A bit of flair in the coalfields

AS A KID growing up in Virginia's Tidewater area, I would go to sleep each night listening to the sounds of a Virginian Railway 2-8-2 switching the nearby yards. The gentle sounds and pungent aroma of smoke would drift through the night air and into my bedroom window like a soothing gauze, especially in the warmer months (this was before air-conditioning).

The Virginian (VGN) had been built in the early 1900's for one purpose—to take bituminous coal from the West Virginia coalfields to the piers at Sewell's Point on Chesapeake Bay, near Norfolk. The 600-mile carrier did its job with efficiency, speed, and a flair unique among the generally drab coal carriers of the time.

The railway traced its ancestry to 1902, when Standard Oil vice president Henry Huttleston Rogers acquired the 4-mile Deepwater Railway. Two years later he had extended it to the Virginia state line and incorporated the Tidewater Railway to build eastward to the Norfolk seaport.

Tidewater was renamed Virginian in April 1907, and a month later it acquired the Deepwater. Track was completed to Sewell's Point in early 1909. For the 436 miles from Deepwater, W.Va., to Norfolk, the line was constructed on a direct path with a grade favorable to loaded coal trains and avoiding most major towns. The steepest mainline grade for loads was 14 miles of 2 percent between Elmore and the summit of Clark's Gap Mountain in West Virginia. VGN's coal-mine branches were another matter, however. Some of these steep spurs, like the Beards Fork Branch, reached 3.48 percent, and some spurs, though short, required Mallets.

Rogers made only one trip over his new railroad. Shortly before the opening in 1909, he took his friend, writer Mark Twain, aboard his private car *Dixie*, one of the last wooden business cars Pullman outshopped, over the entire line. Rogers died a month later. Today *Dixie*, built in 1906 for the Tidewater, is in the Kentucky Railway Museum collection.

Virginian's steam locomotives ranged from high-stepping 4-4-0 Americans to a huge 1917 Baldwin 2-8-8-8-4 Triplex, No. 700. This "Big Mama" was designed to pull trains up the Clark's Gap grade but proved unsuited to the task—the boiler was unable to supply enough steam to power the three sets of cylinders. Virginian's typically inventive solu-

Virginian 2-8-2 436, one of 42 in the noted MB class, switches in Norfolk on December 19, 1954.

H. REID PHOTO; MALLORY HOPE FERRELL COLLECTION

By Mallory Hope Ferrell

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Pacific 213 smokes out of Suffolk, Va., during the final week of VGN's modest varnish operations.

tion was to rebuild it into two locomotives. In 1920 the engine unit became 610, a one-of-a-kind 2-8-8-0; it later had a trailing truck added. The tender engine was rebuilt as 2-8-2 410, sole member of the MD class. Another one-of-a-kind was 2-8-6-2 600, built by Baldwin in 1910 and rebuilt in '22 as a 2-8-8-2.

Also noteworthy was VGN's fleet of 12-wheel gondola cars, 50 feet long on the inside, which could carry up to 120 tons of coal. First acquired in 1916, these mammoth flat-bottom "Battleship Gons" were so impressive that neighbors Norfolk & Western and Chesapeake & Ohio soon acquired similar cars. From 1920 to 1924, VGN had 2024 of them built. They were not so popular with some customers, though. Lacking hopper doors, they required mechanical or rotary dumpers, and were soon relegated to mine-to-pier service. They seldom ventured off home rails, but the last ones weren't cut up until after the 1959 merger of VGN into N&W.

In 1926, Virginian completed electrification of 132 miles of main line between Roanoke and Mullens, W.Va. The motive power, pairs of Alco-Westinghouse box-cab, side-rod/jackshaft units, became known as "squareheads." Four modern, streamlined, two-unit GE cab sets, 125-128, arrived in 1948, followed by a dozen boxy C-C electrics, 130-141, in 1956-57. (The latter went to the New Haven after VGN wires came down.)

