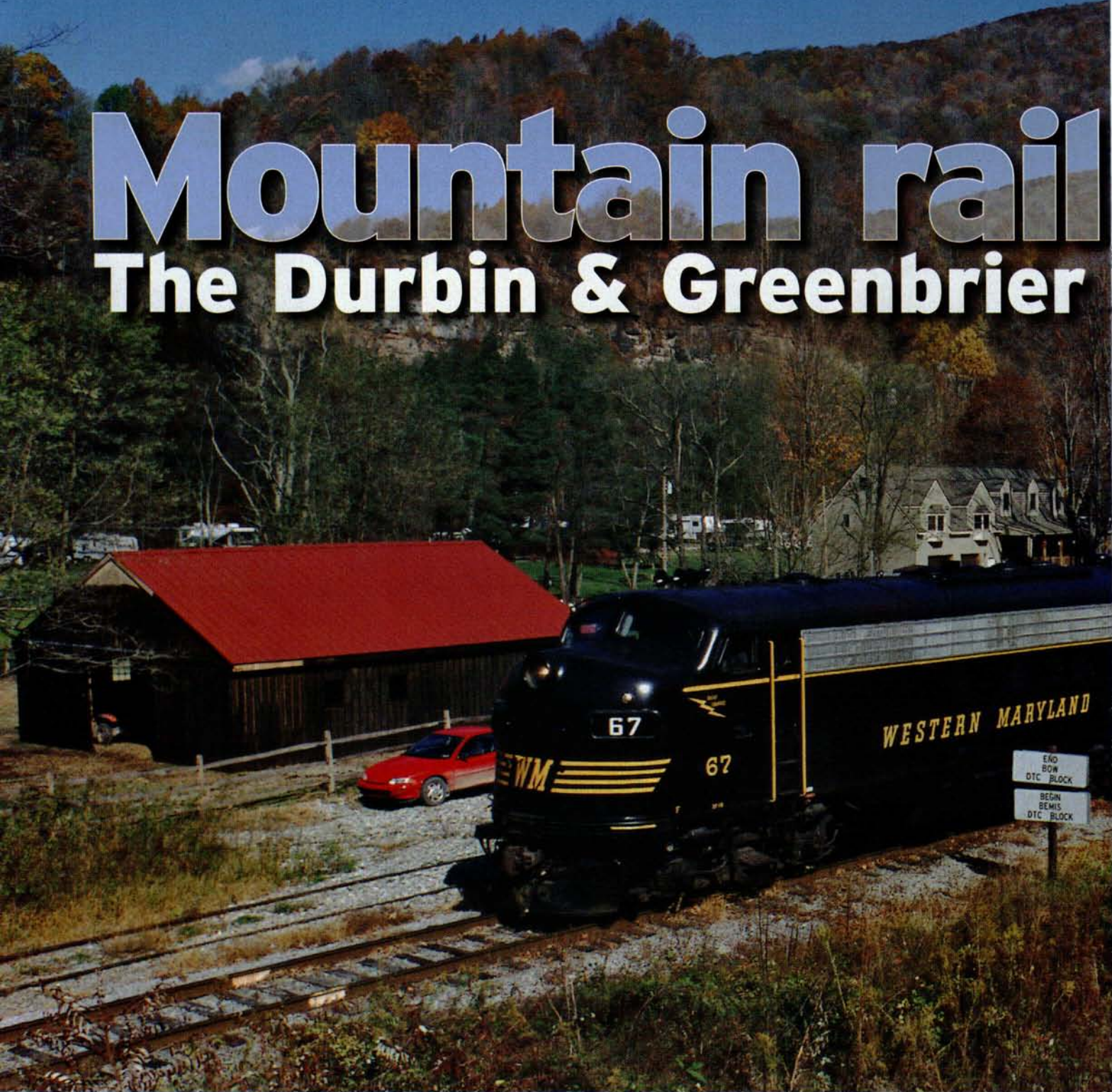


# Mountain rail

## The Durbin & Greenbrier



Thanks to one man and his wife, and the state, West Virginia has a successful tourist railroad operation with three personalities

by Alan Byer

After their first run on the WVC, John and Kathy Smith pose on their former WM BL2 at Dartmoore, W.Va. Lars Byrne





