

Norfolk & Southern Railroad at Mackeys Ferry

Mackeys Ferry, located on the south side of the Albemarle Sound near the mouth of a deep-water creek, was never the same after the Norfolk & Southern Railroad made its grand entrance. For over two hundred years there had been a ferry system operating from Mackeys to the port of Edenton on the north shore of the Albemarle Sound. When the Norfolk & Southern ran a line from Norfolk to Edenton via Elizabeth City in the late 1800's, they found themselves "backed up" to the shores of the Sound and had to transport their rail cars and cargo on barges pulled by tug boats and later their large ferry, the John W. Garrett. In 1910 the N&S RR built a five-mile long wood trestle across the Albemarle Sound to close this gap and opened a whole New World to Mackeys Ferry and its people. Every boy or girl, who was raised in or near Mackeys in the active days of the Norfolk & Southern, can tell you of the pleasures of the place. This is "some" of my story:

My experience would begin in the late 1930's and early 1940's at the beginning of WW-II. When my elder siblings would go to the post office they would take me along. The little post office was close by the track, next to the large country store, owned by Mr. Will Davenport. It was several hundred feet north of the train depot and about three hundred yards south of the train water tank. It had double doors, unpainted clap-board siding, little mail boxes with combination locks that cost twenty five cents a month to rent. Dad would never rent one, so we had to go when the post office was open and ask for the mail through the window. In those days the address was rather simple. For example, all you had to do was write the person's name on the envelope and Mackeys, N. C and the person would receive it. On the wall was a large human size poster of Uncle Sam in his high hat, whiskers and long-tail coat all red white and blue in Stars and Stripes. His finger pointed straight at you with the caption written just below him on the poster that said; "I WANT YOU". No matter where I moved about in that little post office his very stern eyes would follow and stare me down.



My family lived less than a quarter mile across the Mackeys Creek from the post office and the train depot. It wasn't long before I could make this journey alone over the old wood and steel swing span Mackeys Creek Bridge to the area of all the activity. Miss Jammie Riddick was the Post Mistress in the little post office for many years. She would give me a dime to carry the canvas mailbag or bags from the post office to the train mail car and return with the pick up. Saturday and Sundays could be rather busy in Mackeys with lots of people to see the trains come and go. And too, the old canvas mailbags were rather skuffy and not clean some time; she was a rather prissy little lady and did not want people to see her carrying those dirty

old bags. Most of the time the number one passenger and mail train out of Norfolk and the number two out of Raleigh would sidetrack and meet in Mackeys. The normal schedule if I recall was about 1:PM. When this would happen you had to cross over the first set of tracks to get to the mail car and throw the bags up in the car, and like wise the postman on the mail car would throw down the in-coming bag. Now that was living it up! Where else could a boy enjoy all that excitement and get paid ten cents at the same time. This would buy me a 12-oz bottle of Pepsi, Double Cola, or RC Cola and one of the largest five-cent cakes you ever saw.

The sight and the sound of those big locomotives, “those iron horses,” as referred to by the early Native Americans, are still fresh and clear in my mind today. The excitement of feeling the earth shake as the engine would rumble in, hissing, letting off steam, black smoke rolling out the stack. Some days the black smoke would rise in the air, and some days it would stay close to the ground and linger in your nostrils. I think it would depend on the weather. The junction of the Mackeys road and N&S RR was between the post office and the depot, all rather joined together. So to add to all the excitement, the crew was ringing the bell rather steadily so the road would stay clear.

Early spring seem to bring more activity in the area because more supplies arrived for the farmers to start the season. I remember when people would wait at the depot for their baby chickens to arrive in boxes with little holes to allow them to breathe. They arrived from the hatcheries on the number two train from the western part of the state and of course were very hungry and chirping their little heads off always. And too, Mackeys was a commercial fishing community in the 1940's and fish were iced in boxes and shipped to the northern cities on the N&S trains. Mr. Harrison Chesson, the agent operator, would usually get someone to help him pull the pretty red and green railway express cargo cart with the large wide wheels over to the train car to off load and load any cargo.



