

## **Boston To Chatham, Early 20th Century**

### **AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE**

**by spencer grey**

Before 1887 Chatham residents traveling any distance relied on Simeon Nickerson's stage coach to take them to nearby locations, including to Harwich, where they could board a train to Boston, but by 1887 Chatham had its own depot providing trains to Harwich and Yarmouth, as well as two trains to Boston daily and two returning, a two-hour trip when trains were on time.

The trains were pulled by small engines that were powered by steam created by coal fires in the coal car immediately behind the engine, where two husky men shoveled coal into the furnace, stopping only when necessary to catch their breath or take an occasional break. The stack on the front of the engine was mounted by a smoke stack that had a boxy lantern on top that was lighted by kerosene. With a large reflector behind the kerosene flame, the light was thrown ahead to illuminate the way and hopefully spot any obstruction. On top of the engine, between the smoke stack and the engineer's cab, was a bell that was operated by a rope connecting it to the cab. For more important and louder warnings, there was a steam whistle at the very front of the engine that was operated by steam and made an unmistakable "whoop, whoop" whenever the cord was pulled.

The conductors were important members of the train crew, as they not only collected tickets but also tended to the needs of the passengers. Their status on the train was indicated by their formal uniform of a Prince Albert coat with tails, a clean white shirt with a stiff collar and a black bow tie, topped by a cap with a brass plaque above the brim with "Conductor" prominently displayed.

Passenger cars varied depending on the length of the trip and the luxury desired. Most local trains had a combination passenger and baggage car, divided by a partition between the two. Each car was heated by a stove in one corner that burned coal, often filling it with unpleasant coal fumes and smoke. Lighting was provided by kerosene lanterns lining the walls or hanging from the ceiling. For longer trips, such as to Boston, cars varied, depending on the season. On summer weekends trains would be eight or ten cars long, with one or two of them being parlor cars, where the more affluent passengers could relax in the comfort of large padded and upholstered chairs. Cars on these lines were heated by steam radiators rather than by a stove.

Passengers traveling only on day trips usually walked from the depot to their homes or were met by a member of the family with a horse and wagon. Summer residents arriving with considerable baggage were met by Parker Nickerson with his barge to take them to their homes. All of the summer hotels provided their own barges to pick up guests arriving by train. The barge was long and narrow and covered by a wooden roof with canvas sides that could be pulled down in the event of rain or during cold weather. They were long and narrow with a bench on each side and the entrance at the rear, where they were accessed by narrow wooden steps that were pulled up when passengers were in place. Everyone arrived by train until automobiles became prevalent around 1920. During most of that period the barges were operated by Parker Nickerson, who was bald, but most people were not aware of that because he wore a wig, a gray one for week days and a red one for Sundays and holidays.

By 1930 automobiles became more comfortable and capable of transporting people long distances. But roads were only two lanes wide and twisted and turned making travel by that means somewhat slower than the trains. Nevertheless most people began to prefer the privacy and comfort of their own vehicles to train cars that could

be crowded and often smoky, as smoking was allowed in all cars, which even had conveniently located scratch pads between windows to light the smokers' matches.

As more and more people acquired their own automobiles, the trains became less popular, so that by 1937 service to Chatham ended, making Harwich the nearest stop, and by the end of the Second World War, the last stop was Yarmouth.

Travel by automobile also had its perils in the early years, as tires were subject to frequent blowouts, making it advisable to carry several spares. Another hazard was overheating, resulting in the radiator boiling over, which made it necessary to stop until the engine cooled. In the 1930s the Ford Model A, which was popular at that time, was particularly prone to the problem, especially when climbing hills. On the trip from Boston to Cape Cod, making it over Manomat Hill on old Route 3 in Plymouth presented one of the most formidable challenges.

Before the suspension bridges over the Cape Cod Canal were opened in the mid '30s, another common delay was the opening of the draw bridge to allow a ship to pass. But for children it was a treat to get out of the waiting car and run to watch the vessel go by.

All this changed when under President Eisenhower, a national highway system was built, making travel faster and easier but far less colorful and picturesque.

