



CSX DOWNGRADES THE CLINCHFIELD ROUTE

# A Death in the Family

BY ERIC MILLER AND RON FLANARY/PHOTOS BY THE AUTHORS

*“EVERYTHING WAS GOOD and better than he could have hoped for, better than he ever deserved; only, whatever it was and however good it was, it wasn't what you once had been, and had lost, and could never have again, and once in a while, once in a long time, you remembered, and knew how far you were away, and it hit you hard enough, that little while it lasted, to break your heart.”*  
— James Agee, *A Death In the Family*  
Say it isn't so.

Alas, it is so. Hard to believe, but the mighty Clinchfield Railroad route has fallen silent, at least the Clinchfield as we have known and loved and cherished it.

Just over one hundred years ago, on February 8, 1915, the sharp ring of a spike maul striking steel echoed off Sandy Ridge at the south end of the siding at remote Trammel, Va. The final spike of the Carolina, Clinchfield & Ohio Railroad was driven, and the railroad all the way from connections in Spartanburg, S.C., to the Chesapeake & Ohio's Big Sandy Division at Elkhorn City, Ky., was open for through traffic.

What followed was one of the most distinctive eastern coal operations, becoming the stuff of legend. The Clinchfield's fame in the world of railroad enthusiasts was far greater than the

line's relatively diminutive size, only 277 miles in length. The Clinchfield featured 54 tunnels — ten miles of tunnels in total — and over two and a half miles of bridges; most of the line was on curves, and the few straightways were often quite short. The railroad crossed four distinct mountain ranges and reached eight distinct summits, including the famous crest of the Blue Ridge at Altapass, N.C. It was home to thundering 4-6-6-4 Challengers rolling solid trains of citrus reefers bound for the Heartland, dusty black, full throttle SD45-2s, endless long coal drags and fast time freights, and pushers and locals called “Shifters.”

OPPOSITE: For a brief time, Clinchfield's “final four” F-units were based at Dante, Va., for mine run service. Clinchfield FP7 No. 200 (initially purchased in 1952 to handle the road's lone passenger train until discontinued in 1954) shows the effects of years of heavy service lugging bituminous and general freight through the Appalachians. RON FLANARY ABOVE: The hills are ablaze with fall color as SD70MAC No. 4552 heads up a loaded southbound coal train at Dante Yard on October 20, 2007. This coal train will pass through the mostly empty yard without a pause. ERIC MILLER

In 1972, as part of the growing closeness between itself and its corporate children, Seaboard Coast Line created the "Family Lines," a marketing name that combined SCL, Louisville & Nashville, Clinchfield, the Georgia Railroad, and the Atlanta & West Point plus Western Railway of Alabama. Yet it was still Clinchfield, with the "CRR" reporting mark proudly displayed on locomotive cabs and rolling stock. Timetables and paperwork were still emblazoned "Clinchfield Railroad Company."

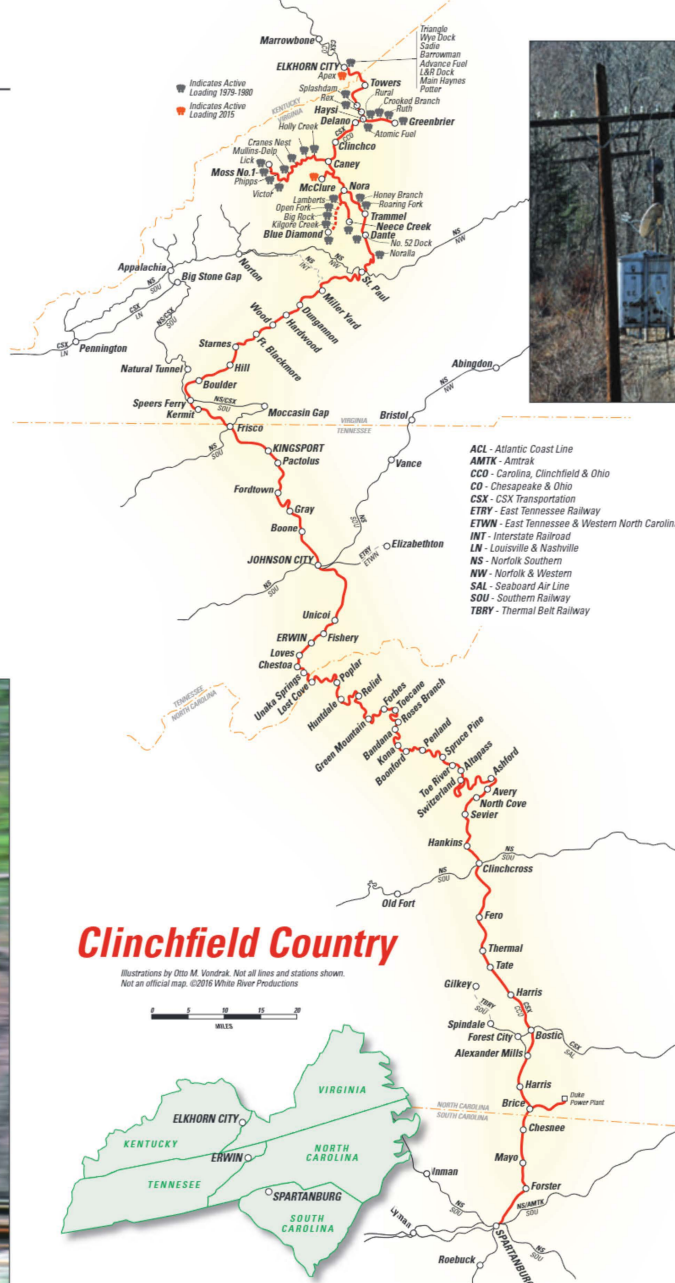
Not even the creation of the Seaboard System Railroad in 1983, which consolidated the Family Lines railroads