The conductor was usually the first to exit the train and would throw down the little step stool and assist the off-loading passengers if there were any. Once everything and everyone was unloaded and loaded, the conductor yelled, all aboarrrrrrrrrd! The engineer would take the slack out of all the cars with a jerk. Funny thing about railroad men, they seem to always want to look at their pocket watch. That seemed to be the last thing the conductor would do before boarding. My Dad, Walter Spruill, was a draw tender for the Albemarle Sound Bridge, and he was forever taking out his pocket watch whenever he would hear a train passing through Mackeys. He would then say something like; “OLE 99 is right on time.”

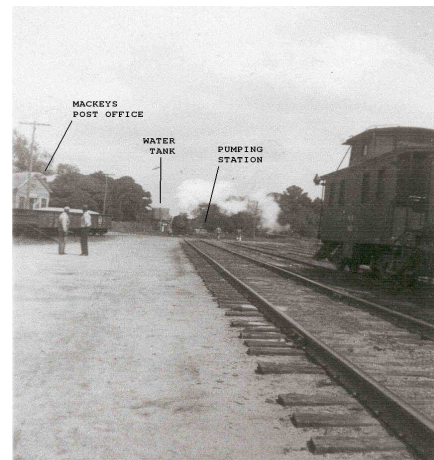
After a great disaster accident in the late 19th century, the Federal Government make a regulation that certain railroad employees watches must be accurate and set standard with in thirty seconds a week, and have a minimum of seventeen jewels. I think his watch was a Hamilton and had to be checked periodically by an authorized jeweler.

I can't speak the language of a real railroad man, but simply remember those days when I had the opportunity to be in the presence of those mighty locomotives. I never realized how much they impressed me as a young boy until years later. I can understand now why the old-time N&S railroaders get weepy eyed when they talk about their original company. When business picked up during WWII the traffic increased coming through Mackeys. Long trains would come through with many cars pulled by more than one engine. Troop trains, were a regular both day and night. Most of the trains would stop to take on water at the big wood structure water tank. The military men, usually soldiers, would be hanging out the windows buying peanuts and other goodies from those who walked along side the cars on the tracks.

There was a rather small elder black man who every one called, "Peanut Jim". He had two home made cloth bags with straps, one hanging over each shoulder.

He walked all over the countryside selling roasted peanuts for five cents a bag. He lived in the town of Roper five miles away, and would walk to Mackeys to meet the passenger and troop trains, walking along side the cars, he would call out; "parched peanuts, parched peanuts". Fred Davenport, whose father owned the store next to the post office, said his father would give the soldiers ice cream from his store, even though his business was a little unstable at the time. I recall Mr. Davenport was a very generous man. The N&S troop trains hauling the men South for training and North to Norfolk to be shipped out, some how left a lonesome feeling with everyone. To be awakening in the middle of the night and hear a troop train speeding through Mackeys with the whistle wailing away would give you that feeling.

Because of the variety, certain trains seem to have their own personality in those days. The very long through freights had large engines, and could stretch out for a mile or more. During the war much large equipment built inland were carried on flat cars to the coastal ports to be sent overseas. Standing on the side of the track in those days was like getting a geography lesson. Cars would have names of states, cities and company logos from places I had never heard of. The caboose too, was a part of that old mystique; always the last car to see as it would disappear out of sight. On a cold winter day you could see smoke flowing from the little



chimney of the red car, with a man looking out the cupola on the top. It was always my desire to go onboard one and look out that little cupola where you could see out in all directions. It never happened.

The long trains seem to be in slow motion as they crept over the sound bridge headed south. After crossing the bridge and passing through the maintenance yard, the large engine would be huffing and belching black smoke to gain momentum as it passed through Mackeys station. If it had to stop at Mackeys to take on water at the tank, most everyone in the community was sure to hear it. As the engineer would align the locomotive with the tank down spout, the fireman would throw open the heavy steel hatch, making a tremendous loud “bang,” pull the spout down with the long cord, and fill the water compartment until water would over-flow and run out on the ground. The hatch would make this loud noise when opened and closed, and could be heard at a great distance. It was a thrill to be standing by the track to see and hear that large monster as it proceeded to get underway. The engineer, with one hand on the control as he propped the other elbow on the windowsill and was looking out the large window. Standing off at a distance from those large steel shiny driver wheels, taller than I, feeling the vibrations of all that power actually penetrating my small boy body. That excitement you take long into your adult life. The jerk and snap of the powerful locomotive as it removed the slack from those cars all the way back to the red caboose, and then it went nowhere. The caboose would be back across the Mackeys Creek trestle and to the sound bridge. Those large pistons would make those large driver wheels spin, and a stream of sand would flow on the rails in front of the wheels to give them traction when there were many cars under tow. Another, and another, and another attempt would be made until it would get the smooth start needed to start rolling. I know now why so many people came to Mackeys, especially on weekends, their day off, to stand around the train station to watch, listen and feel the excitement of the locomotives as they entered and left the yard. Yes, even the adults must have enjoyed it!

