

The Tweetsie



ROBERT W. RICHARDSON

The “white lightning” sparkled as it sprayed through the cool, clear mountain air. It wasn’t the old locomotive’s first encounter with “corn likker,” though. Many moonshiners had boarded the “narr’ gauge” with a basket full of jugs hidden under a tablecloth, bound for the flatlands below. But that was long ago; the train was now loaded with suburban moms and dads, kids in tow. On June 20, 1992, former East Ten-

nessee & Western North Carolina 4-6-0 Number 12 observed its “Diamond Jubilee,” 75th birthday and 35th anniversary of hauling tourists on North Carolina’s Tweetsie Railroad.

The “mountain dew” filled Mason jar was smashed against the engine’s front coupler by Harry Robbins, Spencer Robbins and Frank Coffey, owners of the tourist railroad, to christen the locomotive in celebration of its listing on the

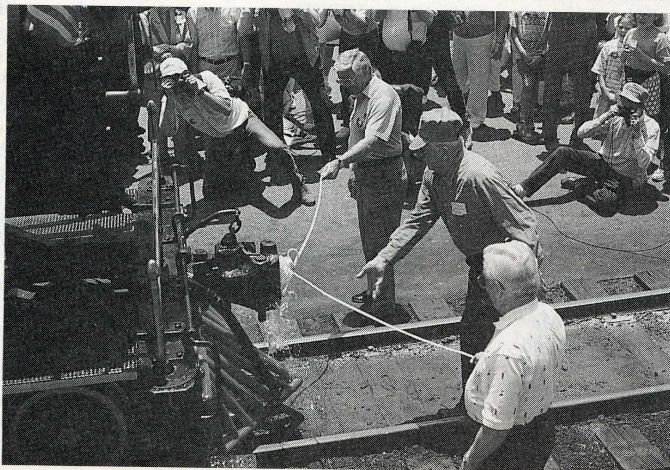
Nation’s Registry of Historic Places. And for the first time since 1954, No.12 was wearing authentic ET&WNC lettering.

Blue Ridge Narrow Gauge

The three-foot gauge East Tennessee & Western North Carolina Railroad was completed from Johnson City, Tennessee, to Cranberry, North Carolina, in 1882. In its 34 miles, the line passed through some of the most rugged terrain in the eastern United States. The railroad — which was begun in 1870 with five miles of five-foot broad gauge — was converted to narrow gauge and pushed eastward by Ario Pardee, who was also building the East Broad Top Railroad in Pennsylvania. The purpose of the ET&WNC was to transport iron from the Cranberry iron mine and furnace to connections with standard gauge roads in Johnson City.

Pardee brought in a Philadelphia engineer, Colonel Thomas Matson, to supervise construction of the line. It proved to be a demanding task. In the 19 miles between Hampton, Tenn., and Cranberry, N.C., the railroad gained 1500 feet in elevation. The Doe River Gorge provided a difficult entry to the mountains. Matson used bridges and tunnels to conquer the chasm. To speed construction he lowered mules into the gorge with block-and-tackle so the tunnels could be worked on from both ends. There were so many tight curves on the line that it was given the nickname

“MOUNTAIN DEW” was used to christen No.12 for her 75th Anniversary on June 20, 1992, as Harry and Spencer Robbins held the tether and Frank Coffey bashed the Mason jar against No.12’s coupler. In 1938 (above), No.12 was on an excursion at Newland on the Linville River. The ET&WNC ran excursions throughout the Great Depression.



JIM BOYD

and ET&WNC Number 12

by John Waite

A Baldwin 4-6-0 spans two eras of railroading

“Stemwinder,” which was immortalized in the book “The Balsam Groves of the Grandfather Mountain,” by mountaineer Sheppard Monroe Dugger.

The first 20 years proved to be difficult for the little railroad. The parent Cranberry Iron & Coal Company’s mine and furnace operated sporadically as the economy fluctuated and iron prices dropped with the opening of the Mesabi iron range in Minnesota. Hardwood timber tracts along the line were quickly harvested by small sawmill operations. General John Wilder’s famous Cloudland Hotel atop Roan Mountain provided a lively tourist business, but it was short-lived.

