

Move On To Bring Little Steam Engine Back Home To East Tennessee

BY BOB HURLEY

COLUMNIST

Some columns just fall together, almost overnight and without a single flaming hoop of fire for me to jump through.



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Others take a little longer, and they come with many flaming hoops.

This one, for example, has taken a mere 35 years to bring us where we are here today. Is it any wonder I'm worn out?

It is about a little steam engine from Erwin that could.

I'm not talking about the famous children's story about the little engine that could talk while straining to get up and over the mountain with the heavy train that the much larger engines refused to even try to pull.

I'm talking about a real-life little steam engine from the 1880s that goes by the name of "No. 1."

If No. 1 could talk, however, I know what it would be saying: "Please take me back home to Erwin in the mountains of good ole East Tennessee."

This story really did begin in 1976, when No. 1 pulled Marilda and me over to Spartanburg, S.C., on one of those passenger excursions that were so popular back in the 1970s.

I knew full well it was No. 1 at the head of the train because I had done my homework, and I knew it was one of the real old-timers still out there on the rails.

I wrote about how one expert said No. 1 was the oldest steam engine still in operation in the U.S.

We were surrounded by hundreds of happy folks who had joined us for the trip behind No. 1. They appeared thrilled to be returning to the days of steam power.

There were lots of opportunities for pictures, and I get to relive the trip every time I thumb through the old negatives.

I have never forgotten my ride behind the little engine known as No. 1.

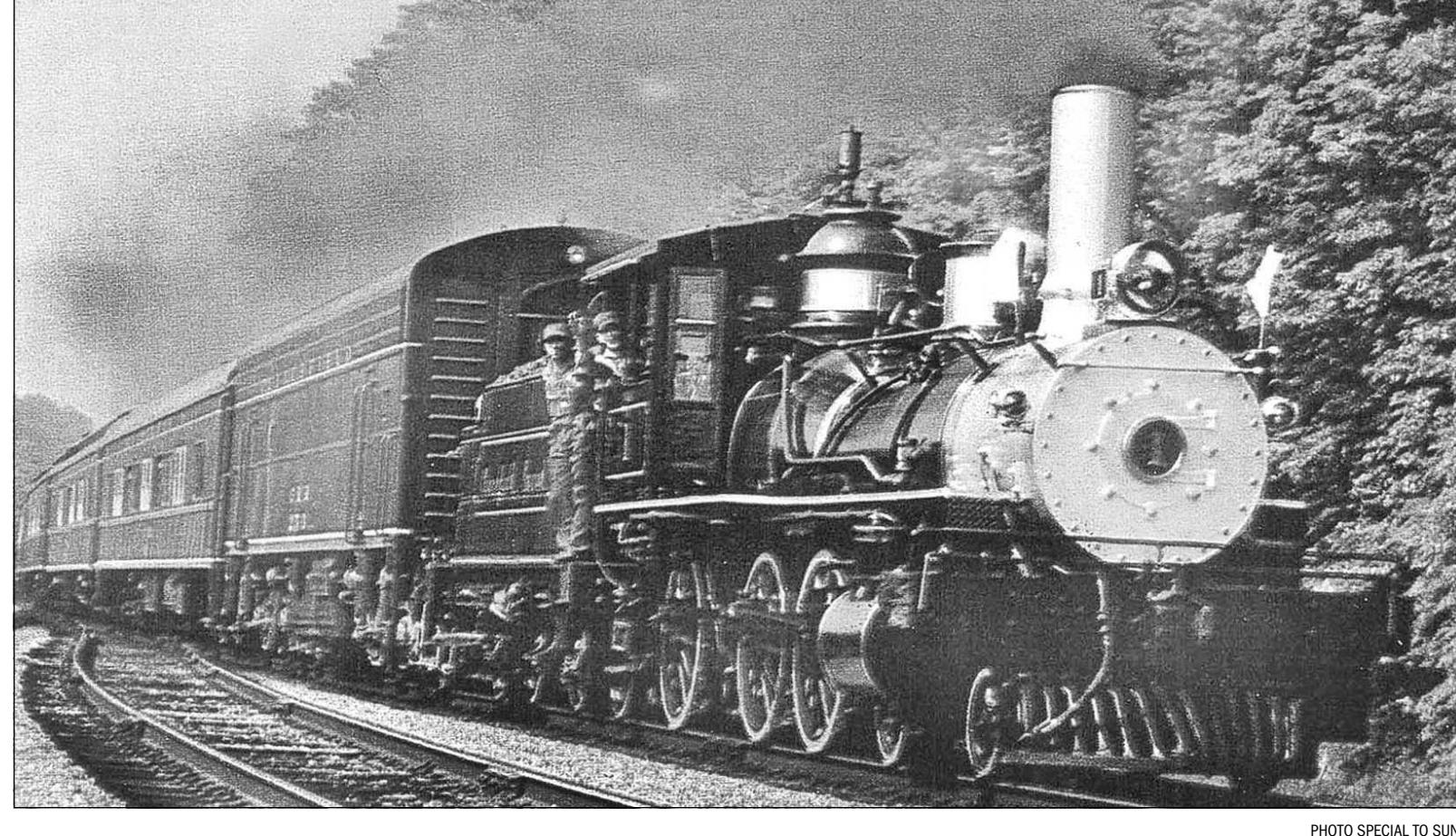
In the years that followed, I wondered about No. 1 every time I passed through Erwin.

