

The Last Run of Trains #725/726

From The Taylors Falls & Lake Superior Railroad by Richard E. Thompson & Steven J. Monson

Conductor Robert Wilcox and his crew had gotten up at the usual time on that Wednesday morning, June 30, 1948, at Rush City, Minnesota. This was to be their final run to Taylors Falls as the branch line was to be abandoned the following day. Brakeman A.C. Williams walked over to the old engine house to see how the engine crew was doing with old #328. He had remembered her older sister #321 which had been retired and scrapped two years earlier. Old #328 was the lone survivor, the last of her class having been built by Rogers Works of the American Locomotive Co. in 1905 and sold to the Northern Pacific in 1907.

Williams yelled over to Frank Slowinski, engineer, and asked if they were ready with the engine. Mr. Slowinski was busy with his oil can. He yelled up to his fireman, H.E. Rachiey and asked, "Are you ready?" Rachiey replied back and said, "All ready with 180 lbs. steam pressure. Let's go!" Brakeman Williams smiled and said OK and then lined up the switches toward the main track. Williams looked down the track toward the depot and saw J.J. "Jack" Murray, rear brakeman, giving a big highball sign with his arm which meant it was OK to come out on to the main line.

They waited five minutes to establish block protection and backed down to the depot to pick up their Conductor Robert Wilcox. He had just received the "flimsies" train orders from agent operator JH. King. The crew quickly read the orders and checked the clearance form. They backed down to the set out track and coupled on to their Grantsburg cars, then headed down to the coach track to pick up their "combine", a combination baggage and smoking passenger car. Next they backed to the depot where they picked up three passengers for Grantsburg. Conductor Wilcox made the proper air brake test and looked at his Hamilton watch. The time was 5:00AM, departure time for their train #736.

Wilcox gave engineer Slowinski a highball sign for Grantsburg. The train departed and arrived at Grantsburg at 5:45 AM, five minutes late. The crew did their necessary work switching and then as train #735, with some freight cars and the combine carrying just one passenger, departed and headed back to Rush City.

After arriving at Rush City at 7:30 AM, the crew did their regular routine switching at Amber Flour Mill and then departed at 8:15 AM as Extra West 328 for Wyoming. The run took about 40 minutes to cover the 24 miles, arriving at 8:50 AM. The engine took on water and then waited for passengers from St. Paul who were coming on train #62, due into Wyoming at 9:26AM.

Old #328's train now became train #726 and conductor Wilcox would get his orders from agent operator G.L. Warner at the depot. They finally departed fifty minutes late at 10:10 AM with a handful of newspapermen and other passengers. With just a Chesapeake & Ohio box car and the #1198 combine they headed east arriving at Chisago City, MP (milepost) 6.3, at 10:23 AM.

Two passengers got off the train in Chisago, Jean Sausen and Harriet Martens. They were going to Camp Ojiketa at nearby Green Lake. About twenty passengers boarded the train and then it whistled off for Lindstrom at MP 8.9. Upon arriving at the Lindstrom depot a good crowd of passengers, around 30, climbed on board and then departed for Center City, MP 10.6, arriving at 10:35 AM. There the train was met by a crowd of some 50 people who had gathered for one last ride. Many of the younger passengers were loaded into the old Chesapeake and Ohio box car, when the combination baggage passenger car got packed to capacity. Head brakeman A.C. Williams sat in the doorway to make certain none of the youngsters fell out.

Arriving at Shafer a similar crowd was on hand, but with only a combine and box car, many who wanted to ride were unable to get on. The train departed from Shafer at 11:20 A.M. heading for Taylors Falls. As they approached the old Franconia shelter shed, engineer Slowinski was surprised to see a man flagging him down. The train stopped for the lone passenger, a man named Alfred Videen. Slowinski reached down and shook his hand, and then the man found a spot to squeeze into in the combine. That day he was a lucky man indeed.

Conductor Wilcox and brakeman Jack Murray had collected 211 round trip fares from Wyoming to Taylors Falls. Engineer Slowinski made a running air brake test at Franconia at MP 17 making sure the brakes were working properly before heading down the hill. The train pulled into Taylors Falls at 11:43 AM, one hour and 33 minutes late.

The writer here wonders what were the thoughts of engineer Slowinski and fireman Rachiey as they passed over the big trestles at MP 18. Being the last engineer and firemen to operate a scheduled passenger train over the line, maybe they were thinking of what an engineering feat it had been back when they were building this line. All the labor, time and money and now in a few months it would be gone.

Now our thoughts drift back to the construction days of 1880. Kathryn F. Gorman, a reporter for the St. Paul Dispatch, had an interview in 1930 with Mr. Joe Thomas, an engineer still on the active list for the Minneapolis & St. Louis Railway. Mr. Thomas had been the engineer on the first M&StL train into Taylors Falls November 9, 1880. He had this to say on the opening of the new line.

"I remember that day well," Joe Thomas said down at the St. Paul Union Depot as he poked around the great locomotive he guides today. "And it was worth remembering. Here I was just twenty years old. The railroad was just new up here then, and I was carrying the most important men in St. Paul and Minneapolis over new track. The engine was wood fed and the way that fireman had to keep on the job would surprise one of them today. He was working every minute. It was only a short run to Taylors Falls, but in those days it was quite a jaunt, and I got \$3.25 for the work, I remember." he said smiling.

