

SOUTHERN DEPOT JOINS CITY'S PASSING SCENE

Johnson City Press-Chronicle
Published 07/18/1973
By DOROTHY HAMILL

JOHNSON CITY – “The atmosphere was never dull.” So said **Mrs. Lloyd Jones**, 212 North Boone Street, in recalling her 30 years as ticket agent at Johnson City’s Southern Railway Station.

That station, once one of the gathering places of the city, will soon be torn down - another landmark yielding to the onward sweep of progress. In March, 1972, the Johnson City Housing Authority purchased the building from the Southern Railway Company. In time, the local Southern office will be moved to a new building on Elm Street, which will also serve as depot.

At present, said **Robert Sliger**, Director of the Housing Authority, Brush Creek is being relocated and covered, and eventually there will be a four-lane street from Elm to Fountain Square, to Buffalo and Jobe, paralleling the E.T.&W.N.C. tracks to Division, so that the new road will circle the downtown area and create a better traffic pattern. Work on demolishing the old station will begin around August 1.

“They may do away with the station, but that doesn’t dissipate memories,” Mrs. Jones said. And those memories are embraced by hundreds of the local population. “Many people have fond memories of the station and going places,” Mrs. Jones reminisced. “It was a gathering place for the town, and also for people in the mountains, for the railway served a number of North Carolina points. It was not unusual for business people to bring their lunches and eat in the waiting room. They would ask when a train might be coming through, and often remarked that the sound of a train was music.

Mrs. Jones, aided by her husband, related some of the incidents that occurred during her tenure. Mr. Jones, who was clerk for the Clinchfield Railway office here and later rate clerk in Erwin, remembered he met his wife at the Southern station and when they were married, friends called it the merger of the Southern and the Clinchfield.

When Jones came to Johnson City in 1911, he said the station was located at the present Free Service Tire Co. The new station had already been built when Mrs. Jones moved to Johnson City in 1913 and she remembered people said it had been there for about a year.

“It’s impossible to estimate the number of people who enjoyed stopping and resting from a trip, or just coming in to watch the trains,” she said. “Some would spend hours just watching and people going from one side of town to another would walk through.”

Emphasizing the different kinds of people who passed through, Mrs. Jones told of a soldier from North Carolina who had been in Mexico and was so glad to be home that he remarked, “I wouldn’t take a thousand dollars for the trip nor one cent for another!”

Once, when she was selling a ticket to a man from the Veterans Administration Facility, with the waiting room full, he dropped dead at the counter. Always ready in an emergency, Mrs. Jones called the V.A.

Some trips presented real difficulties, which were surmounted. During World War II, a Japanese girl, a student at Lees-McRae College, in Banner Elk, N.C., made application to spend the Christmas holidays with her parents in Cairo, Illinois. Then for a Japanese person to travel special permission had to be gained from a government agency. **Hale Williams**, special agent, secured the special permission for the girl, **Charlotte Kubota**, which took about a week. Mrs. Jones had to take care of the girl here, taking her to the hotel, and Williams went on the train with her to Memphis, where he turned her over to people of the Illinois Central Railroad. Because of the embargo on Japanese travel, she always had to be under guard.

Another war trip that was difficult to handle concerned a young, very slight little woman who came from North Carolina and was going to Seattle, Washington to join her husband in service. She had six children under five years of age, including twins a few weeks old. And she had no one to help her - except the people at the local station, who wired to stops ahead that she be given special attention, and there were three changes to be made. So far as is known, she reached her destination.

During those war years about every two weeks there would be embarkation of men from here going to join the armed forces. Frequently a mother or sweetheart fainted. People were packed in the waiting room until a person could scarcely get through, and there would be both laughter and crying.

Another incident of difficulty came when a woman on a bus headed to Washington, D.C., jumped off the bus at night before it reached the terminal. She had left her pocketbook and bag on the bus, and the people at the station called Mrs. Jones, asking her to take charge.

