



Frederick W. Deibert, left, has had an abiding passion for trains since his childhood in South Amboy where he often played along the Raritan River Rail Road tracks. He's written a book about the line.

Train fan pens history of local rail line

By G. GARY SULLIVAN

Tempo writer

HIGHLAND PARK — Frederick W. Deibert vividly recalls the beginning of what would become his lifelong fascination with railroad lore.

He was a lad of about 5, playing with friends on the Bordentown Avenue overpass in his native South Amboy. Noticing smoke escaping from a rust hole in the smokestack of a Raritan River Rail Road locomotive below, young Deibert yelled "... It's going to blow up!" to his comrades, sending them scampering for safety.

"Why you remember some stupid little thing like that I don't know," Deibert said recently, "but I can close my eyes and picture it."

The engine didn't explode. Deibert grew up, went to war, married his girl, Janet, and eventually moved to this borough.

Through it all he retained a special affection for the rail line which headquartered in his hometown.

Deibert's book, "Rails Up the Raritan: A History of the Raritan River Rail Road," traces the 92-year history of the line from its construction to its take-over by Conrail in 1980.

The work marries years of painstaking research with the rail enthusiast-author's own knowledge of the subject.

Railroading in general has been a pervasive theme in Deibert's life. ("When I was in Algiers during World War II it was trolleys, because there wasn't much left of the railroads.")

Lure of the lore irresistible

As a youngster in South Amboy, he lived next door to the Thorvald Filskov family, three generations of whose members would manage Raritan River.

Deibert himself owned and operated a Piscataway model train hobby shop for 30 years. He has penned many railroad-related newspaper and magazine pieces, and always kept a file of information pertaining to Raritan River.

"Rails Up the Raritan" began as a college thesis. He had "the intention, even in those days, of probably expanding it into a book."

Deibert pored through stacks of old newspapers in the Rutgers University library and found a wealth of articles tracing Raritan River's progress around the late 1890s, when an ever-expanding America was afflicted with "railroad fever."

"In those days, particularly in the '80s and '90s, there was a great railroad fever in this country," he said. "Thousands of miles of railroad were built all over. Nobody ever stood a monkey's uncle's chance of getting any money back, but it was a fever ... like gold or something."

Raritan River, however, was "a very profitable railroad up until the end. It never stopped being profitable," even though it discontinued passenger service in 1938.

This "big little railroad" ("little in length, big in service," according to Deibert) was

originally to extend for 20 miles, and to run from South Amboy to South River, Milltown, New Brunswick and Bound Brook.

Construction was to cost \$2,000 per mile.

The valley was already rife with industry in 1888, when work on the railroad commenced.

In the mid-19th century, at least 50 million bricks were made each year in the South River-Sayreville area, and tons of "high quality" clays were dug annually.

"But in those days of horses and wagons, poor roads and light loads, you needed a railroad at your doorstep, as it were, to carry your increasing production to wider-flung markets," according to Deibert's book.

Construction went fairly smoothly at times and dragged at others, plagued by labor and land problems, weather and farmers "who resented the intrusion of iron rails on their land," Deibert said.

In 1890, the line reached New Brunswick, 12 miles from the New York-Long Branch connection at South Amboy. But even though the "big little railroad" never reached Bound Brook, it prospered because of industrial traffic.

In addition to his library research, Deibert had the "complete cooperation" of the railroad management, including his former neighbor and friend Thorvald Filskov, who was appointed superintendent of the railroad in 1916. He was followed in the managerial

post by his son, Harold, grandson, Harold T., and Robert T. Kipp, who was with the company until it was merged with Conrail.

That event provided even more impetus for Deibert to collate his notes, memories and photographs into book form.

"I thought it was time to get something out on the thing," he said. "Raritan River had disappeared a year or two before as a corporate entity, and everybody cried about it, but there it was."

