

# Riding the rails is home for former resident

By Pat Wilson

We hang onto most fervently those things we don't want to see change -- be they a childhood dream, a memory, a bit of our heritage, an experience, or just an idea. It was perhaps a combination of those things that motivated Dusty Finley to make an unusual purchase while he was stationed as a first lieutenant in Fort Wainwright, Alaska. The young officer bought for himself a gutted railroad passenger car.

That was in 1979 and, with a lot of help from his friends, that private coach has, in Finley's words, gone "from hulk to home."

The car was transported to Fort Benning while Finley was in Infantry Officers Advanced School and then onto Hoke County where he lived in it while stationed at Fort Bragg.

Finley's "home sweet train" has left North Carolina now; interestingly, it's on its way back to Alaska, where it will be stored in Anchorage while its owner is advisor to an Alaskan Scout battalion at Kotzebue. When Finley, now a captain, finishes that tour he will be assigned to Fort Richardson, just outside of Anchorage, and will be able to again reside in his uncommon home.

While in the state, Finley's rail car didn't attract a great deal of attention in its setting near Aberdeen. It rested on a side rail which he leased from the Aberdeen and Rockfish Railroad. At the Ashley Heights location, where the railroad tracks cross NC Highway 211, trains regularly rumbled by -- within two feet of the passenger car.

The rail car is blue and yellow, the Alaska Railroad's official colors. The coach's interior today in no way resembles the gutted out coach it was when bought five years ago. "It was a total wreck then. No one could have visualized the possibilities," Finley says.

A lot of effort has gone into making the shell into a home, and the project is still not finished. Finley has kept track of all those who contributed time and talent to making the car a comfortable dwelling.

Finley's list of people includes over 400 names. It begins with friends from his unit, the famed Manchu 4th Battalion (Airborne), 9th Infantry, stationed at Fort Wainwright. Those folks ripped out the deteriorating interior of the car and readied it to become a custom home to suit its future occupant.

Turning the coach into a home has been a project "almost with soul," according to Finley. Perhaps because others shared his dream, they contributed ideas, energies and thoughts, to include his Hoke County neighbors who not only welcomed him and his coach to the neighborhood but allowed him to hook into their water system. They also helped him with the welding and

mechanical work involved in refurbishing the undercarriage.

"Living in a passenger car demands interesting concessions," Finley says. For example, he has to make special arrangements for water and power hook-ups. But these concessions are balanced by special benefits. For instance, the rail car home has its own generator and can be a totally comfortable, self-contained structure. Finley can and does travel in the car when it is moved from one place to another. The rail car is usually hooked behind a train and travels with the freight traffic.

For its trip back to Alaska, the coach was shipped to Memphis on Seaboard System Railroad. From Memphis, the car will ride the rails with Burlington Northern to Seattle, Washington, and from there it will be loaded onto an ocean barge -- destination Goodyear, Alaska. There the rail car will be on home territory and will once again travel the Alaskan wilderness on its way to Anchorage.

Finley's rail car was built in the early 1940s by American Standard Car Company and was to be part of a hospital train. After the war, it was rebuilt for passengers and sent by barge to Alaska. The car operated between Anchorage and Mt. McKinley, remaining in active service until 1979.

The rail car weighs 85 tons when empty, is 85 feet long and 10 feet wide. It once held 66 passenger seats. Finley explains that passenger cars in use today are not as heavy or as long as those manufactured in previous years. There are only about 200 private coaches left in the country, he says. Right now he knows of no one else who lives and travels in one.

A tour of Finley's rail car at its Hoke County location last month began with a greeting by the two special young ladies that add more character to the home. They're "Misty" and "Missy," Finley's cocker spaniels.

One has to step high to reach the bottom step which takes visitors into the mud room or the foyer of the coach. The first room is the kitchen then into the comfortable living room. Next is a utility/laundry room, which also contains a bunk. If need be, in the frigid Alaskan winters, Finley can live comfortably, if not a bit cramped, in just this room and the accompanying bath.

There is a walk-in closet, a master bedroom, and at the end is Finley's study. The entire coach consists of about 850 square feet of living space.