# road empire

## Valley Railroad



**B**y all rights, railroading in the mountains surrounding Elkins, W.Va., should be relegated to the history books, and the state-owned Cass Scenic Railroad should be 85 miles from the nearest active rail connection. However, thanks to the foresight of the state of West Virginia and the energy and vision of a Pennsylvania trucker, John Smith, and his wife and partner, Kathy, railroads are alive and well here. Today, a variety of trains

traverse 105 miles of the most rugged, remote, and spectacular railroad in the East. Steam-powered excursions feature wilderness overnights in a caboose; diesel-powered passenger runs with on-board services cover two scenic routes out of Elkins; a reproduction Edwards railcar carries passengers into an isolated wilderness area; and freight trains serve customers along portions of the former Western Maryland Railway. Perhaps most importantly, these re-

**West Virginia Central's New Tygart Flyer passenger train blasts through Bowden, W.Va., in October 2001. Matt Reese**

talized rail lines have brought many jobs and countless tourist dollars, along with the resulting tax revenues, to an old coal-producing region starved for all three.

In 1997, when the state bought the 132 miles of track that would become the West Virginia Central Railroad, the Mountain State had already been in the railroad busi-





Mechanic Bob Kearns, left, and West Virginia Central President John Smith confer by Climax No. 3 at Durbin. Jim Winn

ness for more than 35 years. This involvement began in 1962, when the Cass Scenic started hauling tourists up Cheat Mountain on former Mower Lumber Co. logging track. In 1977, the state bought the Cass-to-Durbin portion of the old Chesapeake & Ohio Greenbrier River branch, and operated excursions between those towns until floods washed away much of the line in 1985. West Virginia in 1978 became the first state to both own and operate a freight-hauling commercial railroad, the South Branch Valley, when it took over 52.4 miles of former Baltimore & Ohio track between Green Spring and Petersburg in the eastern part of the state. Today that line moves 3,800 to 4,000 carloads of freight per year and hosts the popular *Potomac Eagle* passenger excursions.

However, the West Virginia Central, made up of the former CSX Belington, Tygart, and Laurel Subdivisions (mostly ex-WM), as well as the Dailey Branch, would prove to be a much bigger challenge than any of those earlier enterprises. Total mileage was nearly twice that of the three earlier acquisitions combined, and the track ran through some of the state's most difficult terrain. By the time CSX applied to abandon the lines, the freight business had almost completely dried up.

Against this daunting backdrop, the West Virginia State Rail Authority began looking for someone to turn the WVC into an operating railroad.

No one knew it at the time, but that person had arrived on the scene in 1988. That was the year John Smith moved to Cass and opened his own business. He had visited Cass with his parents when he was 12 years old and was fascinated by the railroad and logging history of the area.

John returned to long-haul trucking in 1992, however, and moved to a cabin on Cheat Mountain above the nearby town of Durbin. He continued his life on the road until spring 1996. During this time, he and

his wife and trucking partner, Kathy, attended all of the abandonment hearings concerning the CSX Elkins Subdivision and met members of the rail authority. The Smiths wanted to see the rails stay, hoping local coal deposits could someday sustain the line, as they had in years past. During a later public meeting, representatives of the rail authority announced plans to remove the remaining rails and ties between Durbin and Cass and convert the right-of-way to a trail. Alarmed that this historic railroad could be lost forever, John and Kathy applied for a license to run trains on the flood-damaged line. In July, the rail authority granted a license to their newly incorporated Durbin & Greenbrier Valley Railroad, but stipulated that no state funds could be used to rebuild or operate the railroad. John and Kathy were on their own.

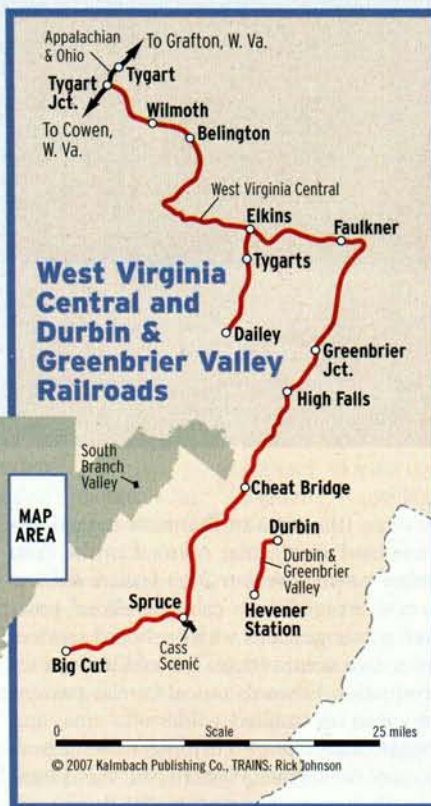
## Starting from scratch

The Smiths started looking for equipment. They located a 20-ton Whitcomb gas-mechanical locomotive in Michigan, a surplus flat car at an Army base in North Carolina, and a caboose available for lease. They even sold their tractor-trailer rig to finance the purchase of the railroad equipment and, at the same time, sold stock to help finance the venture.

