

THE VIRGINIA BLUE RIDGE RAILWAY TRAIL

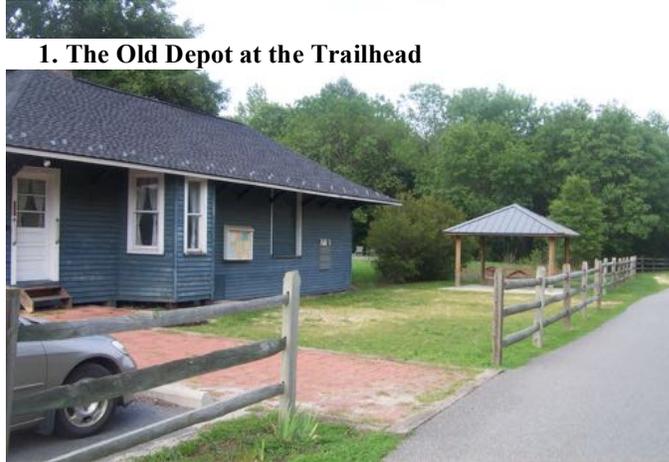
Rebirth of the Nation's
Longest Operating
Short Line



It was 1915 and the blight that was destroying the American chestnut was moving south into Virginia. A handful of timber and railroad men from Lynchburg, Virginia and upstate New York teamed together to acquire 15 miles of roadbed in Amherst and Nelson Counties, to build the Virginia Blue Ridge Railway and to cut and haul chestnut logs to market while they still had value. For the next 70 years, hard working steam and diesel engines pulled and pushed trains up to 40 cars long back and forth over the steep grades between Massie's Mill and Woodson to the junction with what is now the Norfolk Southern Railroad at Tye River.

Fast-forward to 1997. Another team formed, this time of bicycling, horseback riding, hiking organizations and the property owners who had purchased the Virginia Blue Ridge Railway rail-bed when the railway ceased operating in 1985. Thanks to these individuals and with the help of Federal transportation enhancement and other grants, the

railway and all of its history has been brought back to us in the form of the beautiful Virginia Blue Ridge Railway Trail, two miles of which are now open to the public. Let's take a journey along the old "Blue Ridge."



1. The Old Depot at the Trailhead



2. Leaving the Trailhead at Piney River

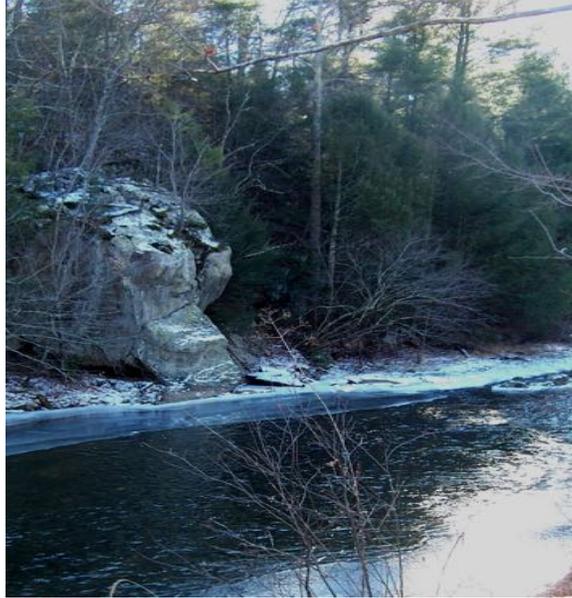
We join the trail at the old Depot on Route 151 just south of Piney River in Nelson County. The parking lot is ample for horse trailers and well landscaped. The trail head features the original station from the days when passengers traveled on the combination car. It is soon to be converted into a museum of railway memorabilia. The old engine shed has long since burned down, but we can sense the vitality of what was once the rail yard across the road. From the depot we head south over the well groomed trail surface past the old American Cyanamid titanium plant.



3. A Winter Day Along Farm Country

After $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile, we pause at a picnic table and overlook to watch the roaring Piney River approaching from the right. From here the trail meanders along the Piney through several farms of grazing cattle. Spring blue bells and wild flocks and occasional cactus plants are among the wildflowers to enjoy. Local boy scouts have installed benches at key points

overlooking deep sections of the river and near the dramatic rock outcroppings of Alpine looking cliffs.



4. Alpine Cliffs Drop into the Water



5. Many Users Enjoy the Trail

We pass joggers and bikers, people in wheelchairs, parents pushing baby strollers and occasional horseback riders. At two miles we ease up the 3 percent grade to Rose's Mill and the big bridge over the Piney into Amherst County. The old iron girders now support a solid wood superstructure and we lean on the new rails to look down into the water rushing over rocks to see the shimmer of what might be a darting trout, brim or bass. Gone is

the grist mill built by the original settler Reverend Robert Rose and his brothers, but the old stage coach house still survives.



6. Beautiful Piney River Scenery

For the short haulers there is a parking area at Rose's Mill, but the hardy keep trekking along the next 5 miles toward Tye River. The grade takes the trail along steep slopes a hundred feet above the river. Beavers have built slides which shoot down to the water and their invisible dams.



7. Ancient Erosion

Other wildlife includes white tailed deer, beaver, great blue heron, red tailed hawks, Canadian geese and the occasional bald eagle. Some have spotted black bear and river otter. Across the river a gravel road meanders and then disappears up a hillside. Millennia of rushing waters have left their cuts in the rock walls to show us that the Piney was once a bigger and deeper river.



8, 9. Naked Creek Bridge Before..During.. and



10. After Construction



We pass a small meadow and picnic area where we can look up and down the river. It was here that one of the old steam engines jumped the rails and turned on its side against the laurel covered cliffs. At 3.5 miles the trail breaks out into the open fields of “Jones’s Bottom” and then crosses Naked Creek toward the Tye River, just below the confluence with the Piney.



11,12,and 13. Tye River Bridge Work



The bridges across the Tye and its overflow show evidence of the 1969 Hurricane Camille, when the force of the flood waters moved some of the girders and rails a foot downstream but fortunately left them on their piers. The view from the bridge up and down the Tye invites thoughts of taking a canoe trip, or perhaps participating in the Piney River Mini-Triathlon which takes place each April along the trail.

After crossing back into Nelson County from the Amherst stretch, the cliffs shift to the north side of the trail. We pass the foundation of the old steam engine watering tower and then under the four lanes of U.S. Route 29. We see the old “weigh station” being

restored. In the distance we can glimpse the 100 foot tall trestle of the Norfolk Southern which was washed away by Hurricane Camille leaving only the welded rails hanging in place. This marks the end of our journey – for now.

Five miles of the trail from Piney River to Naked Creek are currently open to the public. Another two miles to Tye River should be open in 2009. The Virginia Blue Ridge Railway Trail Foundation continues to work on plans to continue the trail another seven miles from Tye River to the James River at Norwood, Virginia and possibly to extend it into the mountains of Nelson County toward the Appalachian Trail. In the meantime, thanks go to the Foundation, to Amherst and Nelson Counties and to all who worked to carry out this rails to trails project, and who brought to the rest of us, and to future generations, the Virginia Blue Ridge Railway Trail. [For more information contact the Virginia Blue Ridge Railway Trail Foundation at PO Box 442 Lovingston, VA 22949 or call 434-277-5510