

RIDING THE RAILS: THE STORIED HISTORY OF THE ET&WNC LINE

Reprinted from the Johnson City Press Monday, April 18, 2005

By Johnny Graybeal

IN 1853, THE EAST TENNESSEE & VIRGINIA RAILROAD was building its line from Knoxville to the state line at Bristol. This was the last link in a chain of that would connect Memphis with the Eastern Seaboard. Henry Johnson built a water tank to serve the steam engines that would work this line, ensuring that trains would stop in front of his store. He also built a depot, and the community became known as Johnson's Depot.

The Civil War came and went. In 1866, the East Tennessee & Western North Carolina Railroad was chartered to build a railroad from either Johnson's or Carter's Depot to the iron ore mine at Cranberry, North Carolina. The company's chief engineer suggested Johnson's because it would provide easier access to Elizabethton and the valleys of the Watauga and Doe Rivers, which were the water routes to Cranberry.

Thus a simple act of geography completely changed the future of a community. Work began on the ET&WNC in 1868, but lack of funds kept the railroad from being completed, and the right-of-way sat idle until it was sold to Northern capitalists. Work finally began on the now narrow gauge (36-inch) ET&WNC railway line in 1880, and it was completed to Cranberry in 1882. This change in gauge had a huge impact on Johnson's Depot. Everything that came out of the mountains had to be unloaded from one car and loaded onto another before it could go on to its final destination. Johnson City, as it was now called, was now a terminal rather than just a waypoint on the way to somewhere else.

The ET&WNC quickly became Johnson City's hometown railroad. Because there were now two railroads in town instead of one, business was drawn to that place. The population of the town grew with each counting, and in 1884 the Johnson City Comet newspaper began publication. For 30 years, this paper gave the week-to-week account of a city on the move. The editors quickly gave credit to the "Narrow Gauge" as the driving force for the growth of the town. Johnson City became known as the "Gateway to the Land of the Sky." Each year, hundreds of people flocked to the area to ride the narrow gauge into the Eastern wilderness. Many of them decided to stay and set up businesses in the growing town.

Nothing spurs growth like growth. General John T. Wilder and others started the Charleston, Cincinnati, and Chicago Railroad. This line was going to connect the East Coast with Chicago, and would pass right through Johnson City. Wilder was also a leader in the iron industry, and he began a company to build a furnace on the outskirts of town, called the Carnegie Furnace. This furnace would use coal and coke brought in

from Virginia on the Three C's, the high grade iron from Cranberry on the ET&WNC and use lower transportation costs to make iron cheaper than anywhere else in the country. The population of Johnson City went from hundreds to thousands almost overnight. The area around the new furnace was called the Carnegie Addition, and was later annexed into Johnson City. Boom times came to town, and as the grading of the line of the Three C's moved north and south, everyone planned and built for the even bigger boom to come.

Nearly 200 miles of the Three C's was built in North and South Carolina, and 14 miles was constructed from Johnson City to the North Carolina State Line in the Nolichucky Gorge in 1890, but the New York bank that was financing the construction failed, and a deepening recession nationwide stopped all work on the railroad. The dream of a railroad across the mountains would be realized 20 years later with the CC&O Railroad, better known as the Clinchfield. Johnson City declined, but still grew faster than other towns in the area.

The boom of the 1880s gave Johnson City another landmark that they could take pride in – **The Carnegie Hotel**. An electric street railway was built to connect the hotel with the downtown railroad depot. This hotel burned down in 1910.

By 1890, maps of Johnson City showed a triangle of railroad tracks, representing three railroads, with downtown nestled snugly within the triangle. New factories, located along these railroad tracks used lumber brought in over the Narrow Gauge. A large tannery used the acid from local wood in the tanning of leather.

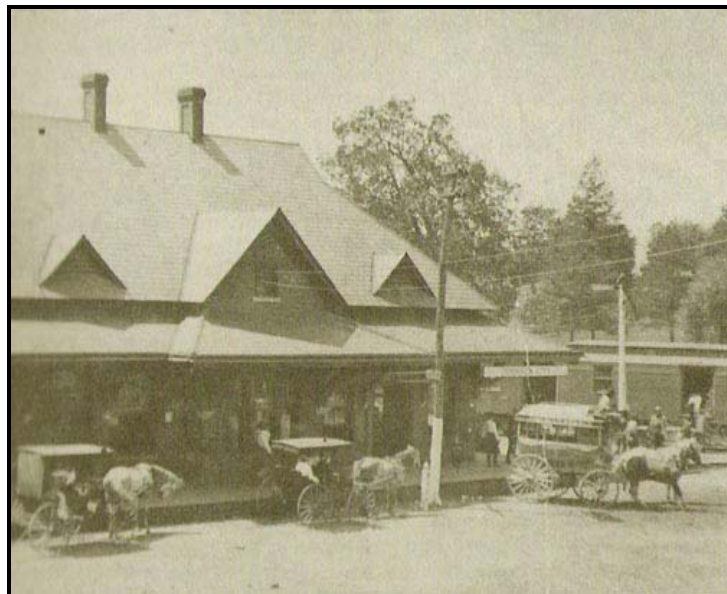


Figure 1 ET&WNC Depot Johnson City

In 1894, the ETV&G became part of the Southern Railway. Their railroad yards were located in the Carnegie area, while the Clinchfield parked cars out near the Normal School (now ETSU). The yard for the ET&WNC ran in a gentle arc from Orleans Street all the way down to Buffalo Street, before ending at the depot and the interchange with the Southern.

By World War I, all three lines serving Johnson City had a passenger depot within sight of each other. All three were in the center of downtown, and travelers often stayed the night at one of the downtown hotels, and ate at one of the restaurants. Convenient to everything was Fountain Square, with its picturesque fountain.

It was during the Depression that the railroad acquired a new nickname. From the earliest days the ET&WNC had been called the “Stemwinder” and “Narrow Gauge,” but by the late Thirties, it became known as “Tweetsie.”

In the years after World War II, the narrow gauge rails **increasingly lost money.** The tracks to Boone, North Carolina washed out in the 1940 flood, and the remaining portion could no longer pay the bills. In 1950, the Narrow Gauge Tweetsie closed, but the rails to Elizabethton from Johnson City, which had been dual gauge since 1905, continued to operate. The ET&WNC became a standard gauge short line, providing daily service to the businesses along its tracks.

However, the ET&WNC never did anything like everyone else. When the nation’s railroads were converting to diesel, the ET bought two beautiful steam locomotives from Southern, and used them in regular service until 1967. For 15 years, rail fans came from near and far to see these now rare creatures in action.

In 1967, the railroad traded these steamers back to Southern Railway in exchange for two ALCO RS-3 diesels. Southern took the engines that they had planned to scrap 15 years before and placed them in excursion service in their Steam Program. Unknowingly, the Tweetsie had preserved these priceless antiques until the rest of the world caught up to the idea that they were valuable. After the trade, rail fans continued to pursue the train because by that time, RS-3s had become rare in their own right.

In 1983, the company changed hands, and the ET&WNC became simply the East Tennessee Railway. Business gradually declined to Elizabethton. North American Rayon closed in 1993, and in mid-2003 the last major customer in Elizabethton closed its doors.

Johnny Graybeal, President of the ET&WNC Historical Society, is the author of a series of books on the railroad, called “*Along the ET&WNC.*” Currently five books in this series are available. More information about Graybeal and his book series can be found at the website www.tarheelpress.com.