

Cy Crumley speaks to the nation on We the People

By Mike Hardin

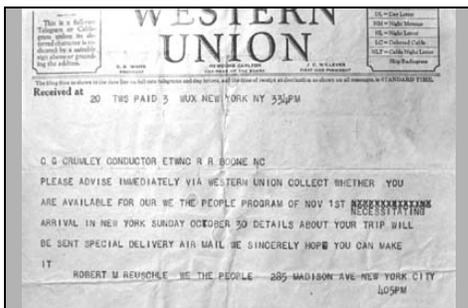
Cy wondered what could be in the yellow envelope he had just received. He read the wire to Edith and Bonnie Ruth in late summer of 1938.

C.G. Crumley, conductor, ET&WNC RR, Boone, NC. Please advise immediately via Western Union collect whether you are available for our We the People program. Details about your trip will be sent special delivery Air Mail. We sincerely hope you can make it.

Robert M. Reuschle

We the People

285 Madison Ave, NYC



This is the Western Union telegraph Cy received from the We the People producer. From the Ken Riddle collection

Cy told Edith “You’d better press my gray suit and Bonnie Ruth, get out that blue suit of yours, we’re fixing to go to New York.”

They left Johnson City on Southern No. 42. The We the People radio announcer would soon say this was the first time Cy had been on a big train since he was a narrow gauge conductor. Cy didn’t want to ruin the story so he kept quiet even though he had worked on the ET&WNC standard gauge many times.

Cy couldn’t believe the traffic in Times Square. He thought there must be as many people here as were in Boone when Tweetsie made her first visit to the college town. When Cy’s taxi got to The Commodore Hotel he examined the hotel doorman who was stiff and at starch

attention. “Do you think he is breathing or not?” Cy asked his daughter. With one sweeping motion the hotel doorman opened the cab door and helped out Bonnie Ruth and collected their luggage all without so much as a snort.



Hotel Commodore in New York City where Cy, Edith, and Bonnie Ruth Crumley stayed while recording “We the People”. From the Mike Hardin collection

It didn’t bother Cy being in front of five hundred people in the Fifth Avenue studio audience or knowing that

much of the world would be listening on the radio.

Soon Harry von Zell’s lecture on the benefits of drinking Sanka coffee was over and the announcer Gabriel Heatter exclaimed “The Twentieth Century, The Zephyr, The Golden Arrow, The Super Chief, stream lined trains flashing across land, racing against time, modern giants of the rails. We have with us tonight a railroad man and he’s here to tell you a railroading story such as you’ve never heard before. The story of the only railroad of its kind in America, he’s Mr. C.G. Crumley of Boone, North Carolina; go ahead sir.

Well, I reckon you folks never heard of my railroad. For thirty two years I have been the conductor of the best train on our line, in fact, it’s the only train. The folks down in the Carolina hills call her Tweetsie.



1935 NBC studio photo of Gabriel Heatter the announcer of “We the People” *From the Mike Hardin collection*

Tweetsie’s track is only three feet wide and she only goes sixty six miles from Boone, North Carolina to Johnson City, Tennessee, but always takes us more than four hours to make the trip. That’s because every day, as we go along, folks run down to the track and ask us to run errands for them in town. Like getting Mistress Thomas some lamp oil or old granny Lane wants some pipe tobaccy, or tell Tom Barton that his mother is better, or stop at the

post office and see if there is any mail for Mrs. Kelly. You see the roads is mighty poor in the mountains and the folks kind of depend on Tweetsie. Then when we come back, me and Sherman Pippin the engineer stop as close to the cabins as we can and tote down groceries, plow points, and in fact most anything they want.

Some years when money is real scarce, we ride passengers for whatever they can pay. Maybe it’s eggs, or pies, or maybe jars of pickles. Children, we just pick up and drop off where there mammas tells us to.



Cy Crumley takes young ‘uns to their house near Blevins. This was a staged photo for the movie “Tennessee Tweetsie” also produced in 1938. *United Press International (Acme Pictures)*

Being conductor, I have to be a doctor some times too. One night a man cut off his leg up in the hills chopping wood. I tied a string real tight around his leg to stop the blood. Then me and Sherman Pippin the engineer toted the man down to Tweetsie. Sherman pulled down the throttle hard and we both yelled, come on Tweetsie. We nearly left the track on every curve. But Tweetsie got that man to the hospital at Banner Elk in time to save his life.

Then one day we run smack into a forest fire. Through a hole in the smoke I saw a woman running across a little clearing with a bucket. I knew who she was and knew that her and five little children lived up there in a little wooden cabin. Sherman and me hopped off and run up to the cabin and got her and the children and fought our way back through the fire to Tweetsie. We all looked like tar babies. But nobody was hurt. Tweetsie got the worst of it. Her paint was blistered bad.

I reckon you all know now why folks down in the

mountains love Tweetsie. Why they watch for her every day. Stream lined trains get you where you want to go in a hurry and they sure are pretty to look at. But as for me, I'm gonna to stick with Tweetsie till the day I die.

(Applause)

(Music)

Cy loved the applause and concluded that New Yorkers weren't much different from people from Johnson City or Cranberry because they loved Tweetsie too.

Everything had gone great in the Big City until Cy got back to the hotel and looked out the open hotel window to the street way below. The cars were no bigger than Doe River chiggers. "I can't understand why there are no screens in the windows," Cy told Bonnie Ruth as the maid came in their room. "Miss," Cy asked, "why doesn't the law make the hotel put in screens to keep you from tumbling out the window?"

“I’ve been here fifteen years and I never heard of any need for a law like that,” said the maid casually. “Besides, only three have fallen out of this room, anyway.”

Many years later Cy told his friend Ken Riddle the thing he enjoyed most about his trip to New York City was standing outside his hotel and watching the people. But then he told him “If I lived there, I’d move.”