

THE RAILROAD IN THE UPPER CUMBERLANDS

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Current Lines of Upper Cumberland Electric

Vol. 8, No. 1 – January, 1990

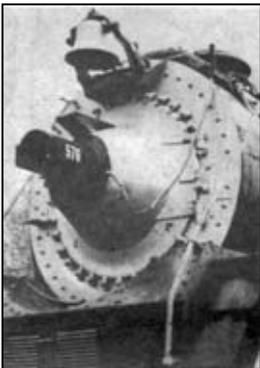


After the Civil War ended, people realized the need for better transportation. Nashville and Knoxville needed to be connected by rail. The land of the area was productive. Cheap land and marketable crops was another reason for building the railroad.

This beautiful stained-glass window (picture left), is in the Monterey United Methodist Church. About 1920 it was given by the Tennessee Central employees that went to church there. The window faces the railroad tracks.

The railroad in the Upper Cumberland linked towns and communities to new businesses in several communities. Farmers could ship their goods longer distances than they ever thought possible. New merchandise soon became available to area merchants and offered locally. People traveled longer distances in much shorter time. They visited nearby towns and could travel a hundred miles or more in a day. A change in the living standards, business, and local economy was being made. The railroad would cause a new prosperity that would last for years.

In the late 1800's, a Pennsylvanian industrialist, Alexander Crawford leased thousands of acres of land for the mineral rights in Putnam, Fentress and Overton counties. The area was rich in coal. There had to be a way to ship the coal to make it profitable. In 1884 Crawford chartered the Nashville Railroad. At that time the North Carolina and St. Louis Railroad came through Lebanon. Crawford was given permission to connect his line with the NC & StL. A survey for a railroad between Lebanon and Cookeville began in 1885.

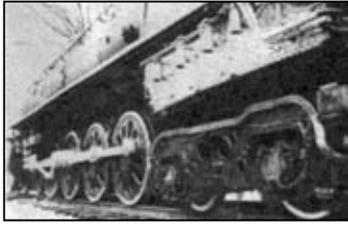


Five years of hard labor connected the Nashville and Knoxville Railroad with Cookeville. On July 10, 1890 the first train arrived at Cookeville. Hugh crowds gathered and scattered when the train arrived. Never had they seen or heard such a monster.

Next, the railroad was to be built to Monterey. Before it was completed, Alexander Crawford died. His sons finished the project. By 1893 the rails reached Monterey. Putnam County now had 30 miles of track.

Lines from Monterey connected to the mountain coal fields of the Crawford, Wilder-Davidson area. Before 1900 the railroad was shipping coal from "The Mountain" throughout North America.

Nashville businessman Jere Baxter bought the K&N in 1893 and renamed it the



Tennessee Central. Soon the Tennessee Central would extend from Hopkinsville, Kentucky to Emory Gap near Harriman. The TC now covered over 250 miles. As prosperity increases, so does the activity and risks of the area. The percentages for tragedy increase.

In 1919, a runaway train claimed the lives of Grover Gill and Willie Wright. They were returning to Monterey from the Wilder-Davidson area with a load of coal. This area is geographically near the joining Overton, Fentress and Putnam counties. The wreck occurred at the foot of Tip-Top mountain, below the community of Love Joy.

The heavily loaded coal train was a double-header, a train pulled by two locomotives. The braking equipment was not as efficient as it would be in later years. Gill and Wright were the brakemen. They worked the entire train by applying the brakes on each car to keep the speed down. The brakemen began at opposite ends of the train and worked toward the middle.

The only communication between the engineer, brakemen and conductor was by hand signals. As the train descended the mountain its speed increased. It began to run away. The brakemen worked furiously to overpower the speed of the train. The speed continued to increase. They were in the middle with no place to go. As the speeding locomotive approached the bridge it remained on the tracks and was able to cross. The stress on the bridge from the speed, force and weight of the heavily loaded coal cars caused the bridge to collapse. The cars in the middle of the train fell about forty feet to the ground. The locomotive and the back portion of the train remained on the track.

