

A FACE-OF-AMERICA FEATURE

Time Almost Forgot Mountain Railroad

When you ride The Virginia Creeper across the towering summit of White Top Mountain, you can reach out from the tailgate and gather an armload of clouds. If it's spring or early summer, there is plenty of flaming azalea and mountain laurel passing by. And in the fall the ancient peaks blaze with the reds of maple and sweet gums and the sombre gold of hickory and poplars.

Whatever your special interests, it's worth the trip along the 55 mountainous miles of this time-forgotten railroad between Abingdon, Va., and West Jefferson, N. C.

How did the pictures and story on this page come about?

A few months ago some Firestone employees were overheard re-living the old days of coal-burning trains — wondering if there were any that had not made that final trip to the roundhouse.

"I know there are a few operated as tourist attractions only," one of them said, "but how about an honest - to - goodness choo-choo train?"

AT THAT, news editor Claude Callaway and plant photographer Charles Clark did some research. A few weeks later, on a morning this past summer they were in Abingdon, boarding the branch line of the Norfolk & Western.

Then came disappointment. The aging "M" engine, "Old Smoky", had been retired. Was the trip worth it, now that a gleaming diesel was pulling one of America's few surviving freight-passenger trains? They'd see.

The trip began at 7:30. If all went well, the train would arrive in West Jefferson at 11:15, and the return trip would start at 11:45, arriving back in Abingdon at 3:15 p.m. On this run, all was according to schedule, although there seemed to be no hurry.

The train (called The Virginia Creeper by rail fans and tourists; "The Peavine Special", by folks along the track) is officially the N & W's 201, and 202 (for the return trip). Whatever it lacks in space-age quality, the train makes up for it in other ways.

IT WINDS through some of the most picturesque countryside in Eastern America, much of it inaccessible by road. All but two of the 19 stations along the way are flag stops—halting only on signal to take on or let off a passenger.

In its 55-mile run, the line crosses 108 trestles, ranging from

small spans over the deep ravines to wooden structures more than 600 feet long. There are no tunnels.

Before the steam locomotive was retired a few months ago, the train's low tractive power (then 40,163 pounds) and the steep grade of three per cent at White Top, the maximum load it could pull up White Top was 325 tons. Today the diesel can snake 350 tons. But even now, a big run for the Creeper means an observation flatcar, three or four box-cars, a combination mail, express and baggage car, and a passenger coach on the rear.

Every day but Sunday the train runs, and twice a year it operates a "special" for railroad lovers.

ALTHOUGH the diesel somewhat updates the Creeper, there's much remaining to suggest a forgotten age of railroading lore. Officially, it stops at two stations and 17 flag stops, and there is a stop now and then with the unexpected appearance of a cow or maybe a stray deer.

Conductor J. C. Wohlford, in



Conductor J. C. Wohlford at his "desk" on the Creeper. Cigar box receives passengers' donations for candy the crew gives children along the line. Photographs are "souvenirs" of children who live near the tracks and sometimes ride the train. A



guest book records names and addresses of tourist passengers.

High school girls, riding to West Jefferson to see a Saturday movie, examine one of the six kerosene lamps in the time-mellowed coach.

his company's service 47 years wears "work clothes" instead of the conventional blue uniform. He tabulates waybills and does other paperwork on one of the green plush seats in the Victorian coach—cooled in summer from the window breezes and warmed in winter by two coal stoves. In winter, when darkness lingers after the train starts its run, six kerosene lamps glow beneath the hatracks.

Brakemen sit in the coach and chat with paying customers. And the train may stop briefly to allow a visit with villagers. On the day the Firestone riders were aboard, a farmer handed the conductor a sugar-cured ham at Green Cove; and further up the line there was a stop to let a man off for a day of trout fishing.

CREW MEMBERS and folks along the tracks are neighbors. At Christmas, trainmen pool money to buy food and clothing

for needy families. Every Saturday they toss candy suckers to every child they see along the way. Conductor Wohlford, keeping alive the friendly tradition begun by a predecessor, passes out more than 200 lollipops each week.

The year around, railroading enthusiasts from almost every state come for the ride. In the conductor's guest book, he counted some 300 tourists from 25 states in a two-month period this summer. Some take pictures, others make tape recordings—and all of them look, especially as the train toils up in view of Mt. Rogers, Virginia's highest peak.

