

A Step Back In Time

The valleys are dense with fog this October, 2009, morning but the sun prevails and it is a gorgeous day.so far. Little cottonball clouds dot the intense blue above us. Yesterday was crispy-clear, too, as we explored curving mountain roads.

Clouds flow in just as we approach the Cass, WV, Rail Park. Oh, well, more the better to see without pesky sunglasses.

We park at the crossing on Back Mountain Road and Shay #6 rumbles past with its 11:00 train of “lookers” on their way up to Bald Knob (elev. 4,832’), a six hour trip.



Among those on board area busload of folks from Mt. Airey, NC, whom we met at breakfast this morning in Lewisburg. I may or may not have seen Aunt Bee peeking out of that last car.



The parking lot by the depot is filling fast.



One red SUV has a bike rack on its rear and has a little kid's trike perched precariously at the very top --- wonder where that kid rides as they zip down the highway. We hope to see the red Jeep with Illinois plates there, too, but, alas!, Cousin Sylvia and Bill did not make this trip. Maybe next time!

Bouncy mountain music wafts through the air as Shay #11, all shiny black with a natty gold bell, pulls into the station and folks scramble aboard for our ride up the mountain.



Oh, it's gonna be a good, good day! Don't you just know Jim is out patrolling the platform with his camera?



Me? I'm sitting right here in the roof-covered, open car writing today's chapter of my life story.



Cass began as a logging town before 1900. (The story is that the Wright Brothers used lumber from this very mountain for their first airplane.) Mountainsides of trees were felled, loaded on flatcars, and transported downhill to the sawmill at the bottom of the mountain.



West Virginia Pulp and Paper Company eventually owned the whole operation and built company houses for their workers. There was a post office, a large store, a church, a local doctor, and all the comforts of home. Of course, the loggers only got off the mountain once a week or so and their families kept the home-fires burning. You can read about the history of this marvelous place if you go to <http://www.cassrailroad.com/>. Today the state of West Virginia owns the town and railroad, runs excursion trains, and rents out the company houses to tourists. That's the company store and post office below:



At one time the company harvested enough lumber in just one day to build twenty 2-story houses. But today that boast is just a memory. We pass the remnant of the old sawmill, long since abandoned and burned in two fires. It is a jumble of twisted, rusted steel and crumbled concrete, just a shell of its former glory.



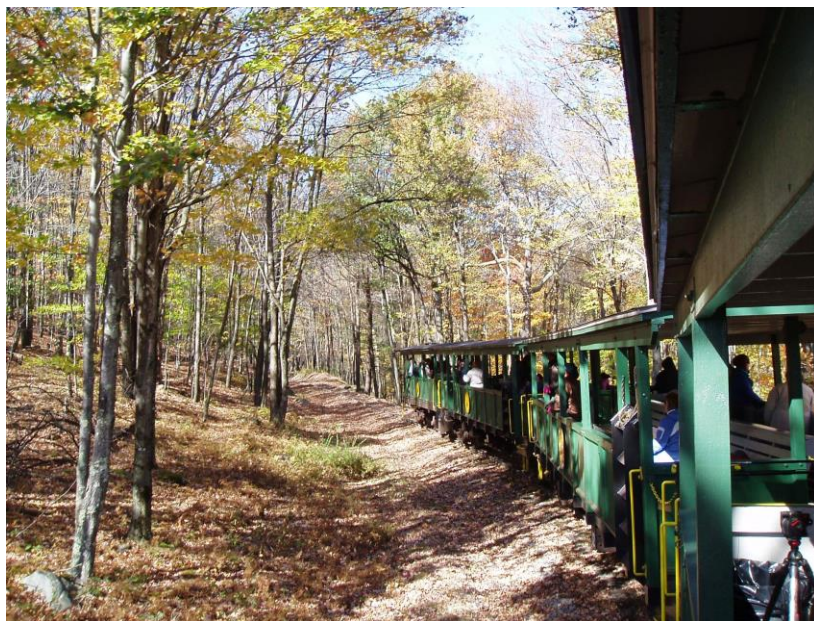
Parked on sidings along our way is a collection of old, old equipment. We can only imagine the life of the folks who were here so many years ago.



That water tank is in dire need of repairs:



Our train chugs backward up the 5% mountain grade at the blinding speed of 6MPH. The earth beside us is covered with a blanket of leaves but there is plenty of room for more --- and lots more leaves are waiting their turn to flutter downward.

