

The difficult life of the Tennessee Central

For seven decades, the railroad Jere Baxter built faced overwhelming odds • **By Clifford J. Downey**



Southern Junction Yard, 1965: Train 81 is in, and next to it with two RS36s and FA 801, 84 is ready to go. At left are an RS3 and a Baldwin.

J. David Ingles

In Tennessee in the 1890s, the Louisville & Nashville dominated rail transportation. L&N and its tightly controlled subsidiary, the Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis, controlled all lines entering Nashville, the state's capital and second largest city. Moreover, either L&N or "the NC" also served the state's other major cities of Memphis, Chattanooga, and Knoxville.

L&N and NC fought hard to protect their turf, so when Jere Baxter announced plans to build a railroad west toward Nashville, the big roads fought him. Baxter persevered and won, and this battle helped turn the Tennessee Central Railway into a legend.

Baxter was born in 1852 into a

wealthy Nashville family. At age 30 he became president of the Memphis & Charleston; later, he developed the industrial cities of Sheffield, Ala., and South Pittsburg, Tenn.

After losing Tennessee's 1890 election for governor, Baxter returned to railroading. His goal was to build a line between Nashville and Knoxville, but owing to limited funds he had to start small. On August 25, 1893, he and some associates chartered the Tennessee Central Railroad (no relation to the same-name abandoned narrow-gauge between Spring City and Jewett, Tenn.). It was to run from Monterey, Tenn., east to Glen Mary and a connection with the Cincinnati, New Orleans & Texas Pacific (the

junction wound up being at Emory Gap). Grading and track-laying through the rugged north-south hills was more expensive than anticipated, the Panic of 1893 ensued, and TC entered receivership in April 1895. Undeterred, Baxter secured money from St. Louis investors, formed a new company — Tennessee Central Railway — and bought the old TC at auction in 1897.

The Monterey–Emory Gap line was finished by late 1900, and in 1903 a short extension from Emory Gap north into Harriman opened. Meanwhile, in 1901 TC arranged to buy the Nashville & Knoxville, a project of Pennsylvania iron baron Alexander S. Crawford to move out coal and ore, which ran from Monterey west to Lebanon. Baxter also tried to buy NC's light-traffic Nashville–Lebanon branch but was rebuffed. Likewise, TC was denied access by the L&N and NC to Nashville's new Union Station and terminal facilities. Using several of Baxter's "paper railroads," TC built from Lebanon to Nashville and erected its own terminal facilities. On May 1, 1902, those companies and the N&K were merged into the new Tennessee Central Railroad Co.

Accompanied by much fanfare, the first TC train rolled into Nashville on May 27, 1902. Baxter then pushed on northwest 95 miles to Hopkinsville, Ky., and a connection with Illinois Central, opened in early 1904. Owing to interference from L&N and NC, this line had to go around Nashville on a belt line in-



Tennessee Central's only tunnel, through Walden's Ridge 3 miles west of Rockwood, has just seen the passage of Harriman–Nashville train 1, behind 4-8-2 No. 553, in November 1947.

Robert Holly

stead of directly through downtown. Also, construction costs were inflated by the need to build many trestles between Nashville and Clarksville, Tenn.

Although it was ultimately doomed, thus did Middle Tennessee finally have a railroad wholly within the state connecting the capital city with East Tennessee.

Dispelling a myth

Contrary to popular belief, TC did not attempt to push its main line through downtown Nashville in a “nighttime raid.” On January 20, 1903, months *after* belt line construction had begun, workers did lay 500 feet of track along Nashville’s Front Street (later First Avenue), but it was to serve local businesses and TC had authority from the city to do so. A track foreman decided to work at night to avoid daytime street traffic, but he failed to notify city officials. Congestion quickly developed, and after midnight the mayor halted the work. This gave rise to the “raid” myth.

Amid this construction, in May 1903, Baxter resigned as president. L&N and NC management resented him, and this was reflected in their business dealings with TC. Baxter believed the situation might improve if he stepped aside, but the animosity remained. Baxter died on February 29, 1904, at age 52.

Unpaid construction debts forced TC into receivership on March 18, 1904. This ended three months later, but TC still had a high debt load and meager earnings. After failing to find a buyer, TC’s owners in 1905 — in a split that would be a harbinger of the road’s eventual fate — leased the road to CNO&TP parent Southern Railway and Illinois Central. Southern leased the Harriman–Nashville portion, and two-thirds of the rolling stock, while IC leased the west end and the remaining equipment. Yards and terminal tracks in Nashville were operated by Nashville Terminal Co., the “paper railroad” that had built them.

