



The Black Diamond



Official Newsletter of the Lehigh Valley Railroad Historical Society March 2023

Message from the Editor

The March 2023 edition of “The Black Diamond” provides full details about upcoming Lehigh Valley Railroad Historical Society events during the year. Featured in this issue is a story about the railroad and mail service in Mendon, New York, by Paul S. Worboys. Please send any Society news and/or historical articles about the Lehigh Valley Railroad to me by U. S. Mail at P. O. Box 200, Manchester, NY 14504-0200 or by e-mail at kemay59@hotmail.com. Thank you for your contributions.

Ken May, Editor/Trustee

Lehigh Valley Railroad History Program To Be Held April 16

The Lehigh Valley Railroad Historical Society will hold a history program about the Lehigh Valley Railroad at the station museum at 8 East High Street in Shortsville, New York, on Sunday, April 16, 2023, from 1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. The museum will open at 1:00 p.m. and the program will start at 2:00 p.m. The free event is a celebration of the railroad's history with a program of DVDs, slides, home movies, photographs, and discussions. Railroad historians will give presentations at the event.

Attendees are welcome to bring their own Lehigh Valley Railroad memorabilia and models to share. There will be a display of LVRR model trains and an operating N scale model railroad layout. The Society's large collection of historical artifacts from the railroad will be on display at the museum. The gift shop will be open. Coffee, water, and light refreshments will be provided and attendees may bring their own snacks and non-alcoholic beverages. Please RSVP by email to info@lvrrhs.org or by telephone at 585-289-9149 before April 9.

2023 LVRRHS Station Museum Open House Schedule

The Lehigh Valley Railroad Historical Society Station Museum at 8 East High Street in Shortsville, New York, will be open to the public one Sunday afternoon a month from May to October this year. Open house dates will be May 21, June 18, July 16, August 20, September 17, and October 15. Hours will be 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. A large collection of historical artifacts from the Lehigh Valley Railroad is on display at the museum. The gift shop will be open. We will be inviting rail historians to give presentations at some of the open houses. Admission is free; donations are welcome.

LVRRHS Facebook Page

The Lehigh Valley Railroad Historical Society Facebook page has had much content added recently. Many LVRR photographs from the Richard Pearson collection that have been scanned by Jack Tuttle and Joe Dickson are now posted on the page. Ken May has posted more historic photographs and postcards of LVRR locomotives, trains, structures, and facilities in Upstate New York in the photos section. Note that you do not have to sign up for Facebook to view the page. Contact Ken to contribute material for our Facebook page.

Donations Needed

Please consider making a monetary donation to the Society. Our income is down because we have not been able to sponsor passenger train excursions on the Finger Lakes Railway since 2019 due to pandemic restrictions and increased costs. Thank you for your generosity.

Help Wanted

We are actively seeking new members for the Society. Volunteers are needed for museum operations and officer/trustee positions. Please ask others to join us. They can print and fill out the membership application from the Join section of our website. Thank you for your support.

LVRRHS Website

Visit the Lehigh Valley Railroad Historical Society website at www.lvrrhs.org for the latest information about Society activities.

LVRRHS Information

“The Black Diamond” is published by the Lehigh Valley Railroad Historical Society, P. O. Box 200, Manchester, NY 14504-0200. Displays and archives are located at 8 East High Street in Shortsville, New York. Contact the museum at 585-289-9149 and leave a message for a return call.

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HAULIN' THE MAIL

A Slice of Nostalgia in Mendon, New York

By Paul S. Worboys

Author's Note: This original account was published in a single edition of the Mendon-Honeoye Falls-Lima Sentinel several years ago, then serialized in the Sentinel in 2012. The central character of the story, Marguerite Alexander, celebrated her 94th birthday before passing in 2016. She remained in her home almost to the end, thus making this serialized and illustrated version a timely tribute to Mendon, New York, a hamlet from another era.