"For twelve years the people at the top of the St. Croix trade had been trying to get a railroad to come into the town and give them as modern a connection with the outside world as other small towns had, but building a road into a river town was a big risk and uncertain business all around so many companies promised, looked over the ground and then quickly withdrew. About this time that year," Joe Thomas said, "the crews were having a fine time up there trying to rush the job through. A spot called a rocktrap, three miles this side of Taylors Falls, made it hard going, but at that, they beat the contract. All during the hot August and September weather there were crews there building that stretch between Center City and Taylors Falls, but did you ever hear the story of that little piece of track?"

"It used to be common talk around here. The people up in that country were begging for a railroad. They didn't want to rely on the boats, when the other river towns were getting railroads to connect them with the bigger towns. So, after all kinds of bickering, the M&StL agreed to build a line direct from White Bear Lake to Taylors Falls. The work was started with the thought that crews should begin at both ends of the line and work toward the middle. Then the St. Paul & Duluth Company commenced to build a branch line out from their track at Wyoming. I guess they were going right along, too."

"In the spring, it was when I first came up here, the M&StL gave up their plan of the direct route from White Bear and got a permanent lease on the St. Paul & Duluth tracks from the Twin Cities to Center City and agreed to help with the construction from that point to the Falls. All the time the work was going on, there was an undercurrent of disagreement in the town and the people there were certain that they never would get a railroad into their city. But the construction went along all right until within three miles of the town a rocktrap, three miles long, was struck. The cost of laying track over the three miles was \$75,000, a huge investment for half a century ago. The twenty miles from Wyoming cost about \$250,000 and through this rocktrap there was a fifty foot grade to the mile."

"It was over this choice piece of track," Mr. Thomas said, "that I had to take that train loaded with all the famous people in the two cities. They were all going to Taylors Falls to help the citizens there properly celebrate the coming of the railroad. All the men were dressed up and the women in the St. Paul crowd had on beautiful winter clothes. It was in November, but there had been a light snowfall. There was just enough of winter tang in the air to make it pleasant riding. Coming into the town we could see all of the folks standing along the tracks ready to welcome us, and just as we drew up slowly the steam boat started to whistle us a greeting and we gave them three toots back. L.M. Stannard, president of the town council of Taylors Falls, made the welcoming speech and then the banqueting followed."

"But many of the women, and they were dressed up, too," Mr. Thomas said, "were more interested in the steam boats and the great rock formations around the river than in looking at the engine that pulled them. In the group that wandered down there was a young New York journalist who was a guest of the railroad at the celebration. His name was William H. Dunne and he was living in St. Paul at the time because of poor health. He went to Taylors Falls to write a glowing account of the first train pulling into the river town. But he was one of the men who, during the speeches, heard the sharp toots of the steamboat whistle and slipped away to see the river."

"We had a fine time," engineer Joe Thomas said, "getting that party together again after they had scattered all over those hills in the four or five hours we were standing there. Nobody seemed anxious to get back. Going out a little boat on the river whistled to us again. We made the trip back in shorter time than going up and I sure was glad to get that party off my hands."

"And on that day, November 9, 1880, when the first locomotive got to Taylors Falls, the team boat captains let themselves in for a fate they could never understand. They had helped to turn the busy St. Croix into an excursionist's river and made guides of themselves'

Now we turn back to the year 1948 where we left our story. We return to the train #726 crossing the trestles at MP 18 on #328 with engineer Slowinski on the last run to Taylors Falls. The train into Taylors Falls was met in its usual manner that day by depot agent Alfred Hobbs, who had been agent there for 37 years. Number 328, which had been a familiar sight on the branch for many years, was then turned on the old hand operated 56' turntable located about a mile north of the depot. The engine was then coupled back to its two car train.

The train left Taylors Falls as train #725 around 12:30 PM and headed west for Wyoming. The train made an unexpected stop after crossing trestle #18-2, and let a few shutter bugs off to record the event on film. The train then backed on the trestle and stopped for Harvey Westberg and newspaper photographer Russell Bull to photograph the train coming forward off the trestle, and then stopping for them to board again. Harvey got to ride in the engine.

Near the top of the hill they made a quick stop at Franconia to let off Mr. Vidcen. The train then stopped next at Shafer to let off a few passengers and then highballed to Center City to discharge some more. Departing there at 1:30 PM and then arriving at Lindstrom at 1:45 PM. they remained there long enough for Lindstrom passengers to get off and a few pictures to be taken by local town folks. The train departed at 2:10 PM and whistled off toward Chisago City. Just as the train left Lindstrom Ed Youngberg, depot agent with 35 years of service, stepped out of his office for a last look and then walked back into the agents office, sat down at the telegraph and called in his last report of when the train left there. The train made a quick stop at Chisago City to discharge some folks, then headed west to Wyoming and finally back up to Rush City as Extra #328, with just a few passengers on board. The last person to get off the train was A.M. Muttson of Rush City. Sixty-eight years of rail service to six small towns had ended.

July 8, 1948

The branch line train service from Wyoming to Taylors Falls is now a thing of the past, the last train run over the branch was June 30th. In spite of no previously planned celebration, 211 people took the last ride on the local filling the coach and box car to the brim. Many others were unable to get on.

The last train Wednesday consisted of the engine, one box car and a combination baggage and passenger coach. Charlie Olson, 83 year old lumber camp cook, Bill Leske of Taylors Falls, and Mrs. C.E. Carlson of Lindstrom as children were among the first passengers on the train when it came, bedecked with bunting, into Taylors Falls the first time in 1880, and were also on the last train, when it arrived Wednesday. The incoming train was met in its usual manner by Alfred Hobbs, who for 37 years has been agent at Taylors Falls.

The Standard Press