



The Mid-South Flyer

May 2011



A publication of the Mid-South Chapter of the Railway & Locomotive Historical Society, Inc

May program

Local author, rail historian to bring narrated slide program featuring "Birmingham's own" short line



OK, rail fans, so you think you know a good bit about Birmingham railroad history. But did you know there's a local rail line that has survived every merger and acquisition over the past century with its name still intact?

That would be none other than the Birmingham Southern Railroad ("BSRR"), organized in 1899. And no one knows the BSRR's colorful history better than Mid-South Chapter member Ron Mele. You might even say Ron wrote the book on it, and you'd be right!

Headlining our next chapter meeting on Saturday, May 21, Ron will discuss his publication, *Birmingham Southern Railroad Company - The First Century*, including a brief history of the BSRR and its importance to the development of Birmingham and the area's industry. A native of Kensington PA, Ron developed an interest in railroads at a very early age. His interest in the Birmingham Southern began in 1989, shortly after he and his family moved to the Birmingham area.

A veteran railfan and photographer, Ron's work has appeared in numerous publications, including *Rails Northeast*, *Railpace*, *Railfan & Railroad*, *Trains Magazine*, *CTC Board*, and *The Railroad Press*. Ron also contributed a chapter on the Birmingham Southern published in *Birmingham Rails*, *The Last Golden Era*. His photo credits include *Pennsylvania Railroad Facilities Volumes 11 and 12*, *Southern Railway in Color, Volume 2*, and *Pittsburgh & Lake Erie Railroad in Color, Volumes 1 and 2*.

The Birmingham Southern was originally constructed in 1878 to haul coal to the steel mills in Birmingham. The Louisville & Nashville Railroad and Southern Railway jointly purchased and operated the line shortly after its organization as the BSRR in 1889. The line was later sold to the Tennessee Coal & Iron Railroad Company, which in 1906 became a part of the United States Steel Corporation. The BSRR remained a U.S.S. subsidiary until 1988 when the line was sold to Transtar, Inc., the transportation subsidiary of United States Steel specializing in the operation of short line railroads and barge lines that primarily serve United States Steel. Today the BSRR operates 84 miles of track, providing switching services in the Birmingham area.



A five-unit Birmingham Southern lash-up is captured in the vicinity of U.S. Steel's Fairfield Works and Vulcan Material's slag yard in this nice Kodachrome shot by Alton Lanier. (Photo courtesy of Red Mountain Press)

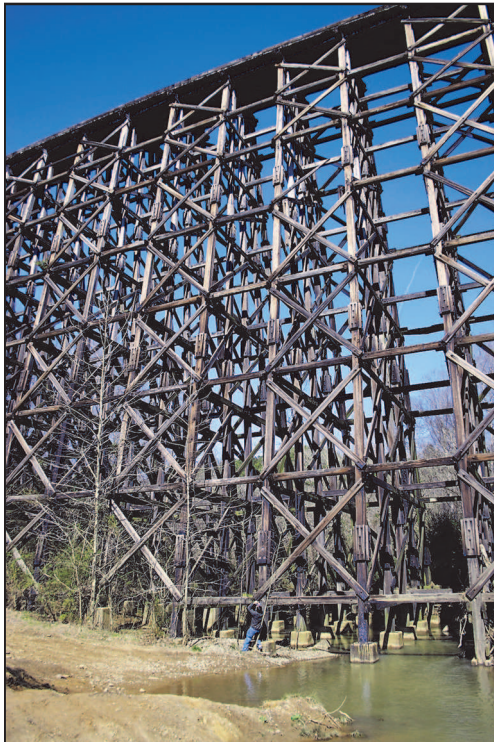
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On Norfolk Southern Rail, an eastbound coal train from the North River mine passes beneath the Cane Creek branch, lead by CSX power. The lead unit, #8758, is a former Conrail SD60M. The NS trackage is a remnant of the original Georgia Pacific that connected Atlanta with Greenville, MS. The trackage from Columbus, MS to Greenville was later sold and became the Columbus & Greenville Railway.



Trestle #10

A Farewell to the Cane Creek Branch

Text and Photos by James Sims

The Cane Creek branch was put in service in 1903 to open the Warrior (Alabama) coal fields. The line was extended to the Sayre mine located at the western edge of Jefferson County. In 1904, the Banner branch was opened, off the Cane Creek branch at Chitopa (near Linn Crossing), to serve the Banner mines, the first mine in Alabama to use electrical power for lighting and haulage.

