

Olive Hill, 1969

by Gene Huddleston



G-7S 979 (Consolidation) leaves Olive Hill with local freight (from Morehead to Ashland) in January 1951. Beyond freight house (with box car in siding) is the main business district of town. (Eugene L. Huddleston Photo, C&OHS Collection, COHS 21067)



"Switcher" departs for Ashland and Russell, August 1969, as photographer stands on wooden freight house platform and family wait in car for him to finish. (Eugene L. Huddleston Photo, C&OHS Collection, COHS 23201)

The famous opening quote of Dicken's *Tale of Two Cities* applies also to the year 1969—"It was the best of times; it was the worst of times." That summer Neil Armstrong made his "giant leap" onto the moon, and it was also the summer when, while visiting Russell, we learned that Bob Harris, outstanding local young man, had been killed in the war in Vietnam. That same summer my friendship with Tom Dixon was taking on substance due to his energy and his sense of the fleeting nature of the "passing parade" of human events and the need to pass on those moments for future evaluation.

But was there anything special on the C&O that year? If I were a modeler, would I want to base my layout on the C&O of 1969? Probably not. C&O passenger trains were on their way out, as witness the *FFV* just a year before. And C&O steam locomotives had been gone thirteen years. Come to think of it, what period in C&O's history would I want to model? Some Pittsburgh modelers and historians had to make that decision for an O gauge layout with over 800 ft. of track at the Carnegie Science Center. While visiting in Pittsburgh over Thanksgiving 2008, we noticed an article on this layout in the *Post-Gazette* (Nov. 29, 2008). It noted that the miniature railroad and village, using hundreds of buildings, "replicates the Pittsburgh area as it would have looked in the 1920's."

That is sugar coating the 1920's, in my opinion. But when Mary Lou, John, and I visited my parents in Russell,

Kentucky in August 1969, I did manage to take some pictures of a part of the C&O that I would want to replicate if I were a modeler; namely, the Lexington division between Lexington and Ashland. And as to the time period, I think I might pick the 1920's in spite of the environmental and labor relations issues that plagued the refractory brick industry and the railroad itself in the Roaring Twenties. Of course, I was not there in the 1920's. But I was there in 1969 and I did get to observe and photograph some of what was left of the "Peavine," as the Ashland-Louisville line was known.

The founding of the C&O Historical Society that year, and especially seeing its newsletter reflect Tom's talents and those of the people he was able to attract, encouraged me to focus my

photography that summer, while in the Russell area, on a line that historically was on a decline. Obviously family responsibilities came first. But on a family trip to Lexington I did manage to arrive in Olive Hill at the very same time as the eastbound "switcher." So I will concentrate on that encounter below. And I need to mention that even if the C&O railroad tracks had not been there, the auto trip from Ashland to Louisville would have been worthwhile since there is an opportunity for industrial archeologists to make what they can out of the remains of the Lexington Division.

Even in 1960, Interstate 64 was not yet planned in Kentucky, probably because its civil engineers could not decide how to cross Great North Mountain in Virginia and The New River Gorge in West Virginia. When it was



Eastbound "switcher" is stopped at Olive Hill depot, in August 1969 while crew checks out orders inside. This GE (1968) U30C diesel has GSC 3-axle trucks. Many C&O's U30C's had trucks designed by Adirondack Steel Castings. (Eugene L. Huddleston Photo, C&OHS Collection, COHS 23720)



*GP7 5837 switches cars at west end of Olive Hill February 1953. This EMD diesel had arrived new in November 1952 and had immediately gone into service replacing the Consolidations assigned to yard engines and locals at Ashland. Photo should be compared with 1967 view of same engine switching at Handley, W.Va., in *Trackside in Appalachia* (2006), p. 80. New paint and new lettering grace 5837 in 1967, and portions of sheet metal fillets covering top of fuel tanks have been cut off. Rain gutter at edge of cab roof has been widened, and chime air horn relocated. (Eugene L. Huddleston Photo, C&OHS collection, COHS 21066)*

built, I-64 ran generally parallel to the C&O between the Ashland suburbs and downtown Louisville, but sometimes road and rail were miles apart because the interstate could be graded to achieve a right-of-way with relative few curves, dips and inclines. In 1959, U. S route 60 also ran parallel to the C&O, and that is the route we took that day to the Blue Grass region centered in Lexington. And the trip over that route, called the Midland Trail, was itself worthwhile. In fact, the Kentucky Geological Survey in 1930 published a guide book titled *The Midland Trail in Kentucky*. The text, photos, and pen sketches in this book concentrate on scenic and geologic features along highway US 60. We were on that highway then and if I had had the book then, I could have reminded myself of “the knob region west of Salt Lick [where] the Chesapeake & Ohio Railway and the highway follow different valleys between the hills.” (Knobs are conically shaped isolated hills between the outer blue Grass and the Cumberland Plateau Region to the east.)

