The Nickel Plate Road Historical & Technical Society, Inc.

Purpose of the Nickel Plate Road Historical & Technical Society, Inc.

The purpose of the NKPHS is to maintain an association of persons interested in the former New York, Chicago & St. Louis Railroad (Nickel Plate Road), and to obtain, preserve, and distribute information and material related to the former Nickel Plate Road, its predecessors, and lessees. It shall be the intent of the corporation to promote, support, and preserve the historic legacy of the Nickel Plate Road through the creation of programs designed to be of benefit and service to its members, as well as to assist qualified, non-profit museums, libraries, rail groups, and historical organizations, either financially or technically, in the preservation, conservation, and/or collection of material, equipment, and memorabilia relating to the railroad and its predecessors.

About Us

The original Nickel Plate Road Historical & Technical Society, was formed in Lafayette, Indiana, in 1966. The NKPHS was incorporated in the state of Ohio in 1972 as a non-profit, non-stock corporation organized for educational purposes. We are recognized as a 501(c)(3) organization by the Internal Revenue Service, so all contributions of material and money are tax deductible. Information on donating money and materials to the NKPHS may be found on our website.

Our Society also offers numerous Internet and online activities free of charge to all of its members. We have an extensive website at NKPHS.org which displays information, photos, documents, and Society news. We have a “Members Area” which can only be accessed by current members of the Society and which contains many items of interest, including Howard W. Ameling’s collection of 5000+ Nickel Plate Road photos. Members with an email address receive a monthly E-List Newsletter with the latest Society information and various articles of interest to NKP fans. We host an online discussion forum on Yahoo.com. You will also find us at youtube.com/nickelplateroad, facebook.com/nkphts, and twitter.com/nkphs.

History of the New York, Chicago & St. Louis Railroad Company the Nickel Plate Road

Main Line Nickel Plate

It is said that the New York, Chicago & St. Louis Railroad Company was probably the only railroad in the United States built for cash in advance of the issue of stocks and bonds. The subscribers to the founding syndicate agreed to furnish the money in ten percent calls as fast as required. It was February 1881, that a party of aggressive men met in the office of H. W. Seney, President of the Metropolitan National Bank of New York City. Among those present was Columbus R. Cummings of Chicago, the first NKP president, Walston H. Brown, Calvin S. Brice, General San Thomas, and a John G. Kemmeter, who formed what was known to be the financial world as the Seney Syndicate. Later, others who participated included General D.W. Caldwell, Dan P. Ellis, and Hon. William Flemming.

In 1880, a survey was made from St. Louis to Fort Wayne, Indiana, to connect with the Lake Erie & Western Railroad, of which Mr. Brice was President. The survey was purchased by the Syndicate and two new surveys made, one from Chicago to Fort Wayne, the other from Fort Wayne to Cleveland, originally intended as an eastern terminus of the road. It was finally determined to temporarily abandon the St. Louis branch and instead build from Cleveland to Buffalo.

Early in April 1881, Major Henry L. Merill, an experienced railroad builder, assumed charge of construction. Contracts were let for 45,000 tons of steel rails at $65.60 per ton. Right of way was secured as fast as the surveys were made. The first rails were laid between Arcadia and McComb, Ohio, and the road was practically finished by September 1882. The first train was run over the road October 22, 1882.

The Lake Shore & Michigan Southern, later a part of the New York Central System, quickly realized the value of the Nickel Plate Road as a competitor, purchased the road and held controlling interest in it until July 1916. The Van Sweringen brothers were looking for ways to expand their real estate business in Cleveland and bought the Nickel Plate to acquire a right-of-way for a new traction line. The Vans soon found how nice railroading was and in a matter of a few years became very powerful railroad barons.

On July 1, 1922, the Nickel Plate Road was operating 533 miles of track between Chicago and Buffalo. On this date the NKP secured control of the properties formerly operated, managed, and controlled by the Lake Erie & Western. The NKP added 707 miles of track reaching from Sandusky, Ohio to Peoria, Illinois, with two branches in Indiana.

On July 15, 1922, another 453 miles were added to the system by affiliation with the cloak leaf (TSL&W RR) reaching to Toledo, Ohio to St. Louis, Missouri. Thus, the Nickel Plate became a 1683-mile system of trackage serving the industrial, agricultural, and distributing region between the Mississippi River on the west, the Great Lakes on the north, and the Niagara Frontier on the east, with close traffic arrangements and service to the New England States and the Atlantic Seaboard reached connecting lines.

The Nickel Plate purchased its first fifteen Berkshire (2-8-4) steam locomotives in 1934. Until that time the NKP had never had a locomotive that was out of the ordinary. With the Berkshire, the NKP acquired an engine perfectly suited to its needs and virtually every 2-8-4 locomotive built afterwards was based on the very successful design of the 700's.

