

CELEBRATING A HUNDRED YEARS

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Cars, Roads & Trains

Ironically, just as railroading was taking off here, the invention that would bring about its demise was also rearing its head in Cookeville — the automobile.

The Herald's Wirt began a campaign in 1909 for better roads, part of a general push across America. 'Pikes' were the big thing, better, straighter roads, roads graded and rocked to keep wagons and buggies out of the potholes.

A March 27, 1909 headline reads, "Good roads make a good county, good roads mean progress and prosperity."

Wirt asked, "If pikes are not a good thing, why are some of our most progressive farmers moving to Williamson, Davidson and White Counties to be on them?"

He tells of a farmer taking a wagon of goods to Sparta. "When he got to the pike six miles from Sparta his mules were wet with sweat and almost worn out.

"After getting on the pike they struck a trot and kept it up until Sparta and were in better shape when they got there than they were when they struck the pike.

"On the return home he made six miles in 40 minutes and about the same to make the next mile. He left home against pikes — he is now for them."

Prosperity was something new for Putnam Countians and many were not eager to turn loose of dollars on taxes for better roads.

Sidewalks

Wirt had more immediate luck in his push for sidewalks. "Sidewalks have been laid from the depot to the top of the hill on the north side of the street. People living west of that point can slide and wade the rest of the way home as usual." (Nov. 10, 1910)

But similar road and taxation battles being fought elsewhere in Tennessee soon convinced progressive-minded residents here that roads were the key to Putnam's future, and in late 1910 they authorized the county to spend a staggering \$100,000 on road building and repairs.

Most road building was left up to the counties and there was a hodge-podge of systems going when, in July of 1915, the state stepped in with a new law specifying how roads would be built.

It required each county court, what is today the county commission, to survey and classify all public roads in every county as first, second or third class roads. Counties were divided into 'sections' and each county court named an overseer over roads and bridges in each section.

The law also provided the manpower. All males in unincorporated sections of counties between ages of 21 and 50, except those excused by the county medical board, were subject to road duty. They worked up to eight, eight-hour days a year ditching and maintaining roads.

And the county court was called upon to levy a tax on all property owners outside incorporated areas, 15 cents per \$100 worth of property, for road building and upkeep.

Cars had been a novelty until then but now with roads of a sort crisscrossing the state, car sales took off.

In a July 1915 edition, Wirt reported that:

1 Clark and Pointer of Algood had secured the agency for Overland cars for four counties and three cars were sold already that week.

1 The City Garage was selling automobiles faster than they can get them “so if anyone wants one they’d better get in line now.”

1 Meanwhile, a new state taxing law went into effect that week for owners of autos and motorcycles. The annual tax: \$2.50 for motorcycles, \$5 for two-seater autos and \$7.50 for four seaters. Revenue went to road work.

Messy Mix

Now Putnam had horse-drawn buggies, autos and steam trains, and the mix was sometimes messy.

The Herald reported a train-auto collision in which five motorists were killed. Their vehicle was hit by afternoon passenger train of the TCR. State law of the day required all autos to come to a complete stop 50 feet from all rail crossings before attempting to cross. In the cavalier fashion of motorists of the day, that car didn’t stop and and Wirt commented, “No blame attaches to the train crew” in the incident.

Meanwhile in 1915, a line of iron hitching posts with chains was placed in the vacant lot between the depot and the main business block by Harp & Pointer to accomodate those wanting to hitch their buggies and horses — and to prevent hitching to phone poles and fences near the depot.

And this ad was placed in the Herald by A.M. Gibbs: “I have a horse and buggy for sale at a very low price. The horse can be driven up to trains and does not care to meet automobiles on the street while they are running at full speed. Home phone 91.”

Cars were on the rise on area roads and horses more and more were left on the farm.

A 1915 ad in the Herald for Clark & Pointer Bros. Overland’s new four-cylinder Overland Roadster boasted a “magnificent dark Brewster green finish with fine hairline striping of ivory white.” It had underslung rear springs and a “convenient arrangement of electric control buttons on the steering column and an “easy working clutch that any woman can operate.” It sold for \$750.

The trend towards the auto continued, but roads that were vast improvements for buggies weren’t as accomodating to motorized vehicles.

In the March 24, 1924 Herald, Quimby Dyer asked in page one letter, “What’s the matter with Cookeville? How does it plan to attract industry with poor roads?”

“Cookeville has about 25 miles of public streets, all in the poorest condition. At the present time, 20 are almost impassable. The other five make a new car look old and worn out in a few months. Some streets are sixty feet wide, some fifty, some forty.”

As late as 1930, the newspaper was reporting that in Putnam County and all across America, farmers were still separated from the marketplace for five months of the year by “barriers of mud.”

There were some 2 1/2 million miles of unimproved dirt roads in the US and about five million farmers in the US living along those roads.

The railroads were still unthreatened as the choice means of travel and transport.

