

Where Did the Term "Hojack" Originate?

By Richard Palmer

Although the rail lines north of Syracuse, both abandoned and existing, have passed ownership from Rome, Watertown & Ogdensburg to New York Central, to Penn Central, to Conrail and finally CSX, this railroad has from time immemorial, been known as the "Hojack." The origin of this title seems to be lost in the mists of antiquity.

Attempts have been made to determine the origin of this nickname, but without much success - until recently. The term applied to the entire system, stretching from Massena to Lewiston, Rome to Cape Vincent via Watertown, Sackets Harbor to Utica via Carthage; and from Richland to Syracuse. The portion of the line from Oswego to Lewiston, running parallel to the shore of Lake Ontario, was always known as the "West Hojack." Joseph Hughes, an old time New York Central conductor on the St. Lawrence Division of the New York Central, said he was told the term "Hojack" originated when one man standing on the main track for some reason waved his hand to the another man on a siding and hollered-- in derision--"Ho, Jack."

Still another story was that men on the division were in the habit of saying "Hello, Jack" to each other. One often quoted story is that the term Hojack originated from the engineer of the first train in 1851 between Rome and Cape Vincent, who was named Jack Welch (often called "Big Jack"). Welch used to be a farmer and was more familiar with horses than steam locomotives. When he stopped the trains he would shout "Whoa Jack!". This supposedly evolved into "Hojack" over time. Even more unbelievable is this quotation taken from a history of the R., W. & O. written by Dick Batzing, Town of Webster (N.Y.) Historian:

"Many people fondly called the R.W. & O. by its nickname, "Hojack." It seems that in the early days of the railroad, a farmer in his buckboard drawn by a bulky mule was caught on a crossing at train time. When the mule was halfway across the tracks, he simply stopped. The train was fast approaching and the farmer naturally got excited and began shouting, "Ho-Jack, Ho-Jack." Amused by the incident, the trainmen began calling their line the "Ho-Jack."

The Syracuse Post-Standard of Jan. 12, 1906 carried this brief article:
EDICT AGAINST 'HOJACK"

Central Employees Ordered to Drop the Nickname.

Henceforth in the lexicon of the New York Central Railroad there is to be no such word as "hojack" if the authorities of that road can render the use of the word obsolete. An order, it was said last night, has been privately issued to the employees of the R. W. & O. division prohibiting them from using the objectionable nickname.

The question then arose as to why the term would be objectionable. Obvious the edict did not work as "Hojack" has continued to prevail right to this day. It soon became obvious that the term meant something completely different than people have concocted over the years, which tend to be unsubstantiated folklore.

An article was finally discovered in the Syracuse Herald of May 11, 1926 that sheds more light on this subject. This was a feature article about the work of the New York Central police force in Syracuse. Of course, this was during Prohibition, and vagrants were riding the rails. The article states these people were classified by railroad men into three categories - the hobo, the hojack and the tramp. "The hobo," according to

Inspector F.E. Welch of the Second Railroad Police District, "is a person who will not work, but will steal. It is custom to pillage and rob stores in small towns and hop a freight to the next town or village, there to repeat the procedure. A hojack works now and then, dresses fairly well and although always with some funds, will not pay for railroad transportation. The tramp is a harmless sort of a person who, through laziness alone, will not work. However, he is honest and generally carefree and happy. He spends most of the winters in jail and in the summers roaming the country."

It was also discovered that the term Hojack applied to the RW&O division at least as far back as the early 1900s and probably before, as newspaper articles refer to trains being late due to bad weather on the Hojack.

Still further evidence shows that the term "Hojack" was by no means confined to the RW&O. Even the Erie used the term. The Port Jervis Evening Gazette of Feb. 5, 1880 claimed it assigned this name to the way freight.

Watertown Daily Times, Sept. 2, 1903

The Origin of The Word "Hojack"

The name "Hojack" was the name given in derision at one time to the Rome, Watertown & Ogdensburg Division of the New York Central. It was applied in the yards at Suspension Bridge. When the Oswego train over the R.W. & O. road was about to leave each day one of the employees would stand on the platform and call out to the man in the roundhouse whose name was Jack Donohue, "hojack," and the Oswego crew made its appearance simultaneously and the road was thus christened, "Hojack."

