

Narr: Hello, and welcome to "Tennessee's Mountain Heritage." This program is one in a series dealing with the history and cultural heritage of Tennessee's mountain people. In this series, we will be listening to the memories and recollections of men and women who have spent their lives in the Tennessee mountains and seen the region grow and change. For the most part, we will be drawing upon taped interviews deposited in the Archives of Appalachia at East Tennessee State University. These first-hand accounts are at least as informative to us as written records because of their personal flavor and the insights they give us into details of everyday life which don't always make their way into history books.

This program is titled "Rolling Down the Track" and it deals with the coming of the railroad to East Tennessee and the changes it brought in its wake. As railroads pierced the mountainous terrain of the Appalachians, they transformed the appearance of the region and the lifestyles of its inhabitants. Isolated hamlets became railway boom towns. Distant hilltops became resort centers, lodges, and hotels. Formerly inaccessible mineral deposits and virgin forests were now open to exploitation. While the railroads did bring in many outsiders to build and manage these new operations, they also drew upon an abundant local work force. Many a mountain farmer became a logger, railroad laborer, or coal miner. The long steel rail brought goods from the nation's industrial centers and carried the natural resources of the Appalachians to distant markets.

Here in East Tennessee, there are still many people who remember the heyday of railroadingⁱⁿ the southern mountains and can tell us how the long steel rail brought Appalachia closer to the commercial and cultural life of America as a whole. But the story of the coming of the railroads to the East Tennessee area begins more than a century ago. Mr. Jim Goforth, of Erwin, Tennessee, is the Chief Engineer of the Clinchfield Railroad and has an extensive knowledge of the history of railroading in this part of the country.

(work chant)

JAG: Well, the first railroad to come in to Johnson City was the Tennessee-Virginia-and-Georgia Railroad that reached Johnson City in 1856. The railroad was being built from Chattanooga up through Knoxville, up to the state line at Bristol, where it would connect with a railroad that was a predecessor to the present-day Norfolk & Western Railroad that serves Bristol.

(work chant)

That line, when completed in 1856--during the Civil War, it was the main rail line, or the main supply route, between the more important industrial areas of the Confederacy--Chattanooga and Atlanta; it was a main connection between those two areas and the Confederate capitol in Richmond. And there were a lot of union sympathizers in this immediate area here, and they gave the railroad operations by the confederates a pretty rough time

during that area there, damaging track and burning down bridges in an effort to block the operation of that rail line, which was a vital operation for the Confederacy.

The next rail line to enter Johnson City was the ET & WNC--East Tennessee and Western North Carolina--that built out of Johnson City going into Elizabethton and on across the mountains into Cranberry and later into Newland and Boone, North Carolina. That line was completed back in the early to middle 1880's. ~~It was said at that time, until the ET & WNC Railroad reached Boone, the only way you could get to Boone was to be born there.~~

(Tab Ward's "Tweetsie Railroad Song")

JAG: The iron ore deposits in the Cranberry area were opened to mining and the ET & WNC Railroad was used to transport the ore down to Johnson City where a huge furnace was constructed in the Carnegie area of Johnson City, out just off of Broadway, out in the vicinity of Broadway and Fairview. And this was a sizeable industry for many years, until the iron ore began to play out, long up in the 1920's; and, of course, the timber was cut out over a period of years and the importance of the ET & WNC Railroad began to fade out, and was contributed [to] also by the coming of the improved highways into the area.

(work chant)

JAG: The next railroad to come into Johnson City was the Charleston-

Cincinnati-Chicago, called the "3-C's." That railroad was projected to run from Charleston, South Carolina, across the Appalachian Mountains, with a terminal on the Ohio River near Ironton, Ohio, to open up the Ohio Valley and give it a connection to the south Atlantic seaboard.

Construction on this railroad was started down in the South Carolina area and was built from Kingville, South Carolina, up to Marion, North Carolina. The northern headquarters were established at Johnson City in the middle 1880's, and construction was begun out of Johnson City, going both North and South.