Railroading Days

'Rail's a humming,
train's a'coming,
got a mind to go.'

— From an old blues tune.

It was a way of life long gone now but it still tugs at the hearts and memories of those who lived it, Putnam's railroading days.

It had its own musical language: the highballer train, the night train, the shopper, the 'Butch boy' selling 'POPCorn, PEAnuts, CANdy,' the roundhouse, sleepers and Pullman porters, and all the colorful terms for a caboose: the cabin car, the van, the ape car, the brain box, the dog house, the zoo, the parlor, the bedbug, or, as it was most widely known, the crummy.

Trains could go in any weather any time of the day or night and the humming of the rails and the rhythmic chugging of the fire-breathing steam locomotives set the pulsebeat of Putnam County until the last passenger train made its final run here in 1955.

Four times a day, passenger trains rumbled through, along with numerous freights, all coming and going on a set and widely-known schedule. Much of the town turned out when passenger trains pulled into the Cookeville Depot just to see who'd come to town. Factories broke for lunch when the noon train blew its whistle arriving on the edge of town. Motion pictures were scheduled so rural patrons could catch the train to town and ride one home afterwards.

Railroad time was Putnam County's time.

Retired Herald-Citizen photographer and former Algood Mayor Jim Heard, a boy in Algood in the 30s, remembers hopping the passenger train in Algood on Saturday afternoons to catch the latest picture at the Princess Theater on Cookeville's Westside, then riding the midnight train back home.

He knew people with cars but he said, "they just weren't the cars we had later on."

When Highway 70 was completed in 1930 here, the steep grade from Buffalo Valley to Silver Point was a challenge for cars of the day, he said. Model T's had gravity flow gas pumps that failed drivers halfway up. "There was a big turnaround where cars turned around and backed up the hill the rest of the way."

In fact, traveling any sort of distance at all in a car was a challenge then. Heard said you could expect at least one flat and usually more on a drive to Nashville. "They were just little narrow tires and you always carried two or three spares."

"Trains were just a lot more practical."

Retired TTU English professor Eleanor Mitchell agreed and remembers riding the train to Nashville when she went away to college at David Lipscomb University. She took the train because it easily accommodated all her belongings.

"I remember the straight, hard seats were very firm and very dirty," she said. Coal soot was pervasive.

In summer, "It was hot inside and you'd want to sit by a window, of course, but that was dangerous. You might get a cinder in your eye."

Memories of trains and the war years are especially vivid here still. They were dramatic years of high emotions. Trains were packed with young soldiers rolling into the unknown, mingling with regular riders.

Eleanor Mitchell remembers special troop trains moving through and “all the young men would hang out the windows waving at us.”

She said, “It was a very special time,” particularly during the Tennessee Maneuvers when the US Second Army conducted war games back and forth across Middle Tennessee and on many weekends, released thousands of young soldiers on leave in towns like Cookeville, and khaki became the town’s color.

She went with friends to dances at the USO. “It was an educational experience. They came from all over — Brooklyn, California — and they were shocked by our accents and we were by their’s.”

“They were lonely and enjoyed our company. We were just teenagers and we were not fully aware of what they were facing, but I think they were and they just tried not to think about it,” she said.

Nancy Jarrell wrote in the Highballer, the newsletter of the Cookeville Friends of the Depot organization, of an especially vivid moonlit summer night in 1943 when the train took those young men away to Europe and combat.

With most of Cookeville’s sons, brothers and young husbands gone to war, residents here had taken the soldiers into their homes for meals, made them presents at Christmas, adopted them as their own, she said.

“And so it came to pass...that when that first long troop train pulled out that summer night, the faces at the windows had become familiar and had names.

“Thousands of little connections had been made: a button sewn on, a letter written, a phone call made, a pingpong match won, a birthday cake baked, a few hundred miles ‘stomped at the Savoy,’ a hand held, a kiss given and received. These were not just troops — they were young men in our lives who were about to become memories.”

Trains brought Cookeville’s own young men home in 1945 and ‘46 — and some as late as 1949 when their remains were shipped home from temporary graves on faraway battlefields.

Business in World War One put the Tennessee Central Railroad firmly on its feet and the TCR saw a heady heyday in WWII, but its decline afterwards was steady and sure. Many of the returning GIs bought cars with their service pay, freight trucks began to seriously strangle rail business and the nation’s demand for coal and the trains that carried it dropped.

The TCR began the switch to diesel locomotives in the late 40s and the long familiar train whistle was replaced by the horn. “It was just a miserable sound,” said Jim Heard.

The last passenger train moved through town, packed one last time with riders and nostalgia, in 1955.

“We just felt an emptiness,” said Eleanor Mitchell. “It left a hole in our community. It took away a way we were connected to the rest of the nation.”

Up, up in the air

The air and what was moving through it fascinated generations of Putnam Countians. Halley’s Comet riveted skywatchers here in 1910 and reportedly drove one woman here mad worrying that the fire in the sky signalled the Second Coming. In 1919, schools turned out and the whole town gathered in a field just west of the Depot when the first airplane landed here.

