

Putting it together

Mile by mile, volunteers are rebuilding the Ulster & Delaware main line in the heart of the Catskill Mountains

Story and photos by Karl Zimmermann

Sept. 28, 1976: Earl Pardini was working his first paid railroad job, braking on Conrail's Catskill Mountain Branch from Shandaken to Stamford, N.Y., the western extent of operations at the time. The power for Pardini's train was GP38-2 No. 8098, still in its Penn Central livery (Conrail was less than half a year old). Pardini may have been beginning his career, but it was the apparent end for the storied Ulster & Delaware, on whose ancestral rails he was riding. On the locomotive's nose was a large sign that read, "Farewell. Last train serving the Catskills. 106 years. May 23, 1870–Sept. 28, 1976."

This was the final westbound move over the former Ulster & Delaware, though a clean-up eastbound would run the following week. Conrail had declined to operate the branch, and that should have been the end, *finis*. Happily, it wasn't. In 1979, Ulster County bought from Penn Central Corp. the 38.6 miles of the Catskill Mountain Branch that lay within its boundaries, and in 1980, seven on-line towns in Delaware and Schoharie counties acquired another 45 miles, conveying it to the Catskill Rail Committee. That non-profit agency, now called the Catskill Revitalization Corp., manages 26 miles of the branch that survive as the Catskill Scenic Trail and operates the tourist-hauling Delaware & Ulster Railroad over another portion of the line. (New York Central abandoned the westernmost 21 miles, west of Bloomville, in 1965.)

The Ulster & Delaware has a history far richer than might be suggested by its modest length: a main line that ran 107 miles through New York State's Catskill Mountains, and some of the most spectacular scenery in the East. Still, the line's moniker, "The Old Up and Down," was apt. Those mountains posed significant operating challenges and grades in excess of 3 percent. Chartered in 1866 as the Rondout & Oswego, the line reached Oneonta, N.Y., in 1900 as the Ulster & Delaware, and thrived hauling coal from the Delaware & Hudson Railroad at Oneonta to the Hudson River at Rond-



At the throttle of Catskill Mountain RS1 401, Earl Pardini returns to the railroad's Cornell Street shop in Kingston on Sept. 27, 2008.

out. In 1932, New York Central bought the Ulster & Delaware and designated it the Catskill Mountain Branch.

Backbreaking grades notwithstanding, the U&D was a high-speed modern railway, a conduit for Pennsylvania anthracite, which made up more than 70 percent of the traffic by 1903. Prodigious amounts of bluestone, quarried near West Hurley, left the mountains by rail, destined to form New York City's sidewalks, curbs, and structures until the use of concrete became popular. Luxurious passenger trains carried tourists to a cluster of elegant Catskill Mountain hotels. From Kingston Point to Phoenicia, the line had Automatic Block Signals, and speeds ranged up to 60 mph.





Calling all volunteers

Sept. 27, 2008: One day shy of 32 years after his last westbound run on the Catskill Mountain Branch, Pardini was in Kingston, N.Y., about to run over a portion of the line he once saw go fallow. Pardini was at the throttle of RS1 No. 401. Built in 1950 for the Illinois Terminal, the Alco passed from Gulf, Mobile & Ohio ownership to the Green Mountain Railroad, then in 1988 went to the Catskill Mountain Railroad, an organization that Pardini has led since fall 1983, the year after its founding.

Catskill Mountain is one of five groups that, bit by bit, are preserving the old Ulster & Delaware. Visitors who come to these mountains can ride more of the line every year or so, in kinship with travelers of a century ago who flocked to the Catskills in search of spectacular vistas, and cool, clean summer air.

Both the Catskill Mountain and Delaware & Ulster offer excursions over parts of the line, while the Empire State Railway Museum maintains the historic 1899 depot at Phoenicia (and is the non-profit counterpart to the Catskill Mountain, which is for-profit though without paid employees). The Ulster & Delaware Railroad Historical Society manages another depot museum at Roxbury, and

Catskill Mountain's Kingston Shuttle rolls west to Kingston Plaza on the first weekend of public service over newly restored track, Dec. 7, 2008, with a flatcar-turned-open-air car and an ex-PRR caboose.

in Kingston, the Trolley Museum of New York offers rides (though not electrified) toward Kingston Point on the Hudson.

