Train Disaster Avoided Thanks to Cool-Headed Fireman
By Bill Poray, Perinton Town Historian

George Schoolmaster’s parents arrived from Germany in the early 1870s, with farming in their blood. But that would not be their son’s calling. Between the Schoolmaster farm on Macedon Center Road and the Erie Canal were the tracks of the New York Central, and a coaling and watering plant near the Lyndon Road canal bridge. That’s where George Schoolmaster’s almost half-century on the railroad began in 1911, with coal, and steam engines.

As a boy, young George could hear the thundering trains from his parent’s farm. Born on a sweltering hot day in August of 1892, perhaps the heat prepared him for a lifetime spent on the railroad. Most of that time was spent as a fireman, scooping the coal, stoking the boiler, and feeding it water as needed, to keep the train thundering down the tracks.

As a boy, trains rumbling through Fairport captivated the imagination of George Schoolmaster, and led to a life on the railroad.

Late in his career, George became a passenger train engineer. But years earlier, in 1925, he earned his stripes behind the throttle of a passenger train. On this night, he was serving as fireman on the steam engine of the legendary Twentieth Century Limited, advertised as “the most famous train in the world.” At approximately 3:00 a.m. engineer Edward H. Peck leaned a
bit too far out his window, and was struck on the head by a water plug left dangling close to the tracks. Peck was thrown to the floor of the engine, gravely injured and bleeding profusely. The train barreled eastbound at sixty miles-per-hour, without an engineer.

Schoolmaster, perhaps numbed to the sight of the injured and dead from his time in France with the 302nd Engineers in WWI, climbed past the dying engineer to the controls of the steam locomotive. The incident was covered in newspapers far and wide, and recalled the fireman’s heroics: “Human instinct would have sent him quickly to the stricken man’s aid. But Schoolmaster knew better. He knew that with the throttle uncontrolled, hundreds of men, women and children were in peril in the heavy coaches behind. Instantly he sprang to the throttle and brought the long train slowly to a stop.”

Perinton-born George Schoolmaster retired in 1957, the day after his 65th birthday, after piloting the North Shore Limited into Buffalo on a Saturday evening. Minutes later he was honored at the terminal. It was almost fifty years since he first started scooping coal for trains barreling alongside the canal near his family’s Perinton farm. The trains that first lured him to a life on the railroad.

George Schoolmaster

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