



Whistle Stop

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Railroading – Past, Present and Future

Volume 31 No. 4

April 2011



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This month's cover photo offers a magnificent view of ex-SOUTHERN, Schenectady-built Consol #154 steaming in all of its restored glory. The significance of this locomotive is its serving for years on the SOUTHERN's Embreeville Branch, an article on which is featured in this month's WHISTLE STOP. Built in 1890 as EAST TENNESSEE, VIRGINIA AND GEORGIA #466, the locomotive saw service until 1953, when it was placed on static display in Knoxville. Restoration began several years ago with completion this past summer. #154 now proudly powers the "Three Rivers Rambler" out of downtown Knoxville.

The next **General Membership Meeting** of the Watauga Valley Railway Historical Society & Museum will be held Monday, April 25, 2011 at 6:30 pm, at the Johnson City Public Library, 101 West Millard St. Johnson City, TN. Come and learn more information about our 2011 excursion program. A program will be presented by Chapter Member Mike Noonkester featuring Steam in Western North Carolina, Southwest Virginia, Southern Kentucky and Tennessee. It has some excellent footage of steam locomotives SOU #4501, NKP #765, N&W #611 and C&O #2765. If you like steam trains you will love this program. Bring a friend and enjoy this program.

Member Notes

by Nancy Jewell

Our sympathy is extended to several Chapter families in the deaths of close relatives: to Bob and Janice McPherson in the death of Bob's mother on February 28 in Montgomery, AL; to George and Margaret Holley in the death of George's brother, Thomas (Jack) Holley, on March 23 in Jonesborough, TN; to Tony King and family in the death of Tony's mother, Sharon King, on March 24 in the Bristol Regional Medical Center, and the James Smallwood of Piney Flats, in his father's death in Bristol in mid-March.

The following deal with health concerns: David Denny, Suzie Price, Charlotte Brown, Randy Moore's mother, Elaine, and yes, Walter Byrd has a pacemaker as of March 29. Please keep these folks in your thoughts.

Do let us know of those members, friends or families who could use a card or phone call to add cheer to their day. Chapter phone is (423) 753-5797 or call Nancy Jewell at (423) 282-0918. As always, thank you!!

Spring Street Coach Yard Mechanical Report

by Bob Yaple

This winter, the yard water supply froze several times and the problem area never showed up. Finally it did and has been repaired.

Moultrie Diner: Several Kitchen updates have been completed and work on an improved ventilation system is in progress.

500 Clinchfield Coach: The car is now back in the yard. In addition to routine maintenance, the dual battery starting system has been reworked. A torn seat back has been sent out for repair.

539 Powhatan Arrow Coach: The update of the A/C heat controls is complete with installation of new digital thermostats. A dual starting battery system has been installed. All cars now have the same starting equipment. A heavy brace has been installed on the Genset frame to prevent displacement in the event of a hard couple. The roof is being cleaned and repaired and painted. Both 539 and 500 will leave the yard again in the coming weeks for excursion service in the south.

Crescent Harbor Lounge / Sleeper: It's been tank month. The fuel tank is now in its box location. The waste water tank is under the car and ready for installation and the design for the waste water pump tanks are near completion. The waste water pumps have been procured. Genset doors are in progress and the auto start controls installed in the electric closet. In addition to the auto-start, an additional 120 volt breaker box has been installed. This will allow for more control of the electrical systems. The decorative chrome rim is being reinstalled in the lounge and corridor.

Back on Track

by Gary Price

After my tour of former CONRAIL territories, it was good to finally set foot back on the old NORFOLK AND WESTERN region. However I was on the Pocahontas Division, and actually I am considered a Virginia Division employee, and by contract, I was now due an off region bonus, a nice addition to my paycheck for my first week back in West Virginia.

On Monday, we unloaded our equipment in NORFOLK SOUTHERN's Dickenson Yard located just east of Charleston, WV, and crossed the Kanawha River Bridge onto the former VIRGINIAN railroad at Alloy, WV. This is commonly known as the Deepwater division of NORFOLK SOUTHERN and it winds 58 miles southeast to Elmore Yard located at Mullens, WV. It is a 100% coal route, requiring the newest and most powerful diesels as well as pushers on all loaded coal trains headed for Elmore Yard.

This line is no walk in the park as it holds some of the most rugged and inaccessible areas on any of NORFOLK SOUTHERN's mountain divisions, and this is the first time that I have worked on this particular part of the line, and I knew that it would be an adventure for me to tackle this line. In the past, I have worked all in service tracks of the former VGN, and I have wanted to work this part my entire career.