The Cane Creek branch must have been a costly railroad to build. It traversed very rough terrain. Much of this line was built on the side of hills, through cuts and high fills. It's obvious that a number of trestles were filled but one magnificent structure remained. Trestle #10 was an impressive wooden

structure that was almost 600 feet in length and more than 110-feet high. This trestle was rare because a curve began on the structure near midpoint. Trestle #10 had to be an unnerving experience for train crews to cross.

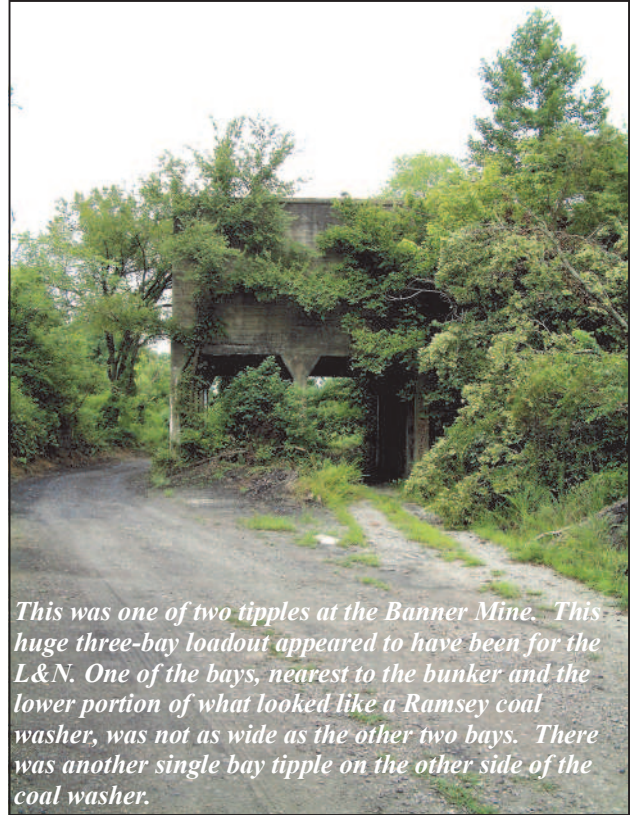
The Cane Creek branch is steeped in the history of the Birmingham Industrial District. It was built to haul metallurgical coal, and about the only towns it served were mining camps. A rare exception was the Bibby brothers, who in addition to operating a coal mine, operated a lumber company and had a very respectable brick plant. I could find only one town, Mineral Springs, that had a depot and a wye. It will forever be linked to the tragedy at the Banner mine. It was part of the route over which the United States Bureau of Mines' Rescue Car #6 rushed from Chattanooga to the Banner in a futile attempt to save lives after the tragic explosion of April 8, 1911. The Banner, touted to be the safest mine in the state, would instead be remembered for the 1911 explosion that claimed 128 lives, most of which were black convicts. It remains Alabama's worst mining disaster. The incident would bring national notoriety to Alabama's convict leasing system and ignited a campaign to end convict leasing in all states using this system. It would take another seventeen years for that effort to be successful in Alabama, the last state to abolish this practice in 1928. Jefferson County, however, ended convict leasing in 1913.

It was the coal from the Warrior Field and the development of coal washing techniques that made Birmingham's iron and steel production successful. It was the Cane Creek branch that opened up these rich coal fields in western Jefferson County that included the Black Creek, Blue Creek, and Mary Lee seams.

Over the years, the Cane Creek branch evolved into a frequently changing route that followed the coal sources, serving the Sayre, Cliff, Praco, Labuco, Maxine, Bessie, Flat Top, Palos, and Chitopa mines among many others. The line was extended as far as Powhatan. At its peak it consisted of more than forty miles of rail line, ranging from its beginning at Black creek, in Fultondale, to the southeast corner of Walker County. To the end, the Cane Creek branch was committed to hauling coal. At some point in time, the Banner branch was extended across Five Mile creek, through a tunnel and on to the Sloss-Sheffield's Flat Top mine. With this extension, a switch was installed for the Banner mines spur and its location was named Granlin. At a location on the south side of Five Mile creek, at a location named West Jefferson, the line became the property of Sloss-Sheffield's Mary Lee Railroad.



