



May 15, 2008

Asheville became a major tourist destination in 1880s thanks to railroad

Bob Terrell
Columnist

The late Jesse James Bailey, a railroad man and former sheriff of both Madison and Buncombe counties in the 1920s, was emphatic in his love of railroads and their value to Asheville.

"'Twas a good day indeed," he said, "when the railroads came. Asheville might still be a crossroads town rather than the metropolis it is, had the railroads not come. The railroads transformed Asheville from a health resort catering to tubercular and other breathing maladies into a tourist resort and brought millions of dollars into local economy."

But if you really wanted to get a closer grip on railroading in the bygone days of steam locomotives, you could have asked the late Jones Dale. He fired a box on the Saluda Mountain run and various other runs for 60 years before diesel made its way to the mountains of Western North Carolina.

"Man, oh, man!" Dale would shut his eyes until he could conjure the visions he wanted in retrospect. "I can see 'em now. Look over yonder. See that big fo'teen-hundred racing along the ridge, smoke streamin', drivers flying, whistle crying. Get that box fired up! Watch that smoke roll out; jes' rare back an' fly. Play me a tune on that whistle!"

He patted his well-used long-handled shovel with his name carved along the handle. "That's my time card," Jones would say.

"How long have I been firin'? I been firin' since the Spanish War. I reckon I been firin' near about as long as I been black."

Railroad men, though often seen in greasy, grimy bibbed overalls, were the local heroes of hundreds of Asheville boys at the turn of the 20th century.

That was the heyday of railroading here. Railroad service was tremendous in Asheville.

Trains rolled into town daily from Chicago, Louisville, St. Louis, New Orleans, Memphis, Chattanooga, Jacksonville, New York, Philadelphia and Washington, pulling dozens of day cars, sleepers and private coaches. They brought the rich and famous and the ordinary John Does to play in the mountains.

The Western North Carolina Railroad reached Asheville in early October 1880, linking the city with Salisbury, from which connections could be made to almost any destination in the U.S.

Before the end of the 1880s, Asheville had rails to Spartanburg, S.C., to the south and Morristown, Tenn., to the northwest. The whole of the U.S. was then within ready reach by rail.

Asheville hostlery, basking in the coolness of the mountain air, catered to guests from the burning summers of the Deep South in the summertime. As soon as their coattails stopped flapping, heading south again in early fall, the tourists came in from Northern states to beat the icy winters there. Thus there was no cessation in hotel and guest home business here.

To care for these guests, especially the wealthier, the Battery Park Hotel, one of the finest in the South, was completed in 1886. It had the first electric elevator in North Carolina and one of the first electric lighting systems. Seven-watt bulbs in its rooms gave off almost enough light to read by. Then, in swift order, Sulphur Springs Hotel opened in 1887, Kenilworth Inn in 1890 and The Manor in 1900 with an

Olympic-size swimming pool.

All joined the huge Swannanoa Hotel on South Main Street, in operation since 1880.

The city was a high-mountain mecca for the rich and famous and for ordinary Joes and Janes.

During the 1880s, Asheville was transformed mightily. Some of the city's respectable citizens looked askance at the count in 1882 that showed the city contained only six restaurants but 14 saloons. Then in the succeeding three or four years the count balanced out, and city residents were happier.

This is the opinion of Bob Terrell. Contact him at bobterrell5@gmail.com or 712-6589.