I knew that the steam-powered excursions had faded away, but I never took the time to inquire as to whatever happened to No. 1 and all those wonderful old dining and passenger railcars from the 1940s and 1950s.

The fate of the wonderful old dining and passenger cars is another story for another day, but a few years ago, I actually took the time to ask someone about No. 1.

"It is in a museum in Baltimore," the nice woman said.

"Baltimore? Why Bal-



Ed Hatcher, waving from the cab of Old No. 1, and his brother, George, standing in front of the coal tender, bring the 1882 model steam engine around a bend near Erwin in this scene from the height of the passenger excursion runs in the 1970s. Ed Hatcher died in 1979. George, now 90 and still very active, is among the group working to bring No. 1 back to Erwin from the B&O Railroad Museum in Baltimore.

engine before his readers on a regular basis.

There is Mike Tilley, who still works for CSX, and who is the most passionate fan of old trains that I have ever encountered.

There is Alf Peoples, who still pilots the long freight trains of the CSX and who worked on the passenger excursions that No. 1 pulled back in the 1970s.

"It will not be easy to get the B&O Museum to release such an important piece of rail history," Stevens said, "but it is not an impossibility."

Erwin would need to have a museum-type building in place to house the engine, Stevens said, before the B&O people would even consider the town's request.

"But, at least, the B&O people now know we would love to have the No. 1 back in Erwin where it was stationed for so many years," Peoples said.

A Facebook "Cause" page created by Peoples has had almost 500 people join it in the past few months.

"No. 1 has more friends here in Erwin than it could possibly have anywhere else in the world," Peoples said. "The old engine is part of the Erwin family, and we need to bring her back home."

As George Hatcher put it, "We need to bring No. 1 back to where it helped those of us in Erwin and East Tennessee make all those memories."

"Its history of service and its story of optimism belong here where it served so long and helped create a legacy for several generations of railroad-loving people here in the mountains."



A passenger railcar from the 1950s and the Clinchfield Railroad's historic No. 1 steam engine provide the background for this group of Greene County women who took a spin down Memory Lane via a round-trip run to Spartanburg, S.C., in this scene from the spring of 1976. Pictured from left are Rowena Bernard, Rosena Morelock, Edith Mitchell and Audrey Neas.

timore?" I asked.

"Because the Baltimore and Ohio Museum bought it from the Town of Erwin."

"How much did the B&O Museum pay?" I just had to ask.

"One dollar," the nice woman said.

From that day to now, there has been a postcard on my desk that pictures the beautiful old No. 1 in the museum in Baltimore.

Before I tell you about the marvelous move now under way to bring the No. 1 back home to Erwin, I need to tell you more about why the steam trip to Spartanburg was such a big deal for me 35 years ago.

If you're thinking it had something to do with all those bells and whistles from the years I spent waving at the steam



PHOTO SPECIAL TO SUN

George Hatcher, of Erwin, is still a little famous up and down the Clinchfield (now CSX) Railroad for the "music" he created with the steam whistle of Old No. 1.

engines as they passed through Mohawk, you are only partly right.

