



History of Tweetsie

Tweetsie's history dates back to 1866, when the Tennessee Legislature granted the East Tennessee & Western North Carolina (ET&WNC) Railroad company permission for the construction of a railroad. At the outset, the ET&WNC line (which mountain humorists dubbed the "Eat Taters & Wear No Clothes" Railroad) was to operate from Johnson City, Tennessee, to the iron mines just over the state line at Cranberry, North Carolina.

The narrow-gauge railroad began operations in 1881 after fifty miles of track were laid through the rugged Blue Ridge chain of the Appalachian Mountains that divide the two southern states. Later, additional tracks were laid to Boone, North Carolina, and in 1919 rail service was extended to that mountain community. The new line added passenger service to the formerly isolated area and brought lumber out of the mountains.

The name "Tweetsie" was given to the railroad by local folks who became accustomed to the shrill "tweet, tweet" train whistles that echoed through the hills. The name stuck, and the train was known as Tweetsie ever since.

Unfortunately, the affection felt for Tweetsie by mountain dwellers could not protect her from a changing economy. The construction of modern roads made the mountain communities more accessible, and Tweetsie felt the competition from trucking companies. Severe floods came in August of 1940 and obliterated sections of the line, hastening the demise of the mountain railroads.

On July 13, 1950, the ET&WNC Railroad ceased all narrow-gauge operations. Tweetsie Locomotive #12—the last of the original 13 coal-fired ET&WNC steam engines—was purchased by railroad enthusiasts and moved to Harrisonburg, Virginia, as the Shenandoah Central Railroad. Her stay there was cut short when Hurricane Hazel swept through the state in 1954 and wiped out the train tracks. The owners found a buyer for #12 in Gene Autry. The movie cowboy intended to ship the locomotive to California to use in films.

However, Blowing Rock native Grover Robbins, Jr. decided that it was time to bring Tweetsie back to the mountains where she belonged. Robbins purchased the rights to Tweetsie from Gene Autry, and in 1956 the little engine headed back to Robbins' hometown in the mountains of North Carolina.

In the summer of 1957, Tweetsie Railroad opened at her new location just a couple of miles away from the old railroad station in Boone. People came from all over the South to welcome her famous whistle back to the mountains and to take a one-mile trip to a picnic area and then back up to the station.

In the following years, Tweetsie Railroad evolved from an excursion railroad into North Carolina's first theme park. The track was expanded into a three-mile loop, and an authentic western town was built up around the station. The Wild West theme park has added attractions over the years and features live shows, amusement rides, Deer Park, concerts, and reenactments.

Tweetsie also operates a complete railroad shop, repairing and restoring steam locomotives for other theme parks and for museums.

Meticulously maintained and now listed in the National Register of Historic Places, Tweetsie continues to delight rail fans, children and tourists who visit the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina.

Visit www.tweetsie.com for more information.