

611

This is the big day! It is Mothers Day, 2016 and it is 68 degrees and partly cloudy. We meet at Cindy and Fred's home, then we are on our way in a 2-vehicle caravan, plied with lots of snacks, cameras and happy expectations.

The area near the tracks is flooded with people and still more cameras. Cindy wheels into a parking lot and we sure hope this Honda isn't decorated with a ticket when we return from our jaunt. A picnic of yummy KFC fills our tummies.

We inch our way thru the throng to our waiting chariot of shiny black steel...well, I get a ride for a couple of blocks on a golf cart but Jim, Lori, Jeff, Cindy and Fred have to hoof it. Age has its privileges, huh?

Up the steps we scramble into the upper deck of Car 5, the Super Dome Car on the Norfolk and Western Class "J" #611.



Tables await, bearings signs, "Reserved for Watson (6)" and we sit down into soft, comfy seats. Oh, this is gonna be niiiiice!

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The "stewardess" on this car is a nice looking gentleman from Amherst and he delivers his safety spiel. He also tells me that he would rather be called a flight attendant than a stewardess. He is a photographer so he and Jim talk cameras.



A huge belch of black smoke, an ear piercing whistle and we are moving away from the back side of the O. Winston Link Museum. The sidewalks are lined with jealous spectators. Na, na, na, na, na!

We roll thru the yards of Roanoke, past dozens and dozens of locomotives that are waiting for their date with a scrap company. Such a shame that they no longer command the position of their former glory.



611 blows her whistle in respect, having escaped their fate and being restored within the past year or so. 611 was built in 1950 in Roanoke for \$251,544 (equivalent to \$2,441,000 in 2015) and restored in 2014/15. Other than the distant mountains, our ride looks much the same as rolling thru the rail yards of South Chicago.



Jim notices that we are running parallel to the old Virginian tracks.



More waving people line the roads along our way. We seem to be traveling in a channel, mountains on both sides of us. Families are waving at us from their back yards, little kids excitedly perched on Daddy's shoulders.

Fortunately, the track curves just in time to miss running smack-dab into the mountain ahead of us.

Hors d'oeuvres and beverages are served...my, aren't we fancy? My pinkie is kinked for the occasion.



Gardens along the way have a great start and look so pretty. It is too early for the weeds to invade.

We creep up a mountain and spot a pasture of cows. Since Jim and I are both on the same side of the coach, the discussion is how to count them for our usual "cow counting" contest. A rock wall hems us in on both sides.



We are up in the air! One passenger takes advantage of his view from the top.

Drones check our progress. People of all ages - from the toddler riding on Daddy's shoulders to Gramma, all decked out in a flowery orange dress and poufy hat - stand prisoners of their cameras.



So much to see:



The mountainside beside is covered with new growth and mostly-leaved-out trees. I wonder how many black bears are lurking in those bushes and watching us and thinking how tasty we would be.



Black smoke is curling around our windows as we approach Montgomery Tunnel and pass under Interstate 81. It all looks so different from this perspective. You are looking back at the other tunnel here.



Here is a picture someone took of us coming out of the tunnel:



Oodles of people are parked just west of Montgomery Tunnel to record our passing by.



Cindy and Fred come back to their seats from a purchasing run and she hands me an ornament of 611. Don't you just know it will NOT wait for our Christmas tree but, instead, will take its honored place on my "memory tree".



Jeff and Fred check their I-Phones and announce that we are cruising thru the countryside at a blazing 18 miles per hour. Our airline attendant tells us that we are doing this in the heaviest passenger car ever manufactured. Now, mind you, 611 is pulling 20 cars with about a thousand passengers up the 1.34% grade of the mountain. Pretty good, I'd say.

We pass through a tunnel of rocks.



With another belch of smoke and a happy sway, we gain speed and zip down the grade into Christiansburg and Cambria, VA.



