

Black Mountain RR Brings Prosperity

Pensacola: Boom Town In

BY FRANCES M. HAMRICK

[Note: Much of the information and pictures for this story were furnished by the late Wayne Ray. He was a lifelong resident of the Pensacola Community and always had a keen interest in the people and history of the section. Mrs. Ray, the former Willie Riddle, resides in Pensacola.)

The posters might have read--"Join the weekend excursion to Eskota, Blue Sea Falls, Low Gap, Dellinger, Windom, Micaville, Kona."

"See the elephant at the circus ground in Pensacola. All next week."

"Movies every Friday and Saturday night: Pensacola Theater."

"World Premier tonight of Motion Picture, filmed in Yancey County. Starring Alice Brady, and Jack Sherrill and Marie Wells."

All of the advertised events were only part of the fascinating development that occurred in the Pensacola section from the early 1900's to 1924.

PENSACOLA 1900-1924

Pensacola was already widely known. It was a section famous for timber, prosperous farming, apple growing, hunting and fishing.

Cattle raising, timber cutting, a small amount of mining, grist milling, blacksmithing and similar occupations were part of daily living.

In their spare time some of the land owners distilled "Birch Oil" for sale. Virginia (Mrs. Brooks) Boone says she has often heard that her

great-grandfather, "Big Tom" Wilson, often engaged in this when his more widely known pursuit of hunting and tracking slackened. It was this same "Big Tom" who found Dr. Elisha Mitchell's body in Mitchell Falls near Eskota.

"Drummers" came through selling wares of every description and several boarding houses flourished to take care of these regular callers.

The scene might have been called the "Big Valley". It spreads today as it has for generations through the beautiful land toward the source of Caney River. The valleys then merge into the Black Mountain Range, southern boundary of the county.

Some of the names carry out the suggestion of the sweep and grandeur of the section. Local tradition has it that Pensacola is an Indian name meaning "Forked Valley."

This is appropriate--to the right the land follows Caney River to the foot of Mt. Mitchell and adjoining peaks. To the left it follows Cattail Creek toward Winter Star and surrounding mountains.

The entire vast section toward Mount Mitchell was once called "Green Pond". Then part of the area was given the name Eskota, an Indian word meaning "Peaceful Valley."

Here, in the quiet of this rather isolated mountain land, a turn of events brought about a great change. It became a busy, bustling world of greatly increased activities.

BOOM TOWN BEGINS

It all happened 50 or more years ago. Then much of the rush and excitement subsided. Not all of the events of these years are recorded. This is a partial recounting of that time.

At the beginning of the century every neighborhood had its store, there were school houses at Pensacola and Eskota, and three churches. There were many homes, some gracious and comfortable, some modest, but all unfailingly hospitable.

Travel in any direction required ingenuity. The main road between Pensacola and Burnsville was over Low Gap and the river had to be crossed five times.

If a traveler wished to follow the original road bed along the river it was necessary to cross 14 times.

RR CHANGES LIVES

Then, in 1912 the Black Mountain Railroad, a subsidiary of the Carolina, Clinchfield -- Ohio-CC&D (now the Clinchfield) Railway was completed to Burnsville. This was 14 miles from the juncture of the company's line at Kona.

Under a contract with Carolina Spruce Company, an extension to Pensacola was completed in 1913. Still later, after Brown Brothers' Lumber Company had begun operations five miles away at Eskota, the line was extended to their mill.

The coming of the railroad and the expanding timber industry meant at acceleration in every aspect of life.

Pensacola then had telephone service. The Forked Valley and the Peaceful Valley changed tremendously.

Agricultural production was vastly increased. More food was needed for many newcomers, more horses were necessary for the lumber industry and travel.

The number of boarding houses was increased; the neighborhood stores were rushed with orders.

THE MAGIC WORD

The magic word was timber. Both the Carolina Spruce Company and the Brown Brothers' Lumber Company had begun operation in 1913 and 1914. Both expanded rapidly, making Pensacola the largest employment center in Yancey County.

To get the logs from the mountains, 15 miles of standard guage with standard flat car switch back rail lines were built up and through the mountains. It was literally a "switch back" operation as the trains went forward then backward to negotiate the heavy curves, and were never turned around on the steep grades.

The lines in the Cattail Creek section were built, owned and operated by Carolina Spruce with three log trains and three heavy, powerfully geared locomotives to pull them. These were Shay type locomotives using steam powered skidders to pull to logs in to the rail lines.

At Eskota, Brown Brothers Company had a similar operation with only one lot

1912

train and one engine.

Carolina Spruce built an eight foot band mill, a large commissary building, forty "company houses", shops, a railway station, locomotive and car repair shops, and other necessary buildings.

An 8 foot mill, a commissary and other essential structures were also built at Eskota. Carolina Spruce used two 5-ton Holt Catapillers to haul logs to rail lines. These were new in the logging industry.