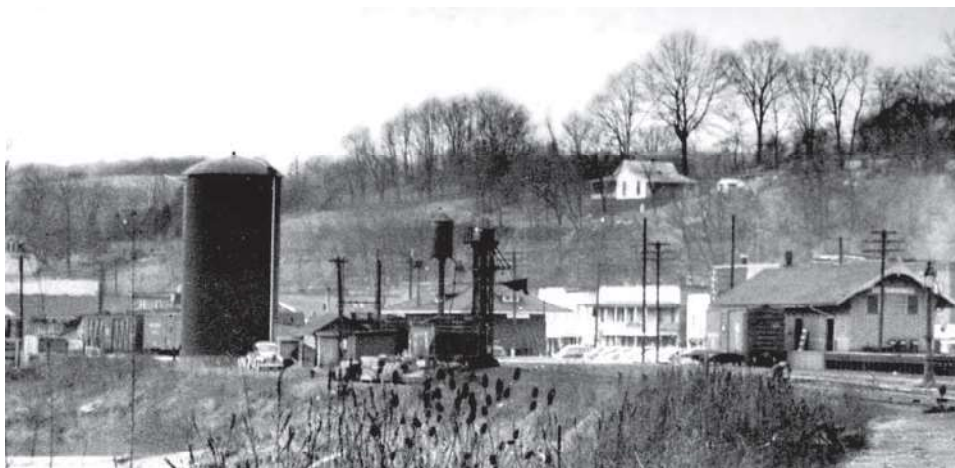
On this day we had no time to stop at Salt Lick, though the depot was still there and picturing it with a knob in the background would come a few months later when I was visiting in Russell at the year end.. We did stop on the way to Lexington (with a side trip to Paris) at Morehead, and Mt. Sterling, where I shot the two depots—and freight houses—with no trains in the pictures. For years as a railfan I had cared little for picturing a depot without a train present, but with my acquaintance with Tom Dixon I begin to see that such “record” shots had historical value. So after eating at the Blue Boar cafeteria outside Lexington, as I recall, we started back to

Russell on US 60. From Hayes Crossing, (marked by a station sign) just east of Morehead, the C&O proceeded over the divide between Triplett Creek and the Tygarts Valley by a cut in the dividing ridge where formerly there had been a tunnel. Route 60 also “passes over a [parallel] divide into the headwaters of Tygarts Creek.”

I could have driven from Hayes Crossing to Olive Hill via back roads that closely paralleled the railroad, but I thought it too time consuming, so I stuck with US 60 and came into town, past the big brick plant, just as the eastbound “switcher” was slowing for a stop in front of the Olive Hill depot. Naturally, I pulled into a parking space at the station and pictured the three unit locomotive as the crew climbed off and went into the depot to relax, for it turned out they had no work there. How the roundhouse office at Russell

picked the units for this job I do not know, but I do know that the day before I had seen these same three units (from my brother’s house near the railroad) leaving Russell early in the afternoon on the westbound switcher. They were GP9 5911, GP 39 3919, and U30C 3310. Though an odd mating of EMD and GE Power, two of the three were relatively new: GP9 5911 from December, 1954, GP39 July 1969, and 3310 September 1968. As for engines, the GP 9 had the famous V-16 (1750 HP), the GP39, a turbo-charged V-12 (2300 HP), and the U30C, a turbo-charged V-16 (3000 HP).

The crew was in the office for less than five minutes. I shot the train leaving from the platform of the distinctive old wooden freight house. My Dad encouraged me to chase the train up the 2.66% grade to Mountain Top summit, but he did not know the “chase” would not be as easy as it sounded, because there was no direct way to chase the train. By the time I drove east on US 60 for about a mile and crossed Tygarts Creek, I would have to go another mile on a narrow side road, to the tracks. But this was not the summit, so the train would not have slowed down enough to get ahead of it and get a shot. So we drove on via US 60 to Grayson, seat of Carter County, on the Little Sandy, which is some three miles down the Little Sandy from the C&O at Hitchins. (Today, one whizzes through Grayson on I 64 paralleling US 60.) We did not hit C&O east of Grayson until we came