In the meantime, flooding on the nearby South Branch Valley washed out much of that line's track. The South Branch Valley's engines were isolated on the south end of the line, separated from the side dump cars needed for repairs. After a few phone calls, the Whitcomb, already en route to Durbin, was diverted to the South Branch Valley. This would be the first time the little dock switcher had been operated in more than 10 years and the first actual railroading performed by the ex-truckers. The Smiths aided the rebuilding effort by dumping carloads of crushed rock along the length of the SBV. That income, along with proceeds from the initial stock sale, provided much-needed revenue for their fledgling company.

When that job was completed, John and Kathy and a few volunteers began to rehabilitate their own flood-damaged line. They used dynamite to reduce the larger boulders into manageable pieces, and a backhoe and bulldozer to fill in the washouts and pull the track out of the river. Kathy worked alongside the men, carrying ties and driving spikes. By July 1997, they had rebuilt enough track to debut a 4.4-mile round trip during the annual Durbin Days celebration. For those trips, Kathy hand-painted "Little Leroi" on the Whitcomb's cab, the nickname coming from the LeRoi Division of the Waukesha Engine Co., builder of its gasoline engine.

Prior to each trip, the conductor, after sizing up the tiny Whitcomb, would warn the passengers to hold on tight because "this







train's gonna take off like a rocket," a tongue-in-cheek reference to the slow pace of the ride. That name stuck, and *Durbin Rocket* became the train's official moniker. Those trips were a big success and motivated the Smiths to start offering regular weekend excursions. That fall, they expanded the schedule to hourly trains running Thursday through Monday to accommodate those visiting the area to view the spectacular mountain fall colors. Kathy's background in commercial art was put to good use designing the *Rocket* logo, as well as all of the logos and design work for the corporation.

Following that first successful season, John and Kathy turned their attention back to rebuilding more track along the Greenbrier. By spring 1998, they and their volunteers had completed another three miles, including one washout that stretched for nearly 2,000 feet. That brought the *Durbin Rocket* route to more than five miles. John trained volunteers to operate *Little Leroi* and act as conductors, and soon developed a loyal cadre of train crews.

On Jan. 19, 2003, Climax No. 3 passes Nottingham on the D&GV, formerly the site of C&O's Boyer Siding. Lars Byrne



About that same time, the Smiths learned that the rail authority had asked for bids to operate the 132.4-mile West Virginia Central. Although six potential bidders expressed interest, John and Kathy, by reason of their prior efforts to attend the abandonment hearings, had an advantage on the competition. Years earlier, during their time off between long-haul truck trips, they walked the entire length of the line from Tygart Junction to Bergoo, making notes and discussing possible uses for each segment, not knowing at the time what the future of the line would be. Armed with this knowledge, they prepared and submitted what proved to be the winning bid. The state would perform the heavy repair and maintenance of the tracks and right-of-way, while the Smiths would be responsible for the locomotives, rolling stock, light track maintenance, and periodic inspections of tracks and crossing signals. The authority awarded

Extensive work has transformed a washed-out track (left) to a steam route south of Durbin. Two photos, John Smith

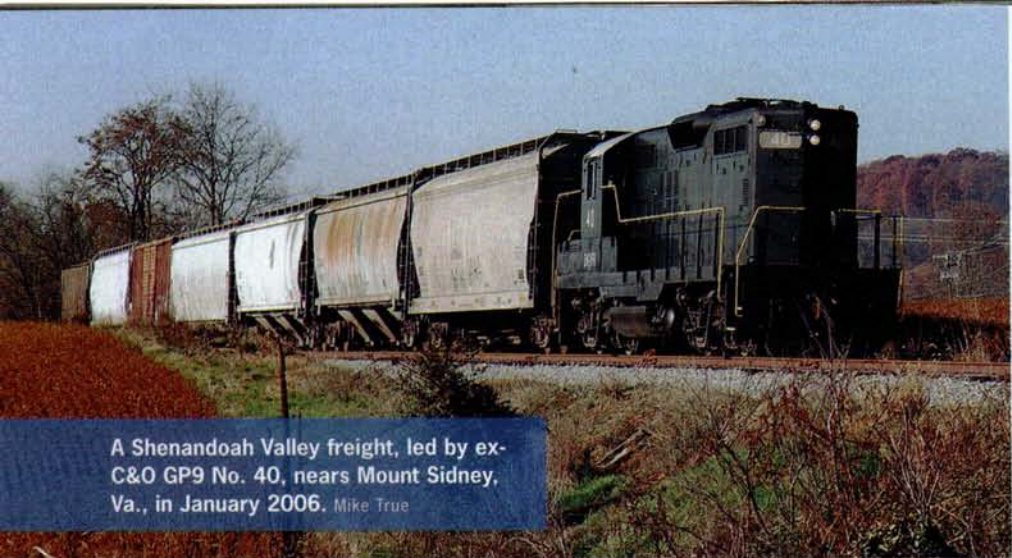
the contract in September 1998, and John and Kathy took over in November.

