

CY CRUMLEY – A RAILROADING MAN

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C.G. (Cy) Crumley grew up the southern way.... To be good and to work hard. His friendly manner in 54 years of railroading on the famous Tweetsie, has left him a wealth of reminiscences and a multitude of friends.

Tweetsie was the saucy but folksy little railroad engine which for years rambled through the mountains from Johnson City to Cranberry, N.C. Cy served as conductor on the first train into Boone, N C. in 1919 as well as the last in 1940. He retired from railroading October 1, 1960.

In his young days he went to work at a lumber yard carrying water to the men and earned 50 cents a day. But always, he had his mind on railroading, and commenced to hoboing on the narrow gauge.

He had married Edith Tilson, not even 16 on March 15, 1906. The license cost \$2, "and I had a quarter left to start housekeeping on." But exactly five months later, the day of August 15, Cy was going to be what he had told his bride he would be – **a railroading man.**

He was hired as head brakeman for the ET&WNC on local freight No. 4 which ran 34 miles from Johnson City to Cranberry. Cy knew much about the job because while hoboing, the conductor let him ride down the line and back.

So that's how the teenage lad got to know about railroading and what brakemen had to do. He loved the railroad. He liked to look out the caboose window and see the rhododendrons, a robin or a rabbit. The air was clean and he was happy he had been born in Tennessee.

Cy was a brakeman for three years, then was promoted to conductor. In 1909, he went on freight service and in 1913 passenger service until 1940 when the road was washed out from Cranberry to Boone. Next he had a passenger train carrying workers from Elk Park, N.C. and Cranberry to the Elizabethton rayon plants. Afterwards he went into yard service with a run between Elizabethton and Johnson City until his retirement in 1960.

Cy can relate numerous stories.... Everything from the time Freight Engine No. 4 hit a heifer, to the old couple on their first ride, to waiting for the doctors to make their rounds, and to the filming of *Tweetsie*, which was interrupted by the mountain woman who asked Cy to "fetch me a spool of white thread."

But *Tweetsie* was known for its friendliness, and it was not uncommon to stop and pick up groceries, deliver packages, or any errand that was necessary. **"Some days the errands outdid the regular business," insisted Cy.**

Take my young'uns over to Jane's house," a mother would say and Cy would know where Jane lived. He'd stop the train and walk the children through a pine thicket to the house on the second hill over.

The retired conductor recalls the young man who came up to him one day and said, "I'd appreciate you taking my grandmaw and grandpaw over to Hodge Gap." They had never ridden a train before. "I'll drive my buggy out there so's I can fetch them back here," he said.

Cy agreed and the old couple climbed aboard No. 6, excited over their first trip on a vehicle pulled other than by a horse. The engineer gave them a good show, tugging hard on the whistle cord for a shrill twee-ee-t.

Cy checked on Grandmaw and Grandpaw to make sure they weren't too frightened traveling along at 10 miles per hour. "We must be flying," Granny said.

After a time Cy said, "We're at Hodges Gap. I'll stop and let you off so your grandson can take you back to Boone." Granny stuck her nose in the air and declared, "We don't want to get off."

Grandpaw asked, "Why, we aim to ride on home with you. Ain't that right, maw" We fancy this here train." "But your boy is out there waiting in the buggy," Cy said. The conductor explained how the train travels the route daily.

Grandmaw turned to her husband and asked, "Well, what do you think, Paw?" "Well, reckon we can wait until tomorrow," he replied.

Cy also recalls the **flu epidemic in 1918** when the doctors rode horseback in the mountain country. He would pick them up in Newland, N.C. and take them to Linville Gap, where they'd walk into the mountains to see their patients. When they finished their rounds, he'd pick them up; but sometimes he'd just have to stop and wait for them.

One hot, dry July day when the woodlands out of Newland were kindling-dry, Cy squinted when he saw smoke thicker than the engine was laying out. Forest fire! Engine No. 4 throbbed to stay out of reach of the running flames.

All at once, Cy thought of the Ledford children, whose house was in the way of the fire. He told the passengers "Keep your seats. We have to make a quick stop...." "Stop?" shouted a well-dressed man who got up. "You must get me out of here. I don't want to die. I'll give you anything."

The conductor shook loose and told Charlie Miller on the side of the engine to "Stay right where you are. I'll let you know when to start up again."

Cy ran down the path to the Ledfords' house and by now the smoke was heavy. He found Mrs. Ledford and her five children barefooted and bewildered.

"Hurry, I've got the train waiting," he said. Cy knew seconds were as big as minutes. "Go on down to the train and get on. I'll have the boys load your things."

The well-dressed gentleman on the train watched as Mrs. Ledford helped her children into the seat beside him. **By this time the fire had worked around both sides of the rain all the way up to the engine cab.** The flames burned through the forest, the Ledfords' house and the lumber yard where Cy had worked as a boy.... All the way to Montezuma.

Cy found a couple at Montezuma "to put the family up for a spell." As the Ledfords made their exit, the well-dressed man turned his head away. Then he arose took Cy's arm and whispered, **"Conductor, you were right in stopping."**

Another story Cy recalls was in 1938 when Tweetsie was being filmed for a movie. Everything ran smoothly, he said, until one of the women along the way needed Cy for an errand.

She yelled, "Mr. Conductor, do me a chore, would you?" Cy said she walked in front of the camera and said, "Fetch me a spool of No. 50 white thread. I got some shirtwaists that need mending."

Amiable Cy was always running errands. A woman at Foscoe wanted him to buy her a corset in Johnson City. He agreed. He walked into the dry goods store and told the clerk. She asked him what size. He stretched his arms and said, "About this wide."

"Sounds like a size 18," the clerk said. She wrapped it as Cy noticed all the hooks and eyes and strings which fastened the garment. A few days later, the woman rode Cy's train to a wedding. "She looked nearly as well-turned as the bride," he thought.

With a storehouse of memories, Cy was invited to New York in 1939 to relate his experiences on the radio program, "***We the People.***" There he was introduced by Gabriel Heatter.

There are many stories about Tweetsie as she puffed on her narrow gauge tracks over mountains and through tunnels, pulling cars of ore, lumber and people through the otherwise inaccessible region.

After several changes of ownership, she was purchased by Gene Autry for movies, but after much consideration, was resold to be restored to operation. **Tweetsie was brought back to North Carolina by lumberman Grover Robbins, Jr., and now puffs again, a relic of a day long gone.**

And after more than a half-century, Cy felt he had outlived the narrow gauge. He had had a good life, married a fine woman and raised a family of two daughters and a son.

All are gone now except Cy and his daughter, Mrs. Ruth Tupper, who live at 1903 Buffalo Street in Johnson City. He still loves to talk about his railroad days and has scrapbooks, pictures and keepsakes to show.

Cy will celebrate his 90th birthday Thursday. His sunny smile and disposition remain the same as in years gone by.

Happy Birthday America. And Happy Birthday Cy!