

“SUSQUEHANNA,” Pride of the Fish Commission

by Jay Osman and Tim Klinger

Like clockwork, they are there. Early in the year, every year, the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission’s “great white fleet” of stocking trucks can be seen replenishing Pennsylvania’s waterways with a fresh supply of brook, brown, rainbow, and golden rainbow trout. It’s hard to imagine this process done any other way. Stocking trucks are highly specialized vehicles operated by skilled fish culturists with one objective—get the fish into their designated waterways alive and well.

Believe it or not, they found a way to stock fish before the now indispensable stocking truck was used. The method of transportation? The railroad. Before the turn of the century, before the automobile and the stocking truck, the two main modes of transportation were horse and buggy, and the railroad. For stocking fish, horse and buggy worked fine for short distances from hatcheries to nearby streams. However, there also was a need to transport fish greater distances. Enter the railroads.

Messenger system

Beginning in the 1870s, fish culturists with the now U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USF&WS) devised a simple method of transporting fish in milk cans. Rail baggage cars were used and hatchery “messengers” accompanied the fish to their final destinations. The messengers’ primary concern, like today’s culturists, was to keep the fish alive and healthy. Messengers did not have today’s sophisticated equipment at their disposal. Their options were limited to adding ice to cool the water, manually aerating the water using ladles, or completely exchanging the water in the milk cans. It wasn’t too long before Pennsylvania and other states adopted this uncomplicated and very successful “messenger system.”

The fledgling Pennsylvania Fish Commission (as it was called until 1991) had two hatcheries in operation in the 1880s, the Western hatchery at Corry and the new Eastern hatchery at Emmaus (this replaced the Commission’s first hatchery, which was located in Marietta). With rapid advancements in fish culture, hatcheries were continually producing more and more fish. As expansion continued, the limita-

tions of the messenger system became apparent. The railroads liked having fish stocked in waterways near their tracks and transported the fish free of charge. However, paying customers were still their first priority. After all the freight, passengers, and their baggage were loaded, messengers and milk

cans filled with fish occupied whatever space remained. Keeping fish alive under these conditions was tenuous at best, and many times passengers were solicited to aid in this task. It was obvious that the Pennsylvania Fish Commission needed a railcar to call its own.



June 1892, railroad tracks adjacent to Walnut and 6th Streets, Harrisburg. Person in photo is probably William E. Meehan, who later became President of the Fish Commission.

The “Susquehanna”

As early as 1887, Corry superintendent William Buller identified the need to purchase a railcar. After convincing the Pennsylvania Board of Fish Commissioners (as it was called then), funds were requested, and the Pennsylvania Legislature of 1891 appropriated \$5,000 (nearly 1/3 of that year’s entire Commission budget) for a “fish car.” In December 1891, four members of the board met with USF&WS officials in Washington, D.C., to get ideas and tour one of their cars. Specifications for the fish car were soon finalized, a manufacturer was found, and on June 5, 1892, the brand new fish car “Susquehanna” rolled into Harrisburg for the first time.

The car was built by Jackson and Sharp of Wilmington, Delaware, one of the world’s leading railcar manufacturers of that era. The olive-green wooden car was 64 feet long and 10 feet wide. It could transport up to 84 10-gallon fish cans. The June 7, 1892, Harrisburg’s *The Patriot* described the car as “well constructed and very attractive.” The story went on to detail the interior: “On either side of the main portion of the car are tanks filled with water in which the cans containing the fish are placed. The water in these tanks is kept cool by means of cold air from a refrigerator on each side at one end of the car. It is fitted up with a kitchen, sleeping apartment, wardrobe and office, and is a model of convenience.”

The Patriot further proclaimed it to be “superior to the car of the United States Fish Commission in the way of better tanks and more commodious sleeping compartments.” The car was on display for several



Corry superintendent William Buller

days in Harrisburg, and according to *The Patriot*, "admired by large crowds since its arrival in the city."

After its short stint in Harrisburg, the "Susquehanna" was delivered to the Corry hatchery on June 9. Although it was used by all of the Commission's hatcheries of that era, Corry became its home base.

