

Bryson City's Last Southern Railway Passenger Train

November 30, 2023

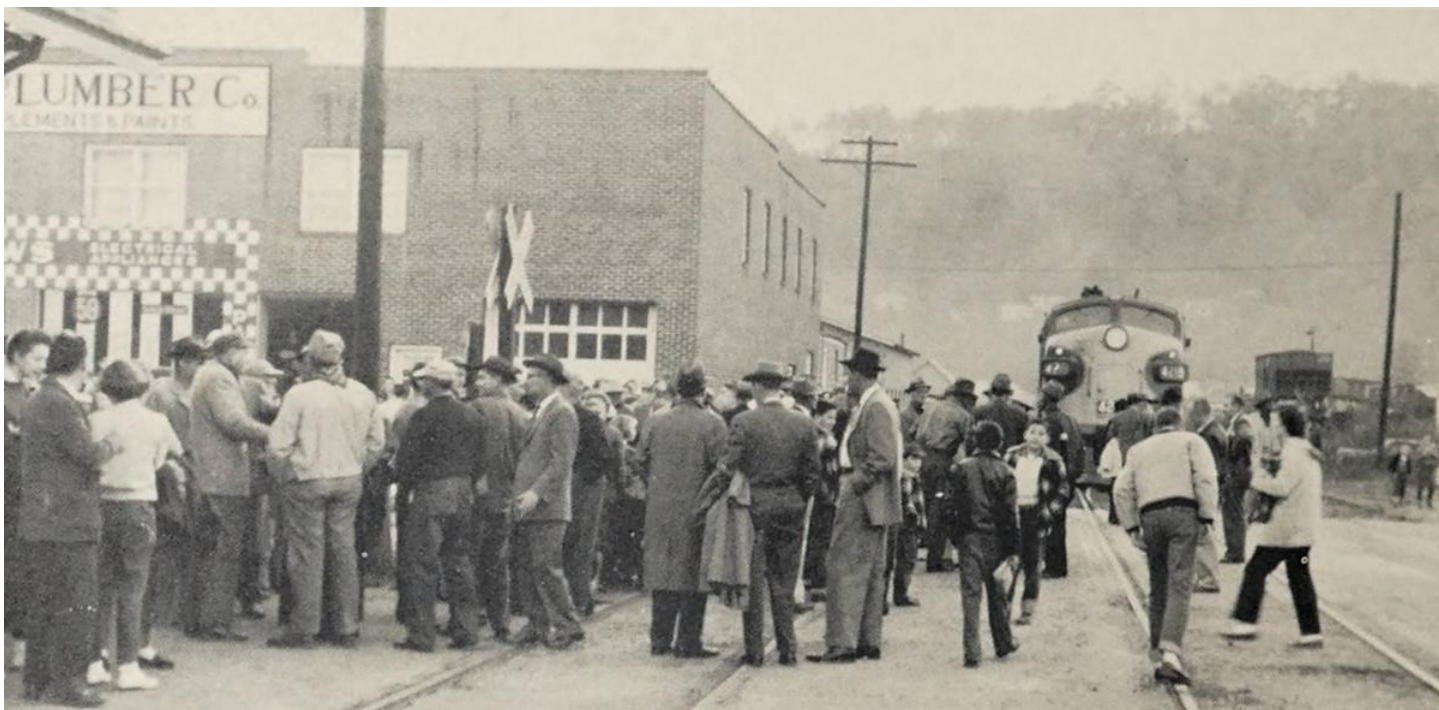


The above photo, digitized by subscription service Newspapers.com, was taken by John Parris to accompany his article on the Bryson City – Sylva special train published in the Nov. 2, 1958 Asheville-Citizen (see transcription on pages that follow). The numbered individuals were suggested by several folks to be: 1) Carol Livingston, 2) Sonya Trawick or Judy Sutton, 3) Lane Robinson, 4) Sandi McCracken [all of whom were Swain cheerleaders], 5) Hilda Myers,¹ 6) Mitzi Eckstein, 7) Helen Herron, 8) Virginia Estes, 9) Helen Witt, 10) Frances Colville, 11) Jimmy Colville. Hopefully, this photo is one of the Asheville Citizen archives which have been donated to UNC-A, according to information supplied by Liz Harper, Special Collections Librarian at Western Carolina's Hunter Library, a partner with UNC-A's D.H. Ramsey Library in the [Southern Appalachian Digital Collections](#), and a superior image will be available at some point.

Special thanks to Bryson City natives Annette Casada Hensley and Beth Sossamon Eckstein. Among several contributors, they were particularly helpful in identifying the folks in the grainy image. It's interesting that some folks, like Annette and Beth, have a particular knack for this sort of thing.

The pair of images from that eventful day shown below were included in the 1959 Swain High Ridgerunner, the school annual.

¹ Hilda Myers' husband Norton was a first cousin of Calvin Myers, who John Parris credited with spearheading the effort to secure the special train to Sylva.



Note the array of dress styles – from women in slacks to men in dress suits. The building to the left is Cope Coal and Lumber Supply Company



In the above photo, the family in the second row on the left is that of Jim and Ida Bain Myers, with son Joe peeking over the seat back in front of him. In the third row, left side, are Margaret and Barney Rentz. On the right, Floyd Cunningham is leaned toward Jim Myers in apparent conversation.

Transcription of John Parris article on the Special Train from Bryson City to Sylva

Published in the Nov. 2, 1958 Asheville Citizen

BRYSON CITY - She came rolling down the rails, a ghost out of the past,

Her whistle blew a salute to the town's memories and another to the history-making occasion.

