



Crew and passengers stand by the original Aberdeen and Rockfish Jitney. This jitney served the area from the early 1920's until the mid-1940's when it was wrecked. A new front was put on the self-propelled train car and it was back in service until the late 1940's.

Depot remodeling brings back memories of jitneys

By Sonya Falls

Recent efforts to revitalize the old depot in downtown Raeford have stirred memories and questions about the railways which were served by the station. The Aberdeen and Rockfish and the Laurinburg and Southern Railroads both operated trains in Hoke County and were important to the area.

Possibly the most memorable aspect of the shortline railroad for Raeford residents was the Aberdeen and Rockfish "jitney" which began its daily run in Aberdeen and continued through Hoke County to Fayetteville.

Built in 1920 by J.B. Brill and Company of Philadelphia, for John Blue, owner of the A&R railroad, this short-line train began operation on December 23, 1923. From then until the early '50's, the jitney was an important and familiar means of transportation for citizens living in and around Raeford. Many people fondly recall the jitney and its function in their life.

An early version of the jitney operating in the 20's was nothing more than a "truck with wheels,"

according to Bob Veasey, president of the Aberdeen and Rockfish Railroad, and one-time conductor of the jitney.

Veasey recalls that the jitney was primarily established to carry mail between Aberdeen and Fayetteville. Passengers and freight (up to a certain amount) were also welcome on the train.

Leaving Aberdeen each morning about 9 o'clock, the jitney stopped to deliver and pick up mail at Ashley Heights, the Sanitorium at McCain, Timberland, Raeford and Rockfish. The jitney would also pick up passengers at Dundarrach, Arabia, Lakefield Hill and Fenix. Railway check-in points were at Raeford, Rockfish and Cliffdale.

Arrival in Fayetteville on Russell Street was at about 11:20 a.m. Passengers could disembark for a day of shopping, visiting or business in the downtown area and return home by the jitney late in the afternoon. Often, they caught a larger train for other cities.

Veasey, who started his career with A&R Railroad as a conductor on the jitney, described the coach as "comfortable; it was heated, but not air-conditioned. It probably reached a maximum speed of

40 miles per hour." Tickets could be purchased for a minimum of 25¢ or as much as \$1.14, depending on one's destination.

For many Raeford residents, the jitney offered an inexpensive connection with other towns and cities, and for at least one young school boy, it was an inviting source of freedom. Luke McNeill recalls one time, as a youth of 14 or 15, skipping school to ride the jitney.

"I never had ridden it so I decided to skip school. There were four of us. William Poole and I and two others. Nobody ever caught us," said McNeill.

McNeill and Poole met the jitney every day to collect *The Fayetteville Observer* for distribution to Raeford subscribers. The arrival of the jitney twice daily also signaled mail delivery for area citizens, according to Sam Morris.

Before the days of numerous automobiles and trucks, trains were very necessary for freight deliveries of all sorts.

Robert Gatlin, a well-known Hoke County history buff, remembers picking up laundry from the Raeford Hotel in his dry

wagon and sending it by the jitney, to Fayetteville, for cleaning. He also recalled that it was used frequently by "drummers" and businessmen who came from Fayetteville to Raeford. "They would arrive in Raeford, pick up orders from the local merchants and spend the night at the Hotel. Then they'd take the jitney back home the next day. In a few days, the merchants would receive the freight on the larger trains." It was Gatlin's job then to pick up freight and deliver it to the stores.

The jitney Gatlin remembers had a regular automobile hood with a longer body and wheel base. Baggage and mail were carried at the rear of the car. He describes it as gasoline powdered with a small cow-catcher on the front.

This early jitney was refurbished and streamlined after it was wrecked during the second World War. Apparently, this modern version was the talk of the town. "Everyone was saying, 'Have you seen the new jitney?'" recalls Gatlin.

Not everyone has loving memories of the jitney. Sonny Wood remembers that it ran over

one of his dogs when he was five or six years old. "I was very upset," he remembers. According to Wood, the dog, unaccustomed to this modern invention was simply crossing the tracks when he was struck.

Eva Miller, who lived along the Aberdeen highway remembered another animal who had no respect for the speed and purpose of the "iron horse."

"I can remember the jitney stopping at Timberland and the conductor got out and chased a cow off the track."

Although Miller remembers "sitting and waiting for the jitney to pass just to see it," she never rode the train.

Dan McInnis was a frequent passenger on the jitney as it made its way to Fayetteville. "I always said you could ride from here to Dundarrach on it and you'd know how to do all kinds of hulas because it would shake from side to side. People around here called it, 'The Yellowhammer,' after the bird."

