Lisa Currie Feature Series or Continuing Story W08

Shenandoah County 250th anniversary: Remembering the thrill of the train going through town

By Lisa G. Currie
The Northern Virginia Daily

The railroad tracks that wind an unkept vein through Shenandoah County — the ties decayed, and the rails rusted — were once the backbone of the Valley, a means to move everything from people to cows. Although it's been nearly two decades since the short line engineer blew the final signal, for many people who live along the tracks from Strasburg south, that whistle still echoes, a reminder of days gone past.

"There was a mystic about the train, an eeriness but a comfort," said Phil Hottle, a Woodstock Fire Department volunteer member as well as a life-long resident of Woodstock.

"I have been close to the tracks my whole life," Keith Alexander said. Living within blocks of the tracks in the county's seat, Alexander said as a child he listened for the whistle as the train moved across North Street and south to Spring Street, its whistle warning people in Woodstock of the pending train.

"I just enjoyed watching the train," Hottle recalls, Alexander's fellow volunteer firefighter and friend. "I would run out when the train came through, just to wave at the engineer. I would stop what I was doing just to watch the train pass."

These two men remember as boys walking the tracks, playing in the culverts under the tracks, and running after the train as it crawled along the tracks from town to town. As young adults they remember the train stopping at various locations to unload goods as well as remembering the farmers who showed up in long lines to bring their goods for shipment on the railroad lines.

"We'd wave to the engineer, and he'd wave back. It was huge then," Hottle said. "And the caboose. The man would blow a horn. We would wait for him to blow that horn."

"Oh yeah," said Hottle, "he had a light. He [the man in the caboose] would wave the light" as a farewell before the train headed south toward Edinburg.

Completed in the 1800s as the Manassas Gap Railroad, the short line's destination was Mount Jackson, a means to provide farmers networks to larger markets around the region and the nation. Later part of Norfolk Southern, the rail took goods — and at one time people — from Manassas to Harrisonburg. After the regular passenger service ended in the late 1940s, the rail provided an excursion train — affluent residents from outside the area traveled to Strasburg and back to their destinations. The railroad was a crucial means of transportation and economics.

But this is a nation built on interstates, interstates that Alexander feels "killed the railroad. When the interstate came in, the railroad died."

Alexander and Hottle were boys when the interstate developed; they played in the dirt that would become the asphalt of commerce, rode their bikes on what is now a busy four-lane highway.

“Yeah, the interstate killed the railroad,” Alexander repeats. Before the interstate, “the Valley depended on the train — to move things out like apples and to bring things in like coal.”

Prior to the interstate system that connects the nation to the globe, the train was the conduit of transportation.

“That freight train moved things from Johns Manville, Aileen [a former textile plant), and chicken plants,” said Danny Edmonds of Toms Brook. He said it probably only cost a dime to ride the train at one time. He remembers when the steam train was replaced with a diesel engine in the 1950s, just a few years after the last passenger train of 1947.

One of Toms Brook’s oldest citizens, Edmonds worked at the quarry, once owned by Shockey, in Toms Brook. In his truck, Edmonds moved gravel from Toms Brook’s plant to the train depot Junction in Strasburg. “We hauled gravel by the tons,” he said, explaining the train cars moved the gravel to Georgia where it was used in paper manufacturing. “I can remember hauling 13 [train] car loads twice a week.”

But Edmonds’ love of the rail and the train outweigh the labor.

“Oh, I love to hear that steam engine horn blow. They [engineers] would blow that horn at both ends of Hillcrest [in Toms Brook]. I just loved to hear that horn,” he said. Not only did the tracks provide a means to transport goods, but the tracks also provided a means of sustenance.

Moving to the Brook as a child, Edmonds remembers walking the tracks in search of strawberries and asparagus. “We would collect enough [strawberries] for jelly,” and countless stems of asparagus. “My mother would cut the asparagus with a table knife,” he said, explaining that a table knife would be just sharp enough to avoid the tough ends of the vegetable, a delicacy that grew wild along the track.

Besides a meal, the tracks provided young minds a place to explore — and dream.

“A lot of kids would wander those tracks,” Edmonds said.

