

ET&WNC TRANSPORTATION COMPANY 85TH YEAR OF SERVICE

This article is reprinted from the 1951 Souvenir Program celebrating the 85th Anniversary Celebration of ET&WNC.

HALF A BILLION POUNDS AND SIX MILLION MILES are weights and distances that stagger the imagination. Written in figures, the totals seem even more impressive: 500,000,000 pounds 6,000,000 miles. But these are merely the ANNUAL figures of the ET&WNC Transportation Company. For each year the ET&WNC transports one pound for every four persons now living on earth.... and travels a bit more than 15% of the distance to the sun.

It all began back in the latter half of the 19th Century, when certain guests at a “log-rollin” over in Western North Carolina imbibed large quantities of mountain dew, created great havoc with the property and persons at that social gathering, and subsequently hid themselves in the mountain fastness close to what is now **Cranberry, North Carolina.**

There, in order to keep body and soul together these gentlemen dug the coveted ginseng. Ginseng, which was made valuable by legend and superstition since Biblical times actually has no medicinal value, has been imported in unbelievable amounts from America for medical purposes. **While digging, the gentlemen inadvertently discovered the richest vein of magnetic iron ore known in the United States up to that time.**

The resulting establishment of the Cranberry Iron Works created the necessity for transportation of the ore to the blast furnaces. Thus, the East Tennessee and Western North Carolina Railroad Company was chartered by Legislative Act on **May 24, 1866** in the Tennessee General Assembly: “for the purpose of constructing a Railroad from the East Tennessee and Virginia Railroad, commencing at either Carter’s or Johnson’s Depots on said road, running by way of Elizabethton, Doe River Cove and Crab Orchard to the North Carolina line, near Cranberry Iron Works.”

The charter allowed the company two years to commence the work, which time would be spent in completing the organization, having the route surveyed, and the selling of stock. The charter provided that the railroad should be completed within five years.

Like many grandiose ventures of the 1860’s, this one ran into difficulties when the tracks were laid out about five miles out of Johnson City. The Company ran out of money.

After a short ownership by John Hughes and others of Johnson City, the Company was sold to **Ario Pardee** of Philadelphia. Mr. Pardee had much in his favor. He had experience in building railroads and he had **Colonel Thomas E. Matson**, whose engineering feats are legend and he had a financial interest in the Cranberry Iron Works.

The actual building of the world-famous narrow-gauge track is in itself a fascinating bit of history. The tunneling that today would be done by high-powered explosives and mammoth machines was accomplished by manual digging, many small mules, and superb planning. Colonel Matson was known to speed operations by working at a tunnel from both ends at once. The cliffs of the Doe River Gorge were so sheer that no animal could climb them. Matson lifted his mules up the face of the rocks by means of block and tackle, then lowered them by the same method on the opposite side of the proper point, and put them to work.

In due time, one, Dr. Abram Jobe of Elizabethton, Tennessee, wrote in his diary on June 13, 1881, that he moved his family to Elk Park, North Carolina, “on the first train coming through.”

When one realizes that in the 19 miles from Johnson City to Hampton, the road climbed 1,500 feet, that the deep spots were spanned by wooden bridges, and the numerous tunnels practically whittled out by hand, one gasps at the actual completion.



Wooden covered bridge near Hampton
—one of two built about 1882

Then came 1901 and the “May Tide” which was a catastrophic cloudburst in the mountains that washed away the railroad track in 39 places, and all the bridges but two. In amazingly short time, the train was running again.

During the early days, the railroad was the only contact with the outside world the vast mountain area had. At a banquet in honor of the opening of the line into Boone, North Carolina, a gentleman of that town was asked to speak. He said **“I remember when the only way a person could get to Boone was to be born there.”**

Tweetsie, as the now famous little narrow-gauge engine is called, was a center of interest for those along the line. Splendid resort hotels sprang up in the mountain wilderness.

Among them was the world-famous Roan Mountain Hotel which numbered among its guests the leading figures of our own country and royal and glamorous personages from abroad. They all rode to the foot of the mountain on Tweetsie, along with supplies for the hotels.

Along the line itself, Tweetsie, made **daily unscheduled stops**. Had a mountain woman broken or lost her precious needle? Then Tweetsie's engineer saw a frantic waving of white cloth beside the track, and brought the train to a stop. Someone of the obliging crew brought back the needles on the return trip.

If daughter Sally decided to "jump the broom stick" with that young man she's been settin' up with" and the crops were ready to harvest, there was no time for a shopping trip. So an understanding conductor conducted diligently with a sales person in Johnson City, and the proper bolt of calico for the wedding dress was delivered to a certain mountain trail next day.

These humane and unscheduled activities were, of course, in addition to the main work of the railroad which was that of hauling out the iron ore from Cranberry to the blast furnace in Johnson City.

For causes beyond the control of the company, the mines were closed down at Cranberry, and the furnace was sold and dismantled about 1929. Timber and other natural resources within the scope of the railroad being exhausted, or shipments thereof being changed to truck transportation, **it was necessary to abandon the narrow-gauge division which was done in 1950.**

Since the time of Ario Pardee, the Presidency of the Railroad has been filled by Frank Firmstone, General Robert F. Hoke, Frank P. Howe, Edgar P. Earle, Louis E. Kirk, and A.G.B. Steel, all of whom are deceased. Alfred Steel is President at this time (1951).

During the early 1900's the gasoline motor became perfected to the point where it became a standard part of the American Way of Life and with it came roads.

While the motor carrier industry was still young, the ET&WNC branched into it. The Company first engaged in the motor bus business in Virginia, East Tennessee and Western North Carolina, and for a number of years engaged in both passenger and freight transportation. In 1938 it disposed of the passenger lines and expanded its freight routes. Since that time it has been operating as a class one common carrier of freight. Incidentally, it was at time that all assets of Cranberry Iron and Coal Company were transferred to the new corporation and the name changed to its present one – the ET&WNC Transportation Company. This transfer of assets resulted in the fact that th motor carrier is now the only common carrier of freight by motor vehicle in this country that wholly owns a railroad.

ET&WNC operates in Tennessee, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia. It employs more that four hundred persons and operates four hundred pieces of

equipment. The Company interchanges freight with many carriers with whom it cooperates in the establishment of joint routes and rates throughout the territory which it serves directly as well as a wide scope of contiguous territory. In this way trailers are loaded on its line and interchanged with various connecting carriers under lease arrangements, and transported to far distant destinations without the freight being transferred or unloaded until it reaches its final destination.

ET&WNC Transportation Company of 1951 is true to traditions of service and progress of the men of vision who built the original company. The colorful little narrow-gauge trains of an earlier era served a small number of people in a given area – and served them well. The present Transportation Company serves a far greater number of people all over the land.

Like the companies before it ET&WNC Transportation Company is a leader in its field. It keeps abreast with the progress that comes with Time, its pioneering spirit at once sturdy and flexible.

