

A TRIBUTE TO THE P-D DISTRICT

# Virginian Farewell

BY SAMUEL PHILLIPS/PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

**R**AILROADS AND THE PHOTOGRAPHY of them are addicting, but there are some routes that are particularly attractive. The old Princeton-Deepwater District of the former Virginian Railway was a spectacular operation to witness firsthand. The incredible scenery, the experience of intense mountain railroading, and the people who made it happen all made it hard to resist.

Norfolk Southern suspended regular freight movements and “mothballed” the Princeton-Deepwater District on October 1, 2015, yet another victim of shifting coal markets and slumping domestic production.

The P-D District spans 48 miles between Elmore Yard in Mullens, West Virginia, and Kellysville, West Virginia. Completed in 1908, its primary goal was to haul coal out of a region in southern West Virginia untouched by rival railroads Chesapeake & Ohio and Norfolk & Western. The Virginian Railway quickly became a major player and one of the busiest coal-hauling railroads in the country. Founder Henry Huddleston Rogers spared no expense when he built the Virginian, and its well-constructed right-of-way commanded respect from the industry.

Deep in Appalachian mountain territory, the P-D District was home to

the steepest uphill grade on the mainline to Roanoke. Clark’s Gap Grade starts at Elmore Yard (milepost 375) and tops out at Algonquin (milepost 363) with the steepest portion being near 2 percent. Since the railroad’s opening, the climb has always pushed the railroad’s equipment to the max and put on quite a show. East of Clark’s Gap the line evens out, and the remaining run to Roanoke is not nearly as grueling as the climb up from Elmore.

The railroad liked to run big trains out of Clark’s Gap, but couldn’t put the huge trains together at Elmore and run them out because of the upcoming grade. They would therefore run a cut of cars

**OPPOSITE:** Just a little over a week before the Virginian closure, Norfolk Southern train U86 roars upgrade across the magnificent trestle at Garwood, W.Va., with NS C40-9W No. 9192 leading 100 loads of coal bound for Belews Creek, N.C., on September 20, 2015. This was my last Garwood experience, but, boy, was it memorable. **ABOVE:** On a peaceful September 30, 2014, night, a single C40-9 shoves hard on the rear of Train 810 eastbound across Black Lick Viaduct in Kegley, W.Va. Black Lick is the tallest trestle on the entire Virginian standing at nearly 250 feet in the air.





ABOVE: On September 22, 2012, Norfolk Southern train U86 grinds upgrade across the trestle at Covel, W.Va., led by EMD SD70ACe demonstrator No. 2012 with a utility train in tow en route to the Belews Creek Steam Station near Winston-Salem, N.C. RIGHT: Train No. 811 roars upgrade through the deep rock cut at Oney Gap with a visiting Canadian Pacific ES44AC leading the way on December 18, 2014. The train is down to a crawl as the locomotives slip on the snow and ice-slickened rail while ascending the 1.5 percent grade.



up the mountain, and send the power back to Elmore for a second cut. Both cuts would then be doubled together at Clark's Gap to make a large drag for the run to Roanoke. The process, called "hill runs," was derived from Virginian days, but Norfolk Southern still utilized this method until the line's demise. Even with today's high-horsepower diesels, a modern hill run had to have at least five or six locomotives on the train to make the grade.

After several strikes in the early 1920s brought on by employees complaining of the "hellish conditions" of nearly suffocating through the five tunnels climbing Clark's Gap mountain, The Virginian electrified the 134 miles between Mullens, W.Va., and Roanoke, Va., between 1925 and 1926. Despite

the high initial investment, this move cut the railroad's annual operating costs almost in half. The entire P-D was included in this project. The Virginian soon thereafter purchased a fleet of Alco-Westinghouse EL-3A "Squarehead" electric locomotives to power its trains. Steam-powered hill runs would crawl up the mountain at a little better than 7 m.p.h., while the electrics could haul at double that speed.

