

Former Narrow Gauge
Railroad/Railroad Construction
Grant County
27.1992.1

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Marker Text

Tracklayers building narrow gauge railroad connecting Great Lakes at Toledo, Ohio, with Mississippi River reached this point October 1, 1880. In 1887, 2,000 men converted 206 miles of this to standard gauge railroad in 11 hours.

A significant part of America's rail system in the 19th century was 18,000 miles of 3-foot-wide narrow gauge railroad in 44 states. Most subsequently converted to 4-foot, 8 ½ inch standard gauge.

Report

The marker text correctly states that the railroad track did connect Toledo, Ohio to the Mississippi River, as verified by June 1887 articles from the *Kokomo Dispatch* and the *Frankfort Crescent*. Unfortunately, this is the only verified fact on the marker. See George W. Hilton's *American Narrow Gauge Railroads* (1990) for more information.

Much of the text is incorrect or unverifiable. For example, the first sentence states that the narrow gauge railroad reached "this point" on October 1, 1880. The use of the phrase "this point" implies that the men laying the rail-line reached the area where the historical marker currently stands. However, no primary sources have been located to verify that the railroad entered the town of Marion on the specified date. John A. Rehor's book, *The Nickel Plate Story* (1965), states that "tracklayers reached Marion on October 1," but it is not cited; and the Indiana State Library does not possess any Marion newspapers on microfilm that date back to 1880. An 1886 *History of Grant County* notes that the "road [narrow gauge railroad] was constructed through the county in 1881," one year later than the marker claims. However, this is contradicted by a January 1, 1881 article in the *Kokomo Saturday Tribune*, which claimed the completion of the railroad occurred on December 31, 1880. Without primary documentation to verify when the

railroad track was built in the town of Marion it is hard to confirm that the tracklayers reached the specific spot of the marker on that particular date.

The second sentence that mentions the conversion of the track size is also inaccurate. Articles from the *Kokomo Dispatch*, the *Frankfort Crescent*, and the *New York Times* in June 1887, and the *Marion Chronicle* in July 1887, agree that 206 miles of the narrow gauge line, connecting Toledo to Frankfort, Indiana, were converted to standard gauge on June 26, 1887. See *The Rails of Grant County, Indiana* by Leslie I. Neher for more information.

The inconsistencies lay in the number of men used and how long it took to complete the project. An article from a Toledo newspaper was reprinted in the *New York Times* on June 26, 1887. It stated that 2,000 men worked on the overhaul, and that work began at 4:30 a.m. and “By noon the spikers...had completed the work.” If correct, the project was completed within seven-and-a-half hours. On the contrary, June and July 1887 articles from the *Frankfort Crescent* and *Marion Chronicle* claim that a “force of 2,500 went to work at five o’clock Sunday morning,” and by “four o’clock Sunday afternoon the first standard gauge train started from Delphos to Toledo.” The *New York Times* piece also confirms that “trains with the new equipment were rolling over the new 4 feet 8 ½ inches track” by that evening. Unfortunately, the eleven hour difference between the five o’clock start time and the train departing from Delphos at four o’clock does not indicate the completion time. This only means that this was the departure time of the first standard gauge railroad on the newly laid line. The Frankfort and Marion paper never provided a completion time. Only the reprint of the Toledo article supplies that information. In actuality, these workmen converted 206 miles of railroad track in an impressive time of seven-and-a-half hours. Unfortunately, this striking feat is not conveyed on the marker, and an accurate number of workers cannot be confirmed by the primary sources available. Again, see *The Rails of Grant County, Indiana* for more information.