My new-found friend from Eagle Rock, VA and I are both immersed in the scenery...and we both have some good ideas for solving the world's woes.



Attendants serve us yogurt with granola and fresh strawberries along with cups of steaming coffee.



Now the sun is hiding behind dark clouds but our view is spectacular, nonetheless.

Vicker is coming into view, then we slide under the huge cooling tower.



It is 3:25 PM and we are entering the "wye" to turn our vehicle of fun for the trip home



Raindrops dot the front windows. Beside us a blanket-wrapped cameraman is intent of documenting our progress.

The New River flows beside us.



Ah, we are in reverse to navigate part of the "wye". Cindy sees on her phone that one of my Facebook friends, Linda Harbertson, is on this trip too.

As we stop our reverse direction, I spot a mountainside of pretty white bushes...no idea what they are but they are gorgeous.



We zip under the Vicker coal tower again and I realize we are over half way thru this wonderful odyssey. This has been a birthday and Mothers Day gift of a lifetime and I don't want it to end! I spot a large, curved pipe sticking up from the ground a few feet away from the tracks and I wonder if we are traveling over a mine.

We see more Black Angus cattle clinging to their hillside pasture. They are, obviously, graduates of Mountain Grazing School. Of course, you know that is where they learn the strategic art of extending two legs farther than the other two to facilitate maintaining their balance as they munch the fresh, juicy grass.

Three men in a fishing boat are taking pictures of us as we take pictures of them. Touché!



Our tracks lead us under a main highway bridge. Officer Friendly is parked right on that bridge so railfans cannot interrupt vehicle traffic with their pesky habit of parking on the bridge to take pictures of the 611 excursion. He is busy snapping pix with his own camera. Allrightythen!

A very rusty old pickup truck is parked in a ditch. It is heaped with junk and must have been sitting there for a while because flowering bushes are growing up between the junk.

Mr. Sun has rejoined us as we rock and roll between the mountains. Our friendly male stewardess and his sweet assistant place more little plates on our tables in anticipation of yet more goodies. Ah, cookies and ooey-gooey chocolate brownies!

My family is enjoying the day.



Jim is grinning and I am taking notes for this story.



We glide down Christiansburg Mountain and all is well. A little white church is nestled in a hollow.

Blackberry bushes are in full bloom so a cold spell and "Blackberry Winter" (as brother-in-law Kelly Sanden called it) is soon to be in our forecast. Winter? Hey, that sounds like the perfect excuse to put up the tree and display the 611 ornament from Cindy!

Between Salem and Shaffers Crossing, to our left, we pass by one humongous scrap yard.



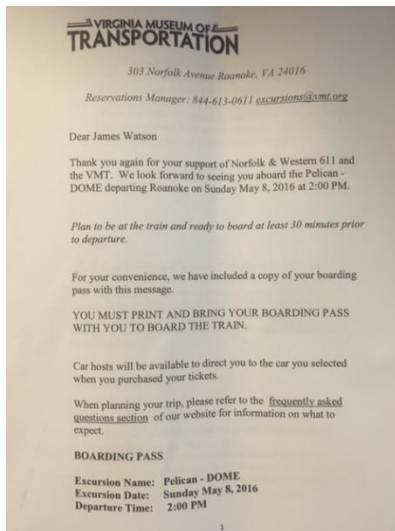
Sadly, we are almost back to Roanoke and I know our amazing jaunt is nearly over. Oh, the memories that are planted in this old grandma's cranium. I shed a tear as we see the Virginia Museum of Transportation come up beside us.

It is about 5:30 as we all scramble off the train. Ah, but there is time for one more picture:



Then we disperse to our waiting vehicles. Lori and Jeff head south to Charlotte, NC and Fred wheels the light blue Honda northward to our home in Lynchburg.

This has been a WONDERFUL trip!



Thank you, thank you to my beloved 5 and their families for this trip of a lifetime. It would be mighty hard to top this one.



I am so blessed!