It is the dawn of the 1950s in a tiny corner of rural America, the sleepy hamlet of Mendon, New York. Two sets of heavy steel rails traverse the scene, arriving from the northeast along Mill Street, slicing the Pittsford Road and curving smartly across the direct road to Rush. Shiny from frequent use, the iron trail suggests that quietude is anything but when the Lehigh Valley Railroad drags a string of passenger or freight revenue through town.

Day and night since its arrival in September 1892, up to a dozen passenger trains and a goodly number of freight trains rattled everything and everybody in the little place - Sunday church sermons and the family china were forever at risk. But the compliant populace appreciated a little excitement now and then, and soon took to setting up railhead businesses, commuting to schools, jobs and shopping, and visiting friends and relatives - not to mention having their best King's English hauled away on the mail cars.

Before 1950, the Lehigh Valley had emerged from World War II, tattered from its patriotic effort and hardly the romantic image of steam engines ferrying passengers from every backwater station it served. Mendon, like many lesser burghs, had been deleted from the passenger train timetables in the 1930s and rarely occasioned a freight train assignment. However, the tracks stayed burnished from long-distance diesel-powered engines tugging lengthy eastbound or westbound consists. Regardless of the hour, high noon or well past midnight, the trains kept up a steady procession.

On weekday mornings, Train #11, "*The Star*," traversed Mendon doing at least seventy, sweeping westward past the recently abandoned depot, hauling people, express, and mail from New York City's Pennsylvania Station to the Lehigh Valley's colonnaded Buffalo terminal. Later, as the noon hour approached, the venerable "*Black Diamond Express*," the famous passenger varnish celebrated since the 1890's, turned the becalmed hamlet into a flash of its iconic Cornell Red. A shrieking chime horn and heavy rumble shook every material thing nearby, as it sped hurriedly down the eastbound track toward Victor, Geneva, and on to New York City.

As the buzz dissipated from the *Star* whistling by and clattering off toward Rush, Batavia, and Buffalo, a diminutive lady with two little boys appeared opposite the station platform. At the instant of the train's passing, a gray canvas bag, hanging tautly from a trackside stanchion, disappeared as the car immediately behind the locomotive whooshed past.

Cautiously making a beeline over the rails toward the rear of Mendon Presbyterian Church, the adult portion gathered in a similar gray sack from the weeds and returned to the platform. With her young consorts firmly in control of the bag, the

woman loaded the boys onto a shiny red Radio Flyer cart and hauled her burden toward Howard's Ice Cream Store near the Four Corners.

Hard by the Irondequoit Creek bridge on the Victor highway, Grace Habecker held sway at Howard's in more ways than one, for it was often her job to fill her husband's soda jerk shoes. But she had U. S. Government tasks to perform as well, since those cubbyhole box affairs in the rear of the store comprised Mendon's U. S. Post Office and Grace was its erstwhile postmistress.

With the arrival of the trio and their cargo, another exchange of mail with the Lehigh Valley Railroad had been completed. Mrs. Albert Alexander, her boys Joe and Butch, and their little red wagon had just traded mailbags with hundreds of tons of screaming railroad train doing seventy miles-per-hour. It was a now-extinct slice of Americana, performed thousands of times a day without fanfare, in fair weather and foul, in mid-20th century America.

Marguerite Alexander, a young mother with two (subsequently three) children in tow, spent nearly four years (1950-53) transferring bags, with "U. S. Mail" stamped on the side, between Mendon's post office and its railroad depot. Together with her husband, Albert, who helped with evening parcel post and 1st Class mail deliveries to and from nearby Rochester Junction, the Alexanders, at \$50 monthly, experienced a microcosm of the intricate and historical web within America's postal system.

Fashioned from the colonial days of horseback mail delivery were two fascinating institutions: Rural Free Delivery (R.F.D.) to reach the far-flung rural folk not served by a community postal facility, and the Railway Post Office (R.P.O.), which carried out functions similar to a community post office, but on specially outfitted Railway Mail Service cars moving along the nation's vast railroad network.