There would be other little treats to enjoy when I would “hang out,” riding my fender-less bike in the station area, up one end of the station loading dock and down the other. To watch Mr. Chesson raise or lower the semaphore’s arm, on the tall post just off the side of the depot bay windows, to signal a passing train. Sometime a through train would slow down as it passed the station to pick up a message. Mr. Chesson would stand beside the track, hold up a long stick with a hoop bent in one end, the engineer would stick his arm out into the hoop, take off the attached train order or other instruction paper, and throw the hoop stick back to the ground, as the train would continue. It would be an honor to have a reason to enter into the station to see Mr. Chesson. Later in life as an adult when looking at some of the Norman Rockwell paintings, they would remind me of that simple “life experiences” I had as a boy. Mr.



Chesson was a rather quiet man, serious and to the point. While at work he would wear a topless little hat with only a visor on it, his shirtsleeves would be pushed up with bands around his arms to keep the sleeves up. There was a little wood picket fence inside the depot separating two working areas with little swinging gates that would open either way, and would squeak each time they were opened. I recall my Mom sending me to the station to send telegrams to older siblings. If I remember correctly a short message would cost about ten cents.

Mackeys had a passing siding to accommodate 99 cars as well as some shorter sidings. This was the largest for quite some distance to the north or south. This, along with the water tank, telegraph, and station facilities, made it one of the pivotal points for the N&S.

The maintenance yard for the five-mile Albemarle Sound Bridge was located on the south end of the bridge. As years went by the bridge became very maintenance intensive. In 1987 the new Norfolk Southern efficiency experts decided to abandon it. The many hurricanes would take their tolls and even the loss of lives when one train would fall in the Sound even though the speed limit was lowered. There was a time though when the maintenance yard was alive with much activity and excitement. In my lifetime there was continuous modifications in process in the change out of the pilings, ties, rails, cross-members, and other work. The bridge maintenance yard was about a mile from the station, with the Mackeys Creek trestle in between. This trestle had a hand operated turntable draw, open on demand, about 250 feet long over a 20-foot depth of water. Now if you really want to hear some real war stories, talk to the boys who grew up in the area and let them tell you about that favorite hang out, “the creek trestle.” Never was there a better place to go skinny-dipping in this world. All of those guard rails, the bridge itself, and an occasional train to come by, that would stop at the station with the cars backed up on the trestle to climb up on and jump off into the creek. The swamp on both sides of the creek in this area, known as [Davenports Swamp], is rather deep. Record shows when the railroad track causeway was initially built over this swamp it began to sink, it was very soft and boggy and was first matted with log, brush and then filled. After six months of operation it ceased sinking and was refilled.

There were two company houses located on the property, one for the bridge maintenance foreman, and I think the other was originally for a bridge tender. In the middle/late 1940s the company installed and operated a sawmill on the yard to cut and reuse the large timbers that were removed in the bridge modification process. Walter “Toby” Waters was its operator as well as a bridge worker. It was with great pleasure I



would [hang out] around the yard with the men when they were on the job. In the late 1940’s my family farmed the property known as the Pollard Farm, bordering the maintenance yard. In 1947 my Dad leased five acres of cleared land for \$20 a

year from the railroad that bordered this farm. He kept this lease until he passed away in 1958. All of this property belonged to the Pollard family up to the turn of the century. The N&S purchased that portion where the railroad came ashore. There were machine shops, shelters and other types of small buildings used to house the various tools and equipment, and material on the yard. Several short sidetracks ran through the maintenance yard, and dead end at the sound shore. The bridge maintenance motorcars and the little flat work cars were always parked on these tracks. The Albemarle Sound today has claimed the area where the tracks ended, and even now there are some railroad car wheels on axles located on the shore with weeds grown up around them.