As only isolated sections of the WVC were ready for operation, special equipment had to move in by truck. They located and purchased an experimental British Leyland railbus in Pittston, Pa. That vehicle was produced originally for the city of Boston in 1980, and had somehow found its way to the back lot of a used-car dealership. When the Leyland arrived on the property, it wasn't serviceable. John enlisted the help of Tim Cochran, a combination electrician/mechanic, to see if he could use his considerable skills to figure out the foreign mechanisms in the car. Tim, who had stopped by earlier to introduce himself and offer his help, would eventually become the railroad's chief mechanical officer.

That spring, their Durbin & Greenbrier Valley started offering excursions from Cheat Bridge, south of Elkins on the Shavers Fork of the Cheat River, to Big Cut, an engineering marvel when the Greenbrier, Cheat & Elk completed the line in 1914. They named the train *Cheat Mountain Salamander* after a rare, endangered amphibian found only locally. For most trips during the first year of WVC operation, John was the engineer, and Kathy was the conductor.

Unfortunately, the Leyland proved to be unreliable and difficult to maintain and repair, so the Smiths started looking for a replacement. John learned that a Mount Dora, Fla., company had purchased the rights to produce the old Edwards line of railcars, and placed an order for a 50-seater. Though the reproduction Edwards car suffered me-





A Shenandoah Valley freight, led by ex-C&O GP9 No. 40, nears Mount Sidney, Va., in January 2006. Mike True

## Foray into Virginia Smiths add the Shenandoah Valley

**John and Kathy Smith** expanded their railroad empire beyond West Virginia for the first time in 2006 when they negotiated a contract to operate the 20-mile Shenandoah Valley Railroad between Harrisonburg and Staunton, Va., about 100 miles southeast of Elkins, W.Va.

The Shenandoah Valley was formed in 1993 when a consortium of local businesses known as the Greater Shenandoah Valley Development Corp. purchased the track from Norfolk Southern Corp. Originally part of the Valley Railroad, completed in 1874, the line came into the B&O family, and was purchased in 1943 by the Chesapeake Western Railway, a.k.a. the "Crooked and Weedy," which came under Norfolk & Western control in 1954.

Today, the Shenandoah Valley serves five on-line and two off-line customers, and carries bridge traffic between the Norfolk Southern interchange at Pleasant Valley and CSX (by way of the Buckingham Branch Railroad) in Staunton. Headed up by former D&GV volunteer Ben True, two full-time and four part-time employees operate the line's GP9 No. 40 (formerly C&O 5940, purchased from the Virginia Central Railroad) to move an average 25 cars per week. During October, the railroad operates passenger excursions from Verona, just north of Staunton, to Pleasant Valley Station, just south of Harrisonburg, using Virginia Central Railroad coaches and a diner, which makes for a great chance to see Virginia's spectacular fall colors. — Alan Byer

chanical problems when it first arrived, Cochran soon had it running. The railroad used that railcar the following year on the expanded *Cheat Mountain Salamander* route, which included trips to the beautiful High Falls of the Cheat River.

With the *Durbin Rocket* and the *Cheat Mountain Salamander* routes in regular operation, the Smiths started looking for ways to use the rest of the West Virginia Central. They leased passenger cars and an Alco T6 switcher from the Roanoke Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society. This equipment, along with a rare EMD BL2 diesel leased from the rail authority, inaugurated the *New Tygart Flyer*. Initially, this train ran from Belington to Elkins and return. The following year, it was extended west 12 miles on ex-B&O track through the spectacular Tygart River gorge to the CSX interchange at Tygart Junction. Passenger service gradually expanded, finally reaching the dramatic High Falls in 2002.

Belington, a town between Elkins and Tygart Junction, was already the site of a

small, abandoned, weed-covered yard, and this became the WVC base of operations. Crews constructed an engine house and repaired and extended the yard tracks there and, in a short time, West Virginia Central maintenance forces could handle all but the heaviest work at this facility.