On this autumn Saturday, Pardini and a small army of volunteers gathered to lay a siding to expand the storage capacity of Catskill Mountain's Cornell Street facility in Kingston. The shop was jam-packed with projects on Pardini's to-do list, notably an ex-Soo Line RS1 with a cracked engine block and two partially disassembled steam locomotives: Lake Superior & Ishpeming 2-8-0 No. 23 (acquired in 1985 from tourist-hauler Marquette & Huron Mountain) and a Davenport 0-4-0.

Pardini fired up the RS1, which coughed into unmistakable Alco life. Its presence was appropriate, since New York Central had dieselized the Catskill Mountain Branch with RS1s in 1948. Sixteen volunteers and a visiting journalist piled into the diesel's cab or onto the trailing ex-Pennsylvania Railroad N5b caboose. We were headed to lunch about a mile and a half west over trackage that the group was readying for public operation in less than eight weeks.

"For the last two years we've been rehabilitating about a mile of



A Catskill Mountain track car and trailer ply a dormant stretch of the line along the Ashokan Reservoir on Oct. 12, 2008. The railroad hopes to offer excursions here in the future.



Catskill Mountain volunteers use a backhoe to replace ties during the Kingston trackage restoration in December 2006. Ernie Hunt

track each year," explains Ernie Hunt, Catskill Mountain's volunteer coordinator, "but we're getting better at it and now are able to pick up the pace, perhaps to two miles a year. My job is to get people to show up." He's obviously good at it. Three years ago the roster of volunteers numbered roughly 40; today about 130 come to assist. A threat to the railroad's future helped draw new members: In 2006, a "rails with trails" initiative surfaced, which, though coexistence is the ostensible goal, raised the specter that the tracks could be ripped up and the right-of-way paved. (The tracks are still in place from Kingston all the way to Phoenicia and beyond, about 60 miles in all.) Catskill Mountain's official position is that the trail is fine as long as it doesn't interfere with train operations.

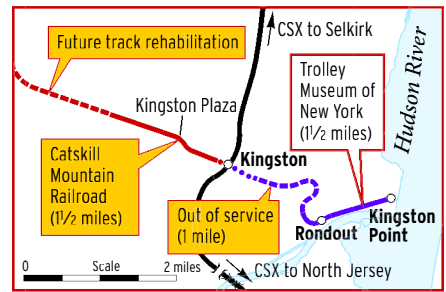
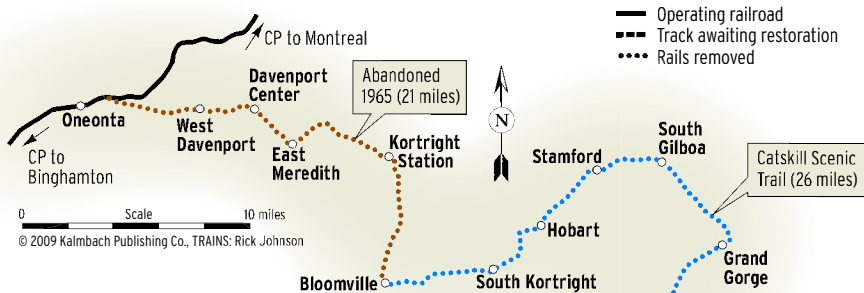
"The generosity of some of the businesspeople in the area keep this railroad going," adds Ron Epstein, Catskill Mountain's assistant

to the director of public relations. "Take Baker Brothers, which gave us more than 7 tons of stone ballast." Eventually, the group hopes to link its Kingston facility with Catskill Mountain's long-established excursion operation at Phoenicia, 22 miles distant.

