

OPINION

Clyde Simerly... a "page" of local history

There was no doubt about it, Clyde Simerly's first love was trains, and more especially Tweetsie.

Simerly, who died Tuesday, was first a fireman and then an engineer on the famed Tweetsie. Born on a farm in Shell Creek 95 years ago, Simerly began working for the East Tennessee and Western North Carolina Railroad in 1916. He was promoted to engineer in 1920 and ran Tweetsie from Johnson City to Cranberry, N.C.

At the time of his death, he was the oldest living engineer of Tweetsie Railroad.

If you visited Simerly at Ivy Hall Nursing Home, where he and his wife, Etta, have lived for the past three years, the only thing he ever wanted to talk about was the railroad, and his romance with Tweetsie. His career with the railroad — Tweetsie and Southern Railway — totaled almost 50 years. His love for railroading combined with his experiences on Tweetsie made for a rich and rewarding life. Simerly loved to talk about them, and he was never without an obliging audience.

He worked the first train that brought the first load of material to build Bemberg and he was on the first train to reach Boone, N.C., after the rail line was completed between Cranberry and Boone.

Simerly's next love was his wife, Etta, and before her, Ibbie, who died in 1980. These last few years Clyde and Etta had spent in blissful romance. In the early days of their marriage, they could be seen sitting on the porch of her Valley Forge home, holding hands. At the nursing home, they shared a room together, and when Etta would have to be hospitalized, Clyde was there too, sitting by her bed, from morning to evening.

He was a handsome man, even in old age. His white hair laid in waves, and there was always a twinkle in his eyes, and most of the time a smile on his face. He was a gentleman, always kind and courteous.

Clyde Simerly's life was like a storybook. He was always in love — first with the railroad and then with the two beautiful women of his life, Ibbie and Etta.

Clyde Simerly was a "page" from local history. With his death, we have lost that bit of living history. And Etta, his beloved wife, has lost the sweetheart of her golden years — the man, who more than 60 years ago, rode the rails by her childhood home in Roan Mountain, and who, for the past ten years, has been her husband and constantly at her side.