Olive Hill, January 1951. Tygarts Creek flows at left. Background details left to right include water tank, pump house, and pusher engine siding. (Pusher is probably at Mountain Top, summit of the grade out of Olive Hill.) Sanding tower and direct coaling machine (with hopper car behind it) almost block view of depot behind. Beyond freight house (with box car in siding) is the main business district of town. Brick plants are out of sight at left. (Eugene L. Huddleston Photo, C&OHS Collection, COHS 21067)



When a freight storage and handling section of a depot was set up as an independent building on C&O from the 1880's to about 1910, it would be about this size. This then was a typical "freight house," built when C&O reached Olive Hill in 1881. It was not typical in the decorative trim under the eaves of the building. Only a few depots and this freight house exhibit such "gingerbread." In left background is the "picture show." The Dixie Theatre will close not many years after this August 1974 photo. (Eugene L. Huddleston Photo, C&OHS Collection, COHS 23718)

into Coalton via a side valley of the East Fork of the Little Sandy. Many years earlier, the AC&I had served a mine up this "hollow." But traces of the mine and tracks were long gone. From Cannonsburg, we followed US 60 through the suburbs of Ashland and thence took US 23 home.

That was August 1969. Months ago (summer of 2007), visiting my brother at Carter Caves State Park, we drove into Olive Hill to buy a treat at McDonalds. I was shocked at the change in the downtown area since the railroad tracks had been pulled out. I did not expect so many changes (principally in the widening and rerouting of the streets). In my return visits to Carter Caves over the years, the access roads were unobtrusive and the buildings fit in well with the rugged scenery, which was being carefully preserved. So to come from the grounds of Cascade Cave and Bat Cave and X-Cave, etc, to one of my favorite little railroad towns was sort of sad. True, the brick depot was still there, but the store fronts of the buildings behind the depot were gone. The movie house with its marquee visible in background one of my 1969 slides made me think of the book and film by Larry McMurtree called "The Last Picture Show," about the changes that came to a small town in Texas in the 1950s when the local movie house shut down. Now, the depot was some kind of community center surrounded by a black top parking area, front, back, and sides.

No sign of tracks was present. That was a lot worse than the situation around 1990, when I had briefly stopped at

Olive Hill to hike to the former bridge over Tygarts Creek east of town. Tracks and ties had been removed locally but ballast was still visible. When I got to the locale of the bridge (near Atlas siding) I was disappointed that the entire girder span had been removed. This bridge was fairly high above the creek, as the railroad started climbing Corey Hill. Thanks goodness Dennis LaBrecche of Richmond, Ky. (unless he has moved) can supply a picture of the bridge that he took from water level months before abandonment. If Dennis has moved out of the area, then we can contact Dr. Wendell McChord, retired dentist of Dayton, Ohio. Dr. McChord has a collection that delves deeply into C&O development in eastern Kentucky and elsewhere. This collection would not have come into being without the founding of the C&OHS in 1969!



As seen in December 1962, the brick depot at Olive Hill, dating from the 1920's, is just off "main street" through town. Naturally, there is a Greyhound bus station on this street and the double decked business building behind the depot seems influenced by cut rate New Orleans "French Quarter" architecture. (Eugene L. Huddleston Photo, C&OHS Collection, COHS 21067)

Then there is Art Rabourn, attorney in Cincinnati and native of Olive Hill, who has made a detailed study of the refractory brick industry (between Haldeman and Hitchins. While not a railfan as such, Art can give you a fascinating glimpse into the brick works in the area, some of which used narrow gauge tram railroads for clay hauling. Art's collection would not have come to light without the work of Dr. McChord to spread the good word through C&O Historical Society.

One outstanding member of COHS, Everett N. Young, who I understand was born in Salt Lick, repeatedly pictured the "switcher" in action at inaccessible places in the months before it was abolished. Who else took a picture of this freight at Olympia, where the railroad impressively traversed a tangent roller coaster of sorts making the transition from the Appalachian (or Cumberland) Plateau to the rolling plains of the Outer Blue Grass region? Olympia seemed almost inaccessible because the railroad in climbing from the dissected valleys of the Cumberland Plateau to the Blue Grass plateau takes a route several miles to the south of route 60, which enters the outer Blue Grass at Owingsville instead of Olympia. Then there is always the question, why did the C&O build through Olympia? Could it have been because at Olympian Springs was a large resort hotel that thrived for some time after the Civil War? That is another area of possible investigation for the C&O Historical Society!