

The Carolinas' prosperous interurban

Piedmont & Northern, a "Buck" Duke creation, lasted almost 60 years • By Larry Goolsby



Husky B-B+B-B freight motor 5611, built by GE in 1941 and P&N's last electric locomotive, rolls through the South Carolina countryside on June 27, 1950. On the previous day, steeple-cab 5106, one of P&N's six original Baldwin motors, switches at Greenville, S.C.

Two photos, H. M. Stange, Krambles-Peterson Archive

four Piedmont cities with electric trolley lines, along with Gastonia, N.C., Anderson, S.C., and Greenville, S.C. These were outgrowths of the many local hydroelectric systems along the Fall Line's rivers flowing toward the Atlantic Ocean. Larger power companies, including several owned by the Duke empire, gradually absorbed these independent operations, and by 1908 two Duke firms had bought the four trolley systems.

Duke's belief in the Piedmont's industrial potential, plus his existing investment in electric utilities, led him in 1909 to approve a plan connecting the region's major cities with an electric interurban railway. He directed that it would be a well-engineered, 1,500-volt D.C. system that could handle not just passenger traffic but also freight.

His wealth notwithstanding, Duke did not intend to finance the new railroad by himself, so he and his agents went on a barnstorming tour to raise stock subscriptions. They concentrated

The often misused label of "unique" might not be an exaggeration to describe the Piedmont & Northern Railway. It was the only large electrified system in the South; nearly all its lines duplicated and paralleled its competitors; it operated two disconnected divisions in two states; and it frequently was at odds with one of its large, powerful "steam road" neighbors. And yet, P&N was comfortably prosperous and independent right up until the moment its owners decided they wanted to move their investments into other ventures.

P&N was the brainchild of North

Carolina industrialist James Buchanan ("Buck") Duke, founder of the Duke tobacco fortune and an avid booster of the Piedmont region of North Carolina and South Carolina in the early 1900s. This area — from Anderson and Greenville, S.C., northeast to Charlotte and Durham, N.C. — tracked the Fall Line and in 1900 boasted a string of modest-sized cities. (The Fall Line is an imaginary boundary between the Piedmont region and the Atlantic coastal plain.)

Duke headquartered his businesses in Charlotte, largest city in the region. It happened that Charlotte was also one of

on owners of textile mills and other businesses who welcomed competition for the area's two major "steam" railroads, the Southern and the Seaboard Air Line. Duke's campaign was quickly successful, and the Piedmont & Northern Railway Co. was chartered in early 1911. Construction soon began.

Surveys for two major portions, one in each of the Carolinas, had been completed, and initial work was begun on those segments. Surveys for the connecting link between Spartanburg, S.C., and Gastonia, N.C., were incomplete, so it was postponed. Each state's initial mileage was placed under a separate subsidiary, Piedmont Traction Co. in North Carolina and Greenville, Spartanburg & Anderson Railway in South Carolina. Both took over certain right-of-way segments used by the four cities' trolley lines, including an 11-mile interurban route between Anderson and Belton, S.C.

PTC built west from Charlotte to Mount Holly, closely following the Seaboard, then shifted toward Gastonia and paralleled the Southern, a total of 23.5 miles. (A short spur to Belmont was added in 1916.) GS&A left Spartanburg westward to Greenville, then turned south to Belton (where the Anderson line connected), then angled southeast to Greenwood, paralleling the Southern for nearly the entire 89 miles.

The Charlotte-Gastonia line was done first, and opened with appropriate fanfare on July 4, 1912. Portions of the South Carolina route opened in mid-1911, but the line was not finished until early 1914. The two subsidiaries were absorbed into the P&N in mid-1914, becoming the North Carolina and South Carolina divisions. The company also built brick and tile-roofed freight and passenger stations, several large power substations, and yards and other facilities. It erected shops at Greenville and at Pinocca, not far west of Charlotte.

Quick prosperity

P&N's two divisions quickly prospered. The region's booming textile industry drove most of the freight traffic, and passenger business was equally brisk as patrons took a liking to "the electric." Passenger rolling stock came from traditional suppliers Jewett and Niles, plus some from yet another Duke enterprise, the Southern Car Co. of High Point,



Express motor 351, at Charlotte, was rebuilt, and semi-streamlined, by P&N in 1942 from the wrecked body of car 350, one of several it had bought from PRR in the 1930s. Car 2108, pictured at the Greenville, S.C., shop in June '50, was typical of the road's interurban fleet.

351, C. K. Marsh collection; 2108, George Krambles



N.C., including two open-platform parlor-observation cars. Freight was hauled by six Baldwin steeple-cabs, soon supplemented by six box-cabs from Alco-GE. Several small city cars helped cover business on the inherited local operations.