Organized in the 1890s, the train became known as the Virginia-Carolina Railroad (hence the V-C, then Virginia Creeper), and extended its line until it stretched 76 miles, to Elkland, N. C. It came under N & W control in 1905. As the lumbering and mining industries grew, so

grew the Creeper. At one time there were as many as seven trains a day, two of them passenger runs.

In time, the timber was depleted and freight service diminished. The combination freight-passenger made its first run in the 1930s, and the Creeper has been "mixed" ever since.

For generations, the train was the only contact between a wilderness area and the outside world. Even today, it means just that to some who live along its line.

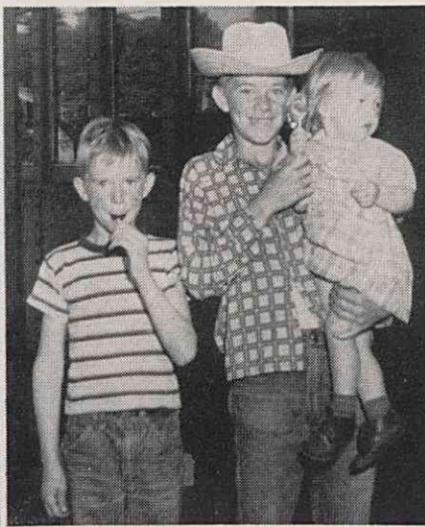
ON THE first 16 miles out of Abingdon, the Creeper clips along at almost 60 miles an hour. But its pace is labored as it begins its way up White Top, circling the mountain so often that it crosses and re-crosses White Top Creek 33 times in 13 miles.

At White Top station it reaches an elevation of 3,577 feet. It travels over ravines, nears cascading waterfalls, and at several

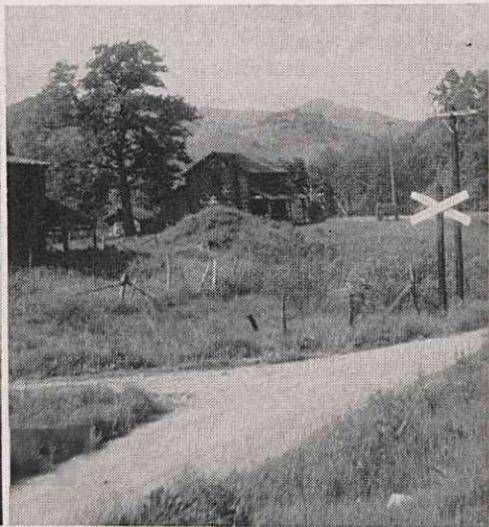
—Ends on page 7



At White Top station the train reaches an elevation of 3,577 feet—highest point attained by a "mixed" train east of the Rockies.



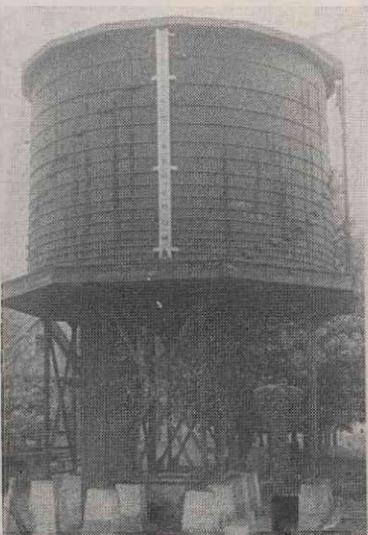
Children come out of the villages and coves to get their weekly treat of lollipops, tossed from the coach platform.



Weathered log houses near Creek Junction are evidence of surviving pioneer country along the way.



A youngster, on the way to visit his grandmother in Taylor's Valley, looks at one of the coal-burning stoves in the coach. On this particular summer run, the stove in the other end of the car was



heated to drive the chill from the mountain air. At West Jefferson, the last remaining water tank along the line is relic of a bygone era in railroading.



Life is unhurried along the Creeper line. Neighbors sit and visit on the station platform at Damascus. Back in Abingdon after the 110-mile run, the train takes the main line into



Bristol. A diesel replaced an aging coal-burner several months ago. The smoking "M" engine was retired to the roundhouse in Roanoke.