

Railroad boosted economy, changed lifestyle¹

CHRISTIANSBURG – Thanks to the town’s bicentennial celebration, many folks are thinking of Christiansburg’s past, of its time as a frontier outpost, of its days as a bucolic small town.

Bill Harman can see and hear history when he thinks of the railroad that made the town and neighboring Cambria a major local station.

Harman’s 40 years of working for the railroad give him clear memories of the countless tasks and endless hours required to keep the trains running.

His experiences, and his interest in railroad history, give him an impression of how the trains played a key pre-World War I role in keeping towns like Christiansburg and Cambria running.

“Before the coming of the railroad, the people of Christiansburg and Montgomery County had to go to Lynchburg to get their household goods. I’ve been told by the old fellows that they would take a wagon train and ride for three days each way.

“With the coming of the rail, the people could just order the goods by mail and pick them up at the station.”

That provided many people with more time to devote to their farms and businesses, and that in turn helped the area’s economy grow, Harman said.

“It just opened up the whole world. Good furniture and stoves that you could heat your whole house with became available.”

Markets for local produce, especially in the nearby coalfields, opened up too.

“There was always a good market along the railroad,” Harman said. “Anything that was perishable wouldn’t spoil.”

The arrival of the railroad in 1856 turned the small town of Cambria into the transportation center for Montgomery and Floyd counties. The people of nearby Christiansburg rejected the idea because of the noise and smoke of a proposed rail line down Main Street.

Instead, the station was built at nearby Cambria, and soon the town turned vibrant, attracting visitors to the local resorts and area farmers alike.

In its heyday from about 1900 to 1925, Cambria had three hotels, blacksmith shops, restaurants,

stores, a hospital and several factories and mills.

Fifteen to 18 passenger trains a day, along with express and freight trains, made the town a bustling place. Most people did not have cars then, and even if they did, the roads were not in good shape, Harman said.

But, starting about 1925, roads began to open, and that saw the decline of the trains. Trucks proved to be more efficient for transporting goods, and cars were better for moving people, Harman said. In 1964, Cambria asked to become part of Christiansburg.

Still, the railroad provided a tax base and employment. Among those people who found jobs on the line were Harman's father and his father before him, who led a crew laying tracks through the mountains earlier in the century.

Harman, a descendant of Adam Harman who, in 1755, found Mary Draper Ingles after she escaped from the Indians, got his first job as a telegraph operator for the railroad.

He went on to work at all times of the day and night in just about every job, including ticket seller, mail handler, freight agent and switch operator. He retired in 1981 after a 40-year career.

The railroad was the source for one-a-year Christmas oranges and

wishbook catalogs, says the 70-year-old Harman, who has several scrapbooks to show and many stories to tell.

Sometimes the trains would bring to the mountains a glamorous taste of the outside, modern world. One instance was especially memorable: the time Elvis Presley came through.

Presley had just been discharged from the Army, Harman says, and he was on his way from New Jersey to Memphis.

"We just had a rush of people who came on a Sunday evening who bought tickets to Radford just to say they rode the train with Elvis. He came out at the back and waved at everybody."

The trains carried tradition, too, Harman pointed out. Norfolk and Western would furnish a train to carry Virginia Tech cadets to the annual Thanksgiving football game against Virginia Military Institute in Roanoke at Victory stadium.

"Lot's of times [VMI students] would put grease on the tracks, and the train would slip and slide. They'd really have a time," he said with a laugh.

Harman, whom his wife Betsy describes as "a train nut both vocationally and as a hobby," nowadays spends some of his time speaking to school groups. He gives telegraph demonstrations,

and lets the kids try their hands at it. But he knows this new generation doesn't have memories of the railroad.

"Ain't nobody left who knows anything about it. Ain't that a shame?"

¹Article written by Kenneth Singletary in the New River Valley Current section of *The Roanoke Times & World-News* June 14, 1992