Virginian had one major shop, just west of the Virginia border in Princeton, W.Va. Here VGN built much of its own rolling stock, rebuilt and repaired almost everything it owned, and employed just about everyone in town. The electrics were maintained at the Mullens (W.Va.) Motor Barn; roundhouses for steam running repairs and servicing were at Sewell's Point, Victoria, Roanoke, Princeton, Elmore, and Page.

Virginian was never much of a passenger road, and its trains carried few people because the route avoided most big towns. VGN owned only 10 steel coaches, painted Pullman green, none with air-conditioning. Before the mid-'30's, mixed trains ran on several branches. After VGN bridged the Kanawha River at Deepwater in 1931, passenger trains operated west to Charleston on New York Central trackage rights. Regular passenger power was six PA class Pacifics built by Alco's Richmond works in 1920, which relegated 4-4-0's and 4-6-0's to miners' mixed trains. The last of the 4-4-0's, 101, lasted until 1953.

The mainline passenger runs were daytime trains 3 and 4 between Norfolk, Roanoke, and (until 1954) Page (near Deepwater). Train 3 left Norfolk Union Station, home to VGN headquarters, each morning at 8 and was carded into Roanoke at 4. Eastbound No. 4 departed Roanoke at 7:30 and was scheduled

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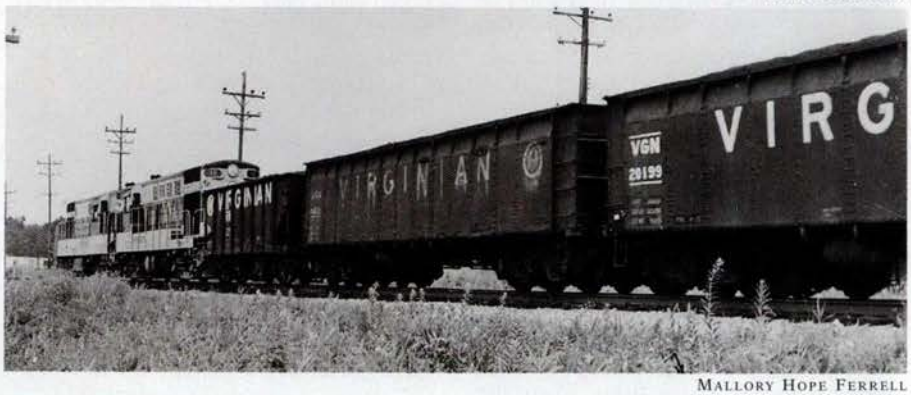

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VGN's famous "bathtub gons" and other coal cars are pushed by one of the road's 10 long-lived 2-10-10-2 Mallets under catenary near Monte Carlo and trail FM Train Masters at Portsmouth.

into Norfolk at 2:46. Their normal meeting point was Nutbush, Milepost 125.2, 6 miles east of the division point of Victoria. The schedule was somewhat leisurely, yet arrival at each end was often late, for the dispatcher frequently would put the consists "in the hole" to meet a coal train. There was no doubt where Virginian's priorities lay!

The passenger trains had steam power until the end, on January 29, 1956. Home from college for a few days, I was at trackside in Suffolk with my Rollei camera as the last varnish departed behind Pacific 212. Fittingly, the day was overcast and gray as the station agent gave a final wave to engineer W. H. Palmer, fireman G. E. Corning, and conductor J. C. Meadow on the westbound.

While most major roads had committed to diesels, Virginian took pride in burning what it hauled (the overhead wires were powered by a coal-burning generation plant at Narrows, Va.). So in 1950, VGN bought 15 relatively new 0-8-0 Lima switchers from C&O and designated them class SB. Built in 1942-43, they took over much of VGN's yard work, though two small, elderly 0-8-0's, Nos. 2 and 4, alternated switching at Suffolk, Va.

I'd like to claim the Virginian Railway as "my own," but that claim belongs to my late friend H. Reid. "Aitch" not only documented the comings and goings of his railway, he wrote its definitive history (*The Virginian Railway*,

Kalmbach, 1961; reprinted in 1970). After H. died, the mantle of Virginian "chief historian" went to Lloyd D. Lewis, like Reid a newspaperman, who has also written volumes on the road. Reid's favorite engines were, without a doubt, the five classes of 2-8-2's, though he was partial to the MB class, 420-461.