Each room is uniquely decorated and adapted to Finley's lifestyle and a respect for the rail car's heritage.

Finley's description of his rail car home as "a pearl in an oyster, rough on the outside and elegant on the inside" is an accurate one. And he and others took pains to polish the interior. Much of the

decoration was done professionally. Paneling in the living room is of West Virginia blue mountain rustic pine, hand stained and hand rubbed. Elsewhere, walls are covered with an entire map of the North American continent.

Set in the living room walls is an old telegraph set from the 1800's which is still functional. There is an electric panel box, also on the living room wall. That blew the electrician's mind when he came to connect the rail car to power lines, Finley says. The panel box is, however, not operable.

Housed within the coach car is a large collection of stoneware and some of Finley's own art work. Some of his hobbies include photography, painting and, of course, model railroads.

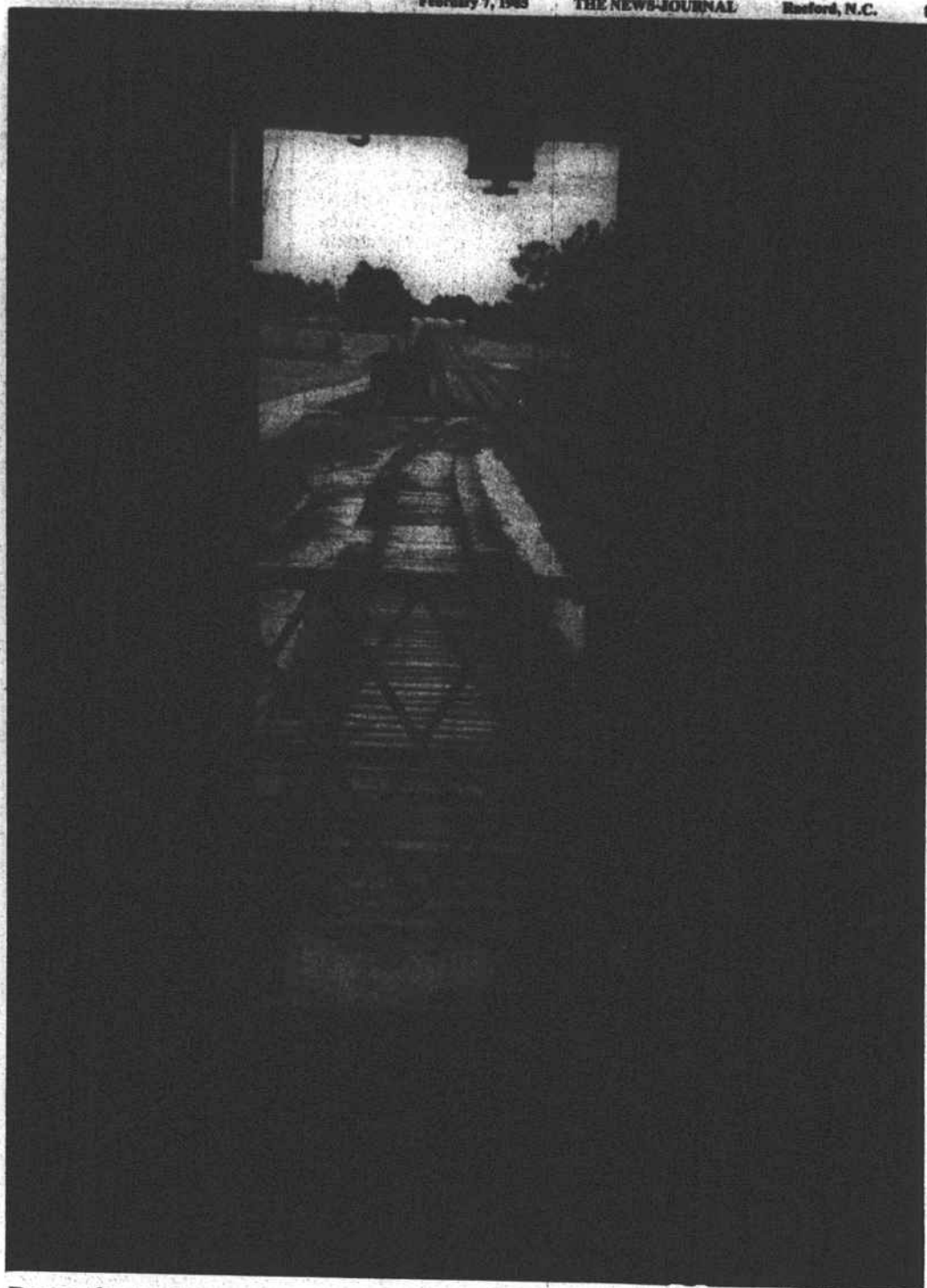
One item is the pride of the soldier who served with the Manchus for two and one-half years. That is a stained glass window handmade by Mary Ann Harrison, wife of an officer Finley served at Fort Wainwright. The window depicts the dragon, symbol of the Manchus, and is mounted in the master bedroom. The window has over 120 pieces of carefully fitted stained glass.