The information most difficult to verify is the text on the second side of the marker. The marker claims “A significant part of America’s rail system in the 19th century was 18,000 miles of 3-foot-wide narrow gauge railroad in 44 states.” According to the U.S. Department of Commerce and Bureau of the Census, it is impossible to gather

precise statistics pertaining to the United States railroad system because the collection of railroad related data did not begin in regular intervals until 1880. According to the statistical explanation given with the figures, much of the information is based on “officers and employees long in service.” The two Federal Agencies also admit that “the figures for any year are...understatements” for various reasons. That said, the numerical figures show that 102,805 miles of track were built in the United States during the nineteenth-century. According George W. Hilton’s *American Narrow Gauge Railroads*, narrow gauge railroads were not constructed in the United States until 1871. Between the years 1871 to 1900, Hilton claims 16,667 miles of narrow gauge track was assembled, but over half of that figure (8,782 miles) was converted to standard gauge by 1900. That left only 7,885 miles of narrow gauge track by the end of the nineteenth-century. Unfortunately, Hilton does not indicate the number of miles built to specific narrow gauge sizes including 3 foot, 3.6 foot, 3.2 foot, 2 foot, and 2.6 foot. Also, the federal statistics do not indicate what track sizes they are recording in their statistical data. Assuming Hilton’s narrow gauge numerical figure only pertains to 3 foot rails, and that number is included in the Census Bureau tally, that leaves 86,138 miles of standard gauge track within the United States during the nineteenth-century. That means roughly 16% of all the track built in the United States during the nineteenth-century was narrow gauge. But if the miles of converted track from narrow to standard gauge are factored into the equation, then roughly 8% of narrow gauge track existed at the conclusion of the nineteenth-century. That is hardly “a significant part of America’s rail system.”

Besides not being a sizeable part of the American rail-system, Hilton’s figures, which encompass numerous sizes of narrow gauge track, demonstrate that the miles of track laid by 1900 was roughly 1,500 miles less than 18,000. To reach the figure of 18,000 miles the statistical figures from the years 1900 to 1910 need to be added onto the nineteenth-century total (before the incorporation of the track conversion statistics) for a grand total of 18,022 miles laid by 1910. All together 18,529 miles of narrow gauge track was built in the United States, and the last year any was laid was 1927. To confuse matters more, Hilton also provides a separate chart in his book *American Narrow Gauge Railroads* that states 17,608 total miles of 3 foot narrow gauge track was built. Though it can be

assumed that the 3 foot narrow gauge figure encompasses the years 1871 to 1927, no specific span of time is provided with the chart. Either way, the marker text is incorrect because the marker implies that 18,000 miles of 3 foot gauge track existed in the United States during the nineteenth century.

After consulting the three definitive books on the narrow gauge railroad, the Indiana Historical Bureau cannot locate the any mention that the narrow gauge rail system was in 44 states. Rehor's *The Nickel Plate Story* and the *Poor's Intermediate Manual of Railroads* make no such claim, but Hilton's *American Narrow Gauge Railroads* provides numerous detailed histories of the narrow gauge phenomenon by dedicating a chapter to each state that possessed narrow gauge railroads. The book has 45 separate chapters. This again proves the marker text is factually incorrect.

Finally, the last sentence states: "Most subsequently converted to 4-foot, 8 ½ inch standard gauge." The marker text implies that a large majority of the non-existent 18,000 miles of 3 foot narrow gauge track was converted to standard gauge. Besides there not being 18,000 miles of track, only about half (8,782 miles) of the 16,667 miles of various sized narrow gauge track was converted by 1900. By 1982, the last statistical year provided by Hilton, 12,431 of the 18,529 miles of all narrow gauge sized track was converted. That is roughly 67%. Unfortunately, the figures do not indicate whether that was all 3 foot track, and the marker does not state whether the track conversion extended into the twentieth-century. With so much non-specific data it is hard to be certain about any of the numerical figures, but it must be emphasized that the facts presented on the marker are inconsistent with the numbers provided by federal agencies and Hilton's book.

If this marker were to be rewritten today, IHB researchers would make sure any statistics aligned with the existing data from the Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, and George Hilton's research. The applicant originally wrote that the narrow gauge railroad "was a social force that tore at the fabric of the industry and generated a controversy that reached far beyond the individual lines involved and the cities they served." The applicant also noted that "The narrow gauge movement deserves recognition because it enveloped the entire country" and that this marker marked the

“nation’s fourth longest line.” A new marker would certainly want to convey these broader contextual ideas.