The 1940's found the Nickel Plate setting record after record with the Berkshires. An additional fifty-five were built during the War. In 1947, the Nickel Plate received its first diesel road engines from American Locomotive Co. The streamlined diesels were affectionately called BLUEBIRDS.
and were the only motive power on the post 1900 Nickel Plate not painted black.

In 1899, the Nickel Plate leased the long sought Wheeling & Lake Erie Railway, which it had controlled for a number of years. The Wheeling gave the Nickel Plate a financially stable railroad that was consistent with the line’s operational and financial performance of the 1950’s.

Lake Erie & Western

The acquisition of the Lake Erie & Western Railroad in 1962 united Nickel Plate with the railroad it had been built to complement forty years earlier.

The Lake Erie & Western’s Sandusky to Peoria mainline ran from Sandusky to the Fremont & Indiana Railroad Company on April 22, 1853. The Fremont & Indiana was incorporated to build a line from Fremont southeast towards the Indiana State line. As years passed, more trackage was laid and through acquisitions the line was completed in 1888.

Crossing the LE&W at Tipton, Indiana was a line that extended from Indianapolis to Michigan City, Indiana. This line became part of the LE&W on April 8, 1887. Built by the Peru & Indianapolis, which was incorporated in Indiana on January 19, 1846, this was the first and oldest trackage on the Nickel Plate System.

Another LE&W branch was a line that extended from Fort Wayne, through Muncie to Fremont southwest towards the Indiana State line. As late as 1846, the line extended from Wellington north to the city of Lorain. This line was completed in 1907, and was also operated as part of the parent company operations.

The Wheeling system even though it rostered only a single steam locomotive. The Lorain & West Virginia was far more successful for the Nickel Plate.

Lake Erie & Western railroad were finally united.

York Central System in 1900. The LE&W was operated as a separate entity throughout its existence on the Nickel Plate. The LE&W, when acquired by the Nickel Plate, became the main heavy diesel repair shop for the Nickel Plate years.

The Wheeling & Lake Erie never did reach Wheeling, West Virginia on its own rails, but it had a road that opened up valuable connections through the Lake Erie, while presenting difficult operating and engineering problems.

The Wheeling had the largest percentage of articulated (2-6-6-2) locomotives east of the Mississippi River, over 20 percent of its roster. In Depression years, they built their own switchers while other railroads were going broke. The Wheeling bought Berksines patterned after the Nickel Plate’s 700’s, but with a few appliances favored by the W&LE. The Wheeling later purchased used locomotives and more famous railroads. In the diesel era the Brewster Shops became the main heavy diesel repair shop for the Nickel Plate.

The original Wheeling was not patterned after the Nickel Plate’s 700’s, but with a few appliances favored by the LE&W, the stage was set for Nickel Plate's spectacular operational and financial performance of the 1950’s.

We hope this brochure will help you gain an insight into our Society and its purpose, and further your knowledge and appreciation of a once great railroad – the Nickel Plate Road.

The Merger - KNP, NSW, ACY, VGN, Wabash, P&W

Since the early days of railroading, mergers and consolidations have played an important role in the development of our nation’s rail system. The influence of large and more powerful carriers always has been a major factor in the growth and stability of the smaller railroads. The greater Nickel Plate Road was a result of the consolidation of the Lake Erie & Western and the Clover Leaf with the original Nickel Plate in 1922. Each of these roads was, of course, a result of earlier consolidations and mergers.

In the late fifties, the greater Nickel Plate found itself in a precarious competitive position. The powerful eastern rail giants were lining up in their respective merger positions. To the Nickel Plate, the potential merger of the New York Central and the Pennsylvania forecasted competitive and financial disaster. The Nickel Plate would have to find a powerful ally to assure itself of a strong position in the merger conscious era.

The Norfolk & Western, looking for a way to extend its coal carrying to the Midwest, became that ally. The merger of the Nickel Plate and the Norfolk & Western could be a benefit to both railroads and develop a strong Midwest to tidewater rail system carrying a broad base of commodities.

The prospect of a Nickel Plate-Norfolk & Western alliance put the Wabash Railroad in the same position as the Nickel Plate had been; that of a competitive orphan. The N&W, an expert in the operation of parallel lines since its acquisition of the Virginian Railway in 1959, made no objections to adding the Wabash.

With the ultimate acquisition of the Pennsy’s Sandusky & Westville, the Wheeling & Lake Erie, the Nickel Plate and the Norfolk & Western, the Akron, Canton & Youngstown and the Pittsburgh & West Virginia railroads were faced with the threat of inclusion in the new system. After more than four years of hearings and planning, the merger became a reality on October 16, 1964.

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