

# Clinchfield: Antithesis of railroad evolution

Built to high standards, it tackled tough terrain and never went through a financial failure

**T**he Clinchfield was different. It was conceived by men who had the vision and resources to do things right. It was built to the highest engineering standards of the early 20th century. It never went through a financial failure or reorganization. Indeed, the Carolina, Clinchfield & Ohio Railway was the antithesis of traditional railroad evolution.

In 1902, a wealthy regional businessman, George L. Carter, began stitching together an integrated industrial enterprise to develop vast coal deposits in the Clinch (River) Fields of Southwest Virginia and to deliver the coal across the southern Appalachian mountains to markets in the Carolinas and to ships calling at Wilmington, Charleston, Savannah, and Jacksonville. Carter, from whom Howard Hughes could have learned secrecy, operated using the South & Western Railway banner. The name said everything . . . and nothing. The S&W was chartered from any point on the Atlantic Ocean to any point on the Great Lakes. Carter agents seized by legal means and/or physical occupation key terrain features through the mountains in physical competition with the Chesapeake & Ohio and the Southern Railway. Carter sponsored and approved a low-grade, high-capacity freight line "through the mountains, not around them," as latter-day advertising touted.



C. K. Marsh Jr.

**Southbound manifest train 26, behind A-B-B F's, pauses by the Borden Textile Mill in Kingsport, Tenn., in March 1967 to add a three-unit rear-end pusher for the 42-mile climb to Erwin.**

Within that generous charter was the idea of building a railroad to haul coal south and merchandise in both directions between the Midwest and the Southeast. The plans also incorporated development of several on-line cities to consume coal and make products from regional resources to diversify and grow the freight business. Finally, a steamship line was organized to move coal beyond the ports to customers in the Caribbean.

By 1905, Carter realized he needed far more capital than he could personally provide. Reluctant though he was,

he managed to convince Blair & Co., a big Wall Street investment house, to finance the project. M. J. Caples, an engineer with mining and railroad experience, laid out and then built a magnificent railroad. Tunnels,

steel viaducts, generous fills, and rocky cuts appeared as needed.

More than 4 percent (almost 10 miles) of the line was under-

ground in 55 tunnels. With construction of the 277-mile railroad well advanced, its name

was changed to Carolina, Clinchfield & Ohio Railway in 1908.

Coal began flowing across the 242 miles from Dante, Va., to Spartanburg, S.C., in 1909 while the owners and engineers debated how to cross the Cumberland mountains into the Ohio River valley. Between 1912 and '15, a 35-mile extension including what was then the 10th-longest tunnel in the U.S. created a through route connecting Chesapeake & Ohio at Elkhorn City, Ky., with the three major southeastern carriers (Seaboard at Bostic, N.C.; Atlantic Coast Line and Southern at Spartanburg). In constant-value dollars, the five-state CC&O was the most expensive railroad ever built in the U.S.

The CC&O was an early and devoted user of the Mallet steam locomotive, acquiring its first one in 1909. It evolved into nine classes of articulateds including 18 high-speed simple 4-6-6-4's patterned after similar Delaware & Hudson and Union Pacific designs. More than half of Clinchfield's steam locomotives



Joe Brunner; C. K. Marsh Jr. collection

**L-3 class 2-8-8-2 735, the first of 10 Alco (Brooks) 1923 USRA "sports model" Mallets (the last of three CC&O L-classes), works a southbound coal train at Mead, N.C., on June 14, 1945.**



**Clinchfield's 277-mile, 5-state line stretched from Elkhorn City, Ky., to Spartanburg, S.C.**

were articulated. It also adopted all-steel cars from the start and immediately began setting industry records for average tonnage per freight-train-mile. Axle loadings were never a problem.