Finley, now a captain, maintains he is not eccentric; he just enjoys his home. "In the military, moving is a pain, an inconvenience," he says. "I saw the rail car as an opportunity to build a home over the years that I could take pride in, not give up every three years."

"The magic of it all is living in the car when it's in transit." He recalls an experience he had during his move to Fort Bragg. It was late at night when the train pulled into a small Georgia town. The elderly station master looked out and in a few minutes came shuffling out with fresh towels, toiletries, and a newspaper. The man was giving services that had been traditionally offered on rail coaches in the past. "I've never been greeted in an adverse manner," Finley says.

Finley admits he didn't know a lot about some of the work required to make the rail car into the self-sufficient home it is. For he needed the help and encouragement of others. That didn't come prior to his purchase of the coach. When he formulated the idea of buying the rail car in the late 1970s, he was told it wouldn't work, he couldn't do it. But it did work and a positive outlook paid off. "A person can do anything they want if they direct their energies," he states.

Dusty Finley grew up in the midwest and his travels throughout the country on passenger trains as a child are what created his interest in trains. His interest in railroads is shared by many, those who heed the beckoning call of trains as tons of steel and iron have hurtled through the 19th and 20th centuries. But not many are as fortunate as Finley, who has reached out and taken a little bit of the romance and adventure of the rails to hold onto.

