



The “Quick Service Route”—the Clinchfield Railroad

By Ron Flanary (all photos by the author)

If you take a look at giant CSX Transportation’s map, you’ll see a rather strategic link that runs north-south through the heart of central Appalachia—western North Carolina, eastern Tennessee and southwestern Virginia. To the current generation of railroaders, the combined 277 mile segments include one from Elkhorn City, Kentucky to Erwin, Tennessee known as the Kingsport Subdivision, plus the line south of there to Spartanburg, South Carolina, designated the Blue Ridge Subdivision. But, to those who have sufficient seniority to recall big 4-6-6-4s on fruit blocks (often double-headed with Mikes), matched sets of gray and yellow F-units urging full tonnage coal trains along heavy steel perched high on granite ballast, or black sided SDs working the mines along the Freemont Branch---this will always be “Clinchfield Country.” The blue and gray-flanked CSX high horsepower hoods that fleet the ceaseless caravan of coal trains and manifests through this striking setting today are engrossing—but not nearly so as the days of allure and sovereignty —when it was the Clinchfield.

Efforts to link the deep water port of Charleston, South Carolina with the Midwest through this mountainous region date to as early as 1827. After earlier corporate efforts to translate vision into reality had failed, a regional icon named George L. Carter would eventually morph his fledgling South & Western Railroad into the Carolina, Clinchfield & Ohio---with completion of the through route consummated by the obligatory “last spike” ceremony (with Carter himself driving it home) at Trammel, Virginia in 1915. By 1924, the CC&O was leased by the Atlantic Coast Line and the Louisville & Nashville—which themselves were corporate cousins (ACL had acquired a controlling interest in the L&N in 1905). The operating name became, simply, Clinchfield Railroad.

In the pre-mega merger years during its last two decades, the Clinchfield gained a cult following among rail enthusiasts for its gritty performance in moving millions of tons of bituminous coal as well as overhead manifest freight through the picturesque Appalachian Mountains. Unquestionably, the road's popularity soared under the hand of general manager Tom Moore, who brought an unprecedented commitment to public relations with the restoration to steam of Ten Wheeler No. 1, and a support cast of heavyweight passenger cars for excursion passenger service. Between 1968 until Moore's departure in a cloud of scandal and fraud in 1979, the Clinchfield was a railfan's nirvana.

But, as with so many good things, it didn't last. As the new Chessie-Seaboard Coast Line amalgamation of 1980 evolved, the Clinchfield, as well as the L&N, the Georgia, the Western Railway of Alabama, and the Atlanta & West Point, were folded into the short-lived Seaboard System at the end of 1982. Within four years, the whole shebang became CSX Transportation.

The folksy nature of the Clinchfield, as well as its identity as a separate railroad, recede with the passage time—but through photos and memories of those who knew her first hand, the railroad's name still resonates. Just eight years after the Clinchfield name was retired, the familiar herald of the "Quick Service, Short Route between the Central West and Southeast" was still visible in faded paint on a 50-foot box car in maintenance of way service at Speers Ferry, Virginia. The thunderous high tech GE locomotives passing the old box car as they hustled the unremitting parade of coal and general freight trains were obliged to acknowledge the distinguished heritage of the route they followed. Considering the railroad and its milieu, a variation of the old slogan of the Denver, Rio Grande & Western always came to mind: "Through the *Appalachians*, not around them."



The era of A-B-B-A sets of gray and yellow F-units is still prevalent on an October day in 1966 at Erwin. Trailing unit 821 is a boomer—built for the Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis in 1949 as its 814, and then renumbered to 1814 when the "N&C" was merged into Clinchfield parent L&N in 1957. Its original owner used its Fs in dual service mode, so the 814 frequently fronted passenger trains such as the *Dixie Flyer* and *Georgian*. Traded to the Clinchfield in 1965, the unit was painted blue and sold to Clinchfield Coal in 1977 as its 014 for service on the Nora Branch. Thankfully, it was rescued, and is now at the Tennessee Valley Railway Museum.

