

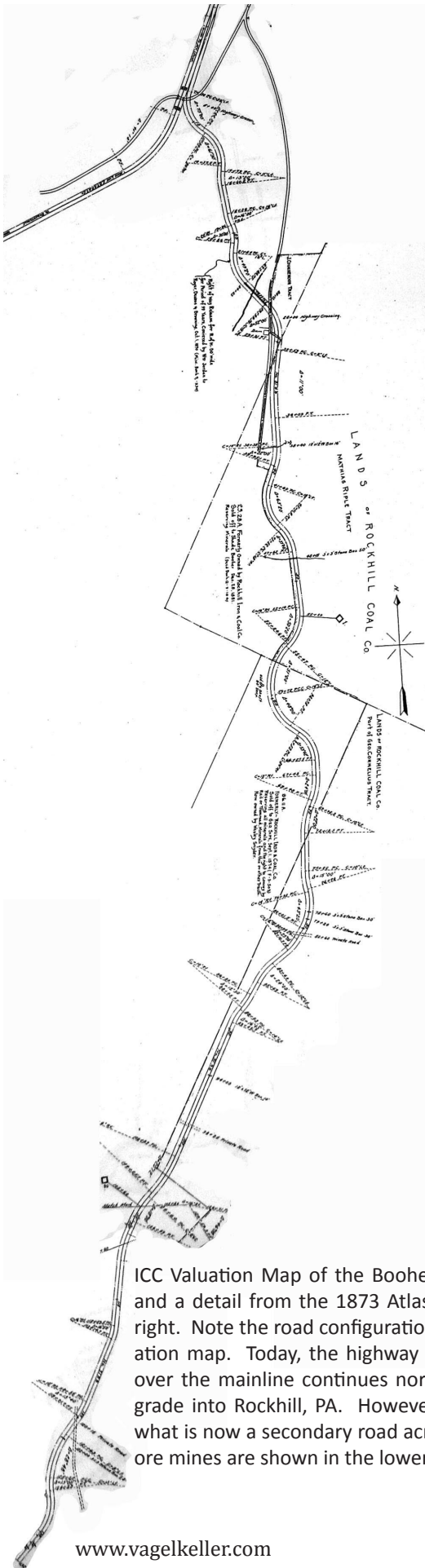
The Booher Branch Railway

by Vagel Keller

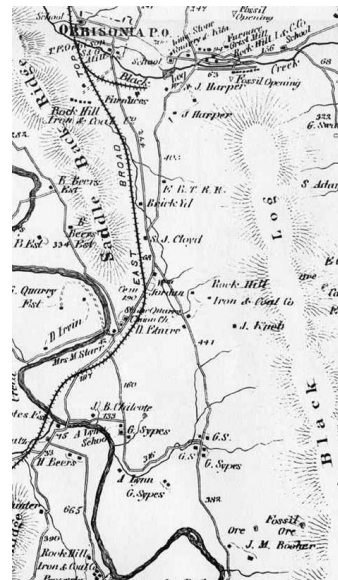
The Booher Branch Railway was the least successful of the four branch lines to be built as separate entities and then operated under lease by the East Broad Top Railroad. The reason for the lack of success was that, alone among the four, it's sole reason for being was the to serve an iron ore mine that opened on the eve of the financial panic of 1893, which idled its client blast furnace at Rockhill, and didn't get back into full operation until the eve of the financial panic of 1907, which put an end to iron making at Rockhill. Unlike the Shade Gap Branch, the EBT's other leased railroad initially built primarily to bring iron ore from Shade Valley to the Rockhill Furnaces, there were no secondary sources of viable traffic once iron production ceased.

According to Rainey and Kyper's definitive *East Broad Top* (Golden West Books, 1984) [out of print], a partnership of "Royer, Dewees, and Browning" opened the Booher Mine on their property as early as 1889 and built a tram road called the Booher Branch Railway at a cost of \$11,000. The branch diverged to the east of the East Broad Top's mainline a short distance north of Jordan Summit, not far south of the Rockhill Yard. SEE Map. The East Broad Top's annual reports to the State Secretary of Internal Affairs indicate that operations began over the line in 1891, when the "Booher Branch Railway extended from [Jordan] Junction to Booher Mine, 2.36 mi and operated under lease by EBT." *East Broad Top* provides the additional information that "the line usually saw two mixed round trips a day."