He, like others, is heartsick to see the tracks fall into disrepair. Alexander is glad the track is undeveloped — an untapped vein of nostalgia because it’s only memories that keep this track alive, not maintenance. Right now, sumac trees sprout between ties as the ties deteriorate into the ground. There is a movement to transfer the tracks to a walking/biking/running surfaced trail that remains before the General Assembly in Richmond. As lawmakers discuss, people remember and anticipate the future.

Dennis Hupp, a retired Shenandoah County Circuit Court Judge, grew up along the tracks in Strasburg. “Maybe 100 yards away,” he said of his boyhood home on the corner of Funk and Queen, just feet from the track.

Hupp's grandfather worked for the rail, so railroads are in Hupp's blood. It's a place he holds near and dear.

Hupp remembers the Strasburg stockyard, a perfect place for young boys to build a fort and play "for hours," he said. In addition, boys will be boys, and Hupp like others said, "We'd see how long we could walk the rails without falling off" — a typical boys' challenge.

Hupp remembers the one time he and his niece were walking the rails when the train came around the corner. "We had to jump down the ravine," he said, laughing.

And he remembers the dangerous one-time trek across the trestle at the Shenandoah River. "No. It was scary, too scary to do a second time," he laughs.

Billy Minton of Toms Brook grew up literally in the train station in Toms Brook. Opened as the Snarr and Miley General Store, located at the top of Hillcrest Drive, the store provided an array of general merchandise as well as apartments for some of the employees of the railroad.

"It's always been apartments. Before we moved in, the railroad used it," Minton said.

Minton moved into the apartments in 1961, and the tracks and trestle in Toms Brook, the second highest in the county, became a boyhood challenge.

"We'd get out there and walk across the trestle all the time," Minton remembers of his youth. He said boys were granted more freedom — freedom to explore. "There were platforms on the trestle," which provided the boys a place to escape if a train caught them on the tracks. "Ah, we would play all over the trestle," climbing underneath as well as walking the tracks, he said.

That whistle that signals the train's arrival — the mystic of the train — is something Hupp and Minton barely remember even though their homes were just feet from the tracks.

"You got accustomed to it. After a while, you did not even pay any attention to it," Minton said.

For Hupp, the whistle meant gathering the scared younger ones. "Some of them would be screaming," he said as he remembers the train's arrival.

Growing up on the tracks, Hupp has stories about when a coral snake, a tropical snake not usually found in this region of the USA, was found on the depot platform. After a carload of bananas was found, it was assumed the snake had taken a free ride to Strasburg.

But if Hupp's grandfather was engineering the trip would have been a fast one because his grandfather was notorious for "going too fast," known usually as "a streak."

Hupp said when his mother was a child, the engineers would allow the residents to "ride on the cattle guard" during frigid temperatures, so passengers did not need to walk to the next stop. "When my grandmother died in Mississippi, the train delivered her body right to door," he said, laughing.

And while there are numerous stories of local people “hitching” a free ride by jumping a train car between towns, hobos were key figures on the trains, not something of Hollywood or children’s stories.

Hupp said his mother always fed the hobos that showed up at the back door; his grandmother even invited a crowd into her home to feed them, asking the engineer to wait until all the men had eaten before he left the depot, a courtesy the engineer obliged.

“Before the interstate everything moved by rail,” Alexander said.

It’s not a coincidence that supply stores such as the current Rockingham Cooperatives were located on rail lines. “Without tractor trailers, farmers used the train,” Alexander said. He remembers when the farmers from around the county would show up with their goods at the depots, located in each individual town. “I remember when the train would come with eggs to Shaffer’s [egg supply in Woodstock],” Alexander said, thinking back to the early 1970s when the train would stop in Woodstock. “We would unload hundreds of eggs.”

The train would stop to unload coal and building supplies at hardware distributors such as Valley Builders or Wayne Feed. “It all came by rail,” Alexander said.

And even though the rails are silent, the depots in Strasburg and Toms Brook remain. The Strasburg Museum is housed in the former depot, once a pottery factory. In Toms Brook, the train depot is currently apartments. In Woodstock, the depot was sold, but the stones were used to construct the concession stand at Massanutten Military Academy. There were depots in Maurertown, Edinburg, and Mount Jackson, a reconstruction of the station as the town office and library.