Business improved when the Pardee forces acquired the modern Carnegie Furnace in Johnson City and closed down their old Cranberry furnace in 1901. The next two decades brought prosperity and growth to the railroad.

Over the years several small logging and mining railroads were built as feeder lines for the ET&WNC. In 1913, the ET&WNC acquired one of them, the Linville River Railway. It had been operating a twelve-mile line to a W.M. Ritter Lumber Company mill at Pineola, North Carolina.

In 1915, the company began building an extension from the Linville River Railway at Montezuma to timber tracts in the area of Grandfather Mountain. Within a year the road had reached a major sawmill at Shulls Mills, N.C., 58 miles from Johnson City. Linville Gap, between Linville and Shulls Mills, was the highest point (4545 feet above sea level) in the eastern United States served by a passenger train.

The Linville River Railway added eight more miles to the line in 1918 when it reached Boone, N.C. For the next 22 years, the ET&WNC and subsidiary Linville River operated 66 miles of narrow gauge, opening the remote mountains to the outside world. As the mayor of neighboring Banner Elk said on the occasion of the first train into Boone, “I can remember when the only way a person could get to Boone was to be born there.”

Dual Personality

A third rail, to accommodate standard gauge traffic, was added on 14 miles of track from Johnson City to Hampton, Tenn., in the period of 1904 to 1910. For the next 40 years the railroad operated as a dual gauge line. Narrow gauge engines pulled standard

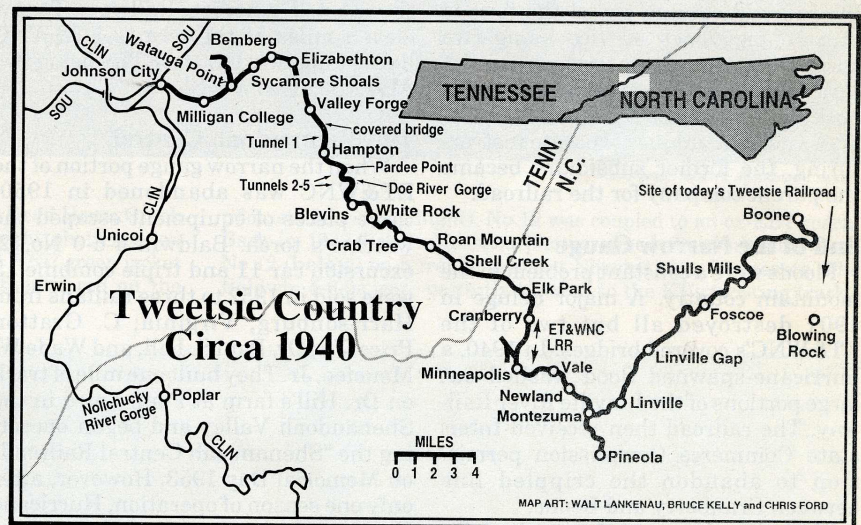
gauge cars using an unusual three-way coupler. Standard gauge locomotives were not employed, but the 0-8-0 bought for Johnson City in 1906 was the largest narrow gauge engine built at that time.

As the railroad expanded, it also added rolling stock and motive power. Hoppers, gondolas and boxcars cars were built in the company shops at Johnson City until the road had over 200 freight cars. Between 1907 and 1919 the company purchased seven narrow gauge Ten-Wheelers from Baldwin Locomotive Works to add to the road’s locomotive roster. The 4-6-0s were better suited to the 4% grades and tight turns of the little mountain railroad than the 2-6-0s and 2-8-0s they had been operating.

its open platform were well worth the extra half-dollar fare.

The most spectacular part of a trip on the ET&WNC began as the train approached Hampton. It crossed a 289-foot-long covered deck bridge just before entering the first of five tunnels. After leaving Hampton, the train steamed over a covered, through-truss bridge before passing through Tunnel 2 into the gorge. There the roadbed was carved into a rock ledge over a hundred feet above the raging Doe. When the river’s twists-and-turns became too tortuous to follow, the little train crossed a deck bridge, passed through a tunnel and crossed another through-truss bridge—all within a quarter of a mile!