After crossing the Kanawha River, our tracks also crossed the CSX double mainline and State Route 61. CSX also had a tie-gang working their lines, so we had a chance to see the differences in our machines and operations, and we all realized that we are just everyday railroaders doing our best to keep our respective companies in operation. The Route 61 bridge caught my eye, as it still has VIRGINIAN boldly painted across it (the VGN was absorbed into the N&W in 1959), I regret that I wasn't able to capture it in photo, but the opportunity didn't present itself.



Mountains, tunnels, high bridges and steep grades rule this line. At MP V429.9 stands Robson Tunnel, hewn through solid rock. On the west side it is completely bare, and the rocks are bleached white. It looks so out of place, like a tunnel that you would see in the Old West somewhere. On the east side, it is plush and green. Looking back at the photos that I took of Robson it was hard to believe that they were of the same tunnel, just opposite ends.



Due to the mountainous terrain, there are more curves on this portion of the track than any other. This means for us, more spikes in each tie to secure the tracks, as well as anchors on every tie to keep the rails from expanding in the heat and under the passage of heavy coal trains. The mainline crosses Loup Creek 21 times in a short [continued on next page]

distance and we could see where the tracks had been washed out several times in the past due to flash flooding of Loup Creek. One of our trestles that crosses Loup Creek is the only means that one family has to travel back and forth to get to the main highway. The family has to walk along the creek bed, and climb a well-worn path to reach the east end of the trestle. The kids cross the trestle to get to school; the mother carries the groceries across; and even the mailbox is located at the west end of the trestle. The mother was washing the clothes in the creek, and smoke from the wood stove gently was whisked away in the breeze. This is deep in the Appalachian Mountains, and some of the most rural and primitive houses that I have ever seen. I wondered to myself, "how can this be in the 21st century"?

At MP V408 the line parallels I-77. If you are traveling north, to the right you can see the rail-line from the toll both at Pax, WV. The line passes under a CSX branch line at Surveyor, WV. We finished up our work on this portion of the line, and trammed our equipment down the line to Jenny Gap to begin the second half of this line. I will discuss this job next month, as we set our sights towards Mullens.

Chapter Notices

CHAPTER BANQUET

Due to our speaker having scheduling problems, we had to change the date of the Watauga Valley 30th Anniversary Banquet just this past week. The banquet will now be held on Saturday, July 9, 2011 at 11:30 am at the Food City Banquet Room on Eastman Road in Kingsport, TN. Our guest speaker will be Bev Fitzpatrick, director of the Virginia Transportation Museum in Roanoke VA. A flyer will be sent to all members in the coming weeks.

MEMBERSHIP DUES

Second Dues Notices have been sent out recently. If you have not sent in your dues, your membership has expired March 31st. Please send your dues in ASAP so you will not miss out on your member benefits. A cut off list will be coming out soon and if you have not paid your name will be removed from the Chapter and newsletter mailing list.

MOTTO CONTEST

The Watauga Valley NRHS Board of Directors discussed adopting a Chapter motto that sums up what we do, or our vision. It was decided that a contest should be held among all the membership to determine what that motto should be. The Board will be taking ideas now through the April 25 Chapter Meeting. Proposals will be reviewed by the Board at their May 2011 meeting for a vote on the motto that best suits the Chapter. A prize will be awarded for the best suggestion. Suggestions should be submitted to the Chapter at wataugavalley@embarqmail.com or brought to the April Chapter Meeting. Have fun, and be creative.

SOUTHERN RAILWAY'S LONG-ABANDONED EMBREEVILLE BRANCH

By Thomas S. Wyman

[Originally published in May-June 1993 TIES Magazine. Reprinted with author's permission. Thanks to Bob May for providing an issue suitable for photocopy.]

Branch lines of major railroads that have been gone for a while seldom excite rail buffs, but these branch lines often played key roles in shaping the history of the regions they served. The SOUTHERN RAILWAY's Embreeville Branch in northeastern Tennessee was the lifeline of that small mining community from 1891 to 1939. It enabled mining operations to continue even through the Great Depression. With the resourcefulness of those working the mines and with rail transportation to move ore concentrates and lumber to markets, Embreeville presented a marked contrast to the poverty which characterized many Appalachian communities during those bleak years.