Stocking

Black bass, known today as smallmouth bass, had the honor of being the first species of fish stocked from the Susquehanna. Many other species followed, including brook trout, brown trout, California (rainbow) trout, lake trout, hybrid (brook and brown cross) trout, largemouth black bass, strawberry bass (black crappies), rock bass, white bass, walleyes, carp, shad, and more.

Stocking allocations were handled differently in the early days of the Fish Commission. Any person could request fish for stocking by "making application" to one of the commissioners. If accepted, an order was sent to one of the hatcheries. If they used the "Susquehanna," the appropriate

fish would be loaded into fish cans at the hatchery and delivered to the car by horse and buggy. The fish, usually fry or fingerlings, were delivered to the applicant at a predetermined meeting place. It was the applicant's responsibility to distribute the fish into streams, lakes, or other waterways by any means available. When the car was not occupied with delivering fish for stocking, it was put to good use transferring fish between hatcheries.

As it turned out, stocking and transferring fish were not the only duties of the new railcar. The "Susquehanna" was used in two world's fairs, the Columbian Exhibition in Chicago in 1893 and the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis in 1904. During both fairs, the "Susquehanna" was instrumental in transporting the Pennsylvania Fish Commission's exhibits, including live fish. The exhibits won awards and accolades, and in 1904 won "grand prize" for its live fish display. The car was originally to be part of the Commission's exhibit in St. Louis, but proved to be more valuable as a means of keeping the display replenished with live and healthy fish for the duration of the fair.

Expensive venture

Operating and maintaining a wooden railcar was an expensive proposition, and after only a few years problems began to surface. In preparation for the Chicago World's Fair, an overhaul of the car cost over \$1,500. Sometimes, when the car was returned from a stocking trip, a bill from the railroad was also presented for repairs made along the way. They deemed the repairs necessary to bring the car up to safety codes. To compound the problem, as early as 1895, some railroads began charging a fee of \$ 0.20 per mile. Money was tight in the 1890s and it was difficult to get funds appropriated for routine maintenance, much less any extra for these unanticipated charges. The car was used less and less until it was practically

not used at all. In 1896 it was removed from under cover at the railroad yard in Kane, where it was stored while not in use, further exposing it to the elements.

Its condition continued to deteriorate. In the 1899 *Report of the Commissioners*, William Buller said, "It is in a deplorable state, and exposed constantly to the weather. Twice tramps have broken in, and used it as a roosting place until driven out." Buller's pleas for additional money during the waning years of the 19th century went unheeded. Through no fault of its own, the beginning of the end was underway for the "Susquehanna."



USF&WS Bureau of Fisheries train car #3.
Most likely the car toured by Commissioners in 1891.

The Fish Commission again began to rely on the messenger system to transport and stock fish. Things had gone full circle. Ironically, the "Susquehanna" was succeeded by the system that it had replaced just a few short years earlier. The car was used so infrequently that a barn was erected specifically to house the now derailed "Susquehanna" at the recently built Bellefonte hatchery. In 1905, the "Susquehanna" was delivered to the "car barn," its final resting place while owned by the Commission.

The next nine years were filled with contradiction and indecision. As the car continued to see little use because of insufficient funds, commissioners paradoxically considered purchasing one, or even two, additional cars. At the same time, the messenger system was still used extensively. Plans for additional cars were ultimately abandoned.

Sealed fate

After seeing two world's fairs, and crisscrossing the Commonwealth to stock hundreds of waterways with literally millions of fish, the fate of the "Susquehanna" was sealed. In 1913, the Commission requested permission from the Legislature to dispose of the car. One year later, the car was turned over to the Board of Buildings and Grounds, and sold. The Commission would continue using the messenger system.

The end of one era and the beginning of another was at hand. The demise of the fish car reflected a greater movement. The automobile had already begun to take the place of the once mighty railroad as the primary mode of transportation. The Fish Commission was not immune to this transition. In 1927, a fleet of brand new stocking trucks was purchased and dispatched to Commission hatcheries to distribute fish to waterways throughout the Commonwealth.

The final disposition of the Susquehanna is unknown. So, if you are about to cross the railroad tracks on the way to your favorite fishing hole, be sure to stop, look and listen. Just maybe, coming down the tracks through the morning mist, you'll catch a glimpse of an olive-green railcar with gold trim and the name "Susquehanna" on its side. If you do, give us a call. ☐

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