While the R.F.D. system came late to the scene (a carrier out of nearby Elba, New York, traversed the first route in the nation in 1896), railroads were designed into mail delivery schemes dating back to the 1830's. A fledgling means of transportation in those days, it was not until the Civil War that mail was sorted onboard trains. Though slow to catch the fancy of railroaders, public imagination was immediately captured via songs, plays, and a railway clerk correspondence school.

The first fast mail train in the U. S. was over the New York Central Railroad in 1875, a twenty-six hour run from New York City's Grand Central Station to Chicago. It included one hundred "scoops" of mail from depots along the way; a loading of New England mail during a quick stop at Albany; and thirty-three tons that originated in New York City - all sorted and bagged enroute for further distribution out of Chicago. While the "Fast Mail" was the glamour, railroads furnished hundreds of workhorse R.P.O. cars that plied the branches connecting small-town America with the major urban centers.

By 1888, at salaries of \$900 to \$1,300 per year, postal clerks ranged over 26,000 miles of track, logging 122,000,000 railroad miles yearly. Long hours, fatigue, and front office whims were the benefits, with a bonus that, with mail cars at the head-end of trains, Railway Mail Service rosters suffered terrible casualties in accidents.

It was high drama, as Marguerite Alexander would have attested, when a speeding train's "catching post" snatched mailbags from depot stanchions. Postal clerks within the R.P.O. car then stamped and sorted flats at lightning speed, while rocking to the clickity-clack song of the rails.

Strictly from Marguerite's trackside viewpoint, Mendon could hardly be considered a major player in the Lehigh Valley's scheme of things. That is not to say, however, that periodic train racket was the only excitement that visited the little depot or the highway crossings that framed it at each end.

To be sure, every rail line had a sordid history of tragedy and the mainline hamlet of Mendon was no exception. Numerous fatalities occurred at its twin grade crossings, when locomotives indiscriminately victimized riders of wagons, buggies, cars, and trucks, as well as pedestrians. The very routine of hauling the mail to or from a R.P.O. rendezvous was broken at least twice at Mendon.

In 1921, the Lehigh Valley's crack fast mail train plastered a car at the unguarded crossing east of the station, resulting in one death. In 1938, a prominent Mendon woman, performing the exact task of transferring the mails as Marguerite, misread the approach of the *Black Diamond* and died - along with the stationmaster's little boy accompanying her.

The latter event was most shocking to the close-knit community. Just before noon on a cheerfully bright Wednesday in June, 75-year-old Mary Schlaefer was at the station to retrieve the mailbag tossed from the *Black Diamond*, rolling eastward toward New York City. As she had done on numerous occasions, Mary was substituting for her daughter, Lillian.

The elderly woman had been joined lately by 18-month-old Robert Slaght on her rounds between the station and the combined Schlaefer home/post office just east of the Grange Hall. Leland Slaght, successor to veteran Mendon agent, Darwin Turner, never doubted for little Robert's safety when in the lady's arms, as the two began crossing the tracks to await the onrushing train.

Coasting on the downhill grade over the Rush-Mendon Road, the steam-powered *Black Diamond* swiftly rode the gentle curve toward the station - fooling Mrs. Schlaefer. The alert engineer spotted her dilemma, applied the brakes and clanged the warning bell - its peal of emergency bringing residents within earshot sprinting toward the tracks.

In horror, both Agent Slaght and his wife realized Mary's blunder too late. Their cries were drowned-out by the shrieking whistle and pounding wheels of the train. From his shanty at the Pittsford Road crossing fifty yards up the line, gate-tender Addison Hodge heard the bell and spotted the danger. There was nothing he could do.