The white flags that fluttered from the front of the locomotive marked her as something special.

A little boy, standing on the station platform in overalls and railroad cap, waved a toy lantern with a red globe.

Engineer Bob Christopher acknowledged the signal from the cab of his locomotive and brought the longest passenger trail ever to make a run on the Southern's Murphy Branch to a halt.

They may write songs and stories about engineers and trains, but Special Passenger Train No. 69 will live forever in the memories of a heap of folks.

The reason is simple.

In the years to come, mothers and fathers will tell their children that No. 69 was the first train they ever rode.

That in itself will be something to remember.

But that will only be part of the story.

The rest of the story deals with a man named Calvin Myers, a football game, and officials of the Murphy Branch of the Southern Railway.

And of course the years back of 1958 are part of the story.

Until Friday, Oct. 31, 1958 which was just the day before yesterday, it had been eleven years since a passenger train had run a revenue trip over the Murphy Branch.

The days of regular passenger train service between Asheville and Murphy, started in the late '80s and abandoned in 1947, lingered only as a memory.

But with road construction making travel almost impossible between Bryson City and Sylva, Calvin Myers of the Bryson City Lions Club figured that few folks of his town would be able to attend the annual Swain High – Sylva football game.

So he got to thinking maybe the Southern Railway would help out by running a special passenger train to transport fans and members of the team to Sylva.

Southern Railway officials agreed to the idea, provided they could be assured of 250 passengers, which would mean a train of five cars.

Within 24 hours of the announcement that a special train would run to Sylva, more than 500 persons had reserved passage. And a couple days later, there were enough reservations to cause the southern to expand its train to 16 cars.

So it was that the longest, heaviest powered passenger train ever to travel the Southern Railways Murphy branch left the Asheville passenger station at 1:46 PM Friday.

Its destination was Bryson City, 66 rail miles west, where more than 800 persons would be picked up for a ride to Sylva and back to Bryson City.

When the train moved out of Asheville, I was the only revenue passenger aboard, the first Murphy branch passenger carrying a ticket in 11 years.

Aboard was a crew and a group of Southern Railway officials, including Asheville division superintendent E. Rogers Oliver, Chief Clerk Frank Mulvaney, Road Foreman of Engines E.A. Norton, and Special Agent (detectives) Lt. A.D. Hampton, R.K. Snyder and Sgt. F.M. Towe.

No. 69 rolled out of the Asheville yards with green signals.

At the throttle of the 17-car train was Bob Christopher, a railroadin' man from a railroadin' clan.

As engineer of historic run, made possible as a goodwill gesture by Southern Railway, Christopher was making the run over a route long familiar.

For Christopher made the next to last run as a passenger engineer on the Murphy branch before service was abandoned.

He started his railroadin' career in 1905 at the age of fourteen. He worked the Murphy branch off and on between 1912 and until the time passenger service was abandoned.

Christopher's father was an engineer on the Murphy Branch back in the days when wood burning engines were used to negotiate the mountain road from Asheville to Murphy.

Bob came after the wood-burners, but he fired coal-burners for eight years and then took over the big diesels.

Back when he was on the regular passenger run over the Murphy branch, Bob Christopher knew every inch of the road bed from Asheville to Murphy like it was the palm of his hand.

"Back in those days," he recalled, "the passenger train was an institution."

Back then the depot and the post office were the only gossip markets, and to folks who live along the Murphy branch the trains were friendly things.

To small boys, an engineer back then was thought of in the same trinity with Santa Claus and God.

They all want it to be a railroad engineer.

Folks along the way reckon the time by the passage of the passenger trails.

The trains kept a strict schedule and a blast of their whistles clocked the hour of the day, even the minute of the hour.

But those days are only memories.

The passenger trains have disappeared.

But for a while last Friday, folks between Asheville and Bryson City lived in the past.

As the 17-car special moved westward, folks gathered along the tracks in the towns and hamlets to throw a salute to the train.

They came out to stand on porches or stop work in the fields to gaze on the train which twisted over its route like a gigantic dragon.

Hundreds of persons gathered in Bryson City to welcome the train.

Is Bob Christopher came rolling into town, blowing his whistle, little boys and girls at home shouted at their parents and urged them to hurry, lest they would miss the train.

Folks without tickets who didn't intend to make the trip came into town for miles around just the same to see the train.

When number 69 pulled out of Bryson City at 6:00 PM bound for Sylva, more than 800 persons were crowded into the 17-car special.

Half of them were children, all but a very few who had never before ridden on a train, and they were excited and almost speechless.

But the grownups had just as much fun as the children.

They remembered the days when passenger trains flourished on the Murphy branch and then recalled story after story, telling their sons and daughters how it used to be.

The train rolled through the night, a twisting dragon casting an eerie light on the land, sounding its whistle at the crossings and the hamlets along the way.

And folks who had missed the train on its westward run were out alongside the tracks to wave or shout or blow the horns of their cars.

Bob Christopher saluted them as he passed.

More than 3,000 persons jammed the area west of the Sylva depot to welcome the special train. Traffic was blocked for miles each way as the passengers disembarked.

And when the football game was over, the folks once more piled onto the train for the ride back to Bryson City.

For all of them it had been a day and a night to remember.

And in the years to come, many a child grown to adult will look back on this run and be forever beholden to the folks of the Southern Railway.