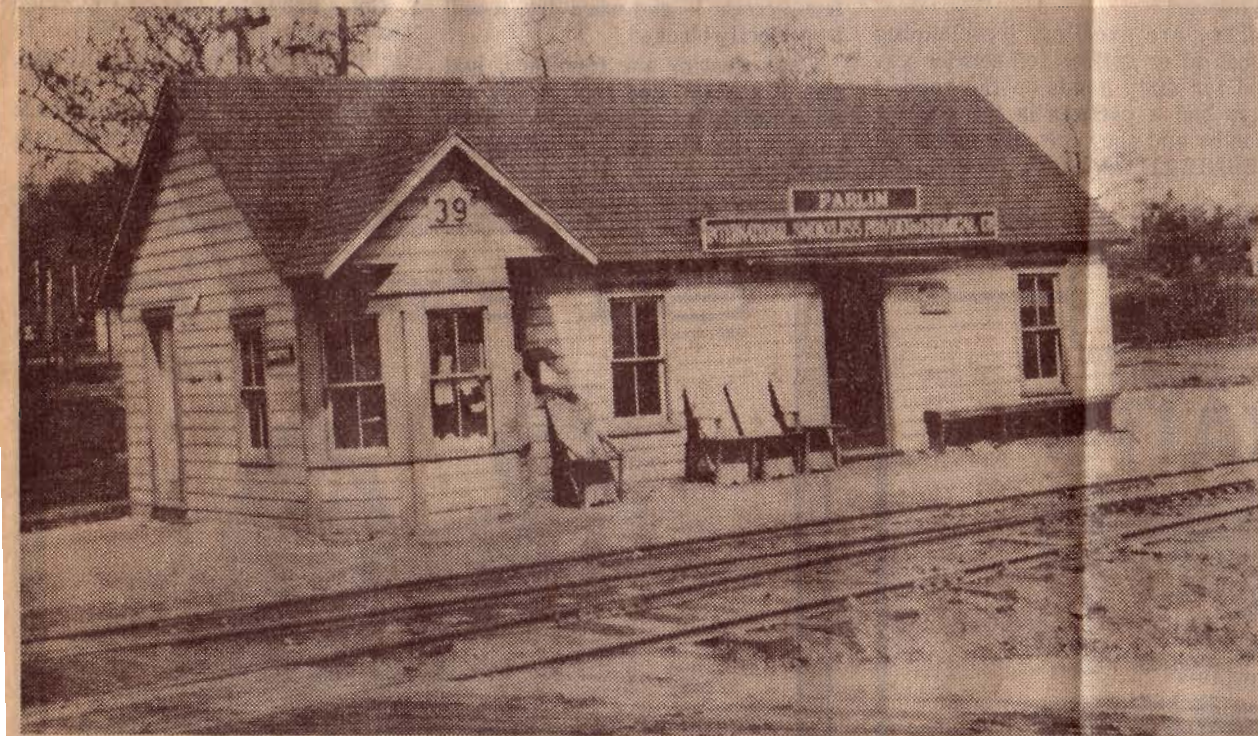
He got additional encouragement from the owners of Railpace Company Inc., a Piscataway-based firm which publishes a magazine, called Railpace, focusing "basically on Northeast railroading." The company also published Deibert's book.

So far, "Rails Up the Raritan" is available at Peterson's Pharmacy in South Amboy, and at the Model Rail Road Shop, the Piscataway business — now in its 50th year — which Deibert owned for three decades.

It's unlikely Deibert's enthusiasm for railroading will ever diminish. But although he might write an article now and then, he admits the prospects for another book are doubtful.

"I spent a lot of time whipping the thing together," he said. "It was a labor of love because, let's face it, no one makes a fortune on something like this."

Although Deibert wrote the book himself, he credits Alfred J. Baumann Jr., a teacher in the Sayreville school system and a fellow train enthusiast for helping him obtain information and photographs for the work.



At left is a photo of the first Parlin railroad station, from the A.J. Baumann Collection. Above is a photo of the shooting of the movie "Jaugernaut" in the early 1900s. Parlin and the Duck's Nest Pond area were popular sites for filming of movies in those days.