

# Chasing The 611

## *N-G Editor Details Newest Local Craze*

By DARRYL WOODSON

My wife and I have become train chasers, or more specifically 611 chasers.

If you don't know what a 611 chaser is, just drive up to Goshen and along the railroad tracks between Goshen and Staunton over the next two weekends.

You will see dozens of photographers with expensive cameras and long lenses – or just nice cell phones – at nearly every railroad crossing or overpass trying to get that perfect shot – or shots – of the first-ever fall train excursions being pulled by the famous Norfolk & Western Class J No. 611 steam engine out of Goshen.

Some of these people set up with their tripods at one location and wait for extended periods of time for the 611 and her historic passenger cars to roll by. Others scurry from one location to another to get ahead of the train to get multiple shots along the way. Hence, the term, “train chasers.”

As with most train chasers, my wife and I – particularly me – have a long love affair with trains.

Mine started at an early age. My grandparents took me and other family members to Tweetsie Railroad in North Carolina and to Cass, W.Va., probably before I was 10. When I was 10, Santa brought me my first model train set, an HO scale one with, yes, a steam engine. I still have that engine today, which, although renovated, only runs backwards.

For the next six year or so, I spent many of my nights and weekends creating a model train layout that eventually stretched over three large tables and featured mountains, streams and a city complete with street lights.

But I somehow turned into a teenager with other interests and the layouts gathered dust until my father eventually took them to the dump. I kept some of the old train cars and engines and some of the model houses, though, and when I married into a family with two young boys, I brought the engines and cars out at Christmastimes and created temporary layouts on a table in the living room. Even though we don't have kids in the house anymore, I do that to this day, along with another under one of our Christmas trees.



THE 611 steam engine pulls its passenger cars down the spur line in Goshen toward Victoria Station after its morning run on Oct. 15. After picking up a new set of passengers, the train headed back to Staunton. Photographers were waiting along railroad crossings, including at the one shown in the photo below east of Hebron in Augusta County. For a video from the viewpoint below, see The News-Gazette's website. (Darryl and Mary Woodson photos)

Over the years, my love for trains rubbed off on my wife, Mary, and the family, and we visited and rode trains at such places as Tweetsie Railroad, the Virginia Museum of Transportation in Roanoke, and the Strasburg Railroad in Pennsylvania Dutch Country.

Now, that explains a little of our love affair with trains but dating our fascination with the 611 engine is a little harder to do.

I'm sure that I saw the 611 as a static display among the various engines and railroad cars at the Virginia Museum of Transportation when I was a child in the late 1960s and early '70s, but I probably didn't take particular note of her. I never saw her pull the excursions of the 1980s after she was brought back to life the first time, but I have seen photos of her rolling across the bridge over the James River at Natural Bridge Station.

When the museum announced that the 611 was being fixed up again, though, we realized then how big a deal she was, and is. We joined several thousand other folks in sending her off from Roanoke to the

North Carolina Transportation Museum for restoration in 2014. We talked about it, but we ended up not buying tickets for any of the excursions that she pulled in Virginia for two seasons after she was restored.

We did, however, go up to Strasburg two summers ago to see her in action on that short track. I guess we officially became 611 chasers at that point, as we scouted out the best locations to get photos of her, including an old cemetery, and took photos of several of her runs. We used two of those photos in the paper this fall when the excursions from Goshen were announced.

When the 611 excursions from Goshen were announced, my wife and I were, of course, ecstatic, and we didn't hesitate a moment to join Joseph Haney, our Goshen reporter, on the trial run three Fridays ago when we were invited by Will Harris, the man who has spearheaded the effort to bring the excursions here. Some of Mary's photos appeared with Joseph's story that next week.

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PHOTOGRAPHERS gather at the intersection of Va. 39 and Cameron Hall Lane in Goshen to await the arrival of the 611 excursion train back from its morning run on Oct. 15. Seen behind them is the old Stillwater plant. (Darryl Woodson photo)



LOCAL RESIDENTS wave at the passengers on the train as it passes in back of the Goshen Rescue Squad building on its way to Victoria Station. In the photo at the bottom of this page, the 611 streams into Staunton later that afternoon. (Darryl and Mary Woodson photos)

# 611

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Mary and I also returned the following Friday to take photos of the first “real” excursion with paying passengers. After taking photos of passengers boarding the train at Victoria Station (no, it’s not a station in the conventional sense, but the large tents serve the purpose just fine), we scouted out two locations just north of there to grab some photos for our first attempt at 611 chasing.

I dropped off Mary at a crossing just north of Goshen along Va. 42, where she joined other chasers, including a young man from North Carolina that we met. I went back to Goshen and headed over the old steel bridge down the dead-end road east of the tracks, where I met another train chaser. And then we waited.

