

City Beat

There are eight million stories in my albums. This is one of them...

The Delaware, Lackawanna & Western Railroad was a U.S. Class 1 railroad that connected Buffalo, New York, and Hoboken, New Jersey, a distance of about 400 miles. Incorporated in 1853, the DL&W was profitable during the first two decades of the twentieth century, but its margins were gradually hurt by declining traffic in coal and competition from trucks. In 1960, the DL&W merged with rival Erie Railroad to form the Erie Lackawanna Railroad.

Changes in the region's economy undercut the railroad, however. The post-World War II boom enjoyed by many U.S. cities bypassed Scranton and the rest of Lackawanna and Luzerne counties. Oil and natural gas quickly became the preferred energy sources. Silk and other textile industries shrank as jobs moved to the southern U.S. or overseas. The advent of refrigeration squeezed the business from ice ponds on top of the Poconos. Even the dairy industry changed. The Lackawanna had long enjoyed revenues from milk shipments; many stations had a creamery next to the tracks. Perhaps the most catastrophic blow to the Lackawanna, however, was dealt by Mother Nature. In August 1955, flooding from Hurricane Diane devastated the Pocono Mountains region, killing 80 people. Hurricane Diane also caused the DL&W to abandon their Old Road/former Warren Railroad line due to severe damages that simply wouldn't be worth it to repair. The floods cut the Lackawanna Railroad in 88 places, destroying 60 miles of track, stranding several trains (with a number of passengers aboard), and shutting down the railroad for nearly a month (with temporary speed restrictions prevailing on the damaged sections of railroad for months), causing a total of \$8.1 million in damages (equal to \$72,417,019 today) and lost revenue. Until the mainline in Pennsylvania reopened, all trains were cancelled or rerouted over other railroads. The Lackawanna would never fully recover.

In January, 1959, the final nail in the Lackawanna's coffin was driven home when the Knox Mine Disaster flooded the mines along the Susquehanna River and all but obliterated what was left of the region's anthracite industry.

The Lackawanna Railroad's financial problems were not unique. Rail traffic in the U.S. in general declined after World War II as trucks and automobiles took freight and passenger traffic. Declining freight traffic put the nearby New York, Ontario and Western Railroad and Lehigh & New England Railroad out of business in 1957 and 1961, respectively. Over the next three decades, nearly every major railroad in the Northeastern US would go bankrupt.

