

A Trip on the Durbin Rocket Steam Train

Even before the roosters were rousing for their official “wake -up-the-day” duties we were excitedly packing cameras and binoculars in the little red Cavalier. One last cup of coffee and we were heading north from Lynchburg on curvy Highway 501, anticipating a full day ahead.

A leisurely breakfast in Buena Vista allowed daylight to catch up to us and illuminate the mountains and breathtaking Goshen Pass ahead of us. Early morning fog shrouded the peaks and hid the secrets of the valleys.

After a thoroughly pleasant trip thru the “Wild and Wonderful” mountains of West Virginia, the little town of Durbin eased into view. At first sight this place appears to be a sleepy little “has-been” railroad town with faded facades that dream of a bygone era of bristling commerce. Even the official tourist brochures describe it as “quaint”. Then you spend time along it’s streets and realize that this is still a vital link to a proud past which has been lovingly restored by dozens of dedicated volunteers...from the friendly young woman busily sweeping the debris from the station to the elderly gentleman who seems to have a finger in every pie and knows all the latest gossip.

The first stop is at the Rail and Trail Store which is a potpourri of genuine goodies and replicas of anything related to railroads and the area. Sun catchers and antiques filled the ample facility and a fired up furnace took the chill away as we purchased our tickets for our trip on the Durbin Rocket.

With tickets in hand we ambled across the shaded street to the restored Victorian Depot, fresh in its soft yellow splendor, decorated with white and brick red trim and sporting a spanking new wood loading dock which embraced three sides of the building.



In my mind’s eye I could see the bustle of carts and horses bringing people to the station to meet

the trains so long ago. Can you not visualize with me the local ladies in their finest clothes...long flowing dresses with perhaps a parasol and a dulcimer ...ready to embark on a journey to some mysterious faraway place? Ah, but the lonesome moan of a steam whistle quickly jolted me back to the present.

This was the first public excursion (May 4, 2002) of the newly acquired and restored 50-ton geared steam engine built in 1910 by the Climax Manufacturing Company.



This monster was originally built for the Moore-Keppel Logging Company and was used for many years to haul logs out of the forests along the Middle Fork River. It had spent its retirement years rusting in Connecticut. Many loving hands restored it to its former dignity and it stood hissing and pulsing, ready to take us on our journey.



Our selection of accommodations was either the open flatbed car, filled with benches, or the bright red 1922 cabooses.



Given the frost in the air, there was no contest and we were soon clambering up the ladders to the cupola for our excursion. What a bird's eye view it was! Before we left the station the young woman from the depot was armed with a bottle of Windex, busy cleaning the soot off the windows. A pot bellied coal stove was stoked for warmth and a coffee pot was put in place for the journey.

After a huge belch of black coal smoke and an ear piercing whistle, we were gently rocking and creaking along the track at the mind-boggling speed of 7 miles an hour. Our route took us along the base of Cheat Mountain and followed the Greenbrier River. A few years ago a flood had washed away the entire original track and volunteers had rebuilt the railway. From my vantage point in that cupola, those rails did not look especially straight as we rumbled along at what seemed like inches from the riverbank. Far below me the water rushed over mighty big rocks and I held my breath with each lurch. On our other side was beautiful Cheat Mountain and the train missed rockslides and fallen trees by inches. I spotted the engineer reaching out and cracking off branches as we traveled.

Oh, such spectacular scenery we witnessed. Streams were oozing out of the mountainside and the bottomlands were filled with Mayflowers, yellow birdsfeet, a drift of white volunteer apple trees in full bloom, ferns all coiled in preparation for their growth, and mountain laurel waiting patiently for their time to burst into bloom. Choke cherries and plum trees were awash in white lace and accented the brilliant green of millions of skunk cabbages. Pink and yellow flowering shrubs lined the riverbanks. The mournful whistle echoed off the mountainside as

voluminous black coal smoke billowed over the long valley. Three horses were happily munching fresh spring grass among the apple trees and did not pay us the slightest attention.

At the end of the track the train lumbered to a halt and we were able to disembark if we needed to frequent the fancy new 2-holer or wanted to have a picnic at the tables nestled among newly cut grass, surrounded by violets and tiny flowers that looked like soft gray kittens' paws.

Soon we were heading back to the depot. We stopped for a crew of volunteers who were armed with modern day weed whackers, chainsaws and big orange water jugs. They had been repairing damage from fallen rocks and mudslides as well as trimming weeds along the right-of-way. One bit of excitement was added to the trip when one of the men spotted a burning cinder behind us and that locomotive was slammed into reverse for a hasty trip back to that spot to put out the blaze. We were able to travel a good bit faster than the previous 7 miles an hour then. The contents of those orange water jugs made short work of the fire problem.

Once the fire was out we resumed our gentle rocking trip along the Greenbrier and all too soon Durbin was in view. While leaving the caboose I noticed that, after the hour and a half trip, I could still lay my hand on the side of that coffeepot and feel very little warmth. Oh, well, it made for a great atmosphere!



A gentle rain began to fall as we left the train and we hurried to the warmth of the car and our trip back to Lynchburg. What a wonderful memory-filled trip this had been! If you ever get the opportunity to ride the Durbin Rocket on the Durbin and Greenbrier Valley Railroad, by all means, don't miss the chance of a lifetime.