Grover Gill was killed when struck by a bridge beam. Willie Wright died while buried beneath the coal. The area was remote and without communications. Help was not readily available. Rescue efforts came slowly. These men had planned to take their families to a circus in Monterey when they arrived home that night.

Soon other counties saw the need for a railroad. The Overton County Railroad, incorporated March 18, 1904, connected Livingston to Algood. The first train on the track was required to reach Livingston by a specific time. If not, they would lose a substantial amount of construction money that had been voted in by the county. To meet this deadline, the tracks were hastily laid. Crossties were spaced far apart. The train met the deadline and arrived in Livingston about 3 p.m. An anxious crowd gathered to meet the train. Later, as it left for Algood, several people were offered a free ride in crude-built passenger cars. These were flat cars with sides and rough seats nailed to them. As the train approached Algood the locomotive and several cars jumped the tracks. The frightened passengers jumped from the train as the train was jumping the tracks. The train finally ended up in a clay bank. They were glad to be able to walk on to Algood.

Two locomotives unsuccessfully operated on the OCRR and accumulated a debit balance of over \$50,000. A receiver for the railroad was appointed in 1910. In 1912 it was sold to a reorganization committee. The same year it was again sold to the Cincinnati-Nashville Railway Company. On August 14, 1912 the Tennessee-Kentucky and Northern Railroad

Company was incorporated. They leased the line for fifteen years.

A Model T Ford with a bus type body was built to operate on the tracks. For a few years this motor car carried passengers from Livingston to Algood. By 1934 the TK&N abandoned the 22 miles of track. Only one locomotive was in operable condition. The TK&N had failed to show a profit. The railroad from Livingston to Algood came to an end.

The railroad operated successfully in several other places. Many people were required to operate the railroad. The agent and assistant agent were located at the depot. Their chief function was selling tickets and operating the telegraph. A baggageman and custodian also worked there. In those days, depots were divided into separate areas for blacks and whites. They also had separate places in the passenger cars. The depot was the gathering place or community center for the locals. People stayed and talked until late at night at the depot.

Maintenance of the railroad tracks ranked top priority. Tracks, bridges, signs, trestles, culverts, switches and anything related to the railbed was maintained by the track or section crew. Some of these men lived along the tracks. When a problem occurred they made the repairs and returned home when the job was complete.

The operation of a train required the cooperation of several men depending on each other. The train crew consisted of an engineer, fireman, conductor flagman and man, conductor flagman and brakemen. Each job was equally important and sometimes one person performed more than one job. The firemen had an extremely hard job of keeping the engine fired on steep uphill grades. The brakemen were responsible to keep the train from running away on downhill grades.



Wrecks and derailments were common. The steep grade from Monterey to Cookeville and from Silver Point to Buffalo Valley had its share of runaway trains. This area was more dangerous than the level areas west of Buffalo Valley. It was a test for crews who had never operated in this area. Amazingly, the record of injuries and fatalities was low on the Tennessee Central.

Loaded coal cars were left standing on the Buffalo Valley Bridge in the flood seasons during the 1920's and 30's. The weight kept the Caney Fork River from washing the bridge out.

One of Smith Counties worst accidents occurred in 1949. The headlines in the April 28, 1949 edition of the Carthage Courier read, "Ten Killed When Train Strikes Truck; County's Worst Tragedy." The Courier reports, "Ten persons were killed and one seriously, injured at 10:30 o'clock Sunday night in a train-truck collision a half mile east of Carthage Junction at the Gordonsville-Lancaster road crossing near Gordonsville.

Those who died in what was reported as the worst accident ever to happen in Smith County were: Jess Bennett 50, driver of the truck, and his wife, Mattie Bell Bennett, 45; their three sons, Douglas Bennett, 12, V. L Bennett, 10, and Melvin Earl Bennett, eight.

Also, Mrs. Paulie Dickens, 24, daughter of the Bennetts; her husband, Paulie Dickens, 24; their daughter, Catherine, one; W. E. (Coonie) Bennett, 49, Jess Bennett's brother; and Miss Linnie Gibbs, 17, daughter of John Gibbs.