The Phoenicia trips began modestly in 1982, using a Chicago & North Western track car to pull several ex-Vermont Railway crew-car trailers for tubers, rafters, and kayakers over 2.8 miles of track along Esopus Creek, whose fast-running waters provided transportation in the opposite direction. Now, a quarter-century later, passengers can ride for 6 miles, between Phoenicia and Cold Brook, in an open-air car or a restored ex-Delaware, Lackawanna & Western M.U. trailer from the 1920s. The train is generally pulled by a curious critter nicknamed "The Goat." No. 29, an ex-U.S. Navy 50-ton side-rod diesel built by Porter in 1942.

It's doubtful there'd be a Catskill Mountain Railroad at all without Pardini's 30-plus years of dedication. At first glance, Pardini doesn't seem like a mover and shaker. Gentle and soft-spoken, pony-tailed and mustachioed, he is a square-dance caller and plays the accordion and fiddle, generally accompanied by his wife, Mimi, on guitar or dulcimer. At work, he sports a brown fedora rather than a traditional engineer's cap.

"I've done enough railroading in my life," Pardini says. "For me, this is all about people working together, and about teaching and learning." Pardini moved from train to engine service in 1979, and after that worked virtually all of Conrail's (later CSX's) eastern lines. He finished close to home in Kingston on CSX's River Subdivision, the former New York Central West Shore line that once fed the Catskill Mountain Branch its New York City-area traffic. Pardini retired in January 2008, but he's still very much a railroader and can be found on the right-hand seat box of the Delaware River Railroad's 2-8-2 No. 142 — sometimes sharing the cab with Mimi, a student



fireman. Pardini brings an invaluable professionalism to the Catskill Mountain.

"We've made becoming a volunteer formal, with a written application and a trial period," Pardini says. "We have a rules class, and you need an 85 to pass." (Catskill Mountain follows NORAC, the Northeast Operating Rules Advisory Committee standards that govern railroad operations throughout the East.) "We do all the mainline stuff," he says. "People have a sense of accomplishment, and stay." Pardini is well-equipped for this responsibility, since he served as rules examiner for the New York, Susquehanna & Western Railway, and as a Conrail road foreman.

Much of Catskill Mountain's restoration work in the past few years has focused on starting a shuttle operation at Kingston Plaza, a city shopping center that offers good access and visibility. The group plans to run trains during the major holidays and for special weekends. The goal was to kick off service on Dec. 6, 2008, hence the activity last fall.

"We've gotten a reputation for making things out of nothing," says Greg Vaughn, a recently retired CSX dispatcher who brings additional professionalism to the group. Under the guidance of railroaders like Pardini and Vaughn, the volunteer workforce has developed the expertise to rehabilitate track, and restore and run trains. As Pardini sailed past with the RS1 and caboose, several volunteers flagged grade crossings. Not long ago this trackage had been buried under brush up to eight feet high. Workers attacked it with an armada of serious track equipment: not just a weed whacker, sickle bar cutter, and backhoe, but also a ballast regulator (ex-Rutland Railroad), a tie handler, scarefire/tie inserter, and pneumatic tamper (all Fairmont products), a Badger Gradall, and more.

In 2009, Catskill Mountain's restoration army will push west from the plaza, though near the Kingston town line they'll encounter a significant obstacle: Bridge C9, which will cost an estimated \$750,000 to repair. You have to assume that somehow they'll find a way to press on.

"We send our workers home dirty and with a sense of accomplishment," says Tom Healy, a yardmaster with the New York City Transit Authority and Catskill Mountain volunteer for 18 years. "The hotels are all gone, the quarries, virtually all the dairy farms, all gone," Healy says. "The railroad is really the only tie with the past."

"It's a miracle it's still here," adds Ernie Hunt.

A day of celebration

Oct. 11, 2008: Corridor Preservation Day. A day of celebration for the old U&D was held in Arkville, N.Y., headquarters for the

Ron Epstein shows off the link and pin unearthed by volunteers installing a new siding at the Cornell Street facility in Kingston.



tourist-hauling Delaware & Ulster Railroad. The day was organized by the Ulster & Delaware Railroad Historical Society, a chapter of the National Railway Historical Society and one of the groups working toward a grand long-term goal of opening all 74 miles of the U&D from Kingston Point to Stamford.

