

May 29, 2006

Hello, Steam Team:

Memorial Day has always been a very special time. The idea was started by Julia Ward Howe in the 1880's. She had written the Battle Hymn of the Republic in Civil War days. I remember going to the cemetery with my mother to decorate family graves, and a special ceremony in the cemetery at Mercersburg in 1942. My father and I carried Spanish American War veterans in our Mountain Wagon in a Wilmington parade in the late 1940's.

On Memorial Day weekend, 1966, the Wilmington & Western Railroad ran for the first time as a steam tourist railroad. There were 5 round-trips each day, May 28, 29, and 30, from Greenbank to Mount Cuba. The railroad had 2 qualified engineers, a few so-called qualified firemen, trainmen, brakemen, and conductors, and no paid staff. But it did have a tiny station originally at Kennedyville, MD, which had been re-erected at Greenbank, a soggy parking lot, and lots of enthusiasm. It had taken 7 years from the earliest meetings of Historic Red Clay Valley, Inc. until the first trains ran on the B & O's Landenberg Branch. Before 1966 was over, 36,000 tickets had been sold for the nine-mile round-trip.

The month of May is a great month, anyway. 50 years ago (1956), Norbert Behrendt and I obtained permission to ride the cab of a Norfolk & Western passenger train from Roanoke, VA, to Bluefield, WV, and return. At that time the N & W was the only mainline carrier in the country to be 100% steam, which was to change completely in the 2 or 3 years immediately thereafter. Norbert was a bachelor friend from Washington, DC, who was part of the steam car community around the Nation's Capital at that time. I drove to his home late Friday afternoon, and our mutual friend Ed Pamphilon took us to Union Station in time to board the night sleeper for Roanoke. The sleeping car was part of a Diesel-powered train on the Southern Railway, which made a connection with the N & W at Monroe, just outside Lynchburg about 5 A.M. Here the steam locomotive was put on which pulled us through Lynchburg and over the mountain to Roanoke. We had time to inspect the N & W shops and the main office of the company with its ultra-modern CTC board showing the location of every train on the railroad, before our cab ride was to start at 12:20 P.M. on the westbound Powhatan Arrow for Bluefield, 100 miles away.

The Arrow was mostly a day train, making the 715-mile run from Norfolk, VA, to Cincinnati without change of locomotives. This was the longest coal-fired run anywhere without change of steam engines, as usually the fire had to be cleaned and the engine serviced before it was returned to service on another train. The 6-car train pulled in from the east on time and Norbert and I, clothed in coveralls and

engineers' caps, met a road foreman named Cabiness alongside the streamlined 4-8-2 locomotive. Cabiness was dressed in a business suit and felt hat and told us he would accompany us to Bluefield and back, so we all climbed into the cab and were introduced to the engineer and fireman.

Roanoke to Bluefield was a 2-1/2 hour trip, as it was mountainous much of the way. Soon out of Roanoke we started to climb toward Christianburg with a few short tunnels on the uphill run. The fireman was busy adjusting valves which had to do with the automatic coal stoker, and we noticed he covered his face with his bandanna as we approached the first tunnel. We soon learned why- the coal smoke made visibility and breathing quite difficult; we learned to take similar measures before the second tunnel came into view. As to Cabiness: nothing seemed to phase him, he just rode along in his business suit and white shirt with cinders falling all over him. There was a station stop at Christianburg and after the stiff pull there was no way the fireman could keep the pop valve from going off as we stopped at the station. To the west we dropped off again and the trip to Bluefield was most enjoyable. We followed a river with the tracks of the electrified Virginian Railway on the opposite bank. Often we saw ancient electric locomotives of the Virginian with their side rods like steam engines pulling coal trains in both directions.

At Bluefield the locomotive was greased and serviced and the whole train washed down during the 15-minute stop. A new engine crew took over, and we said good-by to all except Cabiness. In 2 hours, the eastbound Arrow would come along, and we had a second enjoyable cab ride back to Roanoke, arriving about 7 P.M. Thanking Mr. Cabiness for his wasted Saturday on our behalf, Norbert and I cleaned up and had a gourmet dinner at the railroad's Hotel Roanoke before boarding the returning night sleeper to Washington.

Progress toward completion of the work on the Models 725 and 735 moved along last week, and new safety valves were purchased and installed on our Auburn Valley locomotives. Several cars were made ready for today's parade in Kennett Square (5 cars attended), and Bob Reilly went to Mitchell's Ice Cream in the Model 78 roadster to promote our June 3-4 weekend last Saturday. As often happens, we've had some mechanical set-backs in the past few days; the roadster has stopped pumping oil and the problem has not been completely solved, and the vaporizer on the Model 87 choked today at the Kennett parade. We expect to correct both problems before long.

This week, we will be wrapping up plans to stage our June 3-4 "Family Fun" weekend. Anne Cleary has canceled the regular Events Committee meeting for Tuesday night, 5/30, so that a smaller group headed by Dale Simpkins and Chuck Erikson can meet with Bob Reilly and other key people to make sure all bases are covered. This smaller group will meet here in the Museum about 7:30 Tuesday. Ruth, Chevonne

Robison, and Ruth's friend Jan Rivera have been working hard to have the grounds looking nice (some light rain would be welcome this week). In addition to the things we've always done for our on-site events, this time we're featuring special old-time games, "Little Toot" for children to climb on, a special demonstration of a Stanley being fired up, and our own selling of Woodside Farm's Ice Cream in Dixie Cups, since Jim Mitchell's Ice Cream trailer is not available to us this time. Our promotion team has distributed a lot of literature and we've had some nice publicity, so we hope for good attendance.

If you are not signed up to help, you may be called upon if certain jobs are not covered. Many thanks to all.

Tom