Miss Ruth Robinson, 18, the sole survivor of the tragedy, is in a Lebanon hospital. Her pelvis bone was crushed, it was reported.

The Smith Countians, all residents of Hogan's Creek, were returning from services at the Lancaster Church of God, about three miles from where the accident occurred.

Witnesses said the heavily loaded farm truck pulled around another truck and onto the track in the path of the fast westbound Tennessee Central freight train.

John Overstreet, another son-in-law of Bennett's, and his wife, were occupants of the other truck. He had stopped at the crossing to discharge a passenger.

"I knew the train was coming," Overstreet said. "I tried to wave the truck down, but my father-in-law pulled around me and went on in front of the train."

With the momentum and weight of a loaded freight train it is almost impossible to make an emergency stop from a speed as slow as 10 miles per hour.

Several of the employees of the Tennessee Central live in the surrounding counties. I contacted some of them and they recalled some of the happenings from their days on the railroad. From a laborer on the track crew to a long-time engineer, one comment was shared by all. "the people that lived along the railroad were all good to us."



Norman Bennett, (pictured left) still lives in the house he bought from the railroad at the Carthage Junction. The depot stood about 100 feet from his home. It has been moved to a location at the Carthage exit on I-40 and houses a very unusual antique shop.

An old tool house stands between Bennett's house and the tracks. Its condition shows many years of use with few remaining.

Bennett tells, "A derailment by my house one night tore up many feet of track. I didn't wake up. The cars ended up endways and filled the creek with two-by-fours.

While walking down the track Bennett finds a "dated nail" driven into the cross-tie. The date on the nail is 1952. "When we laid the ties, we drove a nail so they could tell how long it had been there." Bennett said.

He remembered a locomotive that was so old and big that it couldn't get under the coal chute. The coal had to be loaded with shovels.

“One of the first things they told a man when he went to work on the railroad was, ‘There’s no rainy days,’ Bennett said. They worked out on the job regardless of the weather.

Ernest Gambell lives in Buffalo Valley. Every day he walks to the post office that is located on the other side of the interstate from where he lives. Trying to locate him, I stopped a man beside the road to ask where Gambell lived and if he might know him. His reply, “You’re talking to him.”

Gambell began working on the railroad in 1943 and worked until the last day of operation. He was a member of the track repair crew. Gambell said, “When we worked sixteen hours we then went on double-time pay.” In derailments he tells of being gone two or three days at a time. They stayed until the tracks were cleaned up.

Luna Oakes lives in Boma, TN. Oaks said, “I was 13 or 14 years old when I started with the railroad. I worked for 37 years.” Oaks worked on the tracks the crews were assigned to maintain. Sometimes he ran a motor car. Earlier he worked from a hand car. Hand cars were man-powered, two men pumped a bar up and down and kept the car moving. They had to be pushed up the steeper hills.

Oakes said, “The bosses lived in Nashville. When we went out we were gone for days and days. The railroad brought cars to the worksite and we lived in the cars until the job was done.”

Every day they went out to look for dangerous ties when not cleaning up a wreck.

Elmer Parsons started working on the TC in 1943. He went with the L&N when the TC was abandoned in 1968. Parsons was a conductor when he retired. Like many other TC employees, Parsons worked from Emory Gap near Harriman to Nashville and sometimes Hopkinsville, Kentucky.

Several incidents on the railroad are told by Parsons. One of them involved a head-on collision with a steam engine and a diesel at Crab Orchard. Parsons was on the diesel, the steam engine had stopped and the fireman was on top filling it with water. Just before the trains hit, Parsons jumped. The steamer was knocked about 200 feet. No passengers were injured. The fireman died about two weeks later from the injuries of the accident.

Imagine one car coming up two tracks at the same time. A tanker was off the tracks near Buffalo Valley. An oncoming train was eastbound and approaching a curve. A side track ran beside the main track. The engine came up the main track and so did the front wheels of the caboose. The rear wheels of the caboose jumped the track and went up the side track. For a short distance the caboose was coming up both tracks at the same time.

