

## WHITE COUNTY'S RAIL HISTORY SPRINGS BACK TO LIFE

By Amy Davis

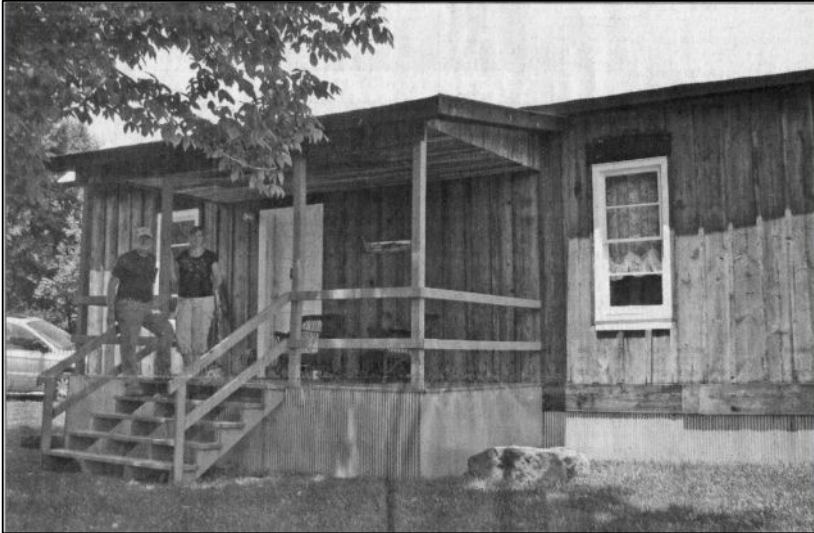
'White County, TN'

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<http://www.bonairmountainhistoricalsociety.org/>

**WHITE COUNTY-** One can almost imagine they still live there – that at any moment, one of the railroad workers from a century ago could walk in the door after a long day of tending to the track. Come home to his “section house.” The kitchen is equipped with all



the essentials of days gone by, as is the bedroom and other portions of the small, wooden house, which showcases White County railroad and coal mining life from 1903 to 1936.

And members of the Bon Air Mountain Historical Society couldn't be more proud of it – which is why

they turned it into a museum.

(Pictured: James Welch, vice president of the Bon Air Mountain Historical Society, and Linda Mackie, president, show off the railroad section house museum – one of Tennessee's last remaining in its original condition).



The building, one of Tennessee's last remaining railroad section houses in its original condition, had been donated to the county and historical society by Carol Blodgett Macintosh in 2009 for that very purpose.

(Pictured: DeRossett Section House – Front Entrance).

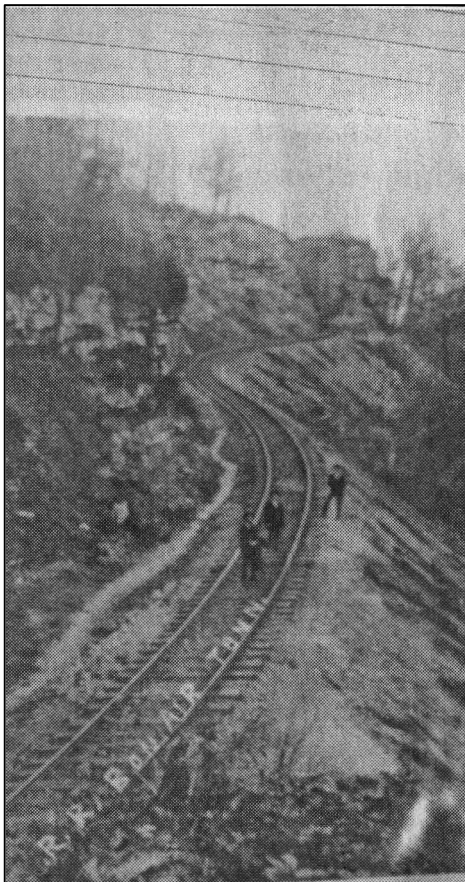
It was then that historical society members finally had a place to display all the many treasures they had collected through the years since efforts to educate local school children and celebrate the community's history began in the mid-1990s.

But much work needed to be done before the museum could be opened- and several volunteers, with help from county inmates, got busy restoring it as closely as possible to its original form.

We had some repairs that needed to be made, and we didn't want to use new materials," historical society president Linda Mackie said.

As it turned out, another railroad section house in the Clifty community had what they needed to complete the flooring, some interior walls and more.

"The inmates went there and got window panes and doors...so the house is intact, time-period wise," Mackie said.



"That's why it was able to be on the national historical registry." She credits fellow historical society member Donald Graham III for his dedication in making that happen.

James Welch, vice president of the historical society, said, "Then it was turned over to us, and we furnished it with old furniture from the late 1800s and early 1900s, as well as the tools the workers used on the railroad."

Welch explained that each section house provided a home for two railroad crew member families. The railroad companies had divided the tracks into sections between 10 and 30 miles long and assigned a foreman and crew to tend each one.

(Pictured: This track leads to the base of the Bon Air mine).

Today, as a museum, the section house provides visitors with a glimpse into the lives of those who once lived there.

Since opening its doors in November 2009, the Bon Air Mountain Historical Society Railroad Section House Museum has welcomed more than 1,000 visitors from 15 states, who have stopped by to explore the rooms, each containing a bounty of artifacts and photos that open up the imagination to the area's rich history.

Welch's contribution includes a display of broad axes, coal miners picks, track hammers and more.

“I’ve always been a collector,” he said. “I’ve got railroad stuff, mining stuff...I just got interested in the collectability of things and the history. I love history!”

And he loves sharing it with others.

“When I come out here a lot of times, I’ll bring a folded chair and sit out on the porch with my feet propped up on the rail,” he said. “People will be driving by, run up the road, see our sign and then turn around and come back.”

Mackie added, “A lot of people come to find their family history. We have books our historian (Welch’s wife, Doris) has done. She has family genealogy, and we’ve got coal miners listed on the wall who worked here, plus immigration and school information.

“You can see a way of life that’s gone...the fire places, old pictures, clothes they wore, mining garb, the chamber pot, old beds and quilts.”

Mackie, a retired teacher at nearby Bon DeCroft Elementary School, remembers learning the history herself back in the mid-1990s and sharing it with her third grade students in a special grant-funded energy project.



In doing so, the class researched a publication on their local coal mining communities: “Mining on the Mountain: Life in the Coal Towns of White County, Tennessee, 1882-1936” by Betty Sparks Huehls of Cookeville.

(Pictured: DeRossett Section House and Museum).

“We got her thesis and broke it down and created lesson plans,” said Mackie of her class, as well as several other classes at the school. “We developed lesson plans that would teach our children what it was like to live back then.”

To culminate their study, the school hosted a Coal Miner Reunion, inviting members of the community – particularly those who lived during that time period – to come and celebrate with them.

It became an annual event on the first Sunday in May. Now the event is referred to as the Bon Air Mountain History Fair.

“We realized people weren’t coming because they weren’t coal miners,” Mackie said. “So in 2007 we became the and changed the name of the event.”

The event includes tour bus trips to different sections of the railroad in the communities of Bon Air, Ravenscroft, Eastland or Clifty.

“All the communities have their unique history,” Mackie said.

For more information about the Railroad Section House Museum or membership to the historical society, call (931) 935-5424 or email: [honeybranch@blomand.net](mailto:honeybranch@blomand.net)

The house, located at 9479 Crossville Highway in Sparta, TN, is open Friday and Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. April through October.

\*Read more about the history of Putnam Co., TN & surrounding areas at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>