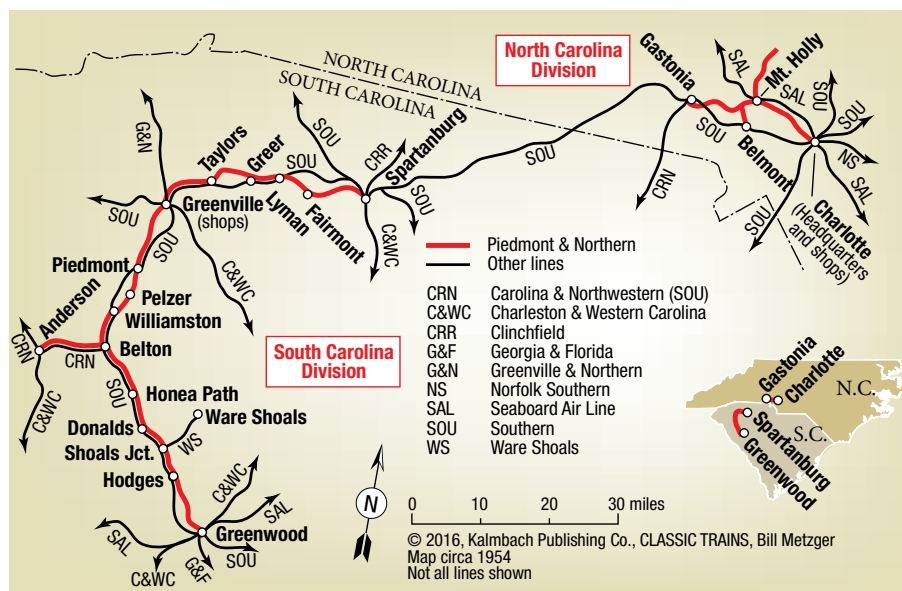
Increased freight traffic during World War I was more than P&N's original roster could manage, and with the big builders too busy to help, P&N built four large B-B+B-B freight locomotives in its own shops during 1917-18. P&N also briefly added an 0-4-4T Forney steam locomotive during the war to help

build and operate an extension to an Army camp at Spartanburg (P&N had earlier owned four other small steamers while the railroad was being built).

After P&N emerged from U.S. Railroad Administration control in 1920, the line needed a lot of rebuilding from the heavy use and deferred maintenance of the war years. Its finances were sound enough to allow physical plant upgrades, rebuilds of cars and locomotives, and continued industrial promotion. P&N boasted it served an average of "a mill to the mile," a phrase frequently used in the railroad's advertisements along with "The Great Electric System of the South."

Minding the gap

After the war and rehabilitation, P&N turned to another long-delayed need: the 51-mile gap. In 1927, after several years





Bright and shiny and just months old, P&N's C420s leave Spartanburg, S.C., April 17, 1966.

Two photos, J. David Ingles



A bit grimy, two of P&N's 10 RS3s from the 1950s rest at the Charlotte shop on May 19, 1966.

to the degree suffered by most neighboring roads. To fill its nearly empty passenger trains, P&N slashed fares to the point that so much passenger business returned, it had to buy some 60-foot coaches from the Pennsylvania and its affiliated Long Island Rail Road.

Just as during World War I, the Second World War brought a fresh round of new traffic. P&N bought more second-hand cars and locomotives, and even went to GE in 1941 for a new eight-axle motor, its first locomotive from an outside firm since 1912. And again, P&N emerged after the war in good shape. Unfortunately for its passenger business, though, customers returned to their growing love of the private automobile, and by 1950 P&N's passenger service was not unlike the sparsely filled trains of the early Depression years. P&N ended its interurban service on both divisions in 1951, three years after the final city streetcar operation, in Gastonia.

Electric to diesel

The demise of passenger trains came as P&N's electric power infrastructure was aging and prices for copper were high. These factors resulted in the greatest change yet in P&N's character: dieselization. Ten Alco RS3s began arriving in 1950, going to work first on South Carolina Division freights. The division soon was soon diesel-only, and many of the electrics were stored. The North Carolina Division continued under wires until 1954 when six Alco S4s took over, except for a short stretch of street operation in

of legal preparation and a delay occasioned by James Duke's death in 1925, P&N submitted its plans to the Interstate Commerce Commission. Once again, the new trackage would closely follow the Southern's, and the giant Class 1, not enthused at more competition from the small but aggressive P&N, objected. P&N's legal advisors brushed off Southern's move; they believed P&N was an electric interurban that, unlike "steam railroads," did not need Interstate Commerce Commission permission for line expansion, and had filed with the ICC simply for its information. (P&N also at various times envisioned other expansions including northeast to Durham and southwest to Atlanta.)