If you're thinking it had something to do with my keeping a promise to Marilda to take at least one trip on a steam-powered train, you'd be getting close.

But the single most important reason that the trip still looms so large in my memory is because the Hatcher brothers, George and Ed, were up in the cab, hauling hundreds of folks not just to Spartanburg but on down Memory Lane as well.

You probably don't know Ed Hatcher. He's been gone for well over 30 years now.

But his younger brother, George, is not only the most remarkably active 90-year-old former prisoner of war I've ever met, but is also one of those rare people that inspire and even entertain me every time we visit or even talk on the phone.

I didn't know George during that ride behind No. 1 in 1976, but I have since gotten to know his amazing story of survival in a German prisoner-of-war camp during World War II, and how he came

back home to Erwin to live out his dream of being an engineer on the old Clinchfield, now CSX, Railroad.

I told you all that about George to tell you this: he says it would be one of the real thrills, one of the real highlights, of his life to see the old No. 1 come back home to Erwin.

"Old No. 1 was such a special little engine," George said. "It was an unbelievable honor for Ed and me to get to be in the cab."

Some very bright and very capable people are leading the way to get the No. 1 back home to Erwin.

There is Mark Stevens, publisher of the *Erwin Record*, who strives to keep the story and the colorful legacy of the old

"We need to do all that we can to get her back home to Erwin so we can show her to our children and grandchildren and tell them about the little engine that thrilled so many of us."

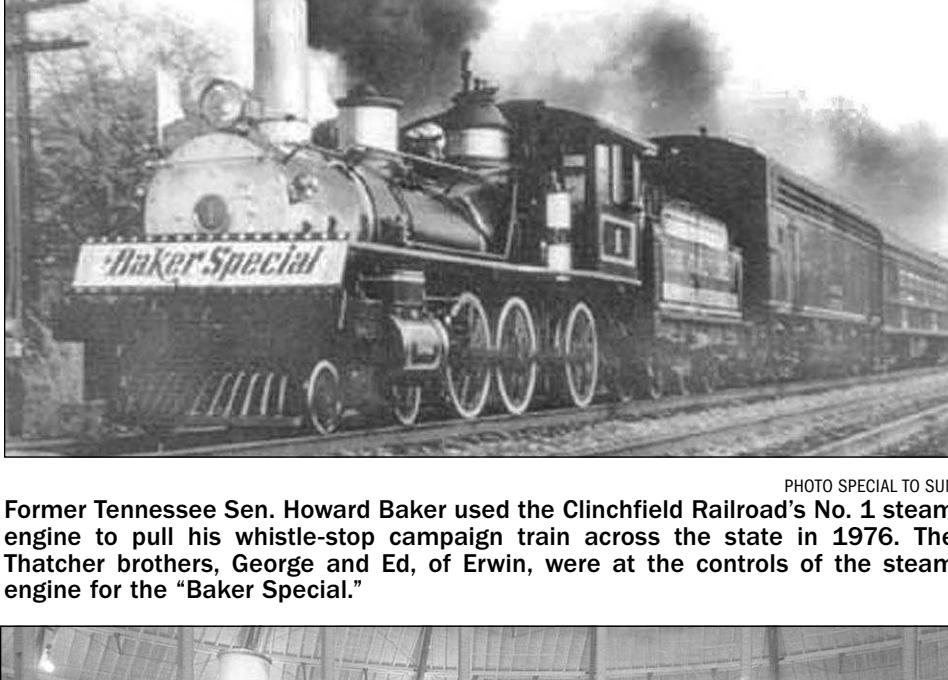
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George Hatcher, right, and his brother, Ed Hatcher, left, are joined by Percy Likens, a superintendent with the old Clinchfield (now CSX) Railroad, in this promotional photo for the passenger excursion runs of the 1970s. They are pictured with the railroad's historic steam engine, No. 1, which pulled the excursion runs, most of which were to Spartanburg, S.C.



Former Tennessee Sen. Howard Baker used the Clinchfield Railroad's No. 1 steam engine to pull his whistle-stop campaign train across the state in 1976. The Hatcher brothers, George and Ed, of Erwin, were at the controls of the steam engine for the "Baker Special."



Since the summer of 1979, the No. 1 steam engine that spent many decades in East Tennessee has been housed here in the B&O Railroad Museum in Baltimore.