

Tiny Nelson and Albemarle Railway Closes Out Sixty Years of Service

By Nancy St. Clair, Progress Staff Reporter, January 5, 1963

Schuyler – This tiny Nelson County community witnessed the end of an era Saturday.

The Nelson and Albemarle Railroad, in operation for 60 years, made its last run. The old iron horse which carried soapstone from the Alberene Stone Co. has been replaced by tractor-trailer trucks that have been found more economical.

Retiring along with the train are Jake Tree, the fireman who worked for the company 37 years, and H.M. Hackett, the engineer, who saw 53 years with the company.

The railroad's diesel engine and a caboose were sent on the last run from Schuyler to Warren and back Saturday. It stopped at Esmont to pick up its final load – three cars of pulpwood.

A small crowd gathered for the event. The conductor swung to the right on the steps of the red caboose, gave the signal and the train lumbered away from the Schuyler station for the last time.

The N&A owns seven and three quarters miles of track to Guthrie where the lines are met by Chesapeake and Ohio track.

The train, its long-time operations and visitors, rambled through the snow-covered woods. It stopped over a creek bridge to give the visitors a chance to examine a beaver dam. The men have watched the progress on the dam on their daily runs and pointed out where the beavers had cut down nearby trees.

The engine and caboose pulled off again and shortly came upon two deer hunters and a freshly shot deer. Arms flew from the cab and caboose to wave.

An old-timer, retired since 1959, familiarly climbed to one of the four seats in the top of the caboose to take a last ride down the tracks which he rode almost daily for 42 years.

Two boys sitting near him listened eagerly as he recalled the old train's history. "I saw them digging the bed for this train with mules when I was a boy," H.L. Drumheller reminisced.

"The most cars we ever carried was about 17 or 18," he said. I was the brakeman from 1917 to 1931. Then I was the conductor from 1931 to 1959. The conductor handles the bills and keeps the records of freight. He's the boss of the train. He's like the captain of a ship, Drumheller said.

The train had only one fatal accident during its 60 years and it was only five years ago when JB Purvis was hit by a truck as he stood on the front of the engine while it was stopped at the Rt. 6 crossing at Esmont.

Both Tyree and Hackett have missed the old steam engines which were junked in 1951 for diesel. "This is nice, it's just like driving my car," Hackett said. "It's much cleaner. Do you think I'd look like this if we still had steam? I'd be all covered with coal dust and soot," he said glancing down at his clean shirt and corduroy jacket.

But being clean is a poor substitute for the old steam engines according to the two men. "You could play 'Home Sweet Home' on a steam engine whistle," Hackett grinned, "but you can't do anything with a diesel whistle."

Tyree added, "I liked to see the smoke and watch those old drivers turn." Is he ready to retire "I've worked enough, I reckon," he said.

Tyree said he started working for the Alberene Stone Co., as a water boy when he was 12 years old. "I worked for five cents an hour," he recollected. Hackett first worked in the quarry.

Frank G. Mothes, vice president of Alberene Stone Co, said that the decision to scrap the railroad was made because 85% of the stone already was being shipped by truck.

Truck freighting isn't actually cheaper, he explained, but handling costs and breakage are reduced by truck. Shipping by train necessitates using a truck to move the stone from the railroad to the construction site whereas a truck can take the stone directly to the purchaser.

The caboose and track will be sold to dealers in used railroad equipment. Bids are due Jan. 15, J.F. Bickers, Jr., trainmaster for the C&O who was present for the last run, said the C&O has applied to the Interstate Commerce Commission to take out their half of the tracks from Guthrie to Warren. He said the tracks don't support their upkeep. The train ran four passenger and baggage coaches at one time but passenger service was discontinued in 1950.