into a single company, could wipe away the Clinchfield. For a time, the line was the Clinchfield Division of the Seaboard System, before it was split between the Corbin and Florence Divisions. CSX Transportation replaced Seaboard System in 1986. Yet, in the heart,

deep in the heart of its workers and its customers and its communities and its fans, it was still the Clinchfield. Name changes and new paint and updated signals and ways of operation could not change that simple fact. It was still the Clinchfield. And so it shall ever be.



**RIGHT:** The Virginia mountains are ablaze in fall colors on October 13, 1980, at Dante. While the 3004 is still wearing its original gray and yellow paint scheme applied at the La-Grange plant of EMD in 1966, GP38 number 2004 and her two trailing units are decked out in the colorful Family Lines livery. **BELOW:** One of the mine runs out of Dante was the Rex Turn, rolling along the main line between Delano and Haysi, Va., on April 22, 1980. The lead SD45 is a former Seaboard Coast Line unit swapped in 1977 as part of deal to send the Clinchfield's seven GE U36Cs to the SCL in exchange for a like number of EMDs. RON FLANARY PHOTOS



**TOP:** It's morning on the last day of 2007. CW44AC No. 259 and a sister are grinding up out of the south end of Elkhorn City and into the Breaks with a loaded southbound coal train. Just ahead are Pool Point Tunnel and another 30-plus miles of grueling uphill grade. ERIC MILLER

**C**oal, the rock upon which the Clinchfield was built, is in decline throughout the Appalachian region. At one time the Clinchfield boasted no fewer than 30 different coal loading points between Elkhorn City, Ky., and Dante, Va., alone. Today, that number has dropped to only two, both located near Elkhorn City. Stiff competition from cheaper, easier-mined, low-sulfur coal from Wyoming's Powder River Basin is one of the reasons. New seams of recoverable coal in the Appalachians are becoming harder to find, and more expensive and difficult to mine. Coal production now is half what it was in 2008. Abundant and cheap natural gas has been a killer as well. As a result, coal trains on the Clinchfield became ever-increasingly rarer, conspicuous by their absence, on a line where they were once so prevalent. In the last few years traffic was down, and in a big way.

In a rail system that thrives on capacity, the former Clinchfield is one of four north-south corridors that were once competing with each other for traffic. With CSX able to choose from the former L&N routes from Cincinnati to Atlanta or Louisville, or the former Atlantic Coast Line from Richmond to points south, the Clinchfield was just too much railroad for the traffic available.



Eastern Kentucky coal was the lifeblood of the Clinchfield, with much of the production destined for generating stations in the Carolinas. One of the first steps taken by CSX as early as 1980 was to connect the nearby L&N and C&O lines at Deane, Ky. This new diversion sent a lot of traffic down the Clinchfield, totaling more than 12 million tons by 1982. Coal traffic increased through the 1990s, until many of the power plants either converted to gas or closed down. Overhead bulk commodities and general freight traffic contributed to the bottom line, but CSX shifted these trains to faster, more direct routes to provide more capacity for coal.

There were rumblings and grumbings before the end, half-whispered rumors, as if to speak them too loudly might give them the weight of truth. The proverbial handwriting was on the wall, but no one dared to read it.