McInnis remembered the jitney being pretty full on Fridays and Saturdays. "People would ride to

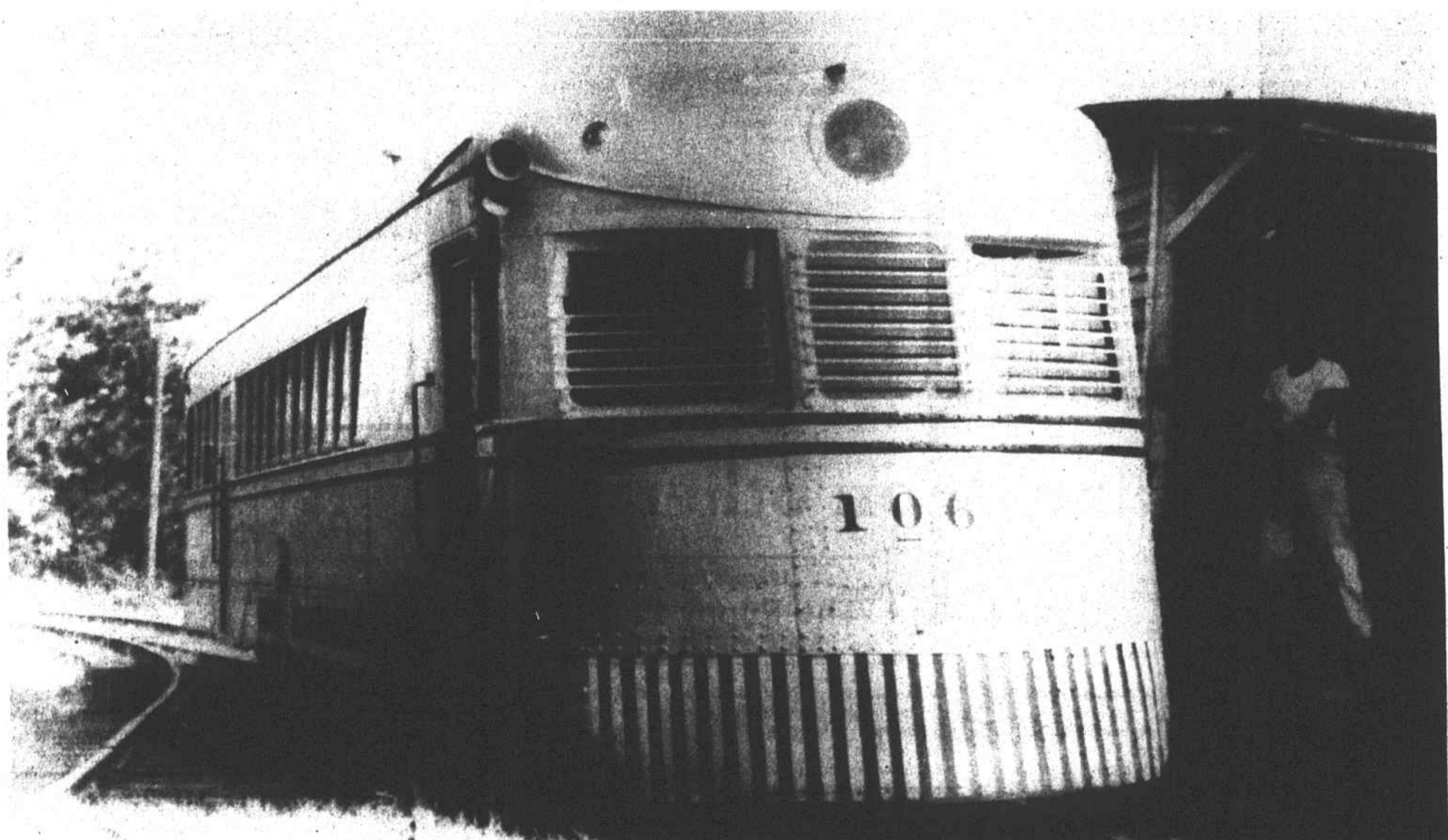
Fayetteville on those days. They called it 'going to town.'"

McInnis also contributed some information about the term "jitney." "In some cities, a nickel was called a 'jitney' and that's what it cost to ride the bus." The term then became synonymous with public transports.

After the second World War and the steady production of autos, the growing trucking industry and improved highways, railways began their steady decline.

Short-line railways and specialized railcars, like the jitney, were no longer needed as much. However, the Aberdeen and Rockfish jitney did find a home. It is pure irony that it is now being used in a familiar sounding place, so far from its original home: Fort Bragg, California.

Amidst the ringing of the repairmen's hammers and the hissing sounds of the chemical sprays, for those who can remember, work on the old depot must conjure up older sounds; the loud toot of a train's exhaust horn and the screeching wheels of the "Yellowhammer" bound for Fayetteville, Aberdeen and all points in between.



This jitney was used by Aberdeen and Rockfish to carry mail and passengers from Aberdeen to Fayetteville as late as 1949.