



NORFOLK SOUTHERN IN WEST VIRGINIA

Pokey Adventures

BY ERIC MILLER/PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

“YOU GOIN’ WITH ME?” Haven’t all these adventures begun this way, with this question posed to my growing-up son in the inky, pre-dawn blackness? And how many of these adventures have been on the Pokey?

The 100-odd-mile stretch of former Norfolk & Western rails between Bluefield and Williamson, W.Va., comprising the Pocahontas and Williamson Districts, is fondly and affectionately known to both railroaders and railfans as “the Pokey.” This is the beating heart of Norfolk Southern’s Pocahontas

Division, part of its Heartland Corridor, a key mainline link between east and west.

The Pokey is a busy piece of railroad, humming with coal trains, merchandise time freights, pushers, and mine runs. The “Billion Dollar Coalfield” is draped over the Pokey’s route, through Mercer, McDowell, and Mingo Counties, wild and wonderful. Nevertheless, coal trains have lost their dominance on the Pokey, a sign of the times. As reserves have been mined out in a more or less east-to-west progression, coal is more prevalent on the west end of the

Pokey, particularly around Williamson. We’ve seen days along the east end of the Pokey where coal trains — even empty coal trains — have been conspicuous by their absence. Across the Pokey, double-stack intermodal, autoracks, and ethanol have risen up to take the place of the black diamonds.

The Pokey begins at Bluefield, the famed N&W division point yard marked by its ever-present monolithic coaling tower, a holdover from steam days. With the patterns in coal traffic forever changed, Bluefield Yard can often be found mostly empty. Through freights

OPPOSITE: Eastbound coal Train 82G emerges from Twin Branch Tunnel No. 2 near Marytown, W.Va., with GE ES40DC 7528 in the lead on January 31, 2015. **ABOVE:** Intermodal traffic has grown to replace some of the volume lost with the decline of coal shipments. A combination of Norfolk Southern and Union Pacific power leads mixed Intermodal Train 29G as it flies west out of Welch Tunnel on October 29, 2016.



ABOVE: Trains are lined up in the Bluefield Yard on the morning of Saturday, March 21, 2015. The heritage unit and the old cooling tower looming in the background add elements to make for a scene that places us in the heart of Norfolk & Western territory. RIGHT: Coal traffic has not completely disappeared from the Pokey. Eastbound loaded coal Train 826 arrives at Flat Top Yard for a day of switching, November 8, 2015.

and intermodals pause briefly to change crews at Bluefield; coal trains are few and far between. Until early 2016, Bluefield was also Pocahontas Division headquarters and home to the division's dispatchers, including the Pokey Dispatcher; today, the division is headquartered in and dispatched from Roanoke.

It's late on a Saturday Bluefield morning. Signal crews are out, and hard at work, erecting new, sterile-looking aluminum masts. Our hearts sink, full of sadness at the falling of the beloved color position light signals. We realize the inevitable, that which has been in the making for so very, very long, is happening. The Pokey is losing part of its original flavor. We drive on toward Welch.

Later we're back, to witness as the victor and the vanquished stand, for a little while, side-by-side. We wait, under dubious lighting, for



two westbounds at Bluefield, Va., knowing that the next time we are here, the position lights will be gone, relegated to history's scrap heap. Our disappointment is palpable.

The East End of the Pokey

From Bluefield, the Pokey heads west, briefly dipping into Virginia, through Falls Mills, then back into the Mountain State through Coopers and Maybeury. It