And it was a sure enough hojack road in those days, too. The power was light and the cars small. One of the old type of engines if seen today would make a railroad man feel like putting it in a shawl strap and carrying it off. There have been many improvements since the line was first known as the Hojack, but there are many more necessary; including a better roadbed and two tracks the entire length of the pike.

Ogdensburg News, Wed., Feb. 24, 1904

Snowplows Over Northern Roads

Employees Must Refrain From Referring to R.W. & O. as the "Hojack"

Syracuse - Feb. 23 - While the railroad officials were feeling so warm yesterday at the New York Central station that they were obliged to open their office window, two snow plows were running at full steam northwards on the Rome, Watertown and Ogdensburg to a place called "Sour Apple Cut," near Richland to help out two trains which had become stalled there. A severe snowstorm prevailed all along the northern road yesterday and No. 8, the train which made the R., W. & O. famous, due here at 9:25 o'clock, did not come in until nearly midnight.

At "Sour Apple Cut", the snow was so dense and deep that the snowplows were still plugging away at 10 o'clock last night and would continue working today, it was said by railroad men last night.

It has been rumored in railroad circles for the past few days that an order has been issued to all New York Central Employees to refrain from using the name "Hojack" in speaking of the Rome, Watertown and Ogdensburg Railroad. It is said that the only real reason for the objection to the word is that it conveys a sort of phonetic reflection of the

road. It is an unusual combination of letters, but how it originated nobody connected with the road seems to be able to tell.

One railroad man said yesterday: "It sounds so like a word of Norway, where they have perpetual winter, and we have been up against it so hard this winter that it sounds like rubbing it in to call the road the "Hojack," so I hope they will cut it out. It is to be known hereafter as the Rome, Watertown and Ogdensburg branch of the New York Central railroad, and if that is good enough for Chauncey M. Depew it ought to be good enough for the public."

Syracuse Journal, Feb. 29, 1904

The "Hojack"

How the R.W. and O. Division Came to Be Called by That Name.

Considerable mystery has always surrounded the origin of the nickname "Hojack" applied to the R.W. and O. division. Railroad men when asked seem to have but a vague idea of the reason of the term. A writer, who signs himself as an "Old Engineer," writes: -

"I noticed recently in a paper that there was some doubt as to the origin of the work „Hojack" as applied to the R.W. and O. division of the New York Central Railroad. There are few persons on the railroad who know how the name came to be applied, but I happen to know the exact circumstances. Along in the early 1870"s a man named Royal and one John Tobin were employed by the R.W. and O. railroad in running trains between Lewiston and Suspension Bridge.

Royal was a gruff, genial fellow and was well liked by the railroad men at the Bridge. It was his habit, when after having delivered his cars at the Bridge; he was ready to return, to stand at the office door and call out to his partner in stentorian tones, "Ho, Jack, time to be going back." The man and the voice became inseparably connected with the railroad and when his train appeared the men would say, „Here comes the hojack" The name sticks to the road and the R.W. and O. is now better known among railroad men as the „Hojack" than it is by its corporate name."

Syracuse Telegram, Nov. 26, 1904

Get Ready for Hard Winter

Central Officers Prepare for Coming Battle with the Snow.

"YS" on the Hojack

Operating officials of the Rome & Watertown division of the New York Central are already preparing for the rigors of winter. Efforts to keep this division open last winter cost of the New York Central several hundred thousand dollars and the company is not desirous of repeating the experience if it can be avoided.

Last winter snowplows were run oftener than trains and when it became necessary to turn one of the plows, it had to be taken to a turntable in this city, Oswego or Watertown.

To meet this difficulty two "Ys" are being constructed, one at Pulaski and one at Woodard, near Syracuse. It is believed that this work will greatly expedite the operation of plows when necessary and it will aid not a little in keeping things moving. Railroad

men do not believe, however, that the coming winter will be anywhere near so severe as the last one.