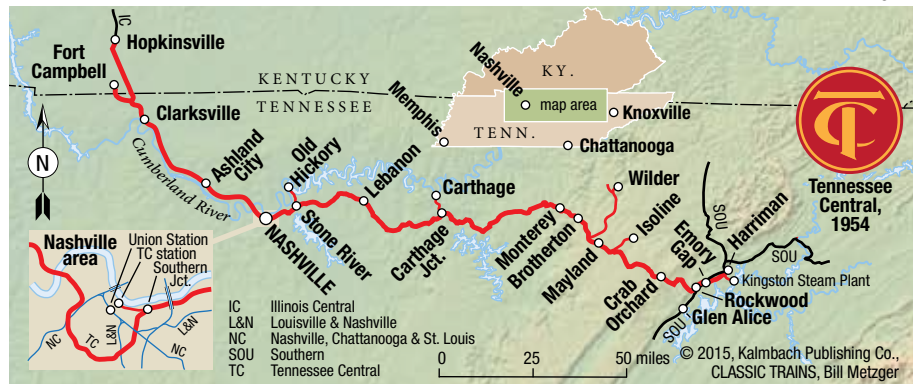
After failing to make money on TC, Southern and IC cancelled the leases and TC resumed independent operation July 1, 1908. It kept losing money, though, and entered receivership again December 31, 1912. Reorganization was futile, and on January 10, 1922, it was sold at auction. The new buyers named it Tennessee Central Railway Co., but this TC had no legal connection to the prior one.

During the auction the prior TC’s debt was discharged. This allowed the



Truly chugging away, an RS36/RS3 duo lifts coal off the L&N, bound for TVA’s Kingston Steam Plant, out of Harriman on September 21, 1965. That’s Southern’s CNO&TP main line at the left.

J. David Ingles



new owners to start fresh, and soon three orders for new Alco locomotives were placed. Mikados 601–608 and 701–704 arrived in 1922 and ’24, respectively, followed by 4-8-2s 551–554 in 1926; they replaced 2-8-0s, 4-4-0s, and 4-6-0s. TC also bought 300 new coal hoppers in 1922 and six new steel passenger cars.

TC recorded a meager profit for 1922 of \$18,455, which rose to \$219,904 by 1929. The reorganized TC weathered the Great Depression in decent shape, losing money only during 1931–33. Other notable events included discontinuing the last Nashville–Hopkinsville passenger trains, on May 19, 1930. TC also bought its first diesel, 660 h.p. “high hood” Alco No. 50, in 1939, then S1 No. 51 in 1941.

Boom, coal, and bust

As on all roads, World War II was a busy time. Much of TC’s increased traffic was to and from Camp Campbell (later Fort Campbell), established in 1942 straddling the Kentucky border west of

Clarksville, which TC served exclusively. TC hauled 436,477 passengers in 1943 compared with 63,012 in 1940, and in 1943 recorded its greatest profit, \$480,208. To handle the traffic, TC bought three small 4-6-2s from IC and four Norfolk & Western 2-6-6-2s.

After the war, traffic plummeted, and TC lost \$506,472 in 1946. Despite this, a group of Northeast investors, led by J. L. Armstrong, saw potential and purchased the TC in mid-1946.

They invested heavily in new diesels, buying Baldwin’s first DRS-4-4-1000 road-switchers (three, Nos. 75–77, at \$105,000 each) in 1948 and then in ’49, five Alco FA1s (801–805) and one FB1 (801B) at \$148,000 each. Although none had steam generators, a Baldwin or an FA was common on the passenger trains in warm weather. All wore a colorful maroon and yellow scheme, and they helped transform the 1948 deficit of \$216,776 into a 1949 profit of \$123,048.

Four Alco RS3s (251–254) arrived in



TC Nos. 75–77 were Baldwin's first DRS-4-4-1000 road-switchers, predating a demonstrator. No. 75 works in Nashville's Southern Junction Yard, TC's hub, in April '66. They served 18 years.

October 1950, and the '50s would be a decade of boom and bust. Electric utility Tennessee Valley Authority in 1951 began constructing its Kingston Steam Plant near Harriman. It was predicted to burn 4.3 million tons of coal a year, and coal businessmen and the TC were eager to cash in. TC in 1951 borrowed \$2.2 million from the Reconstruction Finance Corp. to buy four more RS3s (255–258) and 200 coal hoppers, and to lay a 7.5-mile spur near Monterey to new mines. These RS3s, all with steam generators as 251 and 252 had, arrived in early 1952, and within weeks all remaining active TC steam engines were sidelined, though several weren't retired until 1955.

Longtime TC President Hugh Wright Stanley retired in 1954. He'd been named trustee of the old TC in 1917 and assumed the presidency of the new TC in '22. After Armstrong's group bought TC in 1946, Stanley was forced out, but he returned in '47. He'd spearheaded TC's rebuilding during the 1920s and ably guided it through the Great Depression.

The Kingston power plant began operations in 1954. For 1956, coal traffic helped TC record a \$278,079 profit, and, with another RFC loan, TC acquired two more RS3s, 259 and 260, which introduced TC's black-and-white livery. The coal boom quickly turned to bust, however, as several TC-served mines lost their TVA contracts in the late '50s. The road lost money in 1957, but a rebound in coal traffic, plus "cost-saving measures" (reductions in maintenance) helped produce a profit of \$80,971 in 1959, the last year TC made money.

