

Our Trip on “Tweetsie”

The following narrative was written by Walter R. Allison, Engineer on the E.T. & W.N.C.Railroad for over 34 years

“Tweetsie is a nickname for a passenger train on the East Tennessee and Western North Carolina Railroad. The width of track is 3 feet, therefore is called a **narrow gauge road**, this road terminates at Boone, North Carolina a distance of 65 miles from Johnson City, Tennessee. This trip will take us to Cranberry, North Carolina which is about 36 miles from Johnson City.

Cranberry is known as one of the best magnetic iron ore mines in the United States. Since this iron produced the very best tool steel, this railroad was built primarily to serve this industry.

Our engine is of the ten wheel type, cylinders 16” x 22”, seam pressure 180 pounds and wheel diameter 44 inches. The main driving wheel has no flange to hold it against the rail. This is done to help glide around the sharp curves, some of which are as much as 32 degrees. You will note the small driving wheels, the large cylinder and long stroke. These features make our engine more powerful in proportion than the large standard gauge engines. We can readily see why “Tweetsie” is able to climb the steep grades. Some of the grades are as much as 4 per cent. That means if you measured 100 feet, set up a stake 4 feet high, and laid string on the ground at the beginning of the 100 feet, and on top of the stake at the other end, you will have a picture of what a 4 percent grade looks like.

At the given signal, we leave Johnson City, with five coaches and one observation car. The first five miles seem almost effortless. Then we come to the Watauga River. Watauga, in the Cherokee Indian language means “beautiful” and beautiful it is. Away from its banks covered with cedars, hemlocks, and laurels stretches a fertile valley called the Watauga Valley. It was in this valley that our forefathers established the first free and independent government west of the Alleghenies. On our right stands the marker of the old Watauga fort, while on our left we find Sycamore Shoals. It was here that our progenitors assembled before marching up the Doe River, crossing the Roan Mountain and defeating the defiant British general, Ferguson, at King’s Mountain. This battle, known as the turning point of the Revolutionary War in the south, gained for us a great portion of the freedom that we have so long enjoyed. In this valley today is found the purest strain of Anglo-Saxon blood in America.

The next place of interest in our journey is **Elizabethton**, which is another historical place, as well as being a thriving modern community. In another five miles the whole panorama will change. Lofty mountains rise in front of us, but these are not impenetrable to “Tweetsie” for in this mountain is a hole that looks like a rat hole in a cheese box. “Tweetsie” crosses a high wooden bridge, darts in and out of its tunnels before you know

it. **There is nothing like it in the whole Appalachian region.** The only river that has a gorge anything like this is the Grand Canyon of the Colorado.

Having passed another little town, we are now ready to journey into the beautiful gorge. Again, we pierce a prong of the Blue Ridge mountain and we are in the gorge proper. High mountains rise on either side, whose peaks encircle themselves with the clear blue sky. The road bed is chiseled out of the side of the mountain which is nothing short of a solid granite rock. This road bed is really a remarkable feat of engineering. Far below is the Doe River, lazing and dashing its silvery spray against the rocks.

The author has often wondered how these lofty mountains parted like a scroll to let this tiny river meander its way through the high cliffs, budding and blooming with wild flowers in the latter part of May. It is not the same omnipotent hand that parted the Red Sea which Moses led the children of Israel on dry land. The natural beauty of this gorge is indescribable. It is not the fantastical dream of the artist, or the imagination of the poet, nor is it portrayed by all the cunning devices of the photographer.

We will pause next at **Pardee Point** to let you see how nature builds these mighty cliffs that are hundreds of feet high, layers upon layers of solid granite rocks without cement or mortar. "Tweetsie" had had a pretty hard pull of it thus far, we have been climbing on a 3 percent grade and just at this point will level off, to give "Tweetsie" a rest. Mr. **Thomas E. Matson** who was the civil engineer surveying the railroad did this so "Tweetsie" could drift around the curve and so that the firemen could give the cylinders some oil. This was the days before automatic lubricators.



Figure 1 Pardee Point

Breathe deep of the mountain air laden with the aroma of the mountain flowers and honeysuckle. Have your camera ready to make pictures for we must hurry on. "All aboard" the conductor cries. The bell clatters, and the engineer pulls the throttle, steam rushes into the cylinder and "Tweetsie" moves slowly and cautiously off, for she dare not make a misstep, something she hasn't done in over a half century. The engine huffs and puffs and the black smoke and cinders roll out the smoke stack. Better watch your eyes or you will get a spark in them. We are now going around the hardest pull in the gorge. At this point the author has seen a big fish hawk poise high in the air with pinions spread and talons set, with a trained eye she darts like an Indian arrow and snatches away with a

hickory nut, the ground hogs feast on the succulent vegetation that grows along the route. We cross two steel bridges and go through two more tunnels and find ourselves out of the gorge. In another five miles we will be at **Roan Mountain**. On top of this mountain is found the paradise of purple rhododendron. This garden is 12 miles from the station. A good scenic highway leads to the top. People from every state in the nation visit this garden every year. The garden contains about 800 acres and in the midst of the garden is a clear cold bubbling spring waters are only a few degrees above freezing. This is the second highest mountain in the Appalachian range being 6313 feet above sea level. **It is only a few feet lower than Mount Mitchell, with an elevation of 6711.** Mount Mitchell lacks the exquisite beauty of the Roan. On a clear day, it is possible to see 7 different states from on top of the Roan. Then after leaving Roan Mountain we go eight miles to Cranberry. We start up the State Line Hill, a 3 percent grade. Here is where "Tweetsie" has to do her best. My how she barks and how slow we go. She seems to say "I think I can, I think I can" when pulling the grade, and when going down the other side, "I thought I could, I thought I could."

When Ponce De Leon was searching for the fountain of youth in Florida no wonder he sought it in vain, for it is not to be found where the tadpoles and the alligators grow. But if such a thing was possible what would be more hopeful than to find a cool shady nook in which a clear cold spring is bubbling forth her vivifying waters which go rippling off in a stream filled with the speckled trout, whose beauty no artist has ever depicted. These waters have no doubt quenched the thirst of the Indian warrior, given grace and beauty to our mountain girls and put such vim and courage in the men that they have never been defeated in any war.

We will transverse our scenic road so you can review it. Remember it is very steep and very crooked. The engineer must be an expert air brakeman. Should he lose control of his train it might plunge down a high precipice. With an alert eye, a steady nerve, a skillful hand, with judicious manipulation of the air brakes and the various other devices, **he will bring us safely back to our starting point.** ALL ABOARD.

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Archives of Appalachia

East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee