

Chasing a Legend

In 1950 the Norfolk and Western Railroad built a shiny new steam powered locomotive in Roanoke, Virginia. This beauty cost \$251,544 and was dubbed "611". Traveling about 15,000 miles every month, the locomotive was a dependable worker and pulled many passengers through the hills, mountains and valleys of Virginia, West Virginia and Ohio.

Alas, in October 1959 modern technology thumbed its nose at steam and 611 was taken off the rails.

It was restored and spruced up in 1983 and pulled excursion trains until 1994. Then the black celebrity cooled its heels in the Virginia Museum of Transportation in Roanoke.

In 2014 somebody had the bright idea to restore the aging giant and, amid much fanfare on May 24, 2014, it was towed to Spencer, North Carolina for a facelift and a tune-up for its innards. It took 42 gallons of paint and another 24 gallons of topcoat. Ten thousand man-hours of volunteer labor and about a million dollars completed the job.

Finally, May 30, 2015, the huffing, puffing behemoth made its victorious trek back to Roanoke, the starting point of various excursions through southwest Virginia.

Now, we have all that history stuff taken care of so, let's jump into the present, June 14, 2015. The much awaited trip between Lynchburg and Petersburg, Virginia, is happening today.

Little Red Cavalier is making this jaunt today and I'm pretty sure I saw him wink and grin at Coby, the white Chevy Cobalt, as we eased out of

the driveway. Those two are still engaged in an on-going competition for "Most Favored Vehicle" status.

Jim and his pal Chris have been plotting for days about where to get the best possible pictures of the celebrated "choo choo". Before 7AM we pick up Chris and tool down Route 460, searching for a scenic background. The first location of choice is already filled with train buffs so we cruise a few more miles to Depot Lane near Spout Spring (about 7 miles from historic Appomattox.)

Soon 8 more carloads of photographers join us. One father and son drove all day yesterday from Tampa, Florida, for this occasion. Another couple is from North Carolina. Several guys from Montana are added to the mix. Everybody cools their heels beside the tracks as they wait impatiently, peering westward for today's star.

Whoo hoo! A mournful whistle echoes across the countryside and everybody snaps to attention. Here she comes!

Several more vehicles roar to a stop and fellows are racing toward the tracks, their cameras bouncing. The scent of coal smoke permeates the air as beloved 611 toots and grinds it way toward us. One man is standing on the roof of his pickup truck.

Jim has been waiting in place an hour and a half and, at the last moment, some eager beaver jumps between the train and Jim's tripod. What a twerp!

Oh, the excitement as the steel steed, pulling 19 or 20 carloads of waving passengers, roars past us at 8:45AM.

There is a mass exodus as dozens of vehicles (including us) barrel away, intent on beating 611 to the next perfect photo opportunity.

All along Route 460 photographers are piling out of their cars and are racing toward the tracks. We veer onto a side road at Bowler signal (just west of Pamplin, Virginia) and we see headlights closing in fast as we cross the tracks. Chris jumps out and Jim threads his way between the knot of spectators - and a State Police car. With a mighty toot old 611 smokes past us at 9:04AM and, once again, vehicles scatter like buckshot on their way farther east.

We are done chasing for today so the trip westward is much more leisurely. Ah, but Jim and Chris are still in their picture-snapping mode so we travel back roads, looking for trains that might be following 611. Eventually, we head toward Lynchburg, still pumped from the experience of seeing this fine piece of history.

