



The End of An Era: Train Service Ends

Locomotive 12, known to many as Tweetsie, made its last trip from Johnson City to Elizabethton yesterday, ending freight and passenger service through Western North Carolina and East Tennessee.

“With the extensive damage done by flood waters and the lack of freight and passengers to pay the bills, we simply had no choice but to shut her down,” said East Tennessee & Western North Carolina Railroad executive W.H. Blackwell.

The narrow gauge tracks from Johnson City to Elizabethton represented the last useable section of the line that for many years ran across the mountains to Boone, North Carolina. Severe flooding in 1940 washed out much of the Linville River line. Portions of the track, several bridges, and supporting embankments were completely destroyed, while mudslides covered much of the remaining tracks.

The fact that the railroad’s expenses far exceeded its revenues contributed to the decision to cease operations. “The railroad company has lost tens of thousands of dollars in the past decade,” said Stanley Stuart, a local accountant. “With most of the timber already cut, and the iron ore depleted from the mountain areas, there is simply not enough revenue to require a freight train to serve the area.”

Even the once popular “excursion trains” of the 1930s and 1940s have not generated enough money. “We began the excursion trains to give people a way to see the beauty of the mountains. They could see areas where no roads existed,” explained Blackwell. “Now, the roads are so much better, people prefer to take their own cars.”

Expansion and improvement of highways have also contributed to a significant increase in truck freight. Train engineer Rupert Stuckey explained, “Years ago, you could hardly walk across these mountains. Now these big trucks can get across almost as fast as the train can. And they can go places where trains cannot. They can back right up to the factory door.”

Many people, including some who depended on the train for freight shipments, will have to find other transportation. “We set up our plant right on the railroad siding,” says lumberman John Bunyan. “We liked to ship our big orders weighing several tons on the train. Since they have cut most of the timber from these hills, we have logs shipped in from other areas. Now, they will come by truck or we will have to move the sawmill.”

Dr. B.B. Dougherty, Chancellor of the Appalachian State Teacher’s College in Boone, was clearly disappointed. “Train service has been important to our College and to the Town of Boone for many years. We did everything we could, including developing a proposition to keep the trains running after the flood ten years ago. Unfortunately, we lost our trains back then; so this action today just makes it less likely that we will ever have train service again in Boone. I regret that for the merchants of Boone and for our students.”

Of course, those most directly affected are railroad employees and businesses that supplied materials to the railroad. Bunyan’s lumber company, for example, sawed thousands of railroad ties for the line to Boone. The Watauga Iron Works in Boone supplied iron and steel to the railroads until service ended in 1940.

Engineer Stuckey will continue to work for the railroad, at least for a while. “They have sold most of the track for scrap iron. My job will be to use the train engine to move the scrap to a loading yard. Once that is done, I guess I will park the old engine for the last time. It may be sold for scrap too. The sad thing is that most of my buddies will have to go to work for the truck companies. A truck is just not the same as a good train. And this was a good train.”

Perhaps someone will find a use for Tweetsie so that she can remain a part of the mountains she has traveled for so many years.

—Fictional newspaper article October 1950.