

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, June 12, 2017

A Trip to Erie, 1971: Pennsylvania's only city on the Great Lakes is not a great tourist destination, but it is an interesting place. Just off shore, Oliver H. Perry defeated the British Navy in the War of 1812, sending back the message "We have met the Enemy, and He is Ours." Clayton George, one of the drivers for the Packard Motor Company of Wilmington, took my mother and her niece, Elizabeth Shallcross Roberts, to Erie about 1930, where they boarded one of the Great Lakes steamers for a cruise to Duluth and return. Both the Detroit & Cleveland Navigation Company and the Georgian Bay Line had cruise ships that called at Erie.

In 1971, the air reservoirs on Wilmington & Western (W&W) Locomotive 92 were becoming unsafe, and used reservoirs of the right size and dimensions were located at the General Electric locomotive plant in Erie. G. E. had been quite successful with Diesel locomotives in the 1940s and '50s, but by the late 1960s, General Motors Diesels had most of the market, and G.E.'s plant at Erie had fallen on hard times (in more recent years, it became busy again). I decided I could use my 1969 Chevy Longhorn pick-up truck to take delivery of the air reservoirs and bring them back from Erie to the W&W engine house at Marshallton, Delaware. In June, I drove to Meadville (PA) the first day and planned to be at the G.E. yard the next morning.

Walter Anderson and I had become friendly with the Chaffee brothers, who operated three Holiday Inns from their headquarters in Erie. After looking over the city attractions and their beautiful Holiday Inn there, Earl Chaffee drove me out on Presque Isle, a thin peninsula in the lake, busy with beach people on a bright June day (Earl Chaffee is still alive at age 103!). Then I drove over to the G.E. railroad yard, where there was a myriad of empty tracks, and the two reservoirs were loaded onto my pick-up. Since the diameter of the tanks was too great for both to fit down in the bed of the truck, the higher one was wedged between the other reservoir and one side of the straight-side body. The truck, being heavier on one side, had quite a list for the trip home, but I had no trouble.

The Chaffees had opened a new Holiday Inn at Oil City, probably 50 miles south, and they suggested I spend the night there. En-route, I stopped at the Drake Well, where oil was discovered in 1859 near Titusville. I enjoyed the stop, but the summer insects were terrible. The Oil City Holiday Inn was situated on a beautiful point of land where Oil Creek flows into the Allegheny River. Word had been sent ahead that my dinner, lodging, and breakfast would be complimentary. I had a nice dinner with the innkeeper. Millard Newman used this inn on the 1979 "Trans-Con" tour from Key West to Halifax, and I broke the axle on the Model 87 only about five miles away the morning after staying there.

Oil City, like Erie, fell on hard times in the 1970s, and '80s, when Quaker State moved its corporate offices to Texas, and synthetic oils began to take over from the favored "Pennsylvania Crude." My trip home in the Chevy Longhorn pick-up in 1971 was uneventful as I followed U.S. 322 through State College. The air reservoirs were used on locomotive 92 until it was retired from service on the W&W in the fall of 1972.