The Central is well equipped for fighting snow. New plows have been placed on the R., W. & O. and there is an abundant supply of apparatus in the yards in this city. The equipment here includes four sweepers, six different sized plows for use on different divisions, one rotary for cleaning out cuts and a Russell plow for use on the West Shore and Auburn roads.

The Auburn & Syracuse electric road suffered more than any of the other trolley lines in this vicinity last winter. To prevent a repetition of their experiences a series of snow fences several miles in length will be erected along the more exposed sections of the road. These fences have already been built and the work of setting them up will take only a few days.

The Rapid Transit Company has purchased some additional apparatus during the summer and will now have no trouble in operating its cars unless there are some phenomenal storms.

Watertown Daily Times, Sept. 4, 1908

The Passing of the R.W. & O. Division

In another month the Rome, Watertown & Ogdensburg division of the New York Central will no longer officially be known as such. The main line, running from Suspension Bridge on the west, along the shore of Lake Ontario to Massena Springs on the north, with its numerous branches, will then be known as the Ontario division and the St. Lawrence division: the point of bisection being at the west end of the Watertown yards.

It will, however, be many a day before the public will forget the road as the "R., W. & O." That is an euphonious name and, while it does not fittingly locate the line, there being other and larger cities touched by it than those enumerated in its corporate title, people will be prone to hang on to it.

In the old days, when railroads were sometimes given nom-de-plumes, the Rome, Watertown & Ogdensburg Railroad was referred to throughout its serpentine length as "Rotten Wood and Old Rusty Rails." That was in a time when the appellation was most fitting. The past decade or two, however, has seen much improvement in conditions on the line, and the rather unpleasant (to officials) reference has not been heard in that time to any extent.

Then, too, there is the "Hojack," a name given to the line by someone, no one knows whom. Where the name originated no one knows either. Even the "stovepipe committee" says it has no knowledge of its origin and what the "stovepipe committee" does not know is hardly worthwhile. One old railroader, however, says "Hojack" is a western word and means "two streaks of rust and the right of way." Be this as it may, one thing is certain, the officials of the R., W. & O. hate the word "Hojack," and wax warm and sore whenever they hear it used.

It would seem that in the selection of names for the new divisions, the selector has exercised pretty fair judgment. At least no better name for that portion of the road from the Bridge to Watertown could be chosen. "Ontario" division at once suggests the lake and it is along the lake's south shore that the road runs.

So, too, in the other name, St. Lawrence, a fitting title was selected. The portion of the line to carry that name is the road that leads to the big river and its Thousand

Islands and, too, much of it within the county of St. Lawrence.
However, as we said in the first place, the people will be a long time forgetting to call the line the "R., W. & O."

Oswego Palladium Times, Nov. 28, 1934
Would Abandon 10-Hour Trains

Central Proposes to End West End Passenger Service

If plans of the New York Central Railroad Company are approved by the Public Service Commission, there will be no passenger service, after January 1, between Oswego and Syracuse on the R., W. & O.

The Public Service Commission will hold a hearing in the Monroe County courthouse December 10 at 10 o'clock, on passenger service between Oswego and Rochester, and between Suspension Bridge and Rochester, on the understanding it is the desire of Central operating officials to halt all passenger service between the points involved in the hearing.

Trains 24 and 29 operate daily between Rochester and Oswego, one daily each way, and Trains 52 and 53 between Suspension Bridge and Rochester, one train daily each way. These trains are mixed passenger and freight, mostly freight, with one passenger car on the end of each train. They make all stops and sometimes remain a considerable time at stations while freight is being loaded and unloaded, or while shifts are being made. As a result, the operating time between Oswego and Rochester is about 10 hours, and about the same between Suspension Bridge and Rochester. There has been little or no passenger business, the company reports, and in the interests of economy, it is desired to cease all passenger service.

This will leave the section, west of Oswego, without public service for passenger transportation. There are no bus lines operating on a through schedule, and mail is carried by automobile along the route by government contract.

Written by Dick Palmer in cooperation with the Central New York Modelers Railroad Club.

Preceding article is solely intended for private use unless expressed permission is given.

2 February 2010 All Rights Reserved