The day began at Highmount, a few miles east of Arkville and once the site of the splendid but now long-gone Grand Hotel. Participants boarded track cars to ride east over dormant trackage down the 3.2-percent grade through the Pine Hill horseshoe curves. With

autumn leaf-fall and morning dew, the track cars struggled mightily on the upgrade return, much as the doubleheaded 4-6-0s (with a third pushing on the rear) might have done a century earlier with the *Day Liner* from Kingston Point, filled with Catskill-bound vacationers. Later, a few lucky raffle winners rode west from Highmount down the 3.08-percent grade to Arkville, where the Delaware & Ulster excursions began.

The D&U boasts the longest stretch of currently active ex-U&D trackage: 11 miles, from Arkville to (on special occasions) Kirkside Park, just beyond Roxbury, where most regular trips end. When excursions began in June 1983, the D&U ran east four miles to Fleischmann's, then later added three more miles to Grand Hotel. (Pardini was at the throttle for those early runs.) In 1997, operations shifted to the more scenic and grade-free line west to Roxbury. This portion paral-



lels the East Branch of the Delaware River and takes passengers to the Roxbury Depot Museum, a project of the Ulster & Delaware Railroad Historical Society.

The Roxbury depot dates from the railroad's opening and is a remarkably fortuitous example of inadvertent preservation. Not long after passenger service ended in 1954, New York Central closed the station. In time, it was purchased for office space and storage by Lutz Feed and Lumber and completely enclosed, platforms and all, in a corrugated metal shell in order to increase usable square footage. Later it served as an auto body shop. In 2000, the historical society acquired it and, four years later, opened it as a museum. Restoration is ongoing, and someday the shell will be shed like a chrysalis and an astonishing butterfly will emerge.

For Corridor Preservation Day, the Delaware & Ulster ran two trains. One was an approximation of a Catskill Mountain Branch local: a pair of ex-Pennsylvania Railroad MP-54 M.U. cars painted green and lettered "New York Central," pulled by black Alco S4 No. 5106 (built in 1953 for Chesapeake & Ohio). The other train was the *Rip Van Winkle Flyer*, pulled by RS36 No. 5017 in the elegant livery of the Delaware & Hudson, the railroad that bought the engine in 1963. Behind the Alco was a fluted, stainless-steel, all-Budd-built streamliner, featuring ex-New York Central parlor-observation No. 61, one of 13 NYC sisters from 1948, and a dome-diner that began life as a Missouri Pacific dome coach. These cars, plus an ex-Rock Island tavern handsomely decked out in mahogany, came to the D&U in 2004 after the demise of *The Acadian*, which ran one season, in 2002, in New England and Eastern Canada.

"These cars are like thoroughbred racehorses retired to the Catskills," says Dave Riordan, Catskill Revitalization Corp.'s executive director. Filling out the train was an ex-Seaboard Coast Line

Alcos have found a home on this line since New York Central days. Penn Central fielded RS32 No. 2044 on this westbound local west of Halcottville, N.Y., in May 1970. John C. Stellwagen

diner, on the property virtually from the beginning, and an ex-Santa Fe baggage car fitted with a power generator. The consist operates as a "dinner train," but mostly at lunchtime to accommodate the bus-tour charters that account for the bulk of the D&U's business. Food is cooked off-train and finished on board.

Business on the regular "retail" excursions took a dive in 2008, as did Catskill tourism generally, but the luncheon charters booked "beyond our expectations," Riordan says, and 2009 looks to be even better. (The railroad is a non-profit but does have paid employees.) Though more riders board the regular excursions, the luncheon charters provide the lion's share of the revenue. And 2009 may bring another kind of growth to the D&U.

"We hope to reopen the line to Highmount," Riordan says. "The funding is in place. Basically, all we have to do is fix a slump about a mile from Arkville. Our real hope is to get beyond Highmount and down to Pine Hill, through the horseshoe curves."