As the operations grew, many small lumber camps were built alongside the switch-back lines.

Some of the dwellings in the camps were tents, some were crude shacks. Some of the men "batched", others brought their families and lived there, isolated but close to their work of logging rail lines, cutting timber and dragging it with horses to the lumber cars.

The demand for labor was acute and to meet the shortage many workers were brought in through employment offices in Philadelphia, Pa. One group included about 400 Italians and Austrians, most of them skilled wood cutters. Some brought their families.

THE BAKE OVEN

The Italian families lived in groups and had one thing in common. This was the "Bake Oven". Wayne Ray described the facility. It was a huge opening built into a natural rocky cave. Evidently some kind of closure was arranged and fire or hot bricks provided heat.

Once a week the oven was fired up and enough bread for many families was baked. Some of the loaves came out as "big as a calf", Mr. Ray recalled, "and the oven must still be there. It would take an earthquake to destroy it."

The Italians and Austrians worked until recalled by their governments. World War I had begun and men were needed.

All the great work of logging and hauling in the mountains was important but the hubs of activity were Pensacola and Eskota.

MORE PROSPERITY

The mill at Pensacola where the late G.B. Woody was Mill Foreman and Siler Oberlin was foreman of the lumber yard, and Piercy Bradley of Marion was the lumber ardder; and the mill at Eskota were running day and night. One product manufactured by Carolina Spruce was 30 ft. long clear Spruce

Continued Next Page

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lumber used in constructing airplanes during World War I.

The commissaries and grocery stores were equally busy. To provide supplies, especially for the workers in the lumber camps, it was necessary to fill orders for groceries and supplies at night and have them ready to go in the morning. There was no time during the day--too much local business.

Carolina Spruce Company produced its own electricity. It was also used by most homes and shops. The commissaries were almost self contained businesses. In the one at Pensacola were the main offices of Carolina Spruce, the post office, a full department store (with a ladies' wear section), a grocery store, hardware, seed and feed stores and a barber shop. A very popular department was the well equipped and up to date Drug Store with a modern soda fountain.

On the second floor of the building was the apartment of Dr. C.S. Aldrich, the company president and superintendent, and Mrs. Aldrich.

They, as well as the co-owners, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Oberlin, were from Ohio and Pennsylvania. The

Oberlins lived in the house adjoining the commissary.

EARLY DOCTORS

Several other officials of the Company came from the North, including the company doctor, Dr. A.B. Smith who also served as Postmaster. Sallie Ramsey was Assistant Postmaster. Dr. Smith used a small gasoline powered railway car to serve men employed in logging camps. (Later two doctors, Dr. Carson McCurry of this county and Dr. I.N. McLean of Buncombe County, served in their section and throughout the area.) Dr. Ray, a dentist from Marshall, maintained an office here.

Many visitors also came to visit in the homes of the company officials. Reportedly, one of these was John Bryan, a grandson of William Jennings Bryan. He was a college classmate of Dr. Aldrich's son who one time spent almost an entire summer with the Aldrich family.

Perhaps the luxurious (from local report) Aldrich apartment was quiet and serene. Not so the first floor; activities there required many employees.

H. Grady Bailey was a

young clerk in the commissary. (He left this employment to join the Navy during World War I, returned to Burnsville where he was employed by the Power and Light Company, was Veterans Service Officer and Red Cross Director. He still lives in Burnsville with his wife, the former Zula Ray.

Miss Sallie Parnell came from Selma, N.C. with her brother, the late W.I. Parnell and worked in the commissary, especially in the Ladies' Department.

Miss Sallie Ramsey who married the late Clyde Williams (for many years fireman on the Black Mountain Railroad), was postmistress.

Wilke Beeler was brakeman on the train. He now lives in Skyland.

In October 1913 Fred Proffitt was employed by Carolina Spruce as office manager. Later he was elected assistant secretary and treasurer.

One of the teachers at Pensacola was Miss Althea Hampton. She and Mr. Proffitt were married; they now live in Burnsville where Mr. Proffitt served for 28 years as clerk of court of Yancey County.

SPECIAL EXCURSION

The railroad brought its own activity and prosperity to the section, aside from the shipping industry. A freight train ran daily. In addition there was a daily passenger train with a baggage car and one or two passenger coaches. Special excursion trains were run on weekend and holidays.

Between Eskota and Kona there were five stops--Pensacola, Low Gap, Dellinger, Burnsville, Windom and Micalville. The post office at Low Gap was called Vixen and at Dellinger was called Antone.

At the end of the line, Kona was "big business". In addition to freight shipping and business travels, there was much coming and going socially.

Perhaps the excursion was the most popular recreational activity. Pack a lunch (or plan to visit relatives down the line), gather up family and friends and take advantage of the special runs. The train would stop at almost any point passengers wished to get off.