Industrial agents, supported by the financial muscle of Blair & Co., attracted and financed many who located on the line. Kingsport, Tenn., was the crown jewel of this effort. In 1909 it was a group of farms owned first by George L. Carter and then Blair interests. Twenty years later, Kingsport hosted a cement plant, brick plant, paper mill, one of the



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**CSX still runs the annual Santa Claus Train, now 63 years old, to Kingsport. Tom Moore's "One-Spot" 4-6-0 did the honors in 1976.**

largest printers in America, a glass manufacturer, and a textile mill. They all used coal. But Tennessee Eastman Corp. dwarfed the other industries with its methanol and cellulose acetate plant making safety film base for Eastman Kodak. TEC also operated a sawmill on-site, supported by a 26-mile timber railroad and numerous wood-loading sites along the CC&O. At Kingsport alone, CC&O handled over 150 loads a day.

In 1923 Blair & Co. decided to dissolve and dispose of its assets. In a surprising development, CC&O was leased jointly to ACL and its controlled affiliate, Louisville & Nashville, for 999 years. The new operators took control in 1925 and set up the Clinchfield Railroad Co., an unincorporated entity, to manage the CC&O for their benefit. The operating staff was retained, and the general manager, L. H. Phetteplace, became the senior on-site official. A key provision of the lease required CC&O be operated as a separate, free-standing company with open competitive traffic policies. This was an ICC sop to Seaboard and Southern, which had opposed the lease.

The Coast Line took a keen interest in agricultural development in Florida and soon was effectively promoting perishable service via the Clinchfield into the Midwest. Train 97 was the premier northbound service and evolved into a solid "yellow train" of refrigerator cars hauling citrus products, vegetables, melons, and sugar to hungry citizens in Columbus, Chicago, Cleveland, Toledo, Detroit, and Toronto. In the off-perishable season, 97 filled out with phosphate loads from the Bone Valley around Tampa. C&O expedited its passage north of Elkhorn City, swelling business at what became the largest interchange point on the entire C&O, as it and Clinchfield exchanged four merchandise trains every day plus upwards of 200 coal loads.

Clinchfield weathered the depression but accumulated a lot of deferred maintenance. It was not until 1937 that new rolling stock arrived, the first to carry CRR reporting marks. During 1939-41, traffic finally rebounded, permitting track improvements and more equipment modernization. Then the onslaught of World War II taxed its facilities, even as several hundred employees were drafted. Unlike after World War I, traf-

## Fallen Flags Remembered



Two photos, C. K. Marsh Jr.

**A mixed bag of Clinchfield units, in both the older gray-and-yellow scheme and the later black, pushes Extra 915 South toward Sandy Ridge Tunnel at Trammel, Va., on July 16, 1977.**

fic did not dip with peace but accelerated in all commodities. Four new Challengers (Alco's last articulateds) and six similar UP-designed engines were hastily acquired to handle the growth.

CRR, of course, had a close relationship with coal-mining interests. Nevertheless, in December 1948, partially spurred by repeated coal-miner strikes, it ordered three 4500 h.p., A-B-A sets of EMD F units for the four daily manifest trains. Their arrival cascaded the newer 4-6-6-4's down into service on coal trains and second manifest sections, allowing retirement of the 1919 Mallets.

By 1950, those hardy souls who built and stayed to run the CC&O were senior

citizens. New blood was steadily arriving, both family members and outsiders. ACL sent a promising young manager, William H. "Bill" Kendall, from Wilmington HQ to take over from the home guard. He came with a blank check to wring every dollar of deferred maintenance out of the road and make it state-of-the-art. In a brief four years, he did exactly that, dieselizing the property, completing a barely started CTC project over the entire main line, exiting the nominal passenger business, relaying track with 132-lb. rail, mechanizing trackwork, rebuilding yards, extending passing tracks, modernizing the locomotive and car shops, energizing the

sales department, replacing World War I cars, and so on. He worked quickly and effectively. In late 1954 he was promoted to a senior position on L&N and quickly became its president.

