

LeRoy's Open Spandrel Arch Bridge

by Lynne Belluscio

Or at least that is what I think the Lehigh Valley Bridge at Buttermilk Falls should be called. There is so much I don't know about the bridge . . . I can't even verify when it was built. (And please, do not go down and trespass to see this bridge! It is privately owned, and so is the land around it.)

First, is the question of when exactly did the Lehigh Valley Railroad lay track into Western New York. I read through all of Albert McVean's articles and couldn't find anything specific. In our files we have a newspaper clipping from the Daily News, July 2, 1976 and an interview with Sidney Gear who lived in Batavia. He was 91 and he recalled: "catching a ride on the first Lehigh Valley train to arrive" in Batavia. "I remember when the first passenger train arrived on the Lehigh Valley Railroad," said Mr. Gear, who is mighty proud of the railroad – the last to reach Batavia but which had much to comment it - - "first to use stone ballast, burned anthracite so the trains had less smoke." That was in 1893, when the Lehigh rolled in from Scranton, Pa – New Jersey area and was backed over the 'peanut' to the New York Central line so its cars could be taken to Chicago and the World's Columbian Exposition by the Central. This was as far as the Lehigh went at the time. As a boy seeing the roadbed of the Lehigh constructed along the southern edge of Batavia was a vast project which had always impressed Mr. Gear. "My brother and I jumped on the steps of the first train and rode over to where they switched to the Central," Mr. Gear continued. "The Lehigh crew got off and the New York Central crew got on. It was an excursion train to Chicago. The Lehigh was constructed in low land and pile drivers drove whole trees into the ground and carpenters put down the ties and rails as the earth was filled in ahead of the rails. They filled little cars with



gravel, rolled them on the tracks to the end and dumped them ahead of the work - - must have been millions and millions of tons of gravel between Clifton Ave and the Creek Rd. "you couldn't afford anything like that today - - that was the best railroad ever built - -"

But that was in Batavia - - so what about the Lehigh coming through LeRoy? The passenger line was called the Black Diamond because the Lehigh used anthracite coal. The track was in North LeRoy, coming from Mumford, (through what is now Genesee Country Museum) - along the Gulf Road, (where in 1970 was the chemical spill at the crossing near the old Knickerbocker Hotel) then through the quarries. It crossed Circular Hill Road and then across the Oatka Creek. There was a passenger station near where Crocker's Ace Hardware is today. And there was a siding that allowed the trains to unload fertilizer for the GLF. For a while, the Lehigh crossed Lake Road at grade - - no overpass. There were three horrendous accidents there. . . one in 1893, killing the Bovee family. The wreck of 1901 derailed a car, but there were no fatalities. But the wreck of the Black Diamond in 1932, when the train hit Mr. Brodie in his car resulted in five deaths and many badly injured.

The description in the LeRoy Gazette is pretty gruesome. So at some point, the Lehigh built an overpass at Lake Road. When the railroad ceased, the overpass was taken out.

So the question remains, was the open spandrel bridge across the Oatka Creek, the first one? And right now, I don't know. Reinforced concrete open spandrel arched bridges became really popular in the 1910s and 1920s. In Pennsylvania there are two huge open spandrel bridges. One is the Tunkahannock Creek viaduct which was dedicated in 1915. Another is the Cold Spring Bridge which was built in 1930. The Albertus L. Meyers Bridge in Allentown was opened for traffic in 1913. My thought is that the LeRoy open spandrel bridge was not built in 1893 and is probably a later replacement for an earlier bridge.

The open spandrel bridge supported a deck slab over which trains - - or automobiles could travel. The closed spandrel cement bridge was filled with rocks, gravel and dirt. The one that comes to mind is the one on the NYS Thruway over near Victor. It's the only one on the Thruway. But the closed spandrel bridge had to support all the dirt and gravel, so for long or high bridges, the open spandrel bridge was used. The

state of Ohio has conducted an inventory of their open spandrel bridges which is very interesting. In North Carolina the State Highway Department started using open spandrel bridges in 1917 and they list five historic open spandrel bridges dating from 1922 to 1930. There are over 75 remaining open spandrel bridges in Pennsylvania.

Another consideration to help date the Oatka bridge is the development of reinforced concrete which had to be poured into forms. As far as I can determine, that technology wasn't in practice until after 1900 - - which casts doubt on an 1893 bridge in LeRoy. So I suspect there was an early iron bridge over Buttermilk Falls, and the cut limestone abutments date to the early bridge. It was replaced by the railroad company sometime in the 1920s by the modern-looking cement bridge. So for any of you who enjoy doing some research, see what you can discover. There are several abandoned bridge sites - although its not abandoned. And there are some railroad history sites that could be a resource. Let's find out more about this hidden treasure in LeRoy. (And once again - - it's privately owned and so is the adjoining property. Please respect the no trespassing signs!)