

The Train Comes To Chatham

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

by spencer grey

The Old Colony Railroad Company was formed on March 16, 1844, to serve points in southeastern Massachusetts, operating trains that served the area including Cape Cod. In 1893 it was acquired by the New York, New Haven, and Hartford Railroad Company, which continued to provide service from Boston to Falmouth, Hyannis, and Harwich.

In 1886 the Chatham Railroad Company was chartered to build seven miles of track from Harwich to connect Chatham to The Old Colony system. The track and stations were completed during 1887, with mail, lumber, grain, and coal being shipped in and mail, fish, shellfish and cranberries being shipped out. At the same time four passenger cars were added to the system to carry residents and visitors between Chatham and Boston beginning that year.

After 20 years of waiting in excited anticipation by the people of Chatham, the whole town was in its most festive dress on a Monday in June 1887 to celebrate the opening of train service by the Chatham Railroad. The imposing station was decked out in bunting and surrounded by a horde of excited townspeople. One lady at the event was wide-eyed by its significance, saying, "I'd as quick to think of a railroad getting to heaven as to Chatham." The first train to reach the station had arrived at 7:50 the previous Saturday evening with about a dozen passengers on board. Another had pulled into the station at 6:50 Monday morning with 25 or 30 passengers.

At that point the town was in full carnival spirit with free trains running to and from Harwich loaded with passengers "from the cowcatcher to the rear platform." While some people got off in Harwich, others stayed on board all day, riding back and forth. At noon a train consisting of six cars was jammed full. The next train was even more tightly full, with passengers squeezed into every available spot, and persons either sitting, standing or leaning in all imaginable positions, with an average of about five to a seat, making up a total of 700 or more. Passengers were landed at South Chatham, South Harwich, and Harwich Center, but at every stop about two were added for everyone who debarked.

For the following 50 years the train was the primary means of transportation for Cape Cod in general and Chatham in particular. There were trains to Boston every day in the morning and in the afternoon, and trains from Boston to Chatham at noon and in the evening. On weekends during the summer the trains were eight to 10 cars long and included one or two parlor cars. As the train pulled into the depot an express company wagon and a mail wagon were waiting to pick up their goods; during the summer months there also were barges from each of the hotels, as well as public barges to take summer residents to their Chatham homes. The barges were covered by a roof and their sides had canvas or leather curtains that could be closed in inclement weather. Passengers entered through the rear of the barge by a set of narrow steps and place their luggage in racks on either side.

The driver was Parker Nickerson, who wore a red wig to cover his bald head, but only on Sundays and holidays. Along with his son, Allie, he took passengers to their homes, where they stayed throughout the season, as most of them had no other regular means of transportation, which was not a problem, as both local stores, Atwoods and Bearses, delivered whatever one ordered in the store or by telephone, which became available in the 1920s.

Most families had one or two horses used only to pull their carriages or barges. Very few people rode on horseback but instead walked wherever they needed to go.