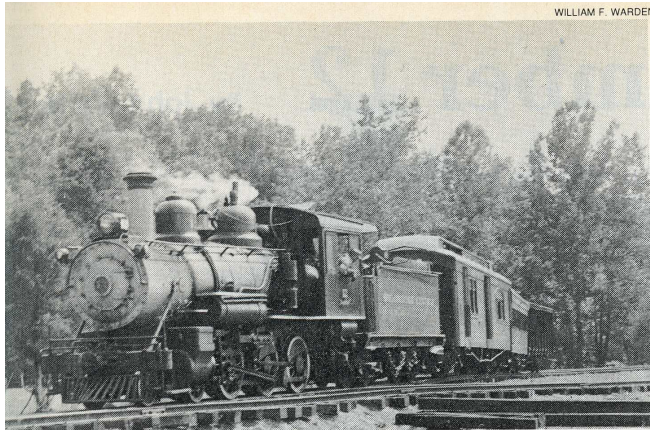
When North Carolina began improv-



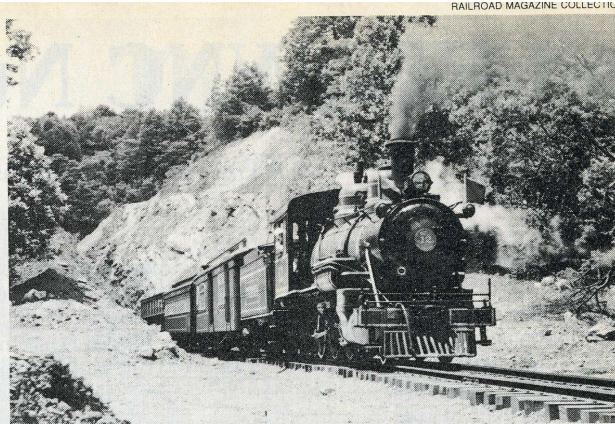
A variety of varnish handled the passenger business, including the only closed vestibuled narrow gauge passenger train in the United States at that time. Passenger runs were usually made behind 4-6-0 No. 12 with Sherman Pippin at the throttle. They often included “triple combine” car 15, which squeezed a Railway Post Office, a freight compartment and a “Jim Crow” coach section for twelve passengers into a total length of only 40 feet. It would be followed by two handsome coaches (featuring gracefully arched windows, oak paneled interiors and rattan seats) and a brass-trimmed parlor-observation car named *Azalea*. The plush comfort of the parlor car’s interior and the views from

ing mountain roads in the 1920s, passenger business fell off. To combat the decline the ET&WNC Transportation Company was formed to move into the passenger bus business. Several White buses were purchased, and routes through the mountains were established.

In 1926, a large rayon plant, American Bemberg, opened near Elizabethton, Tennessee. Two years later a second plant, American Glanzstoff, was built next to the original factory. These factories provided substantial business for the standard gauge portion of the ET&WNC. The railroad’s first standard gauge locomotive, a 2-8-0, was purchased second-hand from the Norfolk &



THE SHENANDOAH CENTRAL operated No.12 at Penn Laird, Va., in the summer of 1953 until Hurricane Hazel hit in October.



THE DEEP CUT on the Tweetsie was traversed by No.12 and the three Shenandoah Central cars in 1957; note the "triple combine."

Western in 1927 to help handle this traffic.

The ET&WNC Transportation Company quickly expanded into the motor freight trucking business and hauled both passengers and freight until it disposed of the busses in 1938. To help accommodate the new freight business the railroad became one of the first to initiate piggyback service using two specially constructed narrow gauge flat cars. Eventually the motor freight business superseded the railroad in importance and, in a unique corporate restructuring, the former subsidiary became the parent company for the railroad.

End of the Narrow Gauge

Floods were a constant problem in the mountain country. A major deluge in 1901 destroyed all but two of the ET&WNC's covered bridges. In 1940, a hurricane-spawned flood washed out large portions of the Linville River Railway. The railroad then received Interstate Commerce Commission permission to abandon the crippled line between Cranberry and Boone.

World War II provided enough traffic to save the narrow gauge to Cranberry, however. Commuter runs were made between the mountains and the rayon plants, where parachutes were manufactured for the war effort. After the war, service on the narrow gauge portion of the line was sporadic, and it was finally abandoned in 1950.