South out of Johnson City, it was constructed over to Erwin and out to a little community called Chestoa, which was on the Nolichucky River. The construction was stopped for some time there to build a bridge across the Nolichucky River to extend the line up the Nolichucky gorge. The track was laid and that section of the line was open to operation. And it was the coming of the 3C Railroad into Erwin that really started Erwin to developing. Up to that time, Erwin had been pretty much just an isolated, landlocked little mountain town.

(Grayson and Whitter's "Train 45")

JAG: The grading work was started north of Johnson City going out through the Fairview area out near DeVault's Bridge, followed the Watauga River, across the Watauga River in the vicinity of the present-day Boone Dam, on through what is now Kingsport,

and the grading, culvert work was approximately 75 to 80% completed up to St. Paul, Virginia. Track was laid on the line from Johnson City out to the vicinity of DeVault's Bridge above Johnson City.

The 3C Railroad was being financed and backed by an English financing firm--banking firm--by the name of the Baring Brothers. They also were financing considerable development over in the Middlesboro, Kentucky, area in the way of railroads and coal mines. The rail line that was built from Knoxville into Middlesboro, Kentucky, was built during that same period and it was also financed by the Baring Brothers. But with the failure of the banking firm, the 3C Railroad was sold at foreclosure and was purchased by a man by the name of Hellier. He operated it under the name of the Ohio River and Charleston Railroad--OR & C-- and he extended construction southward up the gorge toward Hunt Dale and on toward Spruce Pine, North Carolina.

In 1902, George L. Carter--the father of the modern-day Clinchfield--he acquired the assets of the OR & C Railroad. He re-named it the "South and Western Railroad;" and I'm told that the reason that he took on that name was to confuse his opponents as to what his definite plans were as to where he intended to extend that railroad to; with just a general name like "South & Western," it wasn't pinned down very closely. But, uh, George L. Carter was a very clever, ingenious operator and I can give credibility to that story.

George L. Carter extended the line on up to Spruce Pine, North Carolina, in 1902 and on down the Blue Ridge Mountain and on into Spartanburg, South Carolina; in October, 1909, the first train arrived in Spartanburg.

North of Johnson City, the 3C Railroad was typical of the day in which it was located and constructed--the sharp curves, heavy grades. George L. Carter was going to build the ultimate in the way of railroads, engineering features. It was designed primarily to give an outlet for the huge coal deposits in the southwest Virginia-east Kentucky area into the south Atlantic seaboard; and he was going to build a railroad that would permit the economical transportation of heavy coal trains across the rugged Appalachian Mountains. He built it to engineering standards that were unheard of in those days, and they're even considered excellent standards by present-day engineering. His line was characterized by light curves, light grades, bridges that were built to a capacity that were unheard of in those days. Tunnels that were built to dimensions that were also unheard of. Where many railroads built in that era have had to come back and re-strengthen their bridges and enlarge their tunnels to get present-day traffic through it, the Clinchfield has not had to do that.

Narr: Much of the credit for these remarkable engineering achievements goes to Mr. W.C. Hattan, who served as George L. Carter's chief engineer on some of the most difficult stretches of the Clinchfield line and who later assisted Fred Johnson in the planning of Kingsport, Tennessee.

MHB: My father's name was William Carey Hattan and he came here with the Carter construction company in 1905 to build the--they were working on the Blue Ridge Mountain area. He was the resident engineer that built the tunnels and the bridges on the Clinchfield railroad during that period. And apparently, this had been attempted before--years before--and hadn't been accomplished... And his work was so satisfactory that they asked him to come back and build the Elkhorn extension on the northern end. And so he worked up there and built I guess it was 32 tunnels. He worked here until he finished that end of the railroad, and then left on other work. ~~Before he left here though, he went to Kingsport and laid out the pattern of the city area there.~~

