



No. 11, Baldwin-built narrow-gauge Ten-Wheeler, cautiously pokes her nose around a shoulder of the mountain at Pardee Point in the Doe River Gorge. The magnificent scenery of the gorge attracted many tourists.



No. 11 rolls to a panting stop at Elk Park, N. C., after a hard climb up the 3 per cent grade from Elizabethton, Tenn. A few of the townsfolk have turned out to greet the train in true country tradition.

## Tweetsie's last trip

**East Tennessee & Western North Carolina abandons the narrow-gauge portion of its line as iron ore and timber reserves peter out**

WE left Elizabethton, Tenn., at 10:10 in the morning with the whistle screaming and a feather on the pops. No. 11, a Baldwin 4-6-0, stretched the slack in the seven-car train and began battling the grades to Cranberry, N. C., on the last official run of the narrow-gauge portion of the East Tennessee & Western North Carolina.

The date was October 16, 1950. The day had dawned warm and clear, yet the brightness of the weather served only to heighten the sadness of the

crew as Engineer Walter R. Allison and his nephew, Fireman C. C. (Brownie) Allison, climbed into the cab of the three-foot-gauge engine. Brakemen Clyde Simmerly and Mack Luttrell were in their places in the cab and caboose as Conductor C. G. Crumley swung the highball which headed No. 11 uphill on its last east-bound run.

Now we were on our way, and as the train wheeled across the bridge into Valley Forge and went on up the

valley, across the covered bridge and into the tunnel below Hampton, its wheels clicked out memories of days gone by. They were memories of scheduled passenger trains, of summertime excursion trains, of countless carloads of iron ore which trundled over the yard-wide track of the East Tennessee & Western North Carolina, en route from the Cranberry mines to the tool-steel smelters in the outer world.

They were memories of college students and tourists who called the railroad "Tweetsie"; memories of disastrous floods in 1940 which caused the abandonment of half the line and suspension of regular passenger service on the other half; memories of the hundreds of hours I had spent riding these rails in the past 18 years.





These three 1941 photos by Robert B. Adams.

The Ten-Wheeler has just emerged from a tunnel, and the fireman and head brakeman are inspecting the train on the brief stretch of open track across this inverted truss bridge. The tunnel was approached at both ends by bridges; construction of the line through Doe River Gorge was not easy.

## BY JACK ALEXANDER

They were memories of the World War II days when Tweetsie got a shot in the arm as war plants called for more steel and the steel plants called for more ore; when gasoline shortages and tire rationing brought back three daily round-trip passenger runs on this railroad that served two states with 34 miles of line.

And they were memories of declining postwar traffic; of depleted mines and timber reserves. These were the saddest memories of all. Without traffic, Tweetsie could not live. And I was riding the funeral train. The last-but-one narrow-gauge common-carrier railroad east of the Mississippi had gone the way of most of its two- and three-foot-gauge relatives, leaving only the East Broad Top as a reminder of the myriad nar-

row-gauge lines which used to operate in this section of the country.

But Tweetsie herself was not, and is not, dead. For many years the railroad had nine miles of mixed-gauge track between Elizabethton and Johnson City, Tenn. The standard-gauge track remains, and the East Tennessee & Western North Carolina Railroad is officially still in business even though North Carolina no longer sees its trains.

THAT ride to Cranberry seemed the shortest of all the rides I have ever taken on the Tweetsie. With no work to do in Hampton, we were soon in the magnificent Doe River Gorge section of the line. Although I had seen them countless times before, the lofty mountain walls somehow seemed taller, more forbidding, than in the past. It was as if nature, after trying valiantly to regain the ground lost to the railroad when it was opened in 1882, realized she had finally won and was lording it over the little train that was puffing up the 4 per cent grades and around the 32-degree

curves for the last time. The rocky cliffs threw back echoes of No. 11's exhaust, and they sounded like a ghostly laugh.

We made a short stop at Blevins and did some work at Roan Mountain, then hammered up the grade. Lunch time arrived as we reached Elk Park in North Carolina at 12:15, and the crew retired to the depot platform to eat there for the last time. In past years the lunch stop had been one of camaraderie, banter and good old-fashioned "bull sessions," but on this day it was different. Nostalgia had gripped the men as strongly as it had gripped me. It was easy to notice in the railroad men's conversation and in the far-away look in their eyes.

Lunch was soon finished. Some switching was done in the small yard at Elk Park and then the train continued the remaining two miles to Cranberry. Here the crew spotted two gondolas. One of them contained the tools that were to be used in taking up the track.

No. 11 was spotted for water at the Cranberry tank and then was run





Both photos, Jack Alexander.

Top: Engineer Allison "oils around" No. 11 as Fireman Allison stokes up the fire for the narrow-gauge locomotive's last run. Bottom: The yard at Elizabethton was arranged for both standard and narrow-gauge operation. Elizabethton is still served by standard-gauge ET&WNC trains.



John Krause.

Author Jack Alexander takes the throttle of No. 11 on its last trip, as the train follows the highway just east of Roan Mountain, Tenn. Some of Tweetsie's narrow-gauge equipment has been sold to other carriers and is now thinly scattered over an area from Alaska to South America.

around the train, and at 1:30 p. m. we left on the return run to Elizabethton. As usual, the engine was not turned at the east end of the line and was run in reverse at the head end of the train all the way back to Elizabethton.

This was a break for me. With the realization that this was the last time I would ever have the opportunity to see Tweetsie's fabulous grandeur, I climbed up on the tender and rode the water-hatch cover, and thus had a better view than either of the Allison's had in the cab.

It did not take long to drop down the hill, across the Tennessee border and into Shell Creek, and then on to Roan Mountain and Blevins. The flanges screamed as we wheeled into the beautiful gorge of the Doe River. As I sat there, bouncing and rocking through the many tunnels and clattering over the bridges, I thought again of past years, the pleasant associations with these same men and the hundreds of hours I had spent riding these narrow-gauge rails.

And, as has always been the case in these mountains, the folks who live in the little houses and the mountain cabins along the line were all out to wave to the crew and to watch the train roll by. This little railroad has been a large part of the lives of these people ever since the day the first train was run back in 1882, and I could not help but wonder what thoughts and feelings they must be having, knowing that Tweetsie was on the way out. I could not help but wonder — and yet I knew. How well I knew!

The tender bucked as we suddenly reduced speed; and we were creeping around Pardee Point, then on down and out of the gorge, across the covered bridge and through Hampton. The October foliage made a Technicolor backdrop as the train eased across the high bridge over the river and into Valley Forge. Tweetsie's last narrow-gauge run was about over. Three more miles, another few minutes, and the narrow-gauge division of the ET&WNC as a common carrier would be officially discontinued.

Extra 11 West entered the yards at Elizabethton at 3:30 p. m. The crew made a Dutch drop to get the cars in the yard, then ran No. 11 over the pit and dropped the fire.

The Maine Central's Beecher Falls branch has only mixed service. When this picture was made in 1948, MEC Ten-Wheeler No. 379 was wandering up the line near Columbia Bridge, N. H., trailing the inevitable branch-line combine.

Photo by Philip R. Hastings.