The history of the Embreeville Branch dates back to 1890 when an English company, the Embreeville Freehold Land, Iron and Railway Company, Ltd., acquired a large land tract in Washington and Unicoi Counties in the foothills of eastern Tennessee. (This company adopted the spelling "Embreeville" although successor companies corrected it to "Embreeville".) The firm also obtained a charter authorizing the JOHNSON CITY AND CAROLINA RAILWAY COMPANY to construct a branch line between Embreeville and the main line of the EAST TENNESSEE, VIRGINIA AND GEORGIA RAILWAY in Johnson City. No work was done under the charter until 1890 when, as a part of Embreeville Freehold's program to build a blast furnace and begin iron production, it started construction of the branch line. During the course of construction, the JOHNSON CITY AND CAROLINA was absorbed by the EAST TENNESSEE, VIRGINIA AND GEORGIA. The 13-mile Branch opened for business on June 1, 1891.

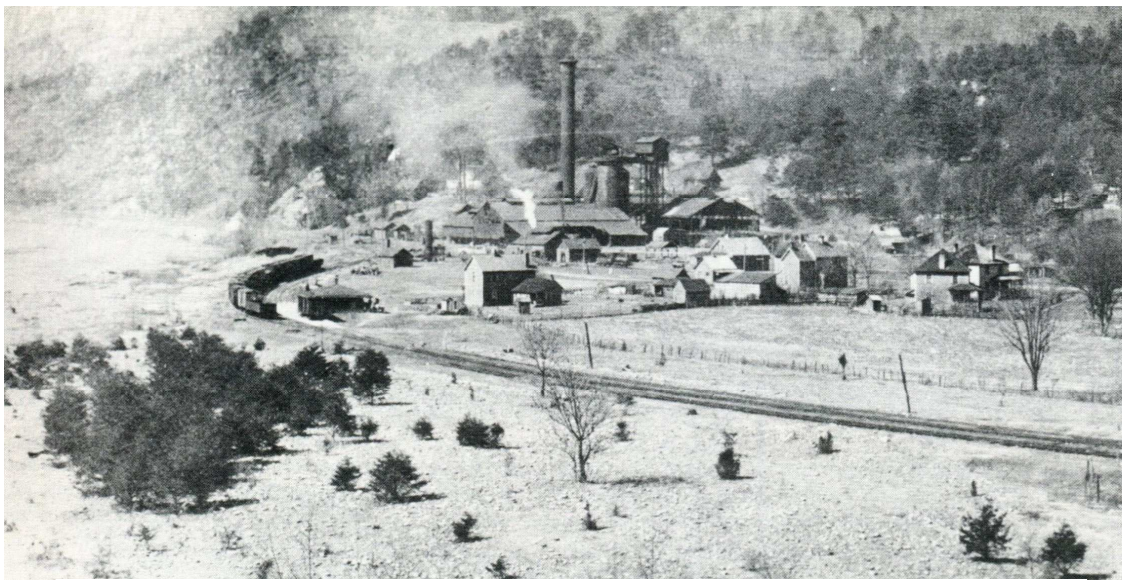
A year after the railroad began operating, a Jonesborough newspaper writer offered this colorful account of his train trip to Embreeville. His assessment of the iron producing operations proved to be overly optimistic:

"This pretty little mountain town is situated on the bank of Nolichucky River, envired by beautiful mountain ranges, the picturesqueness of whose scenery is unsurpassed by even that of the Alps or Himalayas, is predicted as the coming mining town of East Tennessee, and will afford a pleasant resort for Southerners to spend the summer. The large one hundred and fifty ton iron furnace is in full blast and the daily output is about one hundred and thirty-five tons of high grade iron. . . . The furnace is in charge of experienced men, who have given the iron business a thorough trial, and they say that there is no finer grade of iron made anywhere than here. Last Thursday was a gala day for Embreeville. About half past 9 o'clock. Captain Lyle's train pulled in from Johnson City with three coaches loaded down with human beings mostly from Johnson City and stations between here and there. To many of them, the furnace was the only elephant they had ever seen, but some of them saw more than elephants when Sam Lyle brought them down out of the cove at the rate of fifty miles an hour — 'they saw stars.' "

On July 7, 1894, three years after the Embreeville branch began operating, the EAST TENNESSEE, VIRGINIA AND GEORGIA RAILWAY COMPANY was folded into the fledgling SOUTHERN RAILWAY COMPANY. SOUTHERN RAILWAY viewed the Embreeville Branch as a potentially important link in its system in the early 1900s when it was in bitter competition with the predecessor railroads of what eventually became the CLINCHFIELD RAILROAD COMPANY, now CSX [continued on next page]

TRANSPORTATION. In 1905, SOUTHERN planned to extend the Embreeville line through Erwin to Marion, North Carolina in anticipating that its competitor would try to do the same thing. For reasons that are lost to history, the project was abandoned, although some grading was finished and some surveys were made. The effect was that the importance of the Embreeville Branch to the SOUTHERN RAILWAY COMPANY substantially diminished.