Mrs. Jones found the woman and brought her home, only to discover she was suffering from amnesia. Twice, the woman tried to commit suicide. But Mrs. Jones was able to put her on the train going to Washington, however the woman jumped off the train at Radford, VA. Later Mr. and Mrs. Jones had to go to Washington to testify when the woman's brother sued the Pullman railway car company.

Again, a man from Alaska, having no money and sick yet wanting to return to Alaska, said he could manage it if he got to Washington. So Mrs. Jones bought him a ticket to that city.

The biggest, most auspicious day at the station came during the Depression, on June 18, 1932. The railway had advertised a cent a mile rate for that day, when the usual rate was three and a half cents a mile. Hundreds got tickets and rode the trains, and there was a constant stream of people from 6 a.m. until 11 p.m.

Those were also the days of group travel, with summer special excursion rates about every two weeks to places of interest. After World War II and until as long as the trains ran through, special cars took kindergarten and primary children on their first train trip.

The old Tennessean was a popular train and people would come down to see it. One baggage and coach car was named *Johnson City*. There was a porter who always got off the train and as people alighted or embarked, would give a little spiel about Johnson City.

Mrs. Jones remembers the brides and grooms and their excited taking off on their honeymoon. Also the people who would bring their lunch with them to take on the train, and would show her a half of a ham, fried chicken, cake and pies and tell her what else they had.

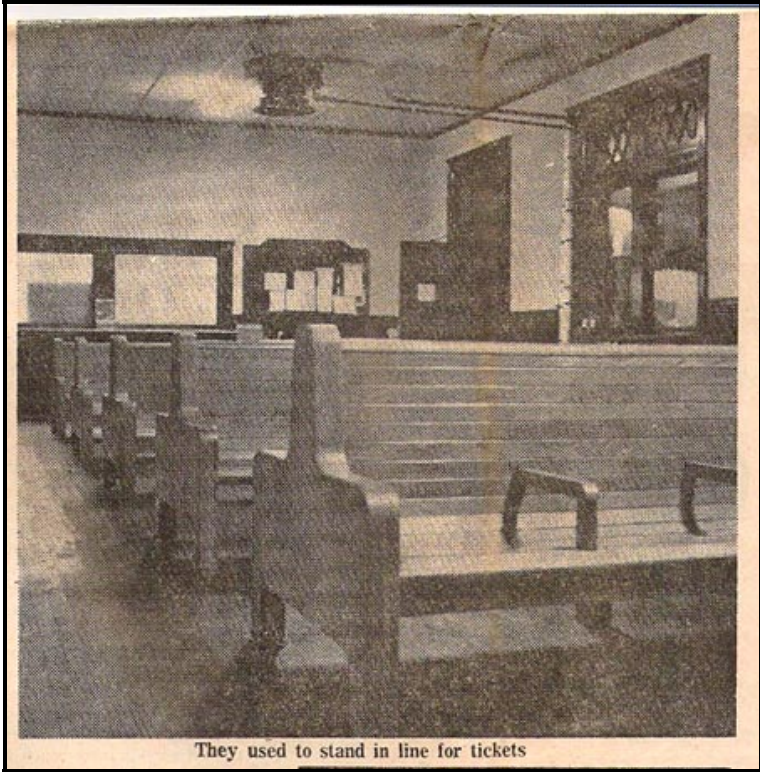
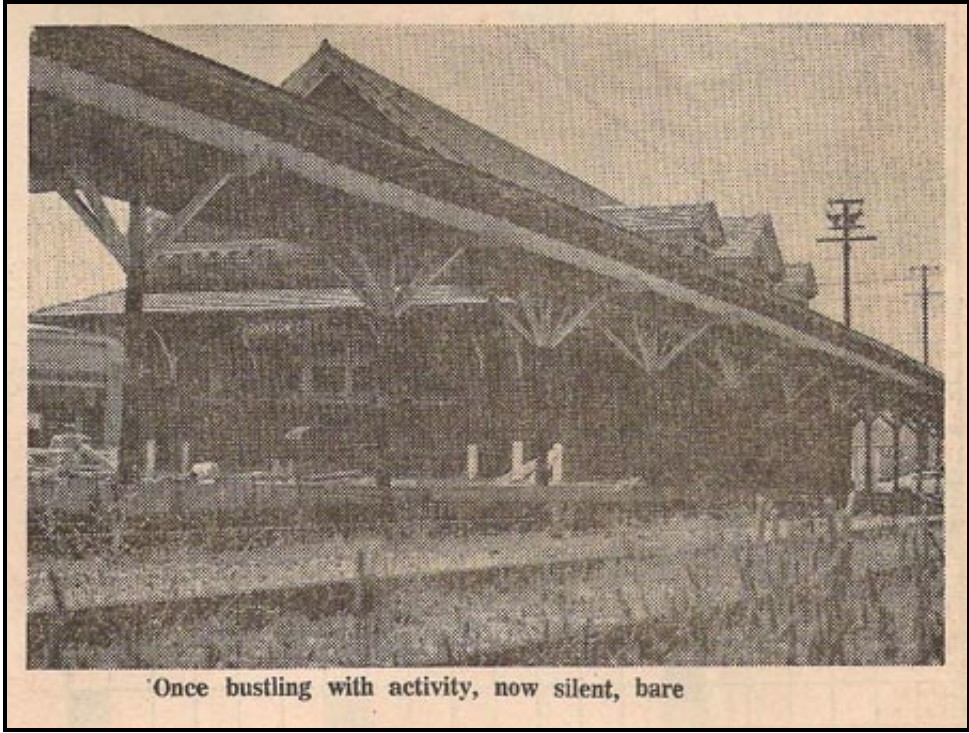
And then there were the famous figures who stopped off here, **Mrs. C. E. Rogers**, whose late husband directed the lyceum program at what was then the East Tennessee State Normal School, recalls some as does Mrs. Jones.