Parsons has collected hundreds of railroad items. His basement contains items ranging from a 1921 L&N calendar, about 35 lanterns, a couple of hundred time-table logos and

about 300 locks.

Lemiel Gill lives in Monterey. He spent twenty years with the railroad. He retired as a conductor. In 1919 it was his father, Grover Gill who died in the runaway train wreck on Tip-Top mountain. Lemiel Gill was less than two years old when the accident occurred. In 1941, Lemiel began a twenty-year career with the Tennessee Central.

Gill said, “What was so fascinating with the railroad was everytime you went out something new happened. No two trips were the same.” He proudly tells that during his twenty years on the rails he never was in a wreck that involved a death.



An amusing story told by Gill is about Clark Parrish, the “rooster fighting engineer.” As Gill tells it. “Parrish kept his roosters at the homes of people living along the railroad tracks. He had roosters located on both his east- and westbound routes. If a fight was scheduled on either route, his roosters were available for him to pick up and fight wherever he went. One special rooster recognized the toot of the whistle. When he heard it he would fly down to the track as the train came by. Parrish always threw off some corn for his prize rooster.”

John Lusk of Monterey retired from the railroad as a conductor. Lusk tells about happenings he encountered on the railroad and of incidents that happened before his time with the railroad.

A train ran from Monterey to Wilder-Davidson in the pre-1920’s called the “Jitney.” The Jitney carried the mail and passengers from Monterey to Davidson. Monterey was the “working headquarters” for the Tennessee Central and Wilder was a prosperous mining town creating a need for transportation between them. The fare ran between fifteen and twenty cents. Later the train was combined as a coal and passenger train.

Monterey was the recreation area of the Upper Cumberland region. Railroad men and miners from Wilder often met to play baseball at Monterey in the early 1920’s. The TC brought people there on the weekend for their leisure time.

One of Lusk’s stories is as follows, “A man at Hanging Limb kept a hundred-dollar bill to give to the conductor to pay his fare. Captain Cherry, the conductor, didn’t have change for the rare hundred-dollar bill. The man was allowed to ride free. The man began using this hundred-dollar bill for several free rides but Captain Cherry was not to be outdone. The next time he was presented the large bill he surprised the passenger by accepting it and giving him the correct change in return. The shocked man begged for his money back but Cherry kept it. This ended his free ride, he always had the correct change.”

The train is very unusual to most of us today. John Lusk has had a very interesting and unusual life in transportation. He left the railroad in World War II to serve his country. He went directly from the railroad to the air. There were only three, four-engine bombers

in World War II, the B-17, the B-24 and the B-29. Lusk was assigned as a gunner in a B-24. He was to stay in the ball turret below and at the rear of the airplane. The gunner had to be lowered into the turret and stay in a reclining position for several hours. The hatch was closed and he remained there until the mission was over. This was a place of action and you depended on the help of the crew. If the plane had to land while he was in there—he would be first on the ground, even before the wheels! The turret and gunner had to be raised up before landing. John Lusk has seen excitement that others have only heard about.

The daily duties were risky on some of the mountainous country where the Tennessee Central ran. To save time and climb the steep grades, they would occasionally “double” a long train. To double meant to take half of the train up the grade and later come back and get the other half. Other tricks were also used on the hills. Lusk tells, “You ran up the hill as far as you could.

The angle cocks were turned so the brakes would leak. We would “cut” the train. To cut was to ride in the middle at the place where the train would separate. You took your heels and turned the air cocks so the brakes would bleed and pulled the pin from between the cars while hanging on to only two hand holds. This involved good balance and working with your hands and feet together. In the meantime you were hanging at the back of a car with the second set of cars coming straight toward you. If something went wrong it was all over.”

“There was never an engineer like Pete Bruce,” Lusk said. “We once worked together. I’ve seen him walk through the front door of the locomotive while the train was running. He would go out front and pile sand then come back in and run the train. Pete was always working with the fireman’s fire, he wanted plenty of steam. That’s the way we ran. We’ve been chewed out for some of the things Pete and I have done.”

