

A RIDE ON THE GRAHAM COUNTY RAILROAD

Robbinsville, North Carolina

Story and Photos By Cliff Scholes

Graduating from the University of Dayton in 1951, I was hired by Haskins & Sells, one of the “big 8” accounting firms in the nation, as an auditor. The firm, now part of the world-wide Deloitte firm, had many large industrial firms as clients. One of them was Champion Paper Company, Hamilton, Ohio. In the spring of 1952, I was assigned with another individual to perform the audit of their plant and facilities in Canton, North Carolina, some 18 miles southwest of Asheville.

Since I was going to be sequestered in a hotel in Asheville for at least six weeks, with no ability to get home over weekends, I needed something to do from Friday evening until Monday morning. Some research in the OFFICIAL GUIDE of the RAILWAYS and highway maps supplied me with a long list of railroads operating in the Smoky Mountain area of western North Carolina, eastern Tennessee and southern Kentucky.

One of those was the 12.13 mile Graham County Railroad, operating from a “wye” at “Junction”, the interchange with the Southern Railroad’s 115.3 mile Asheville to Murphy freight-only branch. Junction is near Topton, 91.4 miles from Asheville. As our tour and work was to be performed as of Champion’s fiscal year end of March 31, I surmised the spring weather should be good, with many days of sunshine (though not always warm).

Arriving in Asheville the last full week of March (we had to take inventory the end of the month); I made plans to get out of town one of the latter weekends in April. Since the OFFICIAL GUIDE gave no information on the operation, except that it was freight-only, I drove to Robbinsville hoping that the line did run on Saturdays. Of course, the weather did not fully cooperate, as it turned out cloudy, windy and cool. Imagine my surprise when I saw two operating three-truck Shays, an old ex-Southern Ry caboose, and wonder-of-wonders, a model A Ford carrying its own turntable.

As Shay 1926 and I wandered around the lumber yard (row-on-row of 2x4, 4x6, and other sizes of freshly sawn cuts), Mr. L. W. Wilson, General Manager of the operation, asked if I would be interested in riding to Junction and back, as they were about to deliver a cut of loaded cars to the Southern. It certainly did not take much time to answer with a “Yes.” In about 15 minutes, we were off with a consist of: #1926; one single dome tank car, with no markings on it; two loaded box cars: one outside framed Illinois Central #16016, labeled “AUTO”; one smooth-sided C&O #15300; and one non-descript heavy wooden caboose.

Trailing all this was the Model “A” Ford on a large railroad-type rear wheel with a small four-wheel “truck” in front. The Ford also carried its own turntable consisting of two rails, each tapered on one end, the other end being curved up to stop the car before it ran off the track, and a large square block of wood with a “king-pin” bolted to the top. The Ford was occupied by two crew members, whose job was to keep an eye on any fires in the woods, started by the Shay. None was started on my trip, so I did not get to witness their expertise in putting out fires.

I began the trip riding in the Shay, keeping out of the way of the fireman and engineer, as the quarters were quite cramped. We made our trip down the mountainside at about ten miles an hour, stopping to take on water at a tank built on the hillside. It was fed from a spring in the mountain, with a pipe jutting across the hillside and directly into the top of the wooden tank. As shown in pictures, the Ford continued its trip a hundred feet or so directly behind the train. At the water tank, I went back to the caboose to ride it to Junction.

On arrival at Junction, the three revenue cars were set out for pickup by the Southern, and there were no cars for the Graham County to pick up and take to Robbinsville. The engine was taken down the Southern and wyeed at Topton, and returned to the station at Junction. The Ford was placed on its own wye at Junction, turned around (talk about an “Armstrong” turntable) and the caboose hop started toward Robbinsville with the Ford bringing up the rear. The crew allowed me time to walk about a half-mile or so up the track and I was then able to take the pictures with all the smoke as the Shay labored up the mountain.

I hopped on the Ford as it was passing me, rode it to the water tank, then again got in the Shay to complete my journey on a fascinating little steam road. I understand the Shay is part of the Cass Scenic Road’s equipment roster, now, and can only assume the caboose and Ford have both met the scrappers’ torch.

The Graham County Railroad has ceased to be as the last OFFICIAL GUIDE I have that lists it is the January, 1971, the next copy I have is dated September/October 1979 and it does not list the GCR at all. In fact, the Southern Railway’s Asheville-Murphy branch is cut back to Lake Junaluska, 25.7 miles from Asheville. Thus, nearly 90 miles of the Southern’s route connection is gone, too.

I had a good time riding a Shay of the Graham County Railroad, the crew were all “good ol’ boys” from the mountain country and were willing to show this green city feller/railfan what real railroading was like.

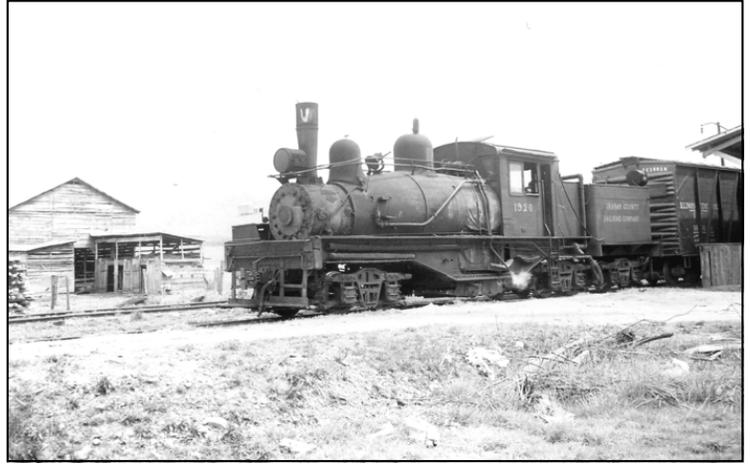


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No. 1926 On Curve Above Topton, NC



Robbinsville, NC, at the Loading Dock



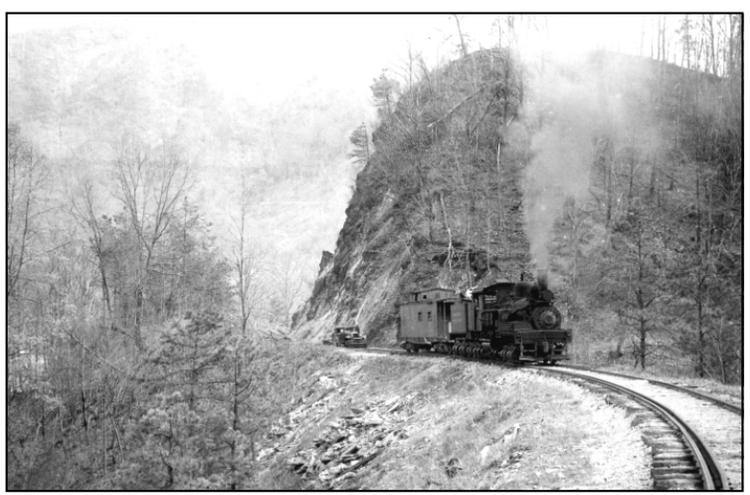
The Robbinsville, NC, Yard



The Robbinsville, NC, Yard



Robbinsville, NC



Storming Out of Topton, NC