Confused by the set of tracks the thundering Lehigh Valley train was travelling upon, then nearly paralyzed by fear, Mrs. Schlaefer stepped towards the Presbyterian Church - directly in front of the thundering locomotive. Doomed, the woman mustered the only strength her fear had not stolen, hurling the station agent's son, Robert Slaght, to the side of the track. As the "Grim Reaper" struck, Mary died instantly and little Robert expired soon after - of a broken neck, sustained not from the train, rather from the tumble.

Services for Mary Schlaefer were conducted from her home where, a decade later, Marguerite and Albert Alexander came to reside. The victims rest in the peaceful community cemetery, overseeing the place where their mortal stay came to a sudden, heartrending end. Crestfallen by the tragedy, Mendon began healing and Lehigh Valley trains continued rolling through town.

A few months further into 1938, another crisis befell the hamlet. Residents and shopkeepers went to war over the Lehigh Valley's proposed radical change in the

railway-highway configuration of the crossroads. The plan would relocate the depot and turn the two dangerous grade crossings into dead-ends.

A highway overpass would then obliterate the historic Mendon Hotel and financially cripple the Cottage Hotel, a roadhouse across the street, and the other shopkeepers on the four corners. Regardless of merit (a statewide vendetta against grade crossings had already produced bridges over the Lehigh Valley at Clover Street and West Henrietta Road), vehement local opposition ripped the idea from the drawing board and into the “circular file.”

Nothing much changed in Mendon through the war years, except the location of the post office. It went from Schlaefer’s, to Earl Broomfield’s Hardware Store, to Isabel Sherman’s, then Hazel Stanley’s place, to Myrtle McEneaney’s, and, in 1947, to Howard and Grace Habecker’s combined residence/ice cream parlor.

That year, the Schlaefer property was sold to Albert and Marguerite Alexander, a young couple with two energetic little boys. Naturally on the lookout for any opportunity for the Mrs. to supplement the Mr.’s paycheck, Marguerite willingly grabbed the unique mail courier route when it came available.

Being of a simple routine, Mrs. Alexander was a quick study. After breakfast, she carried the outgoing mailbag from the post office at Habecker’s store to the train station. Hung on a special trackside stanchion, the westbound *Star*’s R.P.O. snared the sack on the fly... at 60, 70, even 80 miles-per-hour, depending whether the engineer was trying to keep to the scheduled arrival in Buffalo.

Simultaneously, a clerk within the car flung the day’s Mendon satchel to the opposite side of the tracks, which Marguerite dutifully retrieved and delivered to Postmistress Habecker in the post office. Around lunch time, she returned to watch the eastbound *Black Diamond* roar through, where a bag was deposited in the vicinity of the earlier drop to await removal to Habecker’s.

Of course, the scene was not quite so simple as that, since the term “day care provider” was yet to be coined. To perform the duties required by Uncle Sam, Mrs. A. had young’uns virtually in tow, Butch and Joe in their shiny red Radio Flyer wagon.

In practically all the conditions a meteorologist’s vocabulary could offer, Marguerite and her boys met the trains twice a day, six days a week, for the duration of a Presidential term. Drifting snow, spring freshets, bees and bugs and slithery things all had to be dealt with in due course, as mail clerks inadvertently hurled bags over a wide trackside swath.

Marguerite’s job description failed to note that, two years into this part-time employment, one of her job sites lost out to a bulldozer. The Lehigh Valley’s derelict depot, which the railroad quit in 1950, was left to her disposal whenever the elements forced her and the children to seek shelter.

One morning, however, Mrs. Alexander found a concrete “thing” in its place. Hexagonally shaped, yet barely roomy enough for a pirouette, a tiny pot-bellied stove was all that stood between the Alexanders and frostbite.

Once common throughout railroad land, this homely shelter was essentially a telephone booth for trainmen to reach out and touch their dispatcher in some cozy tower near Buffalo. Advancing technology negated these structures, leaving the railroad to recycle them into what Marguerite adopted at Mendon. The Lehigh Valley station on

Lehigh Street in Honeoye Falls, most recently the “Bloomfield Gardens” store, has one standing out front. (It was a neighborhood playhouse when the writer was a boy.)