During my college days at Virginia Polytechnic Institute (VPI, now "Virginia Tech"), I would hike several miles to Merrimac, where N&W's Blacksburg Branch crossed over VGN's electrified main. I only regret I didn't photograph more of the electrics, but I depleted my film allotment on the remaining steam, which was in its final glory.

Following World War II, Virginian operations settled into a pattern that lasted for a decade. Mountain mainline and mine runs were held down by 50 aging 2-8-8-2's, smoking up the valleys and hollows to mining towns like Willabet, Slab Fork, Maben, and Coal Mountain. These were augmented by 7 used Santa Fe 2-8-8-2's, bought in 1947. Alco-Schenectady had built them for N&W in 1919, but they'd gone west during the war.

Shorter runs and locals were handled by 67 trusty 2-8-2's built by Baldwin 1905-12. The electrics ruled between Mullens and Roanoke, where 8 brand-new Lima 2-6-6-6's and 5 2-8-4's took over for the 243-mile flatland run to Norfolk. Based on C&O designs, these "Super Power" locomotives were Virginian's last new steam engines.

Virginian management finally decided to dieselize in the mid-1950's, ordering from Fairbanks-Morse 40 1600 h.p. B-B H16-44's and 25 Train Masters, FM's behemoth 2400 h.p. C-C model made famous in VGN black and yellow by Lionel's O-gauge model. (Initially, VGN's diesels carried no number on their flanks, later made a federal requirement.) Even old No. 4, "Bee" Moore's trusty Suffolk switcher, was replaced by a secondhand GE 44-tonner, numbered 6. The end of steam came rapidly as the FM's arrived from June 1954 to June '57 (two H16's, 48-49, were delivered in October '57 to replace wrecked 23 and 28).

By acquiring VGN on the first day of December 1959, N&W was able to convert to a more efficient "directional operation" utilizing the parallel mains.

Virginian's electric operation was kept until June 1962 before being decommissioned, but the Sewell's Point coal piers were immediately shut down in favor of N&W's at nearby Lambert's Point. All remaining Virginian steam locomotives were sold for scrap within two months after the merger. N&W had all EMD or Alco diesels, but after the big '64 merger, VGN's FM's had company on the N&W with units from Nickel Plate, Wabash, Pittsburgh & West Virginia, and Akron, Canton & Youngstown. An ex-VGN Train Master was the last one to operate in the U.S., in 1976.

Only one Virginian steamer survives: Moore's little SA 1910 Baldwin 0-8-0 Suffolk switcher 4, one of the first five engines ordered by newly formed VGN. Today the "Four Spot" is in Roanoke's Virginia Museum of Transportation.

Virginian's great coal piers have been scrapped, and the east end of the old Norfolk Division, between Chesapeake Bay and Abilene (MP 143.4), torn up. The division point of Victoria is trackless and almost a ghost town. In West Virginia, portions of the old main, plus many coal branches, are gone. Even the spectacular New River and East River bridges have been dismantled. Of the 50-plus active coal mines on VGN at the 1959 merger, fewer than 10 remain in production. For me, the Virginian remains as a vivid memory of the sounds of an MB 2-8-2 drifting through my bedroom window on a warm summer night. ■

Virginian fact file

(comparative figures are for 1929 and 1958)
Route-miles: 545; 596
Locomotives: 175; 120
Passenger cars: 62; 14
Freight cars: 10,273; 17,143
Headquarters city: Norfolk, Va.
Shop location: Princeton, W.Va.
Special interest group: Norfolk & Western Historical Society, P.O. Box 201, Forest, VA 24551-0101.
Sources: *The Virginian Railway*, H. Reid (Kalmbach, 1961); *Historical Guide to North American Railroads*, George H. Drury (Kalmbach, 1999); *The Virginian Era*, Lloyd D. Lewis (TLC Publishing, 1992); *Virginian Railway Locomotives*, Lewis (TLC, 1993).