Covered Wagons

By the late '40s, the waning years of steam could not be denied. As with many railroads, the Clinchfield dialed up LaGrange, Illinois for a meeting with the sales staff of GM's Electro Motive Division. And, not unlike similar mountain railroad cousins out West—notably the Rio Grande and the Western Pacific—the CRR opted for a small fleet of F-cab units, both As and Bs. A slightly smaller group of GP7s was added to handle mine run switching chores, locals, and to augment the F-units. To round out dieselization, a few SW7s were included for yard work and industrial switching at key terminals such as Erwin and Kingsport.

But it was the “covered wagon” that most immediately identified the Clinchfield in these early days of diesel power. The distinctive gray and yellow paint scheme—an unlikely choice given their coal hauling duties and the line's 57 tunnels where exhaust smoke would ruin any pretty lady's Sunday dress—prevailed until the late '60s, when a more utilitarian black with yellow/gold lettering was adopted.



(Previous Page) Well-worn veteran F7A 816 shares pit space with newer SD40 3020 in this scene at Erwin in December 1974. While the black SD still had years of service left, the covered wagon would be gone in less than three years---a trade-in credit to EMD on an order for MP15s for parent Seaboard Coast Line.



A 1974 passenger extra for Spartanburg cools its heels long enough for a few on board photographers to lens the splendid pair of "special duty" F-cabs---the 800 and FP7A 200---at the siding at Rocky, North Carolina.



An early evidence of the Chessie-SCL amalgamation that was CSX Corporation is this meeting of C&O power and the “final four” F-unit set at Dante Yard in October 1980. C&O 4264 is a just-arrived Shelby-Dante turn, and its crew is trying to double over its train in admittedly unfamiliar territory. The 800 and her three mates are handling mine run duties.



Looking forward through the distinctive curved windshield of an EMD cab unit, the 1865-foot length of Clinchfield Tunnel 39—Blue Ridge—beckons as a southbound passenger extra works the last few hundred feet of grade through Altapass, North Carolina. On the other side, the famed “Loops” begins—a descent of 1200 feet in 19 miles, and 16 more tunnels.

Coal and Fast Freight

The initial goal of the Clinchfield was to efficiently haul coal from George L. Carter's enormous holdings in southwestern Virginia. And, the line rose to that task with a commendable effort. However, a secondary goal of the railroad was the industrialization of key locations such as Kingsport, Tennessee, where a subsidiary of Eastman Kodak grew into an industrial giant, Eastman Chemical—a complex that generated significant inbound and outbound traffic for the road.

And then there were the fast freights---the manifests that hustled finished goods, perishables, automobiles, lumber, bulk commodities and LCL traffic through the mountains. Allied with the Chesapeake & Ohio north of Elkhorn City, the Seaboard Air Line at Bostic, and Atlantic Coast Line (and even the Southern) at Spartanburg, the Clinchfield normally fielded two daily manifests in each direction, with extra sections and other trains frequently added to the dispatcher's train sheet.



In March 1979, a northbound extra eases through the passing track at Rocky, North Carolina to meet manifest number 92---which is appropriately holding the main. Number 92 was the southbound counterpart to the "Florida Perishable," train 97, running between its handoff from the C&O at Elkhorn City to the SCL at Spartanburg, South Carolina.



The battle is nearly over as Extra 3617 South digs upgrade at the south end of the 3941-foot siding at Trammel, Virginia. Despite its shortness, Trammel's siding chambers a work train and a Moss Turn on October 16, 1980. Both opposing trains are out of sight around the curve.



A hint of vegetation is starting to sprout along the right of way at Delano, Virginia on April 2, 1980 as a northbound Rex Turn makes track speed en route to its namesake load out north of Haysi.



Clinchfield power of different liveries wait out call times for the various mine runs based at Dante Yard on October 13, 1980. The tiny yard included a small engine shop, turntable, track scales and even a Railroad YMCA for layover crews from Erwin or men on temporary assignment in the coalfields.