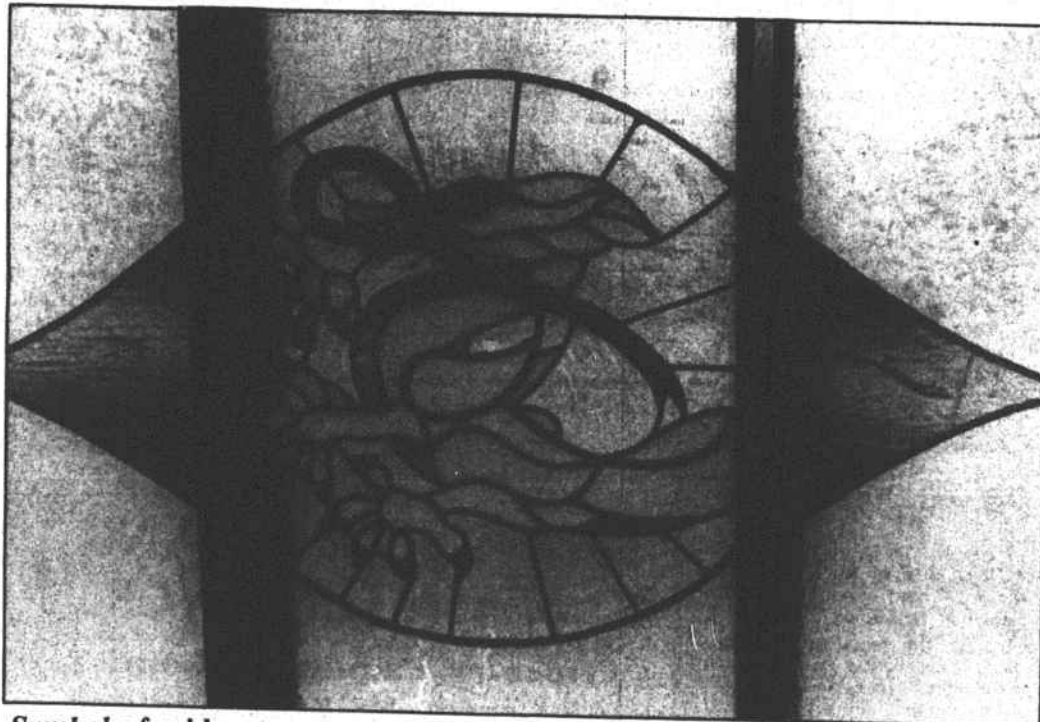


## Down the tracks

Finley had a view of rural Hoke County and the special spur installed by the Aberdeen and Rockfish Railroad to accommodate his remodeled car. Over

400 friends helped with the refurbishing of the circa 1940 car, which has now been moved to Alaska.

(Photos by Cary A. Wilson)



## Symbol of pride

This stained glass window, which is mounted in the master bedroom, was crafted by the wife of a fellow officer. The window depicts the dragon, which is the

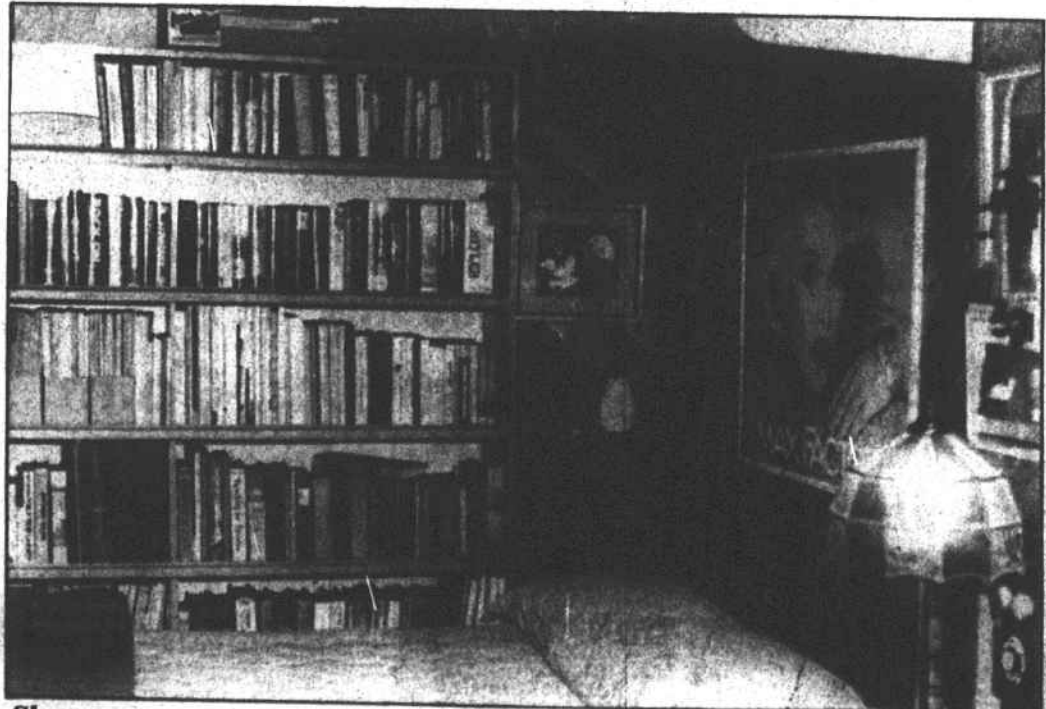
symbol of the Manchus unit Finley served with for two and a half years.



## Coach dogs

Finley's cocker spaniel companions, Misty and Missy, greet visitors who drop by the coach car. The

dogs pose for this photograph before departing with their master for Alaska.



## Sleeper car

Finley's master bedroom contains bookshelves and a walk-in closet.