The standard gauge portion of the ET&WNC operated through the 1950s and 1960s using two ex-Southern Railway 2-8-0s 207 and 208. As one of the last railroads to use steam locomotives in daily service, it became a favorite of railfans and photographers. In 1967, the two old engines were traded back to the Southern for two ex-Central of Georgia RS3 diesels. The 2-8-0s were restored to their original numbers and went on to fame as 630 and 722 of the

Southern's steam excursion program.

In 1977, Red Ball Motor Freight bought ET&WNC Transportation and its subsidiary, the ET&WNC Railroad. When Telcom Corporation, Red Ball's parent company, went bankrupt in 1983, Green Bay Packaging Company purchased the railroad and organized the East Tennessee Railway. Today, eleven miles of the former ET&WNC line are operated by the ETRy using two Alco RS32 locomotives.

The Shenandoah Central

When the narrow gauge portion of the ET&WNC was abandoned in 1950, three pieces of equipment escaped the wrecker's torch. Baldwin 4-6-0 No.12, excursion car 11 and triple combine 15 were sold in 1952 to three railfans from Harrisonburg, Virginia; C. Gratton Price, Jr.; Dr. Paul S. Hill, and Wade W. Menefee, Jr. They built one mile of track on Dr. Hill's farm at Penn Laird in the Shenandoah Valley and began operating the "Shenandoah Central Railroad" on Memorial Day 1953. However, after only one season of operation, Hurricane Hazel washed out most of the trackage that October. Cowboy star Gene Autry eventually purchased an option on the equipment and planned to move it to his "Melody Ranch" in California.

The equipment sat unused in Virginia for over a year as Autry wrestled with the problem of transporting it to California. In 1955, Autry decided instead to buy D&RGW K27 "Mudhen" Mikado 463 (today at Antonito, Colo.) and allowed Grover C. Robbins, Jr., of the Robbins Lumber Company of Lenoir and Blowing Rock, N.C., to purchase the 4-6-0, the two ex-ET&WNC cars and an ex-East Broad Top coach from the Shenandoah Central.

Tweetsie for Tourists

Throughout its existence, the ET&WNC was loved by the mountain

people who lived along the right-of-way. Many affectionately called it "Tweetsie," and Engineer Pippin and Conductor Cy Crumley became high-country legends. Magazines, radio shows and even a movie short focused attention on the railroad. Grover Robbins and his younger brothers Harry and Spencer had grown up near Foscoe, N.C., and had often traveled on the little train to visit their grandmother when they were children. They longed to return it to the mountains.

North Carolina Governor Luther Hodges declared May 20, 1956, "Tweetsie Homecoming Day." When the equipment finally arrived in Hickory on May 24, 1956, thousands of people turned out for the celebration. The locomotive was rebuilt in the Carolina & Northwestern shops by General Foreman Frank Coffey, and on May 23, 1957, the equipment was loaded onto five flat-bed trailers for the move up the mountain from Hickory to Blowing Rock.

Frank Coffey and his crew built three miles of track around Roundhouse Mountain on U.S. Highway 221-321 between Boone and Blowing Rock. The run featured a 5% grade, two deep cuts and a trestle 200 feet long and 50 feet tall over Dead Horse Creek. Coffey became a part owner of new "Tweetsie Railroad" and soon left the Southern Railway system to devote all his time to Tweetsie's operations.

The three Robbins brothers and Coffey had few plans for the tourist attraction other than the enjoyable train ride. When a Charlotte television station rented the railroad for a birthday party for a local TV cowboy, Fred Kirby, the Robbins hired a few college students from Appalachian State University in Boone to act as Indians and train robbers. Kirby fought off the attackers, and the children loved it. Kirby's act was made a regular feature of the train ride.

