town." It was a company town. Many a son followed in his father's footsteps, working in the machine shop, roundhouse, or office. In my family, my*



**7. Pitcairn was a Railroad Town.**

*grandfather was a conductor, his father and brother engineers, and his uncle an air brake foreman in the steel shop. I worked as a clerk in the Yards for most of my career as did my sister. Pennsy employees were a close-knit family. If you went to the bank and said you worked for the railroad, you never had a problem getting credit or a loan. I was proud to be a railroader.*

**Arthur Fox**, a life-long Pitcairn resident, well remembered growing up in a railroad family.

*Raised in a railroad family, I lived half a mile from the continuous turbulence, clamor and thick, gray haze generated by one of the largest rail facilities in the world-the Pennsylvania Railroad's Pitcairn Yards. In the 1950s my week-ends were filled with playing in the dusty abandoned buildings and oil-soaked wooden sheds bordering the PPR tracks, exploring boxcars on remote sidings, and laying pennies along the rails to watch them flatten into thin, copper wafers by passing trains.*



**8. A Railroader - James R. Lemmon**

*Pitcairn workers always kept the trains running. A spirit -- enthusiasm and pride united the 7,000 men of all races and nationalities who worked in the Pitcairn yards during the 1940s. That spirit appeared to be forged by tough hiring practices. Family connections became a prerequisite for employment on many crews, fathers worked alongside their sons. The family connections also made the workforce a happier group of individuals. This*

*camaraderie was reflected in the daily life of Pitcairn families. For instance, my father, grandfather and two uncles all worked for the railroad. My grandmother kept the kitchen table permanently set for meals since railroaders worked unconventional schedules in those days.*

*While in high school, I worked as a clerk in Peter Serra's cramped, corner confectionery store that was across from the iron railroad bridge linking the Pitcairn Railroad station to Broadway Avenue, Pitcairn's main street. "Pete's" served as a cross section of the borough when railroaders, rail passengers, and local crowded the store in late afternoons and evenings.*

*During the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962, I provided passengers fresh off the train with updates from our small radio. Pete's not only provided services, but functioned as the town's "social club." Many of the businesses along Broadway, facing the railyard across Turtle Creek provided for the needs of railroaders and thrived until the late-1960s."*

Another of those local businesses along Pitcairn's Broadway that grew up to cater to the railroad workers was **Amelia Shipley's** tiny luncheonette next to the Broadway Hotel.

*"The town was so crowded with workers, railroad crews, passengers and soldiers who were coming and going, you couldn't walk on the streets for eight hours a day. Every eight hours, a railroad crew would stop for a shift. They came from Altoona, Enola and Columbus. After they ate at the restaurant, they went to the Broadway or one of the boarding rooms to get some sleep. They paid a 10-cent deposit on the room and the company picked up the tab. When it was time for them to go, two calling boys covering the shift would leave their rooms at the 'Y' and knock on their doors."*

*The railroaders were my friends. After you serve those guys for 20, 25 years and see them every other day, they became part of the family."*

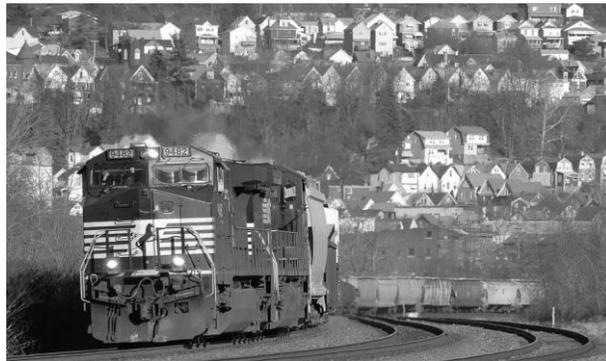


**9. The Workers Became Part of the Family**

The end began sometime after World War II as, one by one, yard operations were phased out or relocated. By 1960, employment at the Pitcairn Yard had fallen to a little more than 1,000. In January 1967, the Pennsylvania Railroad ceased all major operations at the Pitcairn Yards. By 1979, only 75 workers remained.

In the end, Conrail (successor to the PRR) decided it could no longer afford to keep the Pitcairn yards open. It was a bitter decision; workers with years of loyal service lost their jobs. The local businesses suffered, but some, like Mrs. Shipley's luncheonette, managed to keep the doors open for a little while longer. Still, the atmosphere around town wasn't the same.

The abandoned yard was to experience a re-birth in 1996; given a new lease of life as a much scaled back inter-modal facility, then operated by the Norfolk Southern Railroad.



**10. A Norfolk Southern Train traveling through Pitcairn**