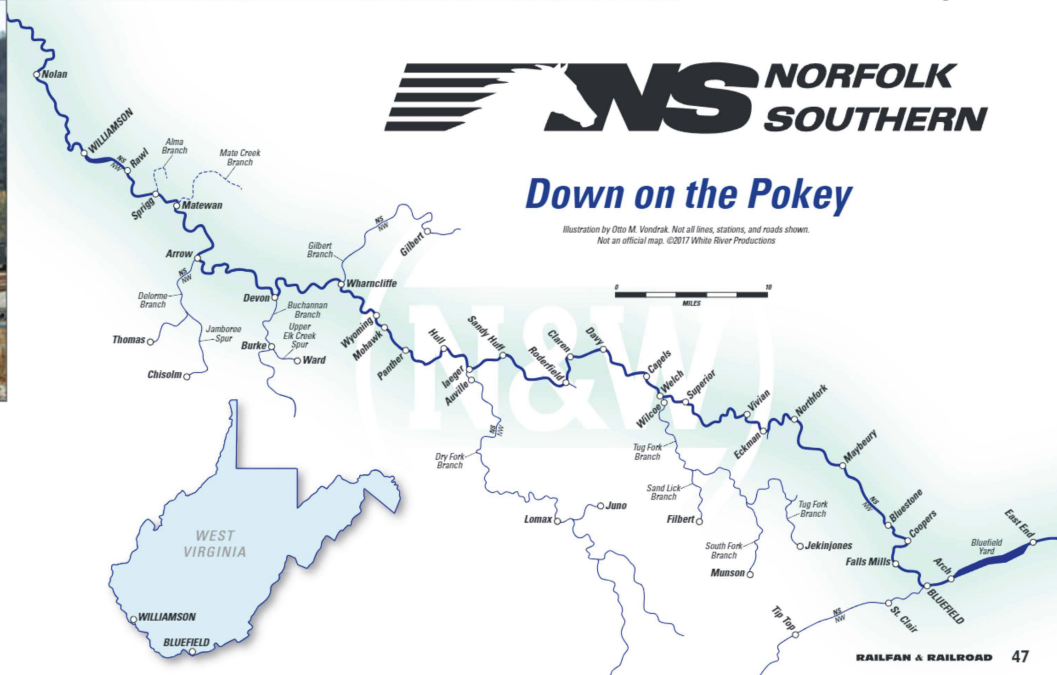
passes through Northfork — the Home of the Demon Burger, Nick's Famous Liver Sandwich, and the Children's Home Society of West Virginia, complete with a drive-thru. It continues on through Keystone and Eckman, Vivian and Kimball, Huger and Superior. U.S. Route 52 — that twisting, turning strip of lost highway, the blacktop thread linking these communities — is never far from the steel ribbons of the Pokey.



LEFT: With four standard-cab GEs leading the charge, eastbound loaded Virginia Power coal Train 838 emerges from Laurel Tunnel and crosses Tug Fork on April 19, 2014. The tunnel clearances were enlarged in 2009 as part of the Heartland Corridor project. This location is right off U.S. Route 52 between Roderfield and Iaeger, W.Va.

By 10:31 a.m., we are in Welch and well on our way toward being sopping wet. The Talking Heads are on the car stereo singing, "We're in for nasty weather." We wanted this Travis Dewitz-style rain and gloom, and we're getting it in bucketfuls. An hour earlier, I realized that two weeks before I had left my 18-105mm lens sitting on the base of a crossing flasher on the old CSX Clinchfield line at Green Mountain, N.C. This day I will be working exclusively with no less than 70mm. Stand back. Nasty weather indeed.

At Welch, the seat of McDowell County, and the only town of any appreciable size along the Pokey, the railfan is presented with a choice — to follow the railroad by way of the precipitous county road CR-7, out through Farm and Capels and Davy, or take U.S. 52, over the mountain but the path of least resistance; the latter is the easy choice when in the heat of a chase. The two options





come back together near Roderfield, heading west on to Iaeger.

After an interminable silence, the scanner has crackled to life, and it is an alarm clock like none other. "Norfolk Southern milepost four-one-three-dot-zero, track one, no defects." We all instantly and immediately sit bolt upright, quickly and almost instantaneously shaking off our sleep.

Iaeger is the junction with the Dry Fork Branch. Lots of coal from Williamson and the west will use the branch as a shortcut down to the Clinch Valley District for movement to destinations in the Deep South. Auville Yard, with another cooling tower looming overhead, is situated at the north (timetable west) end of the Dry Fork Branch at Iaeger. However, Norfolk Southern no longer

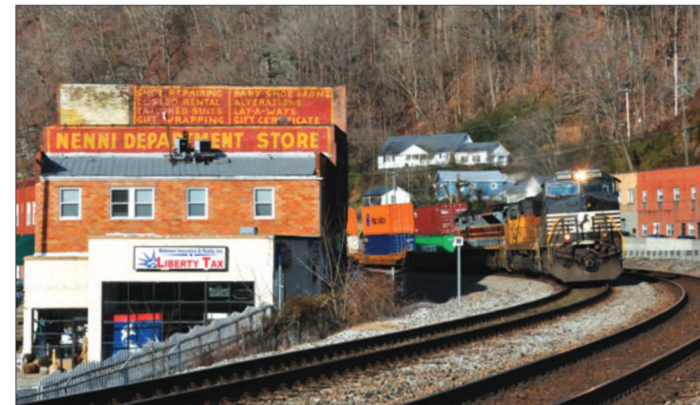
has crews based at Auville, having changed to using Wilcoe Yard (on the Tug Fork Branch south of Welch) as the local mine run terminal.

