

(Chronicle Photos)

Railroad buff...

Doug Kreinbuhl of Uhrichsville is a young but avid railroad buff, who has photographed local rail facilities as a hobby. Above, he prepares to take the last crossing of a train on the Chessie system while Uhrich Tower (in the background) was in operation. Kreinbuhl said he regrets the current downgrading of the Panhandle line and loss of rail service here.

OPERATOR WHO STARTED THERE 35 YEARS AGO PULLS LAST SHIFT

Conrail darkens Uhrich Tower

By STEVE LONG
Chronicle Editor

Dick Mowl got his first look at "Uhrich Tower" when taken there as a boy by his grandfather, Ray Blackwell.

Mowl took his last look Tuesday night by snapping a padlock on the outer door. Uhrich Tower, guardian of the Pennsylvania and B. and O. railroad crossing for more than 85 years, was officially withdrawn from service at 11 p.m.

Grandfather Blackwell was an operator in the tower for 53 years and his grandson repeated history by signing on as a tower operator himself in 1949. Mowl, now living in Bloomingdale, had worked throughout the Pennsylvania system (later Penn-Central, and now Conrail) in the intervening years, returning just three weeks ago for the final sessions.

"They're starting to call me 'The Black Cat' on the railroad," he related. "I worked at Custer and Acre towers and they closed them...now the same thing has happened at Uhrich."

Shutdown of the tower is the latest in the phase-down by Conrail of the Panhandle Division the past few years. In all honesty, there's not much traffic left at the once-busy intersection...one coal train a week on the B. and O (now Chessie System) and an occasional local with three or four cars on the Panhandle.

Mowl contrasted the lack of activity now with the bustle of previous days, when keeping track of trains was a major chore. "This was a real hub," he says.

He said that the tower itself must date back to the 1800s, because his grandfather started there in 1900.

He took Mowl there as a youth and trained him for the job, including throwing the heavy switches that controlled signals on the Pennsylvania from Newcomerstown to Scio.

Even with all the precautions, Mowl was asked if he knew of any collisions at the intersection of the north-south B & O and the east-west Pennsylvania.

"Plenty of them," he said, noting he had witnessed four himself here and elsewhere. A few years ago, Uhrich had two within a month, as a chemical car derailed, followed by a huge grain train smashup.

Not unexpectedly, Mowl hinted that most of the mishaps were from track defects or engineers disregarding signals.

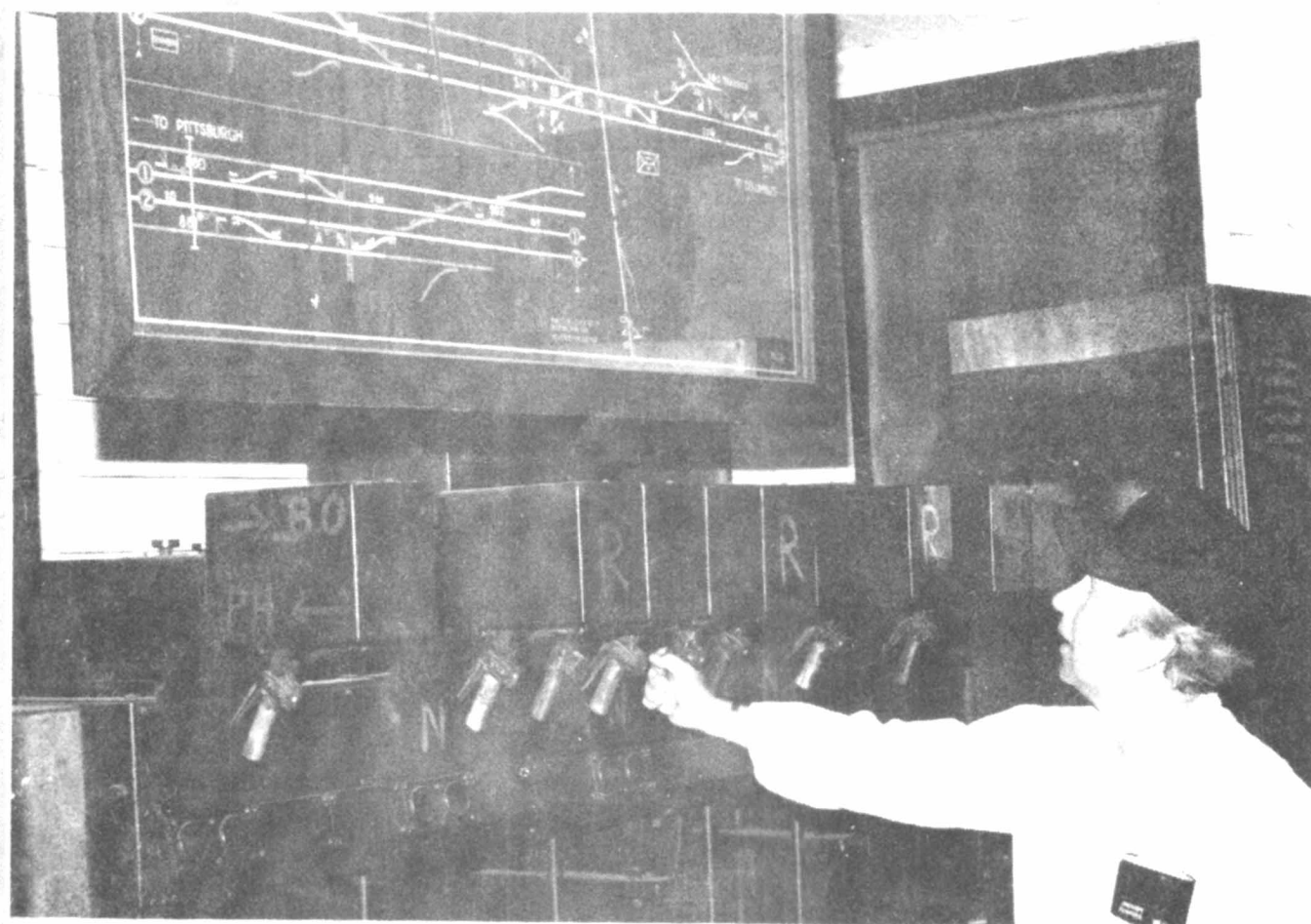
He also told how the tower was something of a social center for train crews as they picked up their orders, plus an unofficial information booth for local residents who figured they could get more accurate information from the tower than the station agent.

However, it was one persistent rail passenger, calling at a busy time, which prompted his grandfather to

throw the phone through the window, Mowl recalls with a smile.

Until recently, the Panhandle had the most sophisticated communications system in the world, including computerized in-cab signals. That's all gone now, as wreck crews continue to tear out one track of the double main line.

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Last time on the board...

Dick Mowl checks the operations board at Uhrich Tower for the last time. The tower was closed by Conrail as of 11 p.m. Monday

night. Mowl, whose first job with the railroad was at the tower 36 years ago, returned for the final shift.

—Conrail—

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In place of the modern system is an old-fashioned semaphore. The first train to the intersection stops and a crewman dismounts to give his train the right-of-way. The semaphore stays

that way until a train approaches from the other track, at which time it stops and a crewman resets the signal...all manually.

"I just can't believe it's going to happen," said Mowl as the clock ticked closer to 11. But it did, the padlock was snapped and Mowl prepared to go to his next assignment, at Rockville Tower.

"I don't think they want to see me coming," he mused.