Kendall was followed on the Clinchfield by a series of high-potential managers at the Erwin offices. The next three achieved senior vice president positions within ACL successor Family Lines. Then in 1968 came T. D. Moore, a different kind of manager. Tom Moore was a graduate of the D. W. Brosnan management style of "damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead," as practiced by Southern Railway, tempered by a public-relations flair. Moore is remembered on and beyond the Clinchfield for three significant events. Early in his tenure he discovered not only the spectacular scenery along his railroad but an 86-year-old steam locomotive stored at the shops. He quickly organized an excursion program and for 10 years raised the company's public profile nationwide by running "the One Spot" at the helm of the "Clinchfield Special" on dozens of excursions each year. The 14 old heavy-weight cars assembled for the train still exist, scattered across the Southeast.

Of greater economic impact was the High Line, a 9-mile, low-grade bypass around Johnson City, Tenn. Implementing an idea that had been around since 1907, he determinedly pushed through its construction in 1969-70, shortening the main line by 3 miles and eliminating pusher locomotives on all southbound coal trains from Kingsport to Erwin. Concurrently, he sponsored construction of a 7-mile coalfields branch incorporated as the Haysi Railroad to reach fresh coal deposits in Virginia.

With annual revenue of \$40 million, the Clinchfield was routinely transferring \$1 million a month to its parents as coal business boomed in the 1970's and the modern facilities, plus a fleet of second-generation GP38 and SD40, 40-2, and 45 diesels, enhanced the record-low operating ratio. Clinchfield was one of the few "revenue adequate" railroads in the country, according to the ICC.

But all was not well with Clinchfield management. In a stunning development, Executive Vice President Moore and two immediate subordinates were summarily fired and subsequently con-



**An SD40, F's, a GP7, a GP38, and another GP7 and F's (from left) congregate at Erwin in March 1972. Legend has it that CRR told EMD to "just follow our F-unit paint styling" on hood units.**

victed of embezzlement and income-tax evasion. It was the beginning of the end.

With a Superintendent instead of an Executive V.P., the Clinchfield was integrated quickly into the package of SCL, L&N, and Georgia/West Point Route and operated as a division, a direct violation of the lease provisions. Clinchfield's independence vanished with the departure of Tom Moore, and its company name disappeared into the Family Lines System on January 1, 1983.

Now, though, more than 20 years later, the Clinchfield lives on. Still a key link between eastern Kentucky coalfields and Southeast electric utilities, it handles dozens of unit coal trains daily from origins on the old L&N and C&O. Ninety-car, 13,000-ton trains are standard, well within the designs of the original bridges, tunnels, and roadbed. More than half the 178 diesels acquired by the Clinchfield, including its original F unit, No. 800, still operate. Two 4-6-0 steam locomotives reside at significant sites. The One Spot is a key exhibit at the B&O Railroad Museum in Baltimore, while CRR No. 99 masquerades in Jackson, Tenn., as Illinois Central 382, the locomotive engineer Casey Jones rode to his death in 1900.

For 80 years, the proud S&W-CC&O-Clinchfield did a yeoman's job of moving commerce to and from the South. As I grew up along its tracks, it became an integral part of my life and interests. As the old Confederate war veteran said, "Forget, hell!" ■

## Clinchfield fact file

(Comparative figures are for 1929 and 1982)

**Route-miles:** 309; 296

**Locomotives:** 86; 98

**Passenger cars:** 38; 0

**Freight cars:** 7562; 5291

**Headquarters city:** Erwin, Tenn.

**Special interest group:** Atlantic Coast Line and Seaboard Air Line Railroads Historical Society, Inc., P.O. Box 4141, Bay Pines, FL 33744; [www.aclsal.org](http://www.aclsal.org).

**Recommended reading:** *Clinchfield Country*, by Steve King (Old Line Graphics, 1988); *Clinchfield Railroad in Color*, by C. K. Marsh Jr. (Morning Sun Books, 2004).

**Source:** *The Historical Guide to North American Railroads* (Kalmbach, 1999).