Not to be outdone, Al Alexander returned home from his daily toil in Rochester and wolfed-down Marguerite’s fine home cookin’. Then they trundled the family off toward Plains Road (via Mendon Center) for an evening rendezvous with the westbound *Black Diamond* at Rochester Junction.

Each weeknight, Albert and Marguerite Alexander’s mail-hauling contract found the family at Rochester Junction’s darkly whimsical depot, where the Lehigh Valley crossed Plains Road. Nestled in a bucolic valley, formerly known as “Surrine (sic) Hollow,” it sat below the long-ago Seneca village of Totiakton.

This is where the two-track Lehigh Valley mainline bisected the north-south branch line that connected the pristine waters of Hemlock Lake with the Court Street shadow of Rochester’s Rundel Memorial Library. The Lehigh Valley’s fanciful 1905 Rochester station, precariously positioned over the oft-angry Genesee River, is today’s popular bikers-to-briefcases rib joint, the “Dinosaur Bar-B-Que.”

Being that the *Black Diamond* always stopped for passengers and to exchange express mail and parcel posts, the Alexanders’ Jeep wagon was regularly spotted rolling through Mendon Center toward the secluded country junction. “Neither-rain-nor-heat-nor-gloom-of-night-kept-them-from-their-appointed-rounds,” even when their third child, Martha, came along in 1953.

It was a benign routine, drudgery at times, but the memories of Marguerite Alexander easily rewound to those days. She recalled when grizzled railroaders, in transit between the big towns, tossed treats to the Alexander children as their trains hurtled past, or when area farmers gathered at Mendon Post Office to await their consignment of spring chicks.

With the springtime call of “peepers” came delivery of “cheepers,” when the majestic *Black Diamond*, dressed in its famed Cornell Red finery, ground to a stop at Rochester Junction. Arriving via parcel post, boxes of baby chicks were loaded into the Alexander jeep and returned posthaste to Mendon.

In the evening chill, brawny farmers gathered about Habecker’s ice cream and mail store to gently cradle the little yellow fuzzballs and hustled them off to uncertain, yet useful futures. Such a ritual could never wait until morning, since chicks tend to huddle together for warmth, severely reducing their population through suffocation.

And, trackside for mail call, the Alexander kids quickly learned the value of a pleasant wave to the choo-choo boys on the long freight trains. Candy and fruit often burst forth from the rugged engine or, failing that, a patient wait for the caboose, trailing one hundred cars along, frequently saved the day.

In April, there were Easter baskets (sans live chicks) and, when little Martha grew big enough to be spotted above the weeds, out flew a securely packaged gift dress. Yes, it was hard to duplicate this fellowship, carried out along the steel corridor of grit and noise, adventure and heartache.

The incessant winds of change blew on and, seventy years after the Alexanders’ mail days, Mendon is a much different place.

The iconic stagecoach inn, the Mendon Hotel, perhaps the inspiration for the hamlet in the first place, was razed for a gas station in 1957. The railroad is gone, too,

pulled up in 1976. The Cottage Hotel, the Habecker's next-door neighbor, survives and thrives on food, music, and dance, keeping the hamlet lively.

Rochester Junction on Plains Road is a lucid memory to those who touched its history. The westbound *Black Diamond* made a final stop in May 1959, while the non-stop *Maple Leaf* blasted through in the dead of night until February 1961. The abandoned station was razed by fire on Easter Sunday 1973, and the last remnants of the Junction's heyday were removed a decade later.

And yet, the Lehigh Valley Railroad has been replaced in spirit by the Mendon Foundation's Rails-to-Trails program. Elements of Rochester Junction's heyday have been replicated and their "Lehigh Valley Trail" connects with other former railroad lines... Victor's "Auburn Trail" (ex-New York Central Railroad) toward the east, and the "Genesee Valley Greenway" (ex-Pennsylvania Railroad) toward the west.