The next morning I joined Pardini, Hunt, and Harry Jameson, Catskill Mountain's chair-

man and director of public relations, for a trip from Cold Brook (the end of trips from Phoenicia) aboard one of the trailers that carried rafters in the railroad's first year. With Tom Healy at the controls of his 1972 Fairmont M19 track car, we headed for the pristine Ashokan Reservoir. After years of water shortages, New York City in 1907 finalized plans to dam the Esopus and create the Ashokan Reservoir, inundating villages and 11 miles of the Ulster & Delaware between West Hurley and Boiceville. Both towns and railroad were relocated at city expense, with the newly aligned U&D opening in 1913.

Almost immediately after leaving Cold Brook, we crossed the



Delaware & Ulster S4 No. 5106 crosses the Batavia Kill near Kelly's Corners pulling the Catskill Mountain Branch local.



Delaware & Ulster RS36 No. 5017 runs around the Rip Van Winkle Flyer (with ex-NYC observation car No. 61) at Roxbury. An O&W business car lurks within the gray building on the right.

Boiceville Bridge, a \$3 million fly in the restoration ointment for excursion trains, but no problem for a track car and trailer, then followed the north shore of the Ashokan. (The original right-of-way was somewhere under the reservoir's waters.) The track we rode was remarkably intact, considering its three-decade-long slumber, and easily navigable, thanks to stalwart brush-cutting efforts of the volunteers. At one point, a washout required us to walk while Healy eased his motor car over skeletonized track. As we walked, Pardini pointed out one of the relocation's original pitch-pine ties and original rails, without tie plates in some cases. He took out a knife and sliced off a sliver of tie. The pine resin was remarkably pungent after nearly a century in place. The entire scene, blazing with fall foliage, screamed "tourism potential."

A dream fulfilled

Dec. 6, 2008: Pardini was at the throttle again, but not before he welcomed an enthusiastic crowd to the grand opening of the Kingston Shuttle. The 401, the caboose, and a roofed open passenger car were decorated with Christmas lights, and Santa Claus was aboard. This equipment, and a former Army side-dump gondola freshly painted in black (with help from local high school students) made up the consist of the first passenger train to operate over this stretch of track since 1954. Some 160 fare-paying adults and children rode the train that day.

"We've been working on this section of track here, about a mile and a half of it, getting it restored, for about three years, and this is a wonderful culmination of all that energy," Pardini says. "At least 10,000 hours of volunteer time have been put in, and everybody comes with a happy heart and has a great time."

The full scope of the ambitious plans promoted by Pardini and his army of volunteers, and Riordan and his D&U team, might seem a pipe dream; surely their completion will be a long slog, and chances are they may never all be realized. But today I see a lovely red caboose that, years ago when it was on display in Newburgh, N.Y., had been set on fire by homeless people living in it; now it's fully serviceable, radiating warmth from a New York, Ontario & Western stove provided by Catskill Mountain volunteer (and O&W devotee) Jeff Otto. I see the tiny but snug Westbrook ticket office and boarding platform at Kingston Plaza where weeks before there had been nothing. I see a passenger car that's sprung from a pile of boards. I see a pair of rare diesels, an RS1 and a Porter 50-tonner, looking glamorous as can be.

"Opening the Kingston operation was a long-needed boost to our visibility and presence," says CMRR Chairman Jameson. "With it, we're in our best position ever." Newly elected County Executive Mike Hein could help, too. "Hein sees his first job to be stimulating the local economy," Jameson adds, "and he's been open to learning what the Catskill Mountain Railroad requires to grow."

Riordan, craving the easier access to the New York State Thruway for the tour buses that feed his dinner train, has expressed

interest in trucking the *Rip Van Winkle Flyer* to Kingston once Catskill Mountain reopens track to the Ashokan reservoir. Perhaps someday you'll be able to board at Kingston and ride the *Flyer* all the way to Roxbury, where the depot will look as smart as the day it was built. Possibilities abound, as do hurdles, but the Catskills don't seem to lack energetic dreamers. **I**

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This 50-ton Porter powers Catskill Mountain trains between Mount Pleasant and Phoenicia on Oct. 12, 2008.