The Virginian later acquired EL-2B

electrics in 1948 from General Electric, which were the world's most powerful locomotives at the time. A set of them could produce over 6,800 hp and 275,000 pounds of tractive effort.

In the diesel era, Virginian acquired a fleet of beefy H24-66 Trainmasters manufactured by Fairbanks-Morse. The blue-and-yellow paint applied to those locomotives is probably the most well-known and eye-catching scheme the Virginian had. Norfolk Southern carried

on the tradition when SD70ACe No. 1069 was chosen to wear classic Virginian paint for the heritage unit program.

**Merger and Modern Times**

The Virginian Railway was swallowed up by Norfolk & Western on December 1,

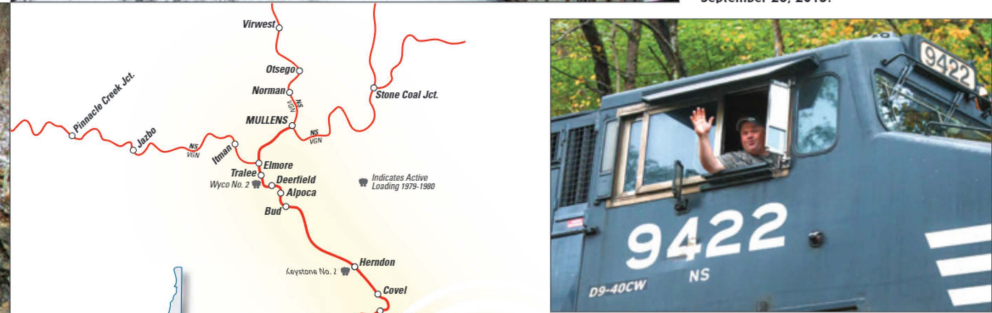
1959. The electrification was dismantled in 1962 and most catenary poles were quickly removed. In the 1980s, NS ripped up the second track starting at Herndon to Algonquin and Weyanoke to Matoaka. Drastic changes came to the railroad's infrastructure and management, but

the towering trestles, deep tunnels, amazing scenery, and a fantastic group of railroaders running it never changed.

The fortunes and failures of the coal mining industry are connected to the region in an unbreakable bond. The population of Mullens was more than 3,500 in 1960. Following layoffs and a gradual decline in the mining industry, fewer than 1,500 call Mullens home today. Mining in West Virginia dropped more than 13 percent overall in the last year, one of the largest margins in recent history for America's second-largest coal producing region. The effects are plain to see as you drive past the abandoned storefronts and homes that line the silent tracks.



LEFT: On a blustery winter day, two ES44ACs lug a cut of 60 loads off the Guyandotte River Branch and onto the P-D mainline at Elmore on December 21, 2012. The two engines pictured are the pushers, and the headend power will soon couple up after they get the train onto the main. BELOW: Engineer Denny Graham waves to the photographer as he brings one of the very last hopper trains through Matoaka, W.Va., on September 28, 2015.



**Princeton-Deepwater District**

Illustration by Otto M. Vondrak. Not all lines and stations shown. Not an official map. ©2016 White River Productions



### Serious Mountain Railroadng

I was first introduced to the P-D in 2011 and I immediately fell in love with it. Intrigued with everything that I saw, I quickly developed a desire to photograph the railroad with a passion like I had for no other place. Maybe it was the magnificent scenery, or maybe it was the experience of seeing hill runs grind up the mountain to Clark's Gap. I made frequent visits, sometimes only capturing a single shot as a result. Sparse traffic and difficult-to-access locations meant photographing trains on the P-D was an enjoyable challenge. I spent more than three years along the railroad, making great memories along the way. I also made some great friends who work along this stretch of railroad.

The mountain railroadng on this line was unreal and perhaps the best part of visiting. I'll never forget witnessing a hill

run from on top of the mountain above Tunnel 9 at Garwood for the first time. The ground shaking beneath you, the pulsating sound of locomotives in notch 8 reverberating throughout the hills, and the countless autumn leaves falling around me from the blast of exhaust are strong memories that will stay with me forever.