“Yeah,” said Alexander said. “The interstate was the death knoll of the railroad.”

Shenandoah County 250th anniversary: Furnaces, and the people who operated them, infused energy into local economy

By Lisa G. Currie

ORKNEY SPRINGS — The Alum Springs Hotel has been gone for more than 70 years. The Alum Springs “mansion” is nothing more than a giant evergreen draped over the road on Route 717. Bird calls echo over the treetops, and a lone vehicle drifts over the pavement as the sun sends spears of light through the leaf-laden branches that guard both sides of the lane. It’s peaceful and just a wee bit isolated.

But standing like a sentinel to the past is the Henrietta Furnace, a giant stone structure resembling an oversized chimney, a remaining witness to days before. The furnace, when operational from 1851 to 1864, would have turned this remote area in a hub of industrial activity. Now these crumbling chimneys or piles of stone are all that remain of most of the furnaces, a historical legacy derelict, surrounded by poison ivy vines or nature’s encroachment. The Van Buren Furnace in Cedar Creek, the Mine Run in Fort Valley, and the Henrietta remain nearly intact.

The Henrietta and several other furnaces around Shenandoah County produced pig iron, the raw material used in iron/steel production — an important material in the development of farm implements, cookware, and later, steel.

The furnace industry lived for more than 100 years in Shenandoah County with Columbia Furnace operating as early 1800 and Liberty Furnace (once titled Shenandoah Iron and Coal Company) closing in the early 1900s. It was an industry that operated within a network of industries.

Norman Scott, an authority on the iron industry in Virginia, has documented hundreds of furnaces in the western part of Virginia, with more than 100 located on the Shenandoah landscape. A retired community college president with an undergraduate degree in history, Scott grew up in Clifton Forge, and developed an interest in the furnaces as a young man. When he retired, his interest turned into historical research; he has now published four different books on the furnaces of Virginia, including one titled "Shenandoah Iron."

The furnaces provided employment for white men, slaves, and freed African Americans — the backbone of the early industrial revolution in Shenandoah County. Scott said top operate the furnace took a large number of highly skilled and industrious workers, workers who were valued not for quantity but for the quality of their output.

Located on waterways such as Stoney Creek or Cedar Creek in order to operate the waterwheels that pumped the bellows within the furnace, the area around the furnace would have been busy with activity — usually 24 hours a day for as many as eight months of the year. Think smoke spewing into the air, wagons clanging over rocky ground, mules and horses pulling sweaty men who were shouting and calling, sooty workers heaving, and limestone and other rock crashing and smashing — a cacophony of industrial sounds.

“Once the furnace was operational, they did not shut it down,” said Scott, explaining that the furnace had to be kept at a temperature suitable to melting the ore found in the mountains near the furnaces. And because these industrial sites operated 24 hours a day, seven days a week, the outlying areas provided all the conveniences of small communities.

At the Alum Springs furnace, a store provided essentials for homeowners as well as employment at the furnace, said local historian Bill Wine of Woodstock, a man who has been fascinated, and therefore researched, the furnaces for several decades.

Suzanne Artz McIlwee lives at the site of the former Liberty Furnace, west of Wolf Gap, a property purchased by her grandfather Sam Clarke. Even though only the water wheel and some stones remain of the once-busy furnace, at the height of operation Liberty Furnace would have housed stores, forges, employee housing, and various other buildings, a small metropolis of activity. McIlwee said her grandfather found and kept authentic ledgers, notes, letter books, and maps of the area, most of which has been donated to the county archives.

The sites would have been industrial hubs, smoke filling the air, heat as high as 3,000 degrees F, and men working long labor-intensive shifts that required endurance and strength. Supplies

were moved by cart, pushed by muscular men; materials were transported by wagon, loaded by powerful arms.

“This was not a job for the faint of heart. That’s for sure,” Wine said.