Passenger trains had to leave on specific schedules. Other trains ran on the same track and time was critical. Sometimes a passenger train had to be flagged down and be backed in on another track so they would clear as the other train came through.

Bill Hall of Monterey started working on the section crew in 1934. The section work lasted seven years. Hall said, “It was hard work, like slavery.” He later was a fireman. When he retired he was an engineer.

Hall tells first hand about the work of a fireman and an engineer on a steam engine. His experience as a fireman tells this, “The fireman keeps the drinking water over the engine. A thick wooden box with a lid on the front makes the water accessible. Our tools were a shovel, coal pick and two clinker hooks, a short and long one.

“You fired the engine by its weight. They were either shovel or stoker fired. Before 1936 they were all shovel fired. A stoker-fired engine had an automatic coal feed. There was a plate inside the door of the fire box with five jets. The wet coal kept the dust from circulating. The jets washed the coal out. If more steam was needed the fireman opened the steam valve.

“There was a light at the front of the smokestack. The smoke went’ through a light and the color of smoke indicated how much coal was needed. You had to watch the smoke.

“The fireman was the watchout. He rang the bell and gave signals. Inside there was a glass or water gauge to tell how much water you had. Sometimes on a downhill grade the water count not be seen. The boiler had three petcocks and a low-water alarm. On a downhill grade you could open the petcocks to check the water. If the water got too low it was dangerous. There was about five minutes in which to do something or have an explosion.

“In this mountainous country, the fireman may have shoveled sixteen tons of coal in an eight-hour day. The fireman stood between the engine and tender (coal car). He balanced with one foot on the pedal that opened the door to the fire box while shoveling the coal.

“The engineer and fireman checked to see if both had everything they needed. The engineer was to see that the water tank and coal bins were full. He kept an oil can, tools and a “bale of waste” which consisted of fluffy chewed-up rags. The locked tool box had a hammer, chisle, screwdriver, stillson wrench and wire pliers. He had two and one-half gallons of lamp oil and tallow.

“The long-spout oil can oiled the shoes and wedges behind the wheels. It took about thirty minutes to oil the engine.

“The engineer oiled everything that moved. He asked if the sand was full. If he was told yes, he checked anyway. He wanted plenty of sand. That’s their traction on hills. When that was done, we were ready to go. When you are off the ready pit you make up the train. Water and ice was put into the caboose. The air pressure was tried for about twenty minutes. The cars were inspected and brakes were set. You drew off the air and watched ‘for leaks. Any leak over seven pounds was rechecked.

“The term “fire” to an engineer means seven or eight scoops of coal into all parts of the firebox. With the coal properly banked, the draft from the exhaust will pull up the coal. Regardless of the method, it took a lot of work to keep the steam engine fired. You watched your gauge, kept the coal in and the steam up. When you began to ease the throttle, the fireman could slow down.”

Sometimes a train returned slightly disabled from its run. Hall tells, “We almost didn’t make it back to Monterey from Rockwood one time. The main rod on engine 4613 broke. I had to hold the road up with a rope to keep it out of the cross ties.”

Hall finished with, “The mountains and hills were hard work, it took a good man to stay with it; it took good men to operate the railroad. This country is for a steam engine, not a diesel. Steam would have kept the railroad operating.”

Thanks to those who gave their time and information for this brief coverage of Upper

Cumberland railroad history and an overview of the operation of a “steamer”:

Cookeville Depot Museum, Marilyn Brinker, Nashville and Eastern Railroad, The Carthage Courier. Dickie Milligan, The First Methodist Church of Monterey. Volunteer Electric Cooperative, Ray King, Janet Gann, Overton County Library, Putnam County Library, Norman Bennett, Ernest Gambrell, Freddie Poindexter, Luna Oakes, Lemiel Gill, Elmer Parsons, John Lusk, Bill Hall, and Sidney Harper. Also thanks to the wives who patiently waited while their husbands told of their railroad experiences. Final appreciation goes to the dogs that kept their distance while some photographs were being made, and to anyone who was omitted by mistake. We appreciate your interest and your help.

