

# New “Oil Trains”, Old Oil Trains: Lessons Worth Learning

---

by Richard L. Beadles

Volume IV, No. 12. June 30, 2012

Occasionally, current rail news reminds us of the past and provides grist for the “futures” mill. But then, there’s not much that’s really new in an industry operating in its third century.

A recent RAILWAY AGE news brief reported that Phillips 66 is, or may be, acquiring 2,000 new rail tank cars to move oil from North Dakota to refineries on both coasts. Out of nowhere comes a new oil transportation requirement. Haven’t we seen that movie before?

This brings to mind the remarkable performance of the U.S rail industry during 1942-1943 [when railroads were still full-service transportation companies]. German U-Boats had essentially driven domestic coastal tankers from the Atlantic, and there was not yet in place the famous “Big Inch” pipeline to help move the daily requirement of 1.5 million barrels of oil from the Texas Gulf Coast to the Northeast. Railroads – which had been handling less than one-third-of-one percent of that volume -- were called upon to come to the rescue. About 20,000 idle rail tank cars were immediately activated, and in about a year a fleet of 154,000 rail cars was moving almost one billion gallons of petroleum product to the East each and every day.

To do that job, every conceivable combination of rail routing was utilized, including at least three (3) direct Virginia routes that today no longer exist: the former Seaboard Air Line Railroad routes between Raleigh and Richmond, and Raleigh and Portsmouth, and the original Norfolk & Southern between Raleigh and Norfolk, each of which was used extensively for these critically-important shipments (the Hampton Roads routes, in particular, serving the U.S. Navy).

The volumes of oil cited above are tiny in comparison with the market requirements of today, but sadly, today’s marginalized railroads could not even do today what they did for the Country in 1942-1943. America, more than ever, runs on oil, and we still have enemies who study history. Currently, there appears to be more interest on the part of

the public in turning railroads into recreational trails than there is in preserving irreplaceable rail transportation corridors. We hope that some of the public policy makers, and their constituents, who recently gathered to congratulate themselves on the new “High Bridge State Park”, took the opportunity to question whether we should have preserved the rails and added a trail? The two are compatible with proper physical separation and liability protection of the private railroad companies. The State of Virginia could have made that happen. What a missed opportunity!

For more on the WWII story, see S. Kipp Farrington’s 1944 Railroads at War. For part of the High Bridge rail-to-trail story, see NS’ 2004-2005 rail “exemption” application to the STB, relative to abandonment of 38-mile line,, Burkville-Farmville-Pamplin..

It is never too late to learn from our missed opportunities!

# # # #