

Old Clinchfield Railroad Built by Wild Death-Dealing Crews

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A steadily mounting number of hastily dug graves along the right-of-way, few of which are now identifiable, marked the progress for the roadbed for the Clinchfield Railroad after the work of extending it over and through the steep, confused mountain ranges south of Spruce Pine, was begun in the spring of 1905.

Reid Queen, Sr., now 72, who a few years later was to become Little Switzerland's first postmaster, worked as a pipe fitter on the miles of steam lines supplying the power to drill the holes for the tons of dynamite which were required to blast mile after mile of solid rock.

He vividly recalls some of the violent deaths that befell unfortunate laborers through explosions, cave-ins, and other accidents or by pistols and knives wielded by their fellow workers. No record is now available, if one was ever kept, of the total number of lives lost in various disasters and through exposure, the ravages of disease and other causes; but the 20 miles of railroad between Spruce Pine and Marion, NC was probably the most costly – both in lives and in money – ever completed in the south.

17 Tunnels Blasted. In these 20 miles the roadbed descends more than 1,000 feet. To achieve a reasonable grade it was necessary to blast some 17 tunnels, ranging from a few hundred feet to nearly a quarter of a mile in length. Even with the cheap labor then available one stretch of the road is said to have cost as much as \$1,000,000 a mile.

Self-propelled earth and rock moving machinery had not then come into use. Except for blasting, and mule-drawn carts and drag-pans, the Herculean task was accomplished with manual labor. More than 3,000 laborers and 200 mules were in use at one time. Italians, Germans, and Russians were recruited in northern cities, many just off the boat in New York. Few had little, if any, knowledge of English. The construction company had to employ an interpreter, who was kept busy going up and down the line from one to another of the seven labor camps to help settle disputes and explain various matters to the immigrants. Some native labor was also employed and a large number of Negroes were also brought in.

These construction years were the most turbulent this area has ever known. With such a mixture of racial backgrounds and temperaments, with the laborers crowded into tiny tar-paper shacks lining the muddy, rocky camp

“streets,” anything could happen – and often did. Innumerable fights and often murders were natural results.

Reid Queen says the laborers had to prepare their own food, purchased from the camp commissaries. He recalls that at one camp some 15 Italians employed one countryman as a cook. One evening when they returned from work to find their cook drunk and no signs of supper being prepared, there was an explosion of Italian temperament, for this evidently was the climax of a long series of such derelictions on the part of the cook.

Trial Held. “They sobered the fellow up and held a trial according to their own law,” says Queen, and the poor man was sentenced to be tied to a tree and shot. The sentence was promptly executed.” Later, says Queen, this group of Italians stood trial for murder in Raleigh for murder. Four or five of them were sentenced to terms ranging from 5 to 10 years.

Queen also recalls when a camp superintendent named Kidd from Kentucky was shot in the back by the brother of a workman he was mistreating, and the brother in turn was shot by a friend of Kidd’s. Both bodies fell into the doorway of a shanty before which they had been standing. Kidd’s friend fled the scene but was later caught in Marion, tried for murder and sentenced to seven years in prison.

Queen says one day he was eyewitness to the murder of a Negro laborer by another member of his race. This happened near Snipes Tunnel and Camp No. 4 where the Mount Mitchell station was established. The name of the station was subsequently changed to Little Switzerland, and several years ago was abandoned except for a flag stop.

Queen and one of his helpers were at a spring adjusting the flow of water for the coal-fired boilers down at the camp when they heard a noise and looked up to see a Negro running at break-neck speed. A few minutes later another man came plunging down the mountainside after him with a pistol in his hand. The pursuer fired one shot and his victim fell dead. The murderer kept running, and as far as Queen could learn, was never apprehended.

Razor Battle. Queen also recalls that at one of the camps a fight between two Negro women resulted in one of them being so badly slashed with a razor that she quickly bled to death. Queen said the murderess was sentenced to serve 20 years, which later was commuted to 10.

Queen also remembers the day a gang was working at the base of a 30-foot cut when the upper part of the bank suddenly caved in, burying alive seven

men beneath tons of loose dirt and rock. All were from the Bear Creek section of Mitchell County.

On that same day, Queen says, nine more workers were killed in Upper Bridle Path Tunnel by an explosion resulting from casual handling of dynamite. Some 15 cases containing 100 pounds of dynamite each, had been carted several hundred feet into the tunnel, where drilling for a fresh blast had just been completed. It was later reported that a worker had been using a long sharp rock “about the size of a man’s shoe” to knock the tops off the heavy wooden cases.

Suddenly the mountain was shaken by a terrific detonation. When the tunnel could be entered after the dust and fumes of the explosion had been cleared away the bodies of only three of the nine laborers – a Russian and two Negroes – could be found. Remains of the other six workers were splattered all over the rocky walls of the tunnel.

Riot Occurs. There was also a riot at Camp No. 6, led by an Italian named Jimmy Mazone. Five “Tallies” as the native workers called them, were killed and buried under the chestnut tree by the Honeycutt Tunnel all lying in a row. But there were others just how many were not reported at the time is not known. There were bodies found in a gully all torn and mixed up and not discovered until buzzards were observed wheeling above the spot, according to Queen.

The death toll continued to mount until the way through the Blue Ridge was cleared and the first trains ran to Marion in 1908. The late James A. Mayberry of Spruce Pine often told of riding in 1910 in the first passenger train to enter Spartanburg, S.C., southern terminus of the Clinchfield. At that time many of the graves along the right-of-way between Spruce Pine and Marion were still in evidence.