

SAILCARS

QUESTION: When is a Catboat not a Catboat as we know it; that is, skimming over blue-green water?

ANSWER: When it is a sailcar.

And what is a sailcar you may ask? A sailcar is a small railroad flatcar, usually propelled by a makeshift sail, horse, mule, or maybe even manpower. You will probably not find the word sailcar or its definition in your dictionary.

Let's go back in history a hundred or more years. Commerce across the waters was by boat. By land goods were moved by man, wagons and animals. The invention of the railroad enabled materials to be moved with relative speed to many places that had once been inaccessible. At the same time the potential of passenger traffic began to be realized. For areas just slightly off the main railroad line a sailcar was utilized.

Small amounts of goods were transported by sailcars from a railroad sideline track to the main track. A sailcar was almost the equivalent of small flat barge: a wooden platform built on top of four railroad car wheels placed so that they could fit over normal railroad tracks. Perpendicular to the wooden platform was a makeshift type of mast, gaff, and boom with a crude canvas sail. Obviously all sails and rigging (if, indeed, such homemade basic structures could even qualify as sails and rigging ...) were different on each sailcar according to maker. Hopefully there was enough wind to either push the sailcar along or to take some of the pressure off man or beast.

"Down The Shore from Manahawkin to New Gretna" is a small book of old photos with captions published by the Ocean County, NJ Historical Society. An old picture shows two men sitting on a sailcar with large baskets of clams headed for market. Part of the caption underneath reads:

"After the Tuckerton Railroad abandoned the short spur from the Edge Cove to the mainline, it was leased to E. A. Horner and F.R. Austin for \$1.00 per year for the transportation of clams. The 'Clamtown Sailcar' arrangement stipulated that all clams dug from Little Egg Harbor Bay be shipped on this 1.75 mile track to the Tuckerton Railroad Station."

Goods placed on the sailcar could be moved up the side track to the main railroad track where they met up with a regularly scheduled train, thus allowing them to reach their destination quicker than other means.

Hopefully the wind was blowing pretty hard (the track ran east to west) as the wooden platform of the sailcar was completely taken up by the men and their heavy catch. A modified gaff rigged small canvas sail is in evidence. The Tuckerton Railroad ran from 1871 – 1936 carrying goods and passengers, connecting most of the time to the larger, far-reaching Pennsylvania Railroad.

A hand crank was also used when the wind was slack. Thanks to a sailcar and the regular railroad line perishables such as clams and oysters could be in the major cities of Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York within a matter of hours.