But not for long. I heard the 611 whistle blow from the other side of town at 9:30 a.m., which is exactly when the first run is supposed to start. I could see the smoke billowing up in the distance, and then I started hearing that chugging sound of a steam engine coming closer.

Then I saw it after it crossed the railroad bridge and came out of the woods. I quickly took a few photos with my cell phone and the train rolled out of my view in a few minutes.

Then it was time for the chase – or so I thought.

I jumped in the car, headed back to Goshen and then up Va. 42 and picked up Mary. Then we – along with a slew of other cars – sped away north on 42 trying to catch up with the 611. However, by the time we saw her smoke again, we also saw fire and rescue lights up ahead signifying an accident. At that point, we knew we wouldn’t be able to catch up that day, so we headed back, our first chase abruptly ending.

We knew, though, that we would return to Goshen because we are, after all, 611 chasers.

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The next opportunity that we had was Sunday, Oct. 14. We decided to go over to Goshen after church and catch photos of the afternoon excursion that starts at 2:30.

After driving through Goshen Pass, where the fall colors were starting to really show, we stopped for lunch at the Goshen Volunteer Rescue Squad, where volunteers are selling breakfast and lunch foods every day of the excursions this fall.

We worried that we hadn’t arrived in Goshen in time to see the 611 pull the morning excursion back into town, which usually occurs about 1 or before. However, when I got a hold of Will Harris on my cell phone, he explained that the train was probably going to be about an hour late. The train had had to wait about that long before heading out that morning to allow a freight train to come through.

So we had plenty of time to eat and then walk just a few yards down the track to find a place to see the train come back into the station on the spur line.

Mary and I took up different spots, along with dozens of other photographers. One young man with a video camera - and his own YouTube channel - told us he had come down from New Jersey with his father for the weekend to chase the train. They were spending the night in Lexington, he said.

Meanwhile, dozens of other cars swirled around the roads as other 611 chasers looked for places to park.

Eventually, the delayed train got back into Goshen, the diesels pulling her backwards from Staunton were unhooked, and then the 611 blew its whistle and slowly pulled its cars down the spur line past us and all of the other train fans.

At that point, we got back into the car and headed down to the huge parking lot and Victoria Station, where Will Harris promised us a chance to get into the cab of the 611 to take photos and video for the paper. Yeah, this is where it’s fun to be a newsperson.

I remember the Goshen mayor saying that he hoped to see a true traffic jam in Goshen because of the excursions. Well, trying to enter a large gravel parking lot where 650 people are getting off the train, and another 650 are trying to get on the train – plus all of the sightseers who were

just photographing the train – took a little while, and probably qualified as a traffic jam.

I told Mary to go on ahead and meet with Will while I parked, which took another 7-10 minutes, but she and Will waited for me. Then Mary and I climbed up into the cab, had a nice talk with the fireman (the one who keeps the firebox going), took pictures and video, and then we climbed back down and met with the chief mechanical officer, Scott Lindsey. (I’ll have more on him in a future paper.)

By that time, the passengers for the afternoon excursion had loaded and Mary and I headed back to the car to chase the train again.

We knew we couldn’t get to all of the places where we’d seen good photographs taken by train chasers that have been posted on Facebook on the N&W 611 Tracker Group page and the Friends of the 611 page.

So we aimed for two places, one at a church in Craigsville, and another in the Swoope-Hebron areas of Augusta County west of Staunton. The Craigsville location turned out to be a bust because the sunlight was hitting in the wrong direction, so we gave up on that site before the train came and headed to the Hebron area.

For those of you future 611 chasers, let me tell you that there are a number of railroad crossings that you can stop at along Va. 42 north to Craigsville and from there to the Augusta Springs area, if you can find a place to park. Just before you get to Buffalo Gap, head cross country, starting out on Va. 703, east toward Staunton, and there are a number of places to see the train there, including from two overpasses.

We eventually decided on setting up at the overpass just east of Hebron Church. I dropped Mary off at the bridge and I parked around the corner along a cornfield. And, yes, there were other photographers set up everywhere we went along the way and at that bridge.

We could both see the smoke in the distance long before we saw the train, and, of course, once again when

we finally saw it, we had only a few minutes to grab some shots and video.

When I picked up Mary from the bridge, she told me she got a little more of the 611 experience than she had bargained for. As she was shooting a short video of the engine coming up and under the bridge, she got a face full of smoke and cinders in her hair. Be sure to check out the video we posted on our website.

From there we headed into Staunton, where we were able to get one more set of photos as it chugged along a city street toward the station. And, yes, there were dozens of people at that location as well, many of whom, though, were nearby residents, rather than true train chasers, I suppose.

So ended our second chase. I won’t bore you with tales of our future chases but be sure to wave if you see us out on the roads one of these next two weekends.

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