General **John J. Pershing** shook hands from a train platform. **Dr. Russell H. Conwell**, a famous lecturer, appeared at the Normal School, now East Tennessee State University. **William Jennings Bryan**, spoke there too, and he had two famous lectures. Mrs. Rogers remembers that when **Dean Russell** of Columbia came to speak, no one had a car to meet him at the train and they had to borrow one from the janitor.

Herbert Hoover, on his campaign for President, came on the train and spoke here and in Elizabethton. **Robert L. "Bob" Taylor**, on his election to the U.S. Senate, spoke to a huge crowd from the train. One of the largest crowds welcomed **Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt**, and shouting, singing teenagers mobbed the station for **Elvis Presley's** appearance.

The old station goes but Mrs. Jones spoke truly that the memories remain.



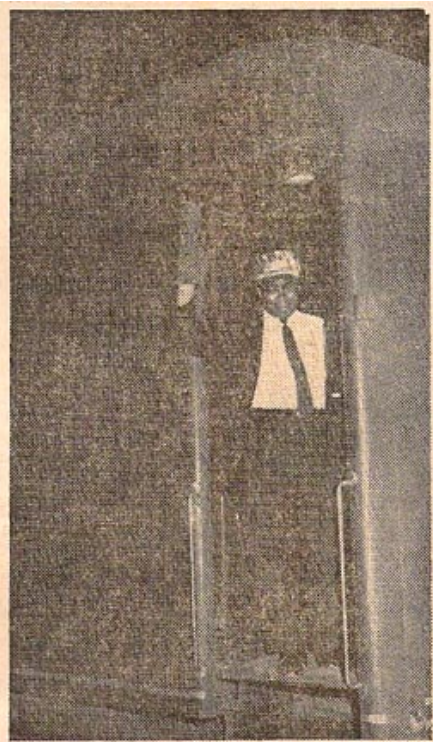




Pulling in for the last time



At twilight, waiting for the 'Tennessean'



A final goodbye



All aboard, please!