JAG: The Clinchfield came into Johnson City--it was 1906, was the approximate date that it came into Johnson City--completed from there up to Dante, Virginia. At the time the Clinchfield was planned through Johnson City, the location that was selected following George L. Carter's engineering for light grades and easy curves--the line was located to bypass Johnson City as it existed at that time. Where the 3C line had gone out Brush Creek to the Watauga River, George L. Carter came in from the west, more or less from the northwest, across Indian Ridge area, circling the veterans' administration facility and was going to be located on the high ridge in behind the present-day East Tennessee State University, to maintain the light grade which had been determined from Kingsport to Unicoi. According to the records we have here, there was a clamor raised by the city

government of Johnson City and many of the leading businessmen and industrial people of Johnson City, that with the railroad bypassing the city the way it was, it would be of no benefit to them and it would hamper their efforts of development. So a compromise was made then, but first there was some construction already under way on the line around Johnson City. Prior to 1970, when the line was eventually built there--which we call the "High Line"--much of the grading, drainage, and some bridge structures were still visible in behind the present-day University. But a compromise was made whereby George L. Carter agreed then to, uh, not to build around Johnson City, but to relocate the line dropping down into Johnson City, and connecting to the old 3C line near the East Tennessee & WNC Railroad shops. He would drop down into Johnson City, connect to that old existing line, and use it south out of Johnson City up through Unicoi, Erwin, and on into the south.

(Grayson & Whitter's "Nine Pound Hammer")

JAG: Well, naturally the city grew as a result of the coming of the railroads because it gave them the element of transportation that was needed for industrial development. Along the Clinchfield Railroad--the industries which came up in the area--there were several lumber and wood products plants. To name a few of them, the Harris Manufacturing Company located on the Clinchfield Railroad in the early part of the century and it has developed and is now one of Johnson City's leading industries. The Sells

Lumber Company was located near the ET& WNC shops, but it ceased to exist several years ago. The Johnson City Foundry and Machine Company located on the Clinchfield tracks. The Miller Brothers was another wood--lumber and wood products plant that located on the Clinchfield. And another plant, which went out of business in the depression of the early thirties, was the American Cigar Box plant, which was located along the Clinchfield tracks between Roane and Division Street, on the--we would call it the east side of the track; geographically, it would be the south side of the track. That was a huge plant. I recall it very vividly back in those days, and the American Cigar Box Company bought many acres of prime timber up in the Mitchell County section of North Carolina, along the Clinchfield Railroad south of Erwin, where the lumber was loaded on the Clinchfield and carried into Johnson City to be processed in their plant.

Other industries which came on the other railroads--~~on the other railroads~~--on the Southern Railway, uh, they served the Veterans' Administration Mountain Home facility. A number of industries grew up on the Southern Railway along their tracks, uh, on each side of the Broadway crossing in the vicinity of the General Shale plant--Tennessee Tank plant. And of course, the big industries only ET & WNC served was the old Cranberry Furnace out in the Carnegie area of Johnson City. So the coming of the railroads really were responsible for the early growth and development of Johnson City.

Narr: You have been listening to "Rolling Down the Track," a history of railroads in the upper East Tennessee area. This program is part of the "Tennessee's Mountain Heritage" series, a joint production of the Archives of Appalachia and WETS-FM. This project is funded in part by a grant from the Tennessee Committee for the Humanities, Incorporated, a not-for-profit corporation with primary support from the National Endowment for the Humanities. The contents and conclusions of this program do not necessarily represent the views of the National Endowment for the Humanities nor those of the Tennessee Committee for the Humanities, Incorporated. ~~ADDITIONAL~~ Additional funding has been provided by East Tennessee State University, Powell Construction Company, Ray Hillman, Jr., the Sullivan County Historical Society, and anonymous donors.

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Tennessee State University. Your comments on this series of programs will be greatly appreciated. If you are interested in this and other activities of the Archives of Appalachia, we urge you to contact the Director, Dr. Ellen Garrison, at the Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee, zip code 37614; or call area code 615-929-5339. This program has been narrated by