Late in the evening of September 30, 1981, an extra south blasts off from Elkhorn City, Kentucky—through Tunnel 1—and onto Pool Point Bridge. This is the beginning of a steady climb the next 34 miles to the summit at Sandy Ridge Tunnel—from 936 feet above sea level here to 1836 at Sandy Ridge. This is the Clinchfield---and this is the unadulterated essence of mountain railroading.

The “One Spot”

When Tom Moore arrived as the Clinchfield’s new general manager in 1968, he soon discovered the rusting hulk of 4-6-0 No. 1 behind the company’s back shop in Erwin. Turning to chief mechanical officer P.O.Likens, as the story goes, Moore asked if the engine could be rehabilitated for operation. Likens carefully explained that the project would involve some hard work, money and time---but yes, it could be done. “Do it,” Moore replied.

The “One Spot” was a true antique, even in 1968. Built in the shops of the Columbus, Chicago & Indiana at Logansport in 1882, the engine had eventually migrated to the South & Western in 1903. From 1913 until 1955, it toiled for short line Black Mountain, a line to Burnsville that connected with the CRR at Kona, North Carolina. Intended for display by the City of Erwin, the project somehow never came together---so the engine was still sitting behind the shop when Moore discovered it in 1968.

Number 1 made its début in November 1968, just in time for the annual Santa Claus Special. Moore’s new toy became the centerpiece for an excursion program that plied the entire length of the railroad, as well as some off line destinations. A broken eccentric rod sidelined the engine in 1979, almost concurrent with Moore’s conviction on Federal fraud charges. Today, the fabled One Spot rests in the collection of the B&O Museum in Baltimore—a regrettably now cold and silent artifact of grand times on the Clinchfield.



Number One performs a photo run-by across Copper Creek Viaduct at Speers Ferry, VA in 1973. This was a “no diesel,” all day trip from Erwin to St. Paul and back. The small Ten Wheeler is handling two heavyweight coaches, an open gon, and a Clinchfield caboose—about all she can wiggle with on her own.



An impromptu photo run by on a foggy Blue Ridge morning at Rocky, North Carolina in 1974 resulted in this scene of the One Spot and her two diesel "helpers" working softly on the 1.2 degree downgrade of the Loops. George Hatcher has mounted a second whistle on the Ten Wheeler for this trip--a three chime model that once graced a Tennessee Central steamer.



PREVIOUS PAGE: *The “trinity” of the Clinchfield’s successful steam excursion program gathers around the One Spot at a water stop in Johnson City, Tennessee in 1973. Left to right, the road’s chief mechanical officer—Percy O. Likens—is checking something over the main driver, while George Hatcher applies some grease to the engine’s inside Stephenson valve gear. Brother Ed also helps out by refilling the grease cup on a crosshead guide. The Hatcher brothers were the regular assigned crew for any move of Number 1, with Ed holding down the engineer’s slot and younger brother George doing the firing.*



On one of the memorable “steam only” runs of the One Spot sponsored by the East Tennessee Chapter of the NRHS, the little 4-6-0 barks authoritatively out of 348-foot Sensabaugh Tunnel a few miles north of Kingsport, Tennessee in 1973. Patrons who elected to stay aboard the two trailing coaches (or worse, the open air gon and caboose) for this run-by were treated to a snout full of smoke and cinders.

Number 1 lays down a thin trail of coal smoke as a southbound excursion with every single passenger car on the roster briefly goes airborne over Copper Creek Viaduct at Speers Ferry, Virginia. The two trailing ex-NC&StL steam generator-equipped B-units (operated from the steamer using a “black box” controller) are painted an incongruous Pullman green to appear as cars, rather than motive power—only the least informed seriously thought the diminutive Ten Wheeler could pull 12 heavyweight passenger cars through the mountains on its own.



The Santa Claus Special

A tradition that began in 1943 when members of the Kingsport Merchants' Association started throwing hard candy off the rear of the daily Clinchfield passenger local each Saturday after Thanksgiving, evolved into a major operation in 1968. The then-new flamboyant CRR general manager, Tom Moore, arranged for the rebuilding of Ten Wheeler No. 1 for initial service on the *Santa Claus Special*. As the years rolled on, the annual run began gaining more media attention---first from the greater multi-state region, then nationally, and finally on the international stage. Amazingly, in the litigious and security-obsessed times in which we now live, the train still runs each year.