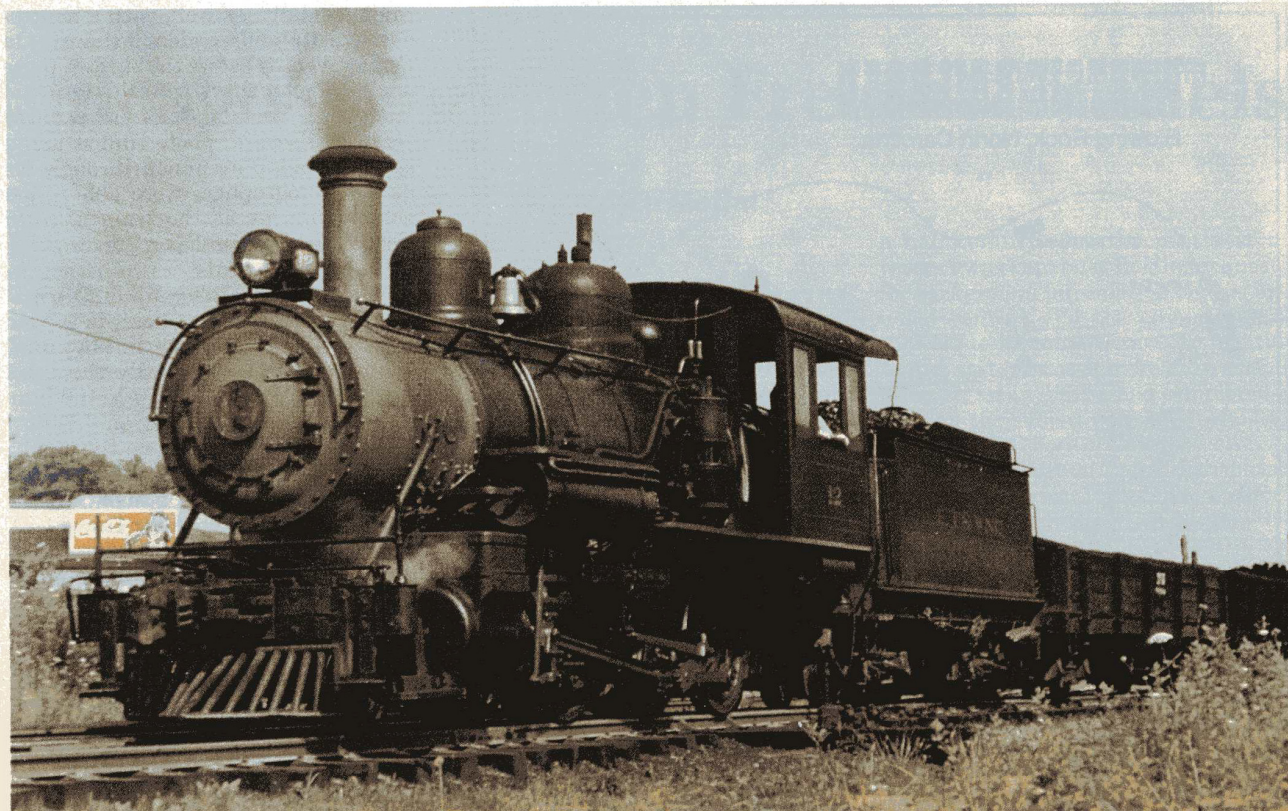
The Western theme was gradually ex-



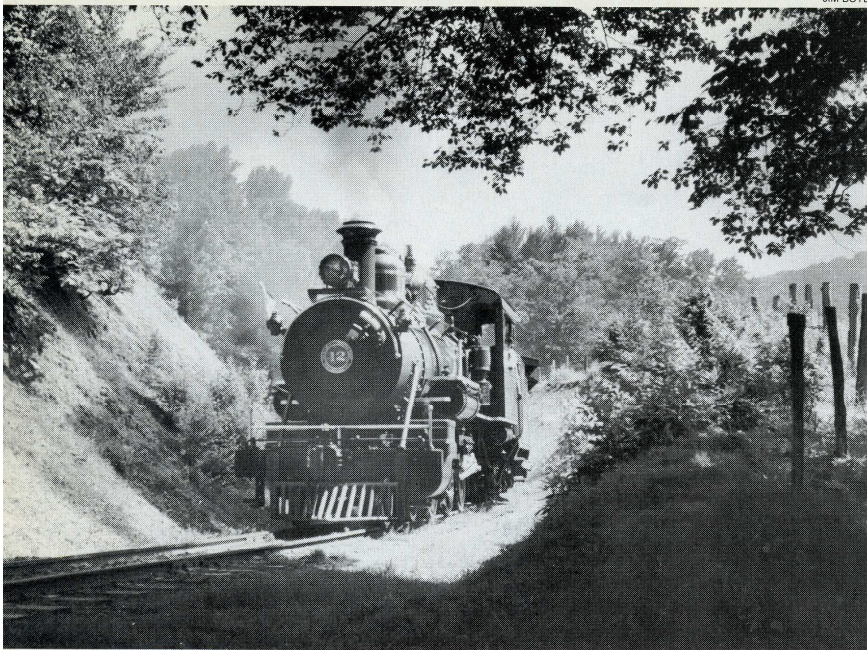
KODACHROME: JIM BOYD, JIM WRINN and JIM KING