Bruce Anglin of Burnsville lived in Pensacola where his father, the late Tarp Anglin

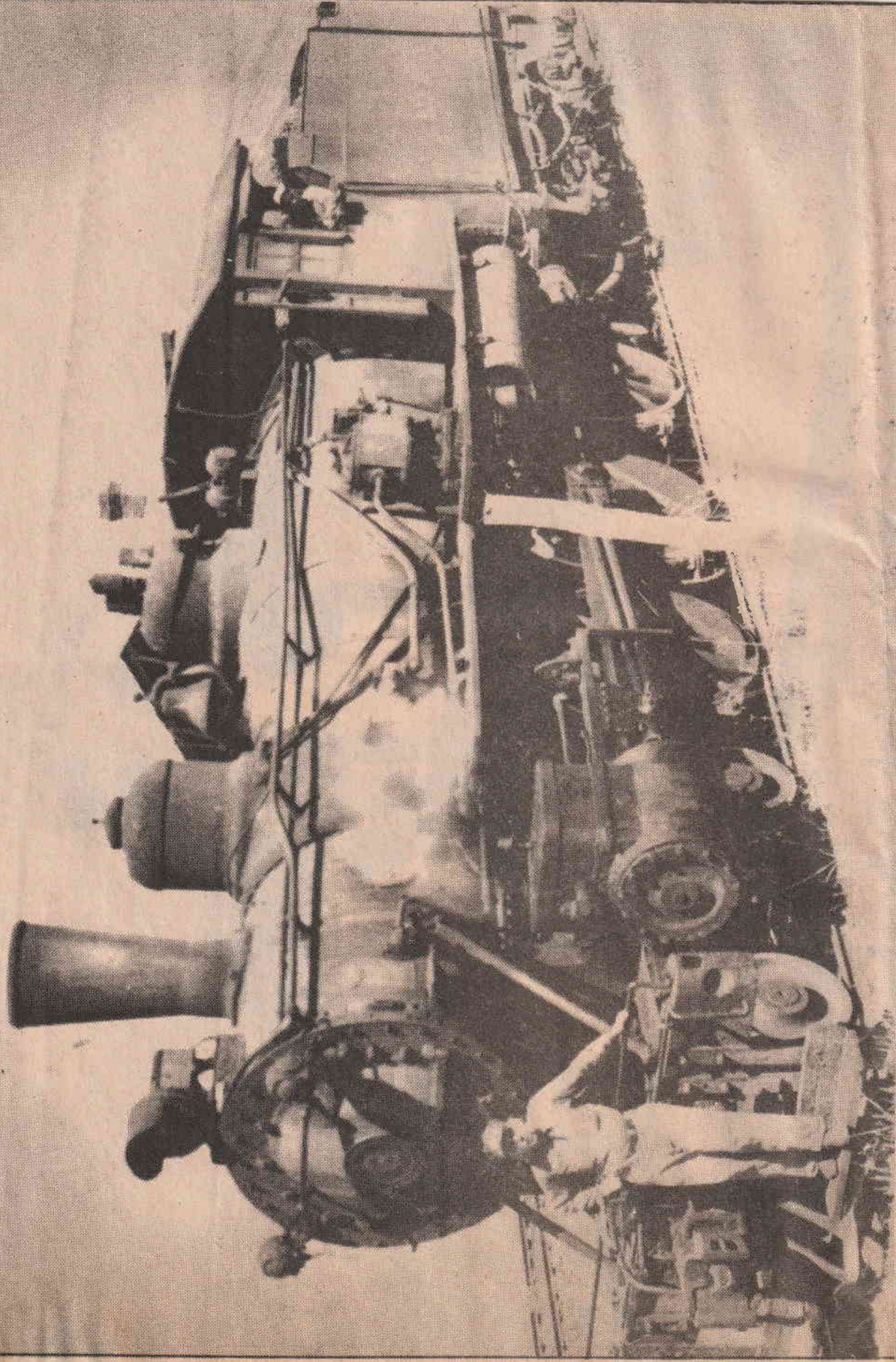
had a general store, and has many fond memories of these excursions. The one he remembers best were the ones to the annual Fair in Spruce Pine.

It was necessary to go to Kona on the Black Mountain, "catch" the CC& O on to Spruce Pine. One year Mr. Anglin remembers there were ten cars for the trip, all packed to capacity.

END OF AN ERA

This era in Yancey County is gone--the mills are gone. Both the one at Eskota and Pensacola were torn down and moved. Only large concrete foundations are left. The commissaries are gone. The one at Eskota burned many years ago and the one at Pensacola was torn down and only the large vault remains.

Many of the people are gone as are most of the physical features that stood as proof that Pensacola was part of the lumber "boom" in the early 1900's. The large vault in an open field, stands solitary and alone with its great iron door always open, rusting in the ruins of a half-century--a monument to the past.



Paul Young (above) worked for the railroad for many years. "I came here for a vacation," he said. "I'm still here!"

Black Mtn RR Brings Prosperity



Old Railroad Depot in Pensacola