Dangerous work

“There were [also] many specialty” jobs associated with the production, said Scott, who traveled from his home in Verona earlier this week to visit the Liberty Furnace. He explained in the early days of iron production the iron master would have been able to determine the temperature of the fire by "the color of the iron and the flow.” Any mistake could be costly to both time and profit, so the iron master was a revered position.

As the ore was released from the bottom of the furnace, guttermen — men who wore boots with wooden soles to protect their feet — would move about in the sand pits where the molten ore would flow from the bottom of the chimney. With melted rock lying in sand molds, one wrong step could have been a painfully hot mistake.

“This was really dangerous work,” Scott explained, saying the men who poured the rock into the top of the chimney would face extreme heat and dangerous gases while hoisting the heavy loads into the furnace at a consistent pace. The man at the bottom endured many of the same dangers.

The product of the furnace is pig iron, a molten lava extracted from mined ore-bearing rocks. Scott said as settlers moved into the Valley from Pennsylvania where iron production was common, they would have known that the “rust-colored” rocks held the ore that was necessary for iron production.

Wine said miners knew which rocks to take because of the weight. “They were heavy,” he said of the ore-bearing rocks that were chipped and cut from the mountain side, moved via cart, pulled by teams of men and mules, and loaded into the top of furnace.

After melting, the pig iron flowed toward the bottom of the chimney; the byproduct was a colorful slag — green, blue, or black melted rock that was smooth and glass-like — cast aside, though later used for paving roadways.

Scott said the slag was lighter than the iron, so it was taken out of the furnace just above the iron, which was released into the beds of sand where it was formed into bars 3-feet long and 4-inches square with a flat “pig-shaped nose” end. It was called pig iron, though, because of the form it took after it flowed from the chimney, like a sow with piglets. These bars were sent to the forge.

Collectors might find that bars were marked with emblem of the furnace, such as the relics McIlwee has that show production at Liberty Furnace.

The bars were moved by wagon to the forge where they were heated, pounded, and shaped into wrought iron — a stronger iron. It was moved by wagon or train cars and sent to a foundry where it could be used in the production of steel.

Making charcoal

Wine explained that the furnace would not have operated without the collier, the charcoal production that was necessary to fuel the furnace.

“If the furnace would have [used] just wood, the fire would be too hot and the smoke too heavy,” Wine said. Therefore, in the early days of furnace operations, charcoal production was essential to the manufacturing of pig iron.

To make the more labor-intensive charcoal, trees were cut and hauled by horse or mule to a flattened area where the logs were covered with earth that remained smoldering, blackening the wood into charcoal for delivery to the furnaces.

Scott said in most situations, the collier would live in a hut near the smoldering fires, so he was always ready to tamp down a sudden blaze.

Scott said the mountains would have been stripped of trees — a single furnace using nearly 300 acres of wood in a year. The collier would have several "pits" burning at the same time, a round-the-clock operation that required constant attention to keep the fire at the right temperatures for smoldering — not burning — as the intent was not to destroy the wood, just char it. These family-run charcoal businesses delivered huge wagons of charcoal by mule teams, a delicate undertaking to avoid wet weather, destruction of the charcoal, and maintain daily supplies.

Years later, charcoal was replaced by coke, a cheaper byproduct material of coal that burns hotter.

One furnace that did not fully switch from charcoal to coke was Liberty Furnace, the furnace west of Edinburg that even operated its own “dinky” rail line, a site of a train derailment in 1911. Wine explained that the furnaces — economic lifeline of Valley prosperity — were the target for warring armies during the Civil War because the pig iron was an essential ingredient in making military supplies such as cannons, cannon balls, and shot. During this time, Virginia was one of the few states that supplied the pig iron needed for southern supplies, and for this reason, several furnaces were targeted by the opposing armies, though in some cases the furnaces remained operational until the financial crisis of the late 1890s. The Valley’s rich base of iron and manganese became part of the Valley's 20th century success stories.

Shenandoah County's 250th anniversary: Mount Jackson Rescue Squad was the first to answer the call

By Lisa G. Currie
The Northern Virginia Daily

MOUNT JACKSON — In 2022, when a person has chest pains, numbness in the left arm, the first thought that registers is to call the rescue squad — the paramedics and emergency medical technicians (EMTs) — for immediate help. We wait anxiously for the box-like vehicle to appear, flashing lights sounding the emergency alarm.