The U. S. Postal Service quit the Habecker building years ago (Postmistress Grace Habecker died in 1968 and her role was assumed by Howard until 1971). Harbored in a shopping plaza overlooking the suburbanizing Mendon hamlet, its former home now serves pizza and wings, amidst the spiritualappings of parcels and baby chicks.

Marguerite Alexander, who passed in 2016 at ninety-four, remained in the handsome turn-of-the-century home built by the Schlaefers. Her welcoming porch was periodically adorned in all manner of sign salutes to people and events dear to Albert's mischievous heart. After Albert passed away in 2005, it was henceforth tastefully decorated with a lady's touch.

Though native to other small western New York State towns, Marguerite doggedly kept alive the memories of those lost days in the Alexanders' adopted little farming community... before the zephyrs of change blew cold.





**Marguerite Alexander (1922-2016) perpetuated the All-American story behind
“Haulin’ the Mail.”**
(2011 photo by Paul S. Worboys)



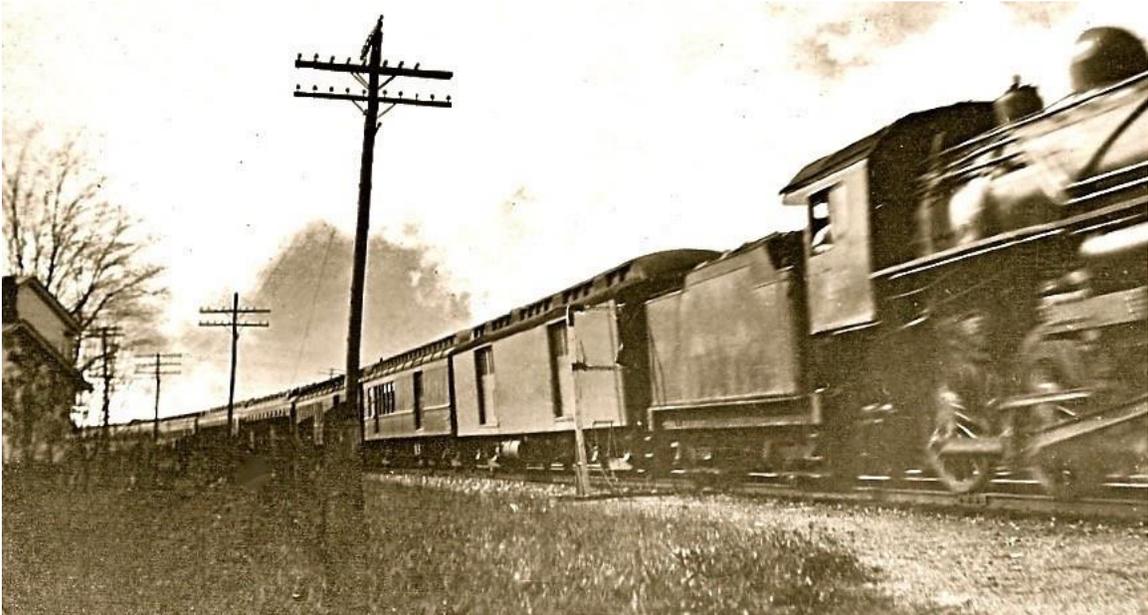
LVRR Mendon depot, looking east, c. 1910.
(Turner Collection, courtesy of Jackson Smith)



***Black Diamond* departs Buffalo for New York, c. 1950.**
(Photo by Gerling, collection of Ronald Dukarm)



LVRR train watchers at Mendon.
(1955 photo of his family by Jackson Smith)



LVRR train passing mail stanchion across from Mendon LVRR depot, c. 1905
(Turner Collection, courtesy of Jackson Smith)