This somewhat famous railroad bridge meant different things to many people over the years, especially those living in the Mackeys area. Foremost would be the employment it provided from the very beginning. For many families it provided wood to heat and cook with from the used timbers that were removed and discarded. Most of the timbers used on original construction were softwood and not treated. This material made excellent burning when the flue cured tobacco barns were fired with wood. This sound bridge, slightly over five miles long, with all those pilings driven close together, was excellent fishing grounds for the commercial and sports fisherman alike. And of course the endless number of youngsters that could tell you their stories of their days playing, swimming and jumping from that great bridge. The sandy beach area where the bridge came ashore was an excellent place to swim and frolic with other youngsters. We all called it Collins beach. Mr. Raymond Collins was the bridge maintenance supervisor, and he welcomed every one to go there. His family built a little closed in shed with a partition dividing it into sections. This would be for the boys and girls to change clothes in. Don't really recall why, but we called it the bathhouse.

I recall the quiet calm late fall afternoons, when my Dad would set a mullet gill net close inshore, not far from the bridge. After setting the net we would tie the juniper skiff to the bridge and wait for the mullet to hit the net. As the cool of the evening would set in, and the sun would get lower in the sky, you could hear the rails on the bridge popping and snapping as they cooled and shrunk and opened their joints. Almost a spiritual mystery to a young boy in those days, to hear something so loud and strange and yet see nothing. Out of this would come the lesson why the "clickety clack" was more prevalent at times than



others when the train went by. Who would ever believe those expansion joints in the rails could open and close so much from the hottest to the coldest days?

The first diesel engine I remember to enter Mackeys was in the mid/late 1940's. I was working on the farm adjacent to the railroad maintenance yard when the train entered the yard from the sound bridge, blowing the horn with great exuberance, or at least that's what it seemed to me. This would be the beginning of a new era of rail-roading in the community. The beauty of the painted streamline engine and the chug-chug of the diesel as it picked up speed after leaving the sound bridge must have been very impressive, or at least different.

With the coming of the diesel power engine, the need for the water tank just north of the depot would no longer be required. This would eliminate one of our "little hang outs." On the opposite side of the track from tank was a rather large deep, below ground water reservoir. It was walled in with thick timbers and cross braces running from side to side wide enough to walk across. Never had there been a better man made bullfrog-hunting pit than this, before or since. Naturally the snakes were very fond of this man made hole as well, but in those days for some reason we boys were not too concerned with those trivial things. Next to the reservoir [we called it the frog pond] was a little house, painted railroad green. Inside was the engine that pumped the water up out of the pit into the tank. This was a one-cylinder engine with a large flywheel that had to be turned over by hand to give the engine its momentum to start. A straight stack pipe that protruded out of the building was the exhaust that made a loud, POP-POP-POP that echoed all over the Mackeys area when in operation. Mr. Josh Griffin was the man responsible to keep the tank full of water. This was a ground feed reservoir that depended on the rain and the under ground water table for its water supply. At times I recall it would get rather low. Some one told me recently that water could not be taken from the creek or the sound because it could be detrimental to the locomotive engines.

The twenty two mile Columbia branch railroad junctioned the main line, near the maintenance yard just east of the creek trestle about three quarter miles from Mackeys station. This track passed close by our house as it meandered to Columbia via Beasley, Scuppernong, Creswell, Woodley and Cooper stations. Just south of our house was Blount siding used to park empty rail cars. In the spring and summer, white potatoes and other produce were transported out of Columbia in ice refrigerator cars. When the empty cars were side tracked, we boys would walk along the tracks looking to see which ones had water draining from the ice compartments. This would tell us there was some ice still there. Up the car ladder and down into the icebox we would go with our burlap bags to get the ice to take home. The "left over" ice was usually dirty but could always be washed clean when we got home. Hearing the train coming would always find the little guys heading out to the track to feel the rumble of the big locomotive. Mr. Joe Hayes was sure a special hero to us guys, always had chewing gum to throw down to us. And too, we couldn't wait to see how flat those rusty nails were that we had lain on the rail

before the train came along. Now I am sure our Dad would have burned some britches had he known we were doing that!