On the east end of the Pokey, most all eastbound trains will have a manned pusher on the rear, for help with the long slog up the tortuous Elkhorn Grade. The pusher will commonly be added to eastbounds at Farm, a sleepy community whose skyline is dominated by a concrete N&W cooling tower. However, rapidly changing operational patterns may see the pusher added almost anywhere, wherever the Pokey dispatcher sees fit. Pushers help eastbounds all the way to Bluefield. Light pusher units scooting west for their next assignment are a big part of the train traffic mix on the east end of the railroad.

A Railroad No-Man's Land
West of Iaeger, past the massive

Litwar Processing coal preparation complex at Hull, the Pokey takes to the wilderness. Access to the railroad from here almost to Matewan — roughly 23 miles — is difficult, and not for the faint of heart. The easy way to go is again U.S. 52, but this route takes one far from the Pokey, up through rail-free hinterlands. Eventually, a shortcut from 52 onto West Virginia Route 65 takes you back to the main at Matewan. This town was the backdrop to the scene of the famous massacre elevated into the popular consciousness by John Sayles' 1987 film named after the town. A faithful replica of the old N&W depot built along the mainline serves as a visitor's center and local history museum.

As the Pokey winds west on its last few miles, the tracks pass through the twin Hatfield Tunnels, and while inside, mark the Pokey's only presence within the state of Kentucky.



OPPOSITE: With eastbound loaded coal Train 82G in the center siding awaiting pushers under the old locomotive cooling tower, eastbound time freight 188 cruises by on the main at Farm, W.Va., on January 31, 2015. Modern signals have already replaced the traditional N&W position light signals at this location.

TOP: Eastbound coal Train 83A eases past a track gang at work at Hemphill, W.Va., on January 31, 2015. The classic N&W signals were not long for this world. ABOVE: On December 27, 2014, eastbound double-stacker 134 cruises through downtown Matewan, W.Va., past the Nenni Department Store. LEFT: How much history can you cram into one scene? The N&W heritage unit is in charge of westbound light pusher 147 at Twin Branch Tunnel No. 2, passing classic signals and a cast-iron whistle post on a rainy April 25, 2015.

From Hatfield, it's Sprigg, the junction with the idle Sprouse Creek Branch, and then the long, sprawling coal marshaling yard at Williamson. Slightly east of the yard at Rawl is where the N&W's mainline was completed in 1892. The roundhouse is still in place, used as a car repair shop, and the brick depot, served by Amtrak's *Hilltopper* until 1979, is a crew change spot for westbounds.

It's the end of another day on the Pokey, this time on the west end, the wilderness end, that wild section between Panther and Cedar. We're at the Tunnel Drive-In in Williamson, the restaurant itself perched literally right above the east portal of Mingo Tunnel; the drive-in's name is exceptionally appropriate. We're eating our victory dinner. The

ordering of our food was interrupted by the passage of an eastbound grain train, an appropriate intrusion into our post-photography reverie.

Wild Adventures

Back when I first began railfan photography, my near-constant companion was Max Graber, a mischievous 70-something-year-old rascal of a character who,

RIGHT: On March 28, 2015, eastbound empty hoppers roll through Devon, W.Va. This is the junction with the coal-rich Buchanan Branch. **BELOW:** Mine run U01 is loading a unit coal train on the Dans Branch, a short spur off the Pokey main at Eckman, W.Va., on May 17, 2014. **BOTTOM:** Eastbound coal Train 83J rides high over the massive bridge at Coopers, W.Va., on January 31, 2015. The abandoned branch to Matoaka runs through town below.



ABOVE: On March 28, 2015, GE ES44AC 8058 leads eastbound loaded unit coal Train 76A through a curve at Wharmcliffe, W.Va., while classic N&W signals stand guard. To the right is one leg of the wye leading to the Gilbert Branch. **LEFT:** Emerging from Roderfield Tunnel, Train 188 heads east at Roderfield on October 18, 2014.



at the end of every single adventure, would comment, "And to think, we made it back in the same day." Max has been gone for over 20 years now, but when we pull into our driveway at the end of the day, I say, "And to think..." with my son completing the phrase, "...we made it back in the same day."

We're eating dinner at Clarence's Drive-In in Unicoi, Tenn., after a

day on the Clinchfield, and we're planning our next trip to the Pokey. I mention that we're going to start at Welch and work west. "Ain't y'all about Welch out?" my wife asks.

"Uhhh, no... Not hardly," I reply.

"Welch is a magic place," Tristan offers.

Indeed. Welch, and the entire Pokey, is hallowed ground.

The Pokey is our Promised Land.

When these adventures first began, my son was merely a wide-eyed and excited observer. Now he has his own camera, his own Nikon D-SLR. He's learning Photoshop and submitting his photos for publication. He's coming into his own.

How long before it's him asking me, "You goin' with me?" 📷