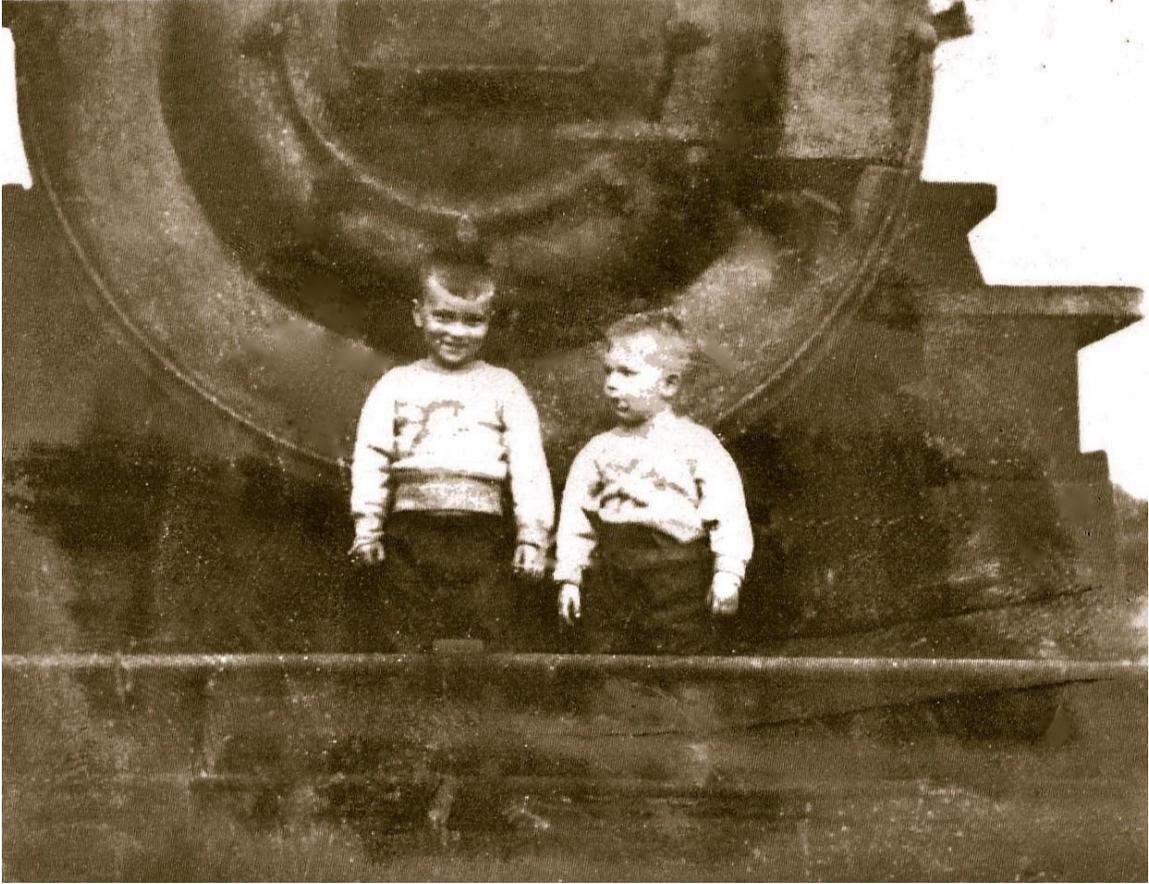
Darwin Turner and daughter pose in front of Mendon's L.V.R.R. depot, 1901.
(Turner Collection, courtesy of Jackson Smith)



Addison Hodge, crossing guard and local barber, at his post, c. 1940.
(Honeoye Falls-Mendon Historical Society Collection)



LVRB telephone booth replaced the Mendon depot.
(1995 photo by Paul S. Worboys)



Marguerite Alexander's boys, Butch and Joe, explored a steam locomotive parked at Rochester Junction, but destined for scrapping in Buffalo.
(1952 photo by Albert Alexander)



LVR boxcar and caboose.
(Paul S. Worboys Collection)



Rochester Junction LIRR depot, late in life on a late afternoon.
(1970 photo by Ray Feasel)