Operations on the Booher Branch were short lived, as the Panic of 1893 idled the blast furnace in May and by August the Board of Directors' meeting minutes recorded, "no business done on the Booher Branch during the month." The branch remained intact, however, as the branch remained under the heading of leased lines in the EBT's annual reports to the State with the notation, "Not now in operation," for several years. At some point during the ensuing decade, though, an unknown party removed the rails.



ICC Valuation Map of the Booher Branch, ca. 1917, at left, and a detail from the 1873 Atlas of Cromwell Township, at right. Note the road configuration at the top of the ICC valuation map. Today, the highway crossing from west to east over the mainline continues north on the west side of the grade into Rockhill, PA. However, the overpass still carries what is now a secondary road across the grade. The Booher ore mines are shown in the lower, right of the 1873 map.



When the market for pig iron improved in 1902 the Rockhill Furnaces went back into blast, operated by the newly-formed Rockhill Furnace Company, comprising some of the shareholders of the Rockhill Iron & Coal Company, which leased the property to the new firm. According to *East Broad Top*, "it had been intended to reopen the Booher Branch and use a large stock of fossil ore on hand at the Booher Mine, but this plan was soon dropped" while attempts were made to negotiate a new lease and trackage rights to the Shade Valley ore mine at Nancy. As well, the overwhelming proportion of ore now came from the rich deposits in the Great Lakes region via lake steamer and the Pennsylvania Railroad interchange at Mt. Union.

Then a dispute with the owner of the Nancy mine led the furnace company to turn its attention back to the Booher Mine. But delays in rehabilitating the branch and in getting the mine facilities at Booher back into operational condition kept the branch from realizing its full potential until it was almost too late to matter. Work on the Booher Branch had begun over the Winter of 1902-03, as the weekly Huntingdon Globe reported on April 2, 1903, "The track on the Booher branch to the Booher mines has been relaid for the purpose of hauling ore to the furnace." The rails were steel, according to a report in the *Globe* during the dismantlement of the line eight years later. But only after the Nancy operation fizzled in December 1904 did Dr. W. T. Browning, by now apparently the sole owner of the mine, take steps to reopen it. The *Huntingdon Globe* on the Twenty-second of that month informed its readers that the mine would be "in charge of Thomas N. Puckey, who [was] cleaning out the cross cut and getting the mine in shape." In January 1906, although the track to the mine was "in good condition," according to the *Globe*, "the work of getting the mine in shape" was still not done. For reasons unknown Mr. Puckey was unable to begin ore shipments until May, and "several more months were required to reach ... full capacity of a thousand tons a month," as recorded in *East Broad Top*.

The EBT operated the restored Booher Branch "under contract based on certain price per ton of iron ore hauled over the road, less cost of repairs to road," according to its annual report to the State for 1906, and the mine eventually employed enough commuting miners to justify restoring passenger service on the line, as the *Globe* duly reported on November 22.

The good times lasted only a year. The Panic of 1907 struck in October of that year, bringing on another collapse in the market for pig iron, and the periodic notes in the *Globe* on the status of the Booher Branch and Mine over the next four years tell the rest of the story:

November 21, 1907: "Work at the Booher ore mines operated by the Rockhill Furnace Company, has been indefinitely suspended and quite a number of miners are out of employment."

February 20, 1908: "The rails owned by the Rockhill Furnace Company at the Booher Mines have been removed, the mine buildings torn down and removed, which is not a hopeful sign."

July 20, 1911: Passenger service on the Booher Branch service dropped from new EBT public timetable.

Sep 21, 1911: "The steel rails have been removed from the Booher branch railroad. This looks as the ore mines will never again be put in operation."

Sep 28, 1911: "The Rockhill Iron & Coal Company has purchased the Browning and Royer interest in the Booher Branch Railway and is now engaged in removing the rails and fastenings. It is the intention to discontinue the operation of the branch for the present at least."

By 1920, the Booher Branch was an empty grade. It underwent a brief new life when its southern portion carried the tracks of a logging railroad operated by the McKelvey Brothers Lumber Company, which based

its operations in the ruins of the Rockhill Furnace during 1922 - 27.

Portions of it are still visible today and have been traversed by members of the Friends of the East Broad Top during their Spring Explorations.

As far as is known by the author, no period photos of the Booher Branch or Mine have come to light. This is a builders photo of one of two Shay geared locomotives operated on the McKelvey logging line that traversed part of the Booher Branch during the 1920s. Source: www.shay-locomotives.com. Photo: George R. Kadelak collection (BP 9-1920)