From Johnson City, the Embreeville Branch passed through scenic rolling hills and fertile farming areas, but beyond Embreeville the mountains closed in, which explains why the small community of Embreeville was selected as the terminus. There was space for a rail yard and for stacking and storing lumber before shipment. There was also room for the mine office, post office, the company commissary and the school.



Embreeville, circa 1915. The depot is to the right of the string of cars; the Nolichucky River is to the left.

This was also the site of the towering blast furnace that began operating in 1892. The intention was to smelt the ore and produce pig iron for shipment by rail — a vision that failed to materialize. For years, attempts to process the ore were plagued by the presence of elements which made it impossible to smelt using conventional equipment and procedures. However, it was these very impurities, zinc and lead, which eventually stimulated the development of a successful mining operation.

First Embreeville Freehold, then another English company tried over ten years without success to develop iron production. Finally, in 1903 the operation was acquired by an American firm, the Embree Iron Company, which mined the iron ore using hydraulic methods. This effort was equally unsuccessful in "fine tuning" the blast furnace to produce a marketable grade of pig iron, and Embree Iron entered receivership in 1908.

The discovery of the value of the zinc "impurities" in 1913 were recounted by James H. Epps, Sr., Embree Iron's counsel, in the course of hearings before the Interstate Commerce Commission in 1936: [continued on next page]

"The Embree Iron Company, when the furnace was running, piled out a rock [slag] as big as this room. They cursed it for years. The rock ruined the furnace. . . . They paid engineers \$200 a month, and still never caught onto it. In 1913, at the end of five years that they had been in the hands of receivers, the caretaker out there came into Jonesborough one February evening about dark, and he told me that he knew that I had no confidence in him or anything he said, but as a personal favor to him he asked me to go to Embreeville with him. And I went. We stayed up all night and ran zinc out with bullet molds. This is a piece of it, right here. We went to work even though the order had been issued to sell the property. Everybody was mad and everybody was cussing. They were owed \$300,000. I went to work with New York counsel, and I got permission to stop that order for a few days until that man and myself — the railroad was torn up — could hire mules and haul this ... rock down to Jonesborough and ship a carload of it to Joplin, Missouri They reluctantly agreed to it. We made the first shipment, and we got \$803 for that carload of rock. We then commenced on 100 carloads and we shipped them, and then we commenced on another 100. Then the people began to take notice. I went and settled all their debts, every single one of them. In less than a year that company was back in the saddle on this zinc proposition, and it has been running ever since, never stopped."

These events were fortuitously timed, and a great deal of credit must go to attorney James Epps Sr., for his efforts in assuring the economic survival of the Embree Iron Company.

The mines themselves were located in Bumpass Cove a short distance from Embreeville. From the SOUTHERN RAILWAY terminus at Embreeville, the railroad continued southwest along the Nolichucky River to Bumpass Cove Creek and then up that creek for two and one half miles to where the ore was milled and where support facilities for the mines were located. Scattered along the narrow Bumpass Cove valley was another small community. Here were the homes of many of the mine workers and their families, along with a small one room school which doubled as a church on Sundays. A boarding house and mess hall were also built in Bumpass Cove to serve the needs of unmarried workers during peak periods of mining activity. [To be continued next month.]

In the News: SOUTHERN No. 630 Returns to Steam

A third SOUTHERN RAILWAY 2-8-0 is back in steam within a year's time after Tennessee Valley Railroad Museum's 1904 Alco #630 [ex ET&WNC #207] began test runs Saturday after a 13-year rebuild and a period of inactivity that dates back to 1989. The engine and a wood NASHVILLE, CHATTANOOGA & ST. LOUIS caboose went for break-in runs on the museum's railroad. Break-in runs will continue, and the engine is scheduled to begin pulling regular Missionary Ridge local trains on the museum grounds starting April 2. No. 630 gained fame as one of the SOUTHERN RAILWAY weekend excursion fleet engines in the 1960s and 1970s, but proved to be too slow and not powerful enough to pull long trains. The engine went to TVRM in 1983 to pull trains there. NORFOLK SOUTHERN plans to use the engine in a new version of its steam program later this year, but no details have been announced. [via Jim Wrinn at *Trains Newswire*, March 22nd]

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Published Monthly by the Watauga Valley Chapter of the National Railroad Historical Society
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Fred Waskiewicz, Editor



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