Inevitable failure

Ultimately, TC could not survive. As an east-west road in a region of north-south traffic, it was an easy target for truck traffic on paved roads and then In-

terstate 40. In Nashville, TC was a token player, a geographically challenged railroad serving no other big cities. Its last passenger trains, Nos. 1 and 2 linking Harriman and Nashville, ended July 31, 1955, two years after the schedule was changed from two trains meeting to one train making a Nashville–Harriman turnaround; overnights 3 and 4, with a Knoxville–Nashville Pullman, had come off in 1949. TC scrapped or put most of its passenger cars into work-train service.

By the early '60s things were looking bleak, though TC did acquire more new Alcos, "trading in" FAs (but scrapping them on-site) on five RS36s (301–305) in 1962–63. In 1966, TC traded parts from the last FA, 801, and RS3 254 for two C420s (400–401), and sold the Baldwins to Alco for three former Reading RS3s. These became 248–250, and TC leased five ex-Reading coaches for a short-lived (1966–67) excursion venture.

Adding to the pessimism, in early 1965 the last major coal mine on TC shut down. TC lost \$1.2 million for 1966 but still had to make payments on the RFC loans from the 1950s. The U.S. Treasury Department agreed to push back the loans' due date to April 1, 1967, but TC missed it. Financial woes increased when deferred maintenance began to take its toll as eastbound freight 84 derailed at Carthage Junction on September 22, 1967, damaging RS3 260 beyond repair.

On December 14, 1967, TC filed for bankruptcy again, citing \$925,017 in assets against \$8,905,877 in liabilities, including the RFC loans. Prominent Nashville businessman A. Battle Rodes was named trustee. His task worsened when train 81 hit a rockslide near Brotherton on March 23, 1968, damaging RS36 302 and C420 401. Throughout 1968, several plans were drafted to save the railroad. Employing 300 people and serving many



S1 switcher 51, posing on June 2, 1965, stuck around Nashville. Now it's a roadside display.

Two photos, J. David Ingles

remote towns dependent on rail traffic, TC was not without value. The Tennessee legislature even passed a bill to buy the line and lease it to a private operator, but the bill was vetoed by Gov. Buford Ellington, an ally of the L&N.

Illinois Central, supported by the rail unions, made an offer for the entire TC, but after much wrangling, Rodes crafted a three-way split that reflected the 1905 solution. IC paid \$600,000 for the 85-mile west end, from Hopkinsville to Nashville but minus the Nashville belt, which TC in 1965 had sold to the state for the proposed I-440. (Had TC kept running, rights on L&N across Nashville would've replaced the belt, but I-440 was delayed until 1970 so that became moot.)

L&N — which on May 31, 1968, had

Tennessee Central fact file



(comparative figures are for 1929 and 1966)

Route-Miles: 296; 284

Locomotives: 41; 21

Freight cars: 663; 557

Passenger cars: 33; 0

Headquarters city: Nashville, Tenn.

Special interest groups: Tennessee Central Railway Museum, Nashville, www.tcry.org; Cookeville Depot Museum, www.cookevilledepot.com

Recommended reading: *The Tennessee Central Story*, by Gary W. Dolzall, September and October 1987 TRAINS magazine; *Tennessee Central Railway: History, Locomotives and Cars*, by Cliff Downey (TLC Publishing, 2005)

Sources: *Historical Guide to North American Railroads* (Kalmbach, 2014); Tennessee State Archives; *Railway Equipment Register*; *Official Guides*

bought 10 TC diesels and 25 cars, immediately leasing them back to TC to keep it running — took the 131-mile center portion, Nashville–Crossville, plus three branches, for \$525,000, and Southern paid \$340,000 for the 30-mile east end. TC ran its last trains on August 31, 1968, ending seven mostly difficult decades.

The ex-Reading RS3s and TC 251 and 259 went to the Alco-heavy L&N, as did the seven newer Alcos. IC got the other four RS3s but didn't use them. High-hood 50 had been cut up in 1963, while S1 51 was sold to western Kentucky short line Cadiz Railroad (KAY-dizz) as No. 8; it would survive Cadiz's shutdown and is displayed alongside U.S. 68 near I-24.

About half of the TC remains. The 17-mile line from Hopkinsville to just south of the Kentucky line near Fort Campbell is run by the Army to serve the base. From Nashville west to Ashland City is short line Nashville & Western (earlier, Nashville & Ashland City), now associated with Nashville & Eastern, which runs 92 miles from the capital to Algood, just east of Monterey, and the Old Hickory and Carthage branches. Norfolk South-



An eastbound local behind RS3 251, one of three repainted (along with 258 and ex-Reading 249) into blue and gray in or after 1966, switches cars at the Lebanon depot on May 22, 1968.

R. R. Wallin collection

ern runs the east end from Emory Gap to Rockwood and leases the line from there up the 2.6 percent grade to the Cumberland Plateau on to Crab Orchard, where Franklin Industrial Minerals has a fleet of ex-NS diesels to haul out aggregates.

Best of all, one can still ride the TC main line between Nashville, Lebanon, and Monterey thanks to the N&E and

two other entities. One is Nashville's RTA, which runs the *Music City Star* commuter trains as far as Lebanon. The other is Nashville's Tennessee Central Railway Museum, housed at the old TC Southern Junction yard site, which runs occasional excursions on the N&E, allowing passengers the chance to enjoy "the railroad that Jere Baxter built." ■