This is the west portal of the tunnel near Flat Top. This end has no mantle dressing the opening. Apparently, the rock at the west end of the tunnel has been stable enough to not require a liner or face support.



This was one of two tipples at the Banner Mine. This huge three-bay loadout appeared to have been for the L&N. One of the bays, nearest to the bunker and the lower portion of what looked like a Ramsey coal washer, was not as wide as the other two bays. There was another single bay tipple on the other side of the coal washer.

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Dale Burns takes his grillin' seriously, folks



Lee Singletary and son Josh wait for a burger

A Day at the Depot



Tim Smith and John Browning snap a high and wide load

Continuing a tradition that began in 2009, on April 16th the Mid-South Chapter held its 2011 Annual Cookout at the Leeds Depot. Previously we had held the cookout in the month of June, but agreed to an earlier date this year to hopefully avoid the often unpredictable summertime weather. As it turned out we certainly picked a nice day, with moderate temperatures and *no rain!*

Members started to gather shortly after 10:00 a.m. Master grill chefs Dale Burns and Tim Smith fired up the grills at 11:00 and we had our “*first call to lunch*” about noontime. Marvin Clemons gave a welcome to everyone in attendance. We all enjoyed the lunch fare, with hamburgers, hotdogs, and all the trimmings. There were good desserts also, leaving everyone satisfied and well-fed.



Former “hoggers” Eddie Cook and Jeff Johnson share yarns from the head end

Following the cookout fare, we enjoyed a program featuring some of Mid-South member Frank Ardrey’s slides of railroad scenes around Birmingham from the 1960’s. Frank was unfortunately unable to attend, so Frank’s son Carl, a Norfolk Southern yardmaster, presented his father’s slides. Everyone knows of Frank’s iconic black and white pictures, and it was interesting to see his work in color. Along with main-line images, there was an interesting segment on the Birmingham Southern Railroad, including a cab ride to Port Birmingham. Other members showing slides were Marvin Clemons, Stan Burnett, and Jeff Johnson.

Attendance was 25 members and guests, including Jack Gillespie, Doc Clements, and Ray Pelham. Carl Ardrey was recognized as our newest member.



Jason Lamb, Alan Maples, and Carl Ardrey are all smiles, so it must be time to eat!

A lot of work goes into lining up what to bring, who will bring what, and eliminating duplication. Our thanks to Sam Ferris for once again coordinating another successful chapter cookout!

(Contributed by Stan Burnett)



Sam showing off her “chew-chew” cookies



All eyes to the east (where is that train, anyway?)



You shoulda been looking to the west, fellas!



A perfect ending to a perfect day as the "Crescent" rolls by at track speed +



Father and son skip the wedding party across the street to join the fun on the platform



Proof that "she who laughs last, laughs best!"

Golden Era Classics



“Bamboo Grove” in retirement — We’ll depart from our usual vintage train photo to bring you this colorful reminder of one of Birmingham’s finest—some might argue, *the* finest—passenger trains from the “Golden Era.” The first lightweight streamliner to operate through the Magic City was the **City of Miami**, inaugurated in December 1940. The **City’s** seven-car consist was adorned with a tropical color scheme, beginning with a green wave streaming up over the flanks of the EMD E-6 diesel locomotive, followed by a green band running along either side of the car roofs and coming to a point at the rear window of the rounded-end observation. Color photos are indeed rare of the **City** in its original tropical dress, but from this photo one can easily imagine the impression it would have made on travelers used to seeing a ubiquitous black steam engine pulling a string of sooty Pullman-green heavyweights. Our thanks to R&LHS member Bill Howes for sharing this photo of the cosmetically restored observation-lounge **“Bamboo Grove”** enjoying a well-earned retirement in Ormand Beach, Florida.

Mid-South Chapter Calendar of Events

Saturday, May 21 — Mid-South Chapter Meeting @ Leeds Depot—2:00 p.m.
Program: Birmingham Southern Railroad by Ron Mele

Saturday, June 25 — Mid-South Chapter Board of Directors—Details TBA

Saturday, July 9— Mid-South Chapter Meeting @ Leeds Depot—2:00 p.m.
Program: Report from the R&LHS Convention in Elkins, West Virginia

Saturday, August 27 — Mid-South Chapter Board of Directors — Details TBA

Saturday, September 10 — Mid-South Chapter Meeting @ Leeds Depot— 2:00 p.m.

Saturday & Sunday, September 17-19 — John Henry Days Celebration & Depot Open House