The quality of the Columbia branch railroad was rapidly deteriorating in those years just prior to its dismantling in 1949. The ties were rotten, grass and weeds were rather high, and many of the ties were sinking in the areas where the ground was soft. This would make the engine and cars sway from side to side as if they were going to turn over. In the “Big War,” WW-II, we boys were always looking for places to find iron to sell to the “iron man,” a half-cent or a penny a pound. Walking the Columbia branch for great distances was sure to yield a good find. Those bent spikes were for ever backing out of those old oak cross ties on their own, or could even be pulled out with little ease. To walk the Columbia branch on a hot summer day was no easy task sometime for a barefoot country boy. The sandspur stickers, weeds, briars and burnt coal cinders were sure not foot friendly. Nowhere could you find a better location to pick black berries on a hot summer day than along the railroad tracks. The rewards of a container of berries for mom to make a pie, was always greater than the miseries of scarred up feet and legs, and the scratching and itching of the little red bugs dug deep in our skin in unmentionable places.

Mr. Newsome Davenport, a draw tender, after each work shift, would ride his three-wheel velocipede to the road crossing near our house, set it off and walk home just past where we lived. Now you know that was not a very wise thing for any adult to do with country boys looking for a little excitement and something to do when there was spare time! Guess the N&S would not furnish him a railroad lock. The people in Mackeys called this three-wheel handcar a “speeder.” I had heard some one say, they thought this velocipede was designed for the draw tenders who worked the Albemarle Sound Bridge when it first opened. Don’t know if that’s a fact.

When I was about ten years old, my sister Hazel and I boarded the number two train at Mackeys for a trip to Norfolk where she lived. School was closed for the summer and the weather was rather warm. We were hardly settled in our seats by an open window, when the train had reached the sound bridge. Looking out the open window, all you could see was water, no rails, cross ties or cross members, “just water!” As the train moved slow across the bridge, the cars would sway from side to side, as if out of alignment, a rather scary feeling for a ten-year-old. Years later I had the pleasure of traveling by the more modern rail system. However, none gave me more pleasure than the ride that day in the car pulled by the “Great Iron Horse”.

The story I tell here is certainly not the history of the N&S; it’s only some events and memories the way I recall them in the Mackeys area, and in my lifetime. Indeed this railroad has played an important role in many lives of several generations. The Mackeys area encompassed all the area from milepost marker 82

at the south end of the Sound Bridge, to mile marker 84 south of the station, and the first mile of the Columbia branch to the east, at state hwy # 64. Also the 30-mile branch from Belhaven via Roper connected to the main line just at the edge of Mackeys, which was discontinued in 1937. The Depot, Sound Bridge, Creek trestle, Columbia branch, Sidetracks and the Post office has all been disposed of. Mr. Will Davenport's store, as well as four others in the community, has been torn down, along with many fish houses on the creek bank. Mackeys once had a cotton gin, fish and produce cannery, rope factory, hotel and a bridge structure that would swing open to allow water traffic to pass through. About the only reminders of the railroad in Mackeys now are the gravel beds. The heavy cement pillows that once supported the water tank for the locomotives, a large cement block for the big water tank pump, and the deep in ground water reservoir are concealed in the underbrush and thicket next to the rail beds, but you would need to know just where to look for them.

In March 2004, the rails, side tracks, signals, signs and cross ties from Plymouth to Mackeys were taken-up and hauled away, the last reminder of the great railroad that served a very active community. When I arrived at the intersection of the railroad track and Mackeys road near the sawmill, on that pretty day in March and saw the tracks being taken up, a rather empty feeling came over me. It was the last reminder of how Mackeys had been for the last century. The local newspaper never even mentioned this historical event that was taking place. But why should it? The publisher and its staff are of another generation that was obviously not aware of its significance. A conversation I had with the contractor who was removing the tracks and ties as he was working in the Mackeys area, told me; quote, he thought it a real travesty that the railroad was being removed, that it was in very good condition. Unquote. At the same time the rails and ties were being removed, North Carolina Dominion Power was installing a very large network of power lines on the railroad right of way. Not a very pretty sight, but a necessity for modern times I suppose!

And so, I share these treasured memories from the museum of my mine that someone else may enjoy them at a later time. When you walk the old railroad beds today, through the swamps and woods of Mackeys, you would never know there were once tracks, "Big Iron Horses" and modern diesel trains located here. But the sounds, sights and memories, still linger for those of us who were there.

Bobby R. "Bob" Spruill