But in an unexpected twist, the ICC ruled it would evaluate P&N's request under steam railroad requirements, saying that although P&N was built as an interurban, its freight business had become dominant and it was now, in effect,

a steam road that used electric locomotives. Using steam railroad criteria, the ICC found P&N did not make a convincing case for its missing link. P&N decided to begin grading anyway but a court injunction quickly stopped that. Appeals by P&N wound their way through the courts until May 1932, when the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the ICC's stance. The ruling not only ended plans for the link but also set a precedent that was applied in later cases of other electric lines, including Pacific Electric, that had changed character since being built.

Despite the failure to connect its two divisions, P&N ended the 1920s in excellent financial condition. One boost came from a 9-mile spur from Mount Holly north to a new Duke Power Co. coal-fired power plant in 1928, which required P&N's shops to build another eight-axle freight motor. But the Great Depression soon forced freight and passenger revenues downward, although not



S4 1003, at Charlotte, sports the large initials applied to some P&N diesels late in the game.

J. David Ingles collection

Charlotte. Two box-cab motors kept working there until May 21, 1958, when all electric operation ended.

Transformed into a dieselized, freight-only line, P&N continued its historic pattern of modernization and expansion. The branch at Mount Holly was extended to Riverbend, N.C., in 1959 to reach another Duke power plant, and further lengthened to a total of 24 miles in 1965 to serve a much larger plant at Terrell. The expanded coal traffic required more diesels, and two C420s arrived from Alco in late 1965. All P&N diesels wore black paint with yellow striping.

Meanwhile, P&N had crossed swords with the Southern again, this time over a tunnel at Spartanburg. First proposed in 1930, the tunnel would allow both P&N and the Charleston & Western Carolina (an Atlantic Coast Line subsidiary, absorbed by ACL in 1959) to connect directly with the Clinchfield rather than pay switching charges to the Southern for slow transfer moves across its busy Washington–Atlanta main line. Southern fought the project until the U.S. Supreme Court finally ended the litigation in 1961 and allowed the tunnel to be constructed; it opened in 1963.

Although P&N was never Southern's favorite neighbor, Seaboard Air Line was a friendly partner that connected with both P&N divisions. When the Duke family decided in the mid-1960s to divest its substantial holdings in the P&N, Seaboard was happy to absorb the railroad. Getting the merger application ready for the ICC coincided with consummation of the ACL–Seaboard merger, which took place July 1, 1967, so the P&N acquisition was pushed back a bit. For one last time, Southern objected to P&N's plans and argued it should be allowed to buy the South Carolina Division. The ICC did not agree, and in July 1969 the full merger was approved as proposed, although by this time into SAL successor Seaboard Coast Line.

The SCL takeover finally allowed the former P&N's two divisions to be united by commonly owned rails, although hardly via the direct route P&N's founders had wanted. Nevertheless, the P&N trackage provided SCL with important new business and expanded its reach into several new communities. SCL kept all the ex-P&N lines, and the smaller road's diesel fleet blended well with the many Alcos SCL inherited from the Seaboard. The C420s eventually wound up in Louisville & Nashville's fleet.

SCL successor CSX continues to operate most Piedmont & Northern lines today. North Carolina DOT purchased the Mount Holly–Gastonia line in 1991 as part of its corridor preservation plan, and in 2011 refurbished the line, which it labels its Piedmont & Northern Rail Corridor. Originally leased to Patriot Rail, it now is being operated by Iowa Pacific Holdings, which created a subsidiary, Piedmont Railway.

CSX still uses the former South Carolina Division from Spartanburg to Greenville and south to Pelzer, where short line Greenville & Western takes over to a point 3 miles south of Belton; the P&N from there to Greenwood has been abandoned. Pickens Railway operates the Belton–Anderson branch.

Several pieces of P&N equipment survive, notably small box-cab 5103 (one of the remaining two when electric operation ended in 1958) at the North Carolina Transportation Museum in Spencer. In South Carolina, office car *Carolina* and interurban 2102 are preserved at the Greenwood Museum. 📌

P&N fact file



(comparative figures are for 1929 and 1968)

Route-miles: 127; 150

Locomotives: 17; 18

Freight cars: 340; 23

Passenger cars: 30; 0

Headquarters city: Charlotte, N.C.

Special interest group: Atlantic Coast Line–Seaboard Air Line Historical Society, www.aclsal.org

Recommended reading: *Piedmont & Northern*, by Thomas T. Fetters and Peter W. Swanson Jr. (Golden West Books, 1974)

Sources: Book cited above, plus *Historical Guide to North American Railroads* (Kalmbach, 2014)