More than anyone else, the person who helped propel the Clinchfield *Santa Claus Special* to national and international prominence was CBS News' Charles Kuralt. On November 20, 1982, Kuralt, members of his crew and volunteers from the Kingsport Chamber of Commerce survey the air space below Copper Creek Viaduct from the rear platform of CRR office car 100.



With the One Spot permanently sidelined, diesel power has taken over the Santa train for the second year since steam returned in 1968. At the community of Hanging Rock, or more appropriately (in railroad terms), the north end of Boody (VA) siding, CRR Extra 800 South exercises a CTC meet with Extra 8129 North, a “cab light” movement to Dante. Earlier, the extra had dropped its train of empty hoppers back at Castle siding, just south of St. Paul.



PREVIOUS PAGE: After a meal stop, the 1976 edition of the *Santa Claus Special* is underway again as it speeds beneath an overhead bridge at Hardwood, Virginia. The One Spot and her two diesel allies are on the point, but with just six cars on the power's rear drawbar, they could hardly be winded.

The "Homecoming"

As the Union Pacific's Steve Lee widened on the throttle of Challenger 3985—temporarily renumbered and re-lettered as "Clinchfield 676"—just past Caney, Virginia, a middle aged woman among the thousands lining the tracks along the route held a hand-lettered sign aloft for those aboard the 50th running of the *Santa Claus Special* to see: "Welcome Home 676!" In truth, this particular 4-6-6-4 had never rolled a wheel on this route, but in the face of the moment, it just didn't matter; this was indeed a "homecoming."

The audacity of bringing steam—let alone giant-sized steam—to the fore for the 1992 50th running of the famed holiday train began with a lark. The "Clinchfield Mafia" gang was in Cheyenne in 1987, and again in 1988 to ride behind the 3985 on trips across Sherman Hill. With Lee's support and help, stick on lettering transformed the Challenger into "Clinchfield 675" for a night photo shoot in Cheyenne in 1988. The CRR had, indeed, operated six nearly identical Otto Jabelmann-designed Alco Challengers which the company acquired from the Defense Plant Corporation in 1947. The big engines were constructed to UP specs, but delivered to the Rio Grande in 1943 at the behest of the War Production Board. After World War II, the Challengers were expendable, so the CRR snatched them up at bargain prices to join a dozen smaller 4-6-6-4s built to a Delaware & Hudson design. And while their service life on the Quick Service Route was brief—just six years—the impression they left was indelible.

Despite the logistical nightmares of bringing the Challenger to the Appalachians safely, UP and CSX crews pulled it off. And, many years after the big event in 1992, folks along the route of the annual Santa train still talk about the "big engine."



The Challenger rolls southward on the last leg from Huntington, West Virginia to Kingsport on November 19, 1992 as it exists Sykes Mill Tunnel at Rush, Virginia. This is the southbound ferry move to bring the engine to Kingsport.

The two men most responsible for pulling off the impossible task of bringing a live steam 4-6-6-4 back to former Clinchfield rails for the 50th running of the Santa train reflect on their accomplishment as the train passes the yard at Dante. CSX's Jerry Davis (left) called upon his UP contacts and roots to make it happen, after Eastman Chemical's David DeVault (right) was bold enough to ask if it might be done. And indeed, it DID happen!





You're sitting on the jump seat behind UP engineer Bob Krieger as "Clinchfield 676" hammers upgrade at Hill Station, Virginia—beckoned onward by an emerald green intermediate signal. The rainy weather does little to dampen the spirit of the moment.

Still in the early stage of a 1500-mile return to its home base in Cheyenne, Wyoming, "Clinchfield 676" hammers by an icon of the railroad—the Union Baptist Church at the north end of the yard at Dante, Virginia. At Huntington, West Virginia, the Challenger will give up her temporary disguise before heading west.