In the ‘30s, Clarence Stone and friends lit the airfield north of town late one night with car headlights so a mail pilot running perilously low on fuel and miles off course from a storm could safely land.

In 1932, one of Stone's friends, barnstormer Earl Sark, advertised an aerial exhibition in the newspaper and promised a free airplane ride to anyone who could guess how high he was when he dropped a chicken out over the crowd.

In 1933 on its way from Rio de Janeiro to the World's Fair in Chicago, the Graf Zeppelin caused a sensation here when it sailed over Cookeville and people stood on the street watching, rapt.

But while air travel fascinated Putnam County, its air field north of town became locked in by growth on the town's northern edge and as Cookeville grew, it looked elsewhere to meet its air needs.

The field was used to train air cadets at TTU in WWII and officials struggled for grants afterwards to modernize the facility and lengthen its runway to handle bigger airplanes and, eventually, corporate jets. But homes and businesses blocked it from growing.

The situation was highlighted in the early '80s when a trailer park owner temporarily halted flights from the airport by erecting a television tower in the runway's flight path and attempted to charge the county "rent" for use of the airspace over his property.

The airport was closed down in 1997 and the property used for the new Cookeville High school. The county now partners with White County officials at the Sparta-White Airport a few miles south of Cookeville.

Automotive age

Postwar America hit the road and hit it with enthusiasm in the automobile, spawning a travel industry here and creating jobs as well.

The newspaper reported in its Oct. 27, 1955 edition that Police Chief Hubert Crawford and Mayor Dero Brown had declared it "Courtesy Week" in Cookeville. They urged everyone to be extra friendly to travelers.

A year later it reported that not only had traffic become a problem here, but parking had too. The merchants on Westside built a parking lot behind the stores on the north side of Broad and installed a booth where drivers paid the attendant 10 cents to park for an hour.

It was a pattern that played out from then until now, attracting travelers and shoppers and workers here, then struggling to cope with too many cars and not enough roads.

In the 50s, teenagers got their hands on the wheel too. Herald editor Earl E. Neiberger wrote in 1958 that teens were not only learning to drive, they had a their own language as well.

In the new slang, teens called their car's front grill a "fireplace," accessories like metal flying swan ornaments were "goodies," and "skins" were what they called the tires. 'Spaghetti" was an excessive amount of chrome, hubcaps were "moons," and an "Uncle Daniel" was an older car that was souped up but still seemed a little tame, he wrote.

Drive-ins and drive-throughs came to Cookeville and so did jobs, thanks to cars.

The newspaper reported in its Aug. 23, 1960 issue that Ford Motor Co. officials announced at a banquet here that Cookeville's Delman Corp. had become a million dollar supplier of windshield wipers to the auto maker. Since 1949, Ford had increasingly placed larger orders for windshield wipers at the plant. In 1960, orders topped \$1 million.

Other major employers followed. Fleetguard came to make automotive filters in the '60s and in the 1990s, TRW opened a massive plant here to make air bags for car safety systems.

The completion of Interstate 40 in the mid-60s and most of Highway 111 in the late 1980s put Cookeville squarely in the crosshairs of rapid growth.

Local drivers were so eager to get onto the new interstate that the newspaper carried photos of them driving on newly gravelled sections long before it was paved and the links were joined to make it a national route. Today you can reach Nashville in just over an hour on I-40, rocketing along at 70 miles per hour.

Back to future?

You can rocket along, that is, if traffic isn't too heavy or you're not held up by construction fixing road wear or adding lanes and bridges to handle the ever-increasing traffic load.

William Drunic, president of the Nashville and Eastern Railroad, the short line railroad now rolling a freight train slowly through town once or twice a week, announced last June that federal grants were being pursued to reopen the tracks east to Monterey.

The failing TCR sold its tracks in 1967 and Southern Railroad took up the rails from Monterey to Crossville. Algood is now the end of the old TRC line. The NER stopped runs up the mountain east several years ago and trees now grow through the remaining cross-ties.

But talks are under way to reestablish a rail link east, possibly to Knoxville.

"People are waking up to the fact that we can't live on highways alone. They're too crowded and there's too much pollution," said Drunic.

Restored rail service would be good news to patrons of the Cookeville Depot Museum, which opened in 1986. They lament that rail service ended in the first place. Until a decision is made on the rails, they've got plenty to look at at the Depot to stoke their enthusiasm for trains.

There are two cabooses stationed there now, the museum is packed with Tennessee Central memorabilia popular with old and young alike, and last fall a 1913 Baldwin steam locomotive made the Depot its new home. The '509 Plaza' was added in May to show it off.

Depot Museum officials say that often now, motorists passing by spot the 'iron horse' park there and pull in to have a closer look, to climb up into the cab, or just run their hands over the metal of the old engine, touching the past, reliving the good old days here.

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