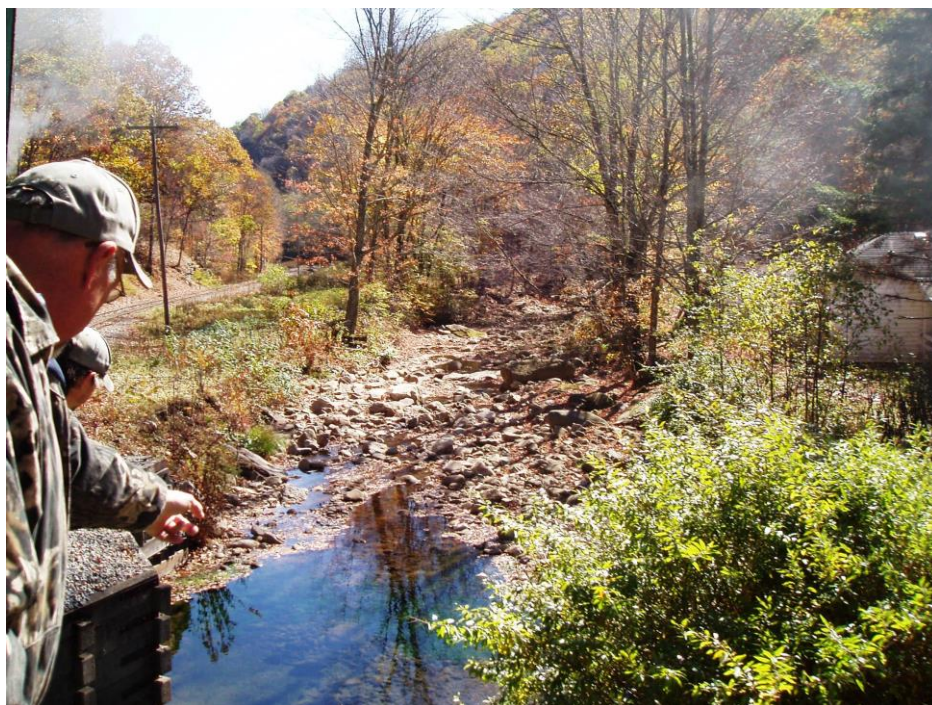


Ferns and moss peek between the leaves as two deer watch the latest batch of intruders (that would be us!) pass through their territory. This heavy coat is beginning to feel plenty good. We are rocking and rolling ever upward.



A green plastic alligator is perched on a stump beside the track -- not sure what that critter has to do with this whole trip back in time. Two switchbacks allow our huffing monster to climb the mountain. After the first switchback our engine is in front of us and we are warned to watch out for cinders. A track car follows us to check for fires our steel steed may have started.

Moss and lichen-covered rocks as big as outhouses are strewn among the trees. Ferns up here are no longer lush and green, due to frost. A break in the trees reveals Gum Curve, where we are accorded a panoramic view of the valley and farm below us. Fall colors abound as we continue our journey.



This county, Pocahontas, is known as the birthplace of rivers with eight rivers flowing into other counties.



We travel through Limestone Cut, hand-blasted with black powder by Italian workers so the track could be laid so many years ago. The immigrants could not speak English and carried tags with their employee number. Often they were only known by their numbers and not by their names.

Once past the second switchback, we are once more being pushed; this 9% grade is just the stuff for our gear-driven Shay locomotive. Today our young-lady fireman is hand-shoveling $\frac{3}{4}$ ton of coal for our trip.

The distant mountains are resplendent in reds and golds and greens.



A stray ray of sunlight ignites a patch of gold and the mountainside erupts with color. Truly, West Virginia lives up to its nickname, Almost Heaven. They tell us that, on a clear day, you can see the Virginia mountains, eleven miles away.

We reach our Whittaker Station destination (elev. 3280’).



We are on the short trip today -- only 3.8 miles from the rail park but the weather is certainly more attention-getting up here. Passengers spread like a mushroom cloud across the grassy field which is home to a logging camp replica. There is the usual concession stand, the busiest place up here today as many folks gulp down hot chocolate and coffee. Others are led on a walking tour of the cook shack,







the cabins, skid loader



and various logging equipment.



You can also rent a caboose if you care to stay here overnight.



(If Wal-Mart was close, it would be a great place to live.)

An old crow voices his opinion of this latest collection of interlopers. I sit quietly and listen to the wind carrying the voices of immigrants so many years ago. I wonder how many of their descendants have made the trip back here to see where “Grandpa” worked.

Fog and clouds obscure the tops of nearby mountains and the air is filled with a barely-seeable drizzle. A small patch of goldenrods takes its last stand against the coming winter.

Slowly, passengers, their hoods pulled up over their ears and coats securely buttoned, make their way back to today’s conveyance of choice for our trip back down the mountain.



My nose is cold! One lady spills some peanuts and carefully shoves them through cracks in the floorboards. Wanna take bets how long it will take for that crow to find them?

Shay #11’s mournful wail echoes across the valley and, with a mighty belch of black smoke, we begin our journey back down to civilization. Along our way brakemen (mostly young women) control hand brakes on each car to slow our descent. The locomotive isn’t puffing out nearly as much smoke as it did on our way up.

Two horseback riders along the tracks pause to take our picture as we, in turn, take their picture.

Clouds are turning our world into pre-nightfall and leaves float gently beside us.



They drop one by one and soon the entire tree is empty. Perhaps we could all take a lesson from the trees; if we tackle a job bit by bit, we can complete any project.

Summer is over now and it is high time we put up the Christmas tree!