THE TWEETSIE RAILROAD posed No.12 on Dead Horse Creek trestle on June 19, 1992, for the first railfan night photo session ever held on the line. Sporting an authentic ET&WNC green jacket and gold lettering (and just a bit of not-so-authentic red on the

pilot, stack and headlight), No.12 was coupled to an ex-EBT coach. Back in 1947 Bob LeMassena photographed the workaday black No.12 (**below**) on a freight train at Elizabethton, Tennessee. The Baldwin 4-6-0s were perfectly tailored to the ET's twisting track.



KODACHROME: ROBERT LEMASSENA / MALLORY HOPE FERRELL COLLECTION



NUMBER 12 creates a timeless image as it negotiates the S-curve between the depot and the trestle on June 20, 1992. Black and white photos neutralize the tourist colors.

panded to include a frontier town, Tweetsie Junction, complete with general store, ice cream parlor, jail, bank and shops. They then built a Country Fair featuring a variety of rides and games for children and the Palace Theater for entertainment. On top of the mountain, reached by a chair lift, the

Robbins added a Mouse Mine ride, gold panning and a petting zoo.

The "Tweetsie" 4-6-0 received a bright green, red and gold paint job, and new passenger cars were built over the years to accommodate the growing crowds. The Tweetsie's new open tourist cars are not unlike the excursion "summer

cars" used by the old ET&WNC. In order to handle the longer trains, Coffey was sent to Alaska to purchase a White Pass & Yukon locomotive. He came home with No.190, the *Yukon Queen*, a 2-8-2 built by Baldwin in 1943 for the U.S. Army Transportation Corps.

Tweetsie's shops developed into one of the most complete steam locomotive facilities in the East. Using machine tools acquired from the original ET&WNC, they maintain their two engines and do contract work for other steam operations, such as Dolly Parton's "Dollywood" park in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee. Their craftsmanship is highly regarded by other steam operators.

"We can build any part for a steam engine," Coffey proudly says.

The "ET&WNC" Returns

Engine No.12 received special treatment from Frank Aldridge, who replaced Coffey when he retired from daily operations, in preparation for its special day this summer. After making sure all little dings and dents were removed, the Ten-Wheeler was sprayed with a green paint, specifically formulated to match its original Baldwin factory paint job. Bright red was used for the trim, and gold leaf lettering was applied to the cab and tender. Railfans were particularly pleased that the engine sported authentic "ET&WNC" lettering for the first time in over 40 years.

Number 12's birthday party was held in conjunction with "Railroader's Day" at Tweetsie Railroad, and one of the old-timers on hand commented that, "I h'ain't ever seen 'er look so good!"

Not only did the engine look good, it ran splendidly, as well, with a melodious whistle and strident exhaust. On Friday evening before the big day, those who attended the ET&WNC Railroad Historical Society Convention were treated to several photo runbys and a special two-lap excursion through the park. Photographers were able to get action pictures as the train charged across the high trestle, up the 5% grade and through the cuts.

Number 12 doesn't work full time at Tweetsie Railroad anymore. It is used from the park's opening in May until "Railroader's Day," usually the third weekend in June. Ex-WP&Y 190 handles the heavy loads of July and August — the 190 is also easier on the engine crew, as the 4-6-0's "deckless" cab squeezes the engineer in alongside the rather warm firebox. After Labor Day, No.12 returns to duty until the end of the season. Last year the park initiated a special Halloween train, with night runs full of scary surprises. The program will be expanded in 1992 to run for several weeks in October.

Of course, the "ET&WNC" No.12 will be the star attraction.