Today, jaws would drop, and shock would register if a hearse — a long station wagon-like vehicle — arrived at the emergency. Someone might question if the call was made correctly.

But just 60 short years ago, it would have been local funeral home personnel to respond to the emergency, the hearse retrofitted to go from casket transport to cot.

“Yes, it would have been a hearse” laughs Dale Painter, a life member with the Mount Jackson Rescue Squad. Painter has been a member for more than 40 years, joining as a junior squad member at just 15 years of age. With a chuckle, he shakes his head and echoes sentiments heard from several department members: “they [funeral home] would get you one way or the other.”

But in 1963 a group of men from Mount Jackson took a lesson from Harrisonburg and set about to organize the first rescue squad operation in Shenandoah County. This was a daunting task because the department had to be built from the ground up.

The first step in the process was recruiting members.

Richard Hottle, now 82, was a young man of 22 when the conversation started in the basement of the Mount Calvary Lutheran Church. “That’s where we had our first meetings,” Hottle said, remembering people like James Bowman, Jack Sperry, Flo Hawkins, Wendel Green, Alvin Irwin, Carl Estep, Danny Proctor, and others who “wanted to serve the community. We just wanted to help. We saw the need.”

These citizens — not particularly trained in rescue just willing to learn and, more importantly, willing to serve — knew it was going to be a challenge. Hottle can’t remember the exact dozens of hours of preparation; he just remembers there were many evenings and weekends committed to the project.

Besides support from the community, Hottle said, Dellinger’s Funeral Home was ready to hand over the duties. “Oh, they wanted someone to take it off their hands.”

Yes, the first squad vehicle in many towns was a hearse, and in Mount Jackson, one of the few departments in the state to have green emergency vehicles.

“Now the color is gaining popularity,” said Painter, explaining the green color stuck with the department because of that green Cadillac hearse.

The second step in the process was to redesign the wagon. Kelley Stauff, Painter, and Hottle remember the hours donated by members who doubled as mechanics, carpenters, architects, and pseudo-engineers just to retrofit the first Cadillac or later the Ford Econoline vans of the 1970s and make these vehicles into emergency medical transport. Everyone played a role whether cutting plywood or establishing secure rigging for cot placement.

Stauff, another life member, a man well over 6 feet in height, remembers trying to crunch his body into the rear of the station wagon beside a patient on a cot. “It was plain awful,” he remembers, saying when the 1970 van replaced the Cadillac it was like going from “tent to condo.”

With the green Cadillac hearse emergency vehicle, the men set about with their American Red Cross Advanced First Aid courses as training.

“We could bandage, give oxygen, and take ‘em to the hospital,” laughed Painter, remembering the basic service provided. Now, an EMT is required to have more than 200 hours of training, a paramedic license requires even additional hours and training with recertifications every three years.

In 1963, the group had to develop a communication network, taking into consideration that at the time period, many homes did not have telephones, a stationary object that was attached to the wall, not a mobile hand-held palm-sized device.

Long before 911 services connected the county, in Mount Jackson residents — and those as far away as Orkney or Edinburg — would call 477-2626 for emergency services.

This number connected callers to between 10 and 15 phones — phones held by the department members. Even though rescue department members had scheduled duties, there was no specific location, so the call went into the individual home.

“We all answered. You had to. It would not stop ringing,” Stauff said. “It was not a normal ring. It was one long continuous noise.”

When all members answered the call, “everyone listened. Then we would decide who was on duty and who was closest. Then you went," Stauff said.

When the department was ready for a building, the memorable quote, though unsure of its origin, was that funds for construction would come with “the good Lord’s help and the faith of the people.” The first building cost $60,000. Today, a single cot costs $40,000 and a vehicle nearly $500,000.

Turkey-oyster dinners, donations of appliances for auction, door-to-door campaigns, and corporate sponsors helped support the construction, development, and continuation of the service.

“We were the first,” said Painter, adding this department was also the first to ask the county for paid personnel because hours donated by volunteers were extremely limited. “We take every single bit of help we can get.”