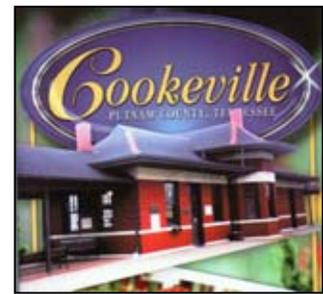
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Tennessee Central Depot
 A locomotive on the Nashville-Knoxville first steamed into Cookeville in 1890. The Tennessee Central brought the line in 1902 and built this depot with its distinctive pagoda design in 1909. Soon six trains daily brought visitors, shoppers and salesmen to town and took natives to distant places. Also freights loaded with lumber, poultry, hogs, corn and tobacco rolled to faraway markets.



Tennessee Central 9828
 Train restoration in memory of Thomas Springfield. Funded by his daughter Gladys S. Owens – 1993.



Cookeville Depot Museum,
 Cookeville, Putnam Co., TN



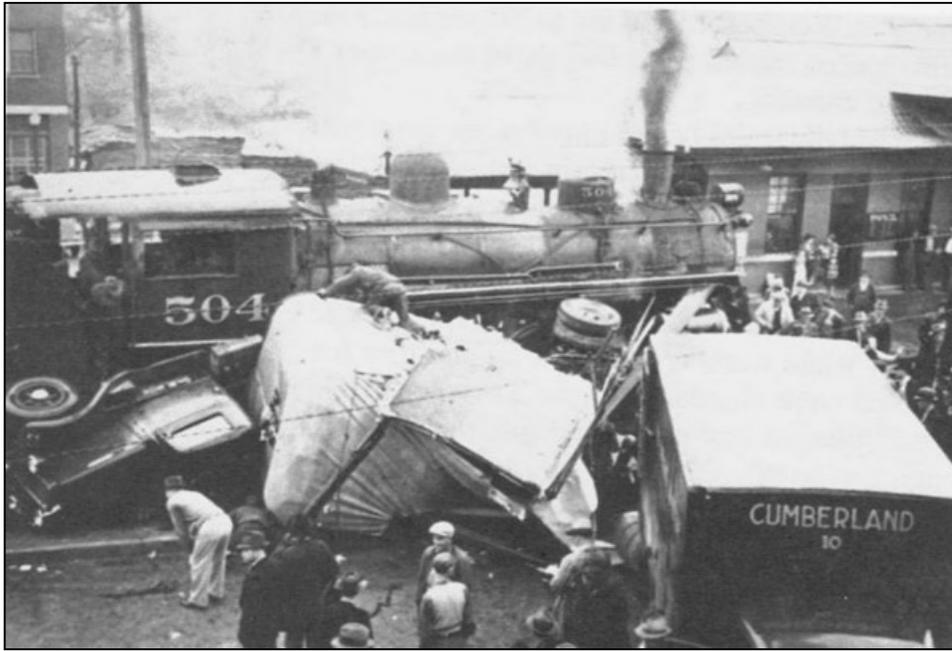
The coal chute and sand house as it appeared in Monterey, 1966. Today the tall block structure is all that remains.



The Cookeville Depot was built in 1909. This Victorian building was constructed of brick and was very unusual for the area.



Baxter, Putnam Co., TN when the railroad went thur.



Railroading was hazardous, as these pictures of WRECKS ON THE TC TRACKS through Putnam County illustrate.



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(Herald Citizen Newspaper: Sept. 14, 1954) The Tennessee Central Railroad has petitioned the State Public Utility Commission to discontinue passenger service through Cookeville, and the newspaper prints an article looking at what might be the effects.

Cookeville Postmaster L.K. Mahler says that it could cause trouble for the mail service here, which primarily uses trains to bring in the mail, although it does have one night truck going to Nashville each day, he said.

But what about times of ice and snow when roads are closed here, he asks. Also, at least two rural communities that are not served by commercial bus lines — Brotherton and Buffalo Valley — could be in trouble too. Their residents have come to rely on the railroad to get to Cookeville. Now they'll have to find neighbors or relatives with cars to take them.