At 7:00 a.m. on October 15, 2015 — just over a century after the line's opening — a contingent of grim-faced CSX officials from Jacksonville faced the dedicated employees at the Clinchfield's old general office building in Erwin, Tenn. These were the people who, day in, day out, continued the tradition of outstanding railroad service on this strategic corridor. The message was unfathomable: This line would no longer be a through route. The yard,



**TOP:** A southbound unit coal train roars out of Tunnel 29 at Speers Ferry, Va., on June 14, 1987. The lead SD40-2's rusty nose is showing the effects similar to a horse that's been ridden hard and put away wet. This 1,116-foot bore is mid-way between the big bridge over Copper Creek and the much longer (4,135-foot) Clinch Mountain Tunnel.

**ABOVE:** Early evidence of the Chessie-Seaboard Coast Line combination as CSX Corporation is apparent in this October 14, 1980, scene at Dante, Clinchfield No. 800 (and her three sisters) are working a mine run while C&O No. 4264 is arriving with a Shelby-Dante turn. The C&O crew was attempting to double over its coal train in unfamiliar territory. The Shelby-Dante operation was a new aspect of the corporate amalgamation of the two railroad companies. RON FLANARY PHOTOS



**ABOVE:** It's cold and rainy in October 1990 at Kingsport, Tenn. Lined up on the main is a three-car train bound for Spartanburg carrying officials from Eastman Chemical and CSX. The mission is to show off improvements to the big shipper and explore ways to improve service. RON FLANARY

**LEFT:** The rumors swirling around about the line were reaching fever pitch when we hiked up to the south end of Sandy Ridge Tunnel on October 10, 2015. We were quickly rewarded with the appearance of southbound time freight Q696. We didn't see another train on the Clinchfield that day. Less than a week later, on October 15, came the dreaded announcement from CSX. ERIC MILLER

**BOTTOM:** It's a muggy evening on August 20, 1993, as a CTC-controlled meet takes place at Green Mountain, N.C. A northbound empty hopper train is in the clear on the 7,007-foot siding as a southbound coal load continues the long grind from Erwin to the top of the Blue Ridge at Altapass. RON FLANARY

engine facilities, car shop, in fact all terminal functions would cease to be. An as-needed freight from Bostic, N.C., to Kingsport, Tenn., would handle the remaining general freight business, and only a few remaining Norfolk Southern unit coal trains will operate between St. Paul, Va., and Frisco, Tenn. Norfolk Southern would also continue its service to the giant Eastman Chemical complex in Kingsport using its six miles of trackage rights from Frisco.

On the north end of the railroad, only as-needed runs to the still-operating Alpha Resource mine at McClure, Va., would run out of Shelby, Ky. The 20-mile segment between McClure and St. Paul would be withdrawn from service. That stretch included the very spot where Clinchfield founder George L. Carter saw his railroad vision materialize at Trammel some 100 years earlier.

**RIGHT:** With a friendly wave from the engineer, Extra 120 South flies across Copper Creek Viaduct near Speers Ferry, Va., on October 20, 2007. Behind the power are 110 loads of coal for South Carolina Public Service Authority.

**BOTTOM:** CSX Train U299, a loaded southbound South Carolina Public Service Authority unit coal train, rolls out of the south end of Miller Yard and approaches Townes Tunnel on August 14, 2008. Clinchfield had several tunnels with the distinctive "horseshoe" shaped portals. CW44AC No. 505 is in the lead.

**OPPOSITE:** From high atop Hills Mills Tunnel, we witness 110 CEFX coal loads coming south out of the deep and rugged Breaks on May 24, 2008. While the "Grand Canyon of the South" is mostly behind them, there's still plenty of grade to climb, with the summit inside Sandy Ridge Tunnel still 24 miles away. ERIC MILLER PHOTOS

**A**ND SO IT WAS OVER for this storied and beloved railroad through the very heart of the rugged Appalachian Mountains. Decisions had been made. The deed is done. As James Agee wrote, "The axe can fall at any moment, on any neck, without any warning or any regard for justice." And so it came to pass for the legendary Clinchfield Route.

The Clinchfield was an artery, through which coal, its lifeblood, flowed, and the lack of that coal eventually finished off the line. The non-coal traffic, once so noticeable amongst the parade of coal trains, was not enough to save the Clinchfield. What remains is essentially two branchlines, each with dubious prospects for the future.

Now, the last time freight has traversed the length of the Clinchfield, and the last coal trains have tied up at Shelby and Spartanburg. Silence now reigns inside Sandy Ridge Tunnel, where only recently modern General Electric units filled the bore with sound and exhaust smoke as they crawled over the top with a mile of coal and steel hanging on their rear knuckle. As the blaze of fall color peaks across these mountains, a strange, new stillness and quiet has fallen, a silence not heard for one hundred years.

Clinchfield, we miss you already. ☐