### The End

The news I got on September 18, 2015, broke my heart when I learned my beloved Virginian was going to close. I immediately requested a couple days off from work for the last three days of operation. While bittersweet, I could not stay away even though I knew this was the end. I spent every free moment through the end of September shooting photos and spending time on the P-D.

September 28 came much faster than



OPPOSITE TOP: NS No. 8114 wearing "original" Norfolk Southern livery brings empty train 813 westbound through the Matoaka Tunnel on a muggy August 20, 2015, morning. Remnants of electric catenary structure could be found at the tunnel portal.

LEFT: Train U86 with a long string of empties in tow crawls across the trestle at Ingleside soaring high above I-77 with light snow falling on November 1, 2014. The two locomotives are really struggling to maintain traction with the tough winter conditions making the ascent to Princeton much more difficult than usual.

OPPOSITE BELOW: Three a.c. units thunder across Garwood Trestle on a beautiful September 19, 2015, showing hard on the rear of 100 tidewater coal loads that make up Train U86.



I wanted. It was time to hit the road for Princeton and spend time savoring the last few hours of this magnificent railroad. The first day provided a westbound empty hopper train led by NS No. 9455 with one of my best friends at the throttle. We caught up to the train at Kegley, Matoaka, Garwood, and Bud as he headed west across the line. The reality of the impending line closure had not really begun to sink in.

The next day came and went quickly as we kept ourselves occupied with a train coming down from Deepwater. Following that, the P-D was dead since a work train taking up newly dropped ties had the line plugged up for a large portion of the day. I captured a night shot of the train we had chased earlier from Deepwater at Covell, and I savored every moment of that experience. The sound of those locomotives piercing the quiet night air and the scene of the lead locomotive shooting huge headlight beams through the thick atmosphere were awesome. I paused when the pushers came by and just listened. The distinct sound of flange squeal around tight curves and the sound of ACEs in notch 8 filled the air, then slowly retreated into the night. Now just 28 hours away from an official closure, I thought to myself: *This could be the last eastbound hill run I ever see.*

It turns out I was right. Later that night, we found out NS had already begun routing trains via the Guyandotte River Line and it had no more plans to send any loads up the hill. That was it. The only thing I could hope for was a train of empties the next day.

My wish was granted as we found an empty Train 811 coming west from Roanoke with No. 1110 in original Norfolk Southern paint in the lead. A U85 Elmore crew was waiting at Kellysville to do a quick crew change

before heading to Elmore. I knew this would probably be the last coal train (and it was). I made a mental note as I started the chase to soak it all in. Much sooner than I wanted, I found myself at Bud, just outside Elmore, finishing up the chase.

I was getting ready to leave Elmore and I heard the yardmaster make mention of a hill run on the scanner. *Could it be?* I quickly found out it was light engines that would go east to Kellysville and return light with seven empty gondolas. I knew it would be well after dark by the time they got back, but I wanted to get a shot of the very last train across the line. So I set up and got a night shot of them returning to Elmore, just an hour and half before the line closed.

And then, silence.

### Reflections

I made so many wonderful memories on the old Virginian Railway over the years. How can somebody be so broken up over a railroad closing? When you do something you love, it becomes a part of you. When that something is gone, a part of you is also missing. That's the best way I can describe how it feels.

Norfolk Southern hasn't completely given up on the Virginian. Hi-rail trucks make weekly inspections of the rails, and maintainers keep block signals and grade crossing protection in good working order. This piece of mountain railroad can be called up for service at a moment's notice, and perhaps it will in the future. But for now, the rails sleep. ■

*Samuel Phillips, 20, hails from Radford, Va. He has been taking photos since he was 5 years old and the desire has never left. He loves mountain railroadng and spending time with all his friends enjoying the hobby.*