John and some volunteers restored the classic Western Maryland Railway "speed lettering" on WVC's motive-power gem, BL2 No. 82, which soon was joined by an FP7-F7B set of former Clinchfield units, which CSX had used to pull its business trains. All are painted in WM livery, as is an Alco FA that last worked on the Long Island Rail Road as a power car.

### Three for one, and more

With three routes available, WVC began to offer its "Three-Trains-In-One-Day" package, which became wildly popular and

is still marketed today at group travel shows across the country. The *New Tygart Flyer* originates at Belington with a stop on the south side of Elkins, then travels over the repaired line through a curved tunnel and up the Shavers Fork to High Falls and back. At High Falls, a 33-degree curve prevents standard 85-foot-long passenger cars from continuing south, so the *Salamander*, based at Cheat Bridge, meets the *Flyer* there, allowing groups to change trains. At Cheat Bridge, passengers meet their bus, ride down the mountain to Durbin, and board the *Rocket* for its afternoon trip.

One WVC line is not a passenger route — the Dailey Branch, which runs south of Elkins and has several potential freight customers. Although traffic remains sporadic, some growth has occurred, as General Superintendent Matt Reese has worked hard to bring freight back to the rails.

In 2001, when the Connecticut Trolley Museum decided to auction off former Middle Fork Railroad (Ellamore, W.Va.) 55-ton, two-truck Climax No. 3, the Durbin & Greenbrier Valley submitted the winning bid. When the Smiths learned the funds available for the purchase were less than the bid, Kathy suggested trading the Leyland railbus for the shortfall, and the sale was completed. Following repairs by an all-volunteer team headed by long-time mechanic Al Leyh and boiler specialist Bob Kearns, that locomotive started handling the *Durbin Rocket* in spring 2002. The Climax is a rare steam locomotive. No. 3 is among 15 or so survivors of 1,100 built, and one of only four still in steam, the others in New England and on the West Coast.

An interest in rail preservation had moved the Smiths to get into railroading in the first place, and they took this a step further in 2003 when they promoted the organization of the West Virginia Railroad Museum, a non-profit group dedicated to preserving historic rail equipment associated with the Mountain State. WVRM recently signed an agreement to buy the land that housed the Western Maryland roundhouse and turntable in central Elkins, and the museum and WVC have been working with local and state authorities to replace a bridge that will allow rails to be relaid to the site, which is anchored by the restored former WM Elkins depot.

So far, WVRM has acquired the beginnings of an impressive collection, including several historically significant pieces of freight equipment from several museums and individuals. Included is the last Heisler built, former Middle Fork three-trucker No. 7, from the North Carolina Railroad Museum. Perhaps the museum's most important acquisitions are two 2-8-0 steam engines built for the West Virginia Northern at Kingwood, W.Va., and later purchased by the Preston Railroad at Crellin, Md.

West Virginia Central's passenger-car

### >> Want a ticket to ride?

Information on the D&GV passenger operations is available on the railroad's Web site, [www.mountainrail.com](http://www.mountainrail.com), or you can reserve a ticket by calling 877-MTN-RAIL.





A short train of side dump cars passes Coal Rock in the Cheat River's Shavers Fork valley in December 2006. Matt Reese

fleet has changed from those in the lead photo. In 2003, the Roanoke Chapter notified John and Kathy of plans to transfer its cars to other locations. The Smiths scrambled to find replacements, locating cars in Arkansas on the White River Scenic Railroad, which have been used on the *New Tygart Flyer* since the beginning of the 2004 season. Shop forces refurbished the cars' interiors during the winters of 2004 and 2005, and planned to repair and repaint the exteriors this spring.

Also in 2004, WVC began offering "Castaway Caboose" service, which features overnight stays in one of two former Wabash Railroad cabooses on the *Durbin Rocket* route. Up to four passengers can ride in each of the cabooses, which are refurbished with all modern conveniences. The cars are added

to the usual consist, then uncoupled at the end of the line, where patrons can spend one or more nights on-board, returning to Durbin later on a regularly scheduled train.

### On the 2007 schedule

For the 2007 season, the Durbin & Greenbrier Valley planned to offer passenger excursions on all three routes from May to October. Three *New Tygart Flyer* trips vary from a 4-hour, 46-mile excursion from Elkins to High Falls and return, to a 7.5-hour, 102-mile trip from Belington to Tygart Junction., then through Elkins to High Falls and back.

The Edwards car makes two 3-hour *Cheat Mountain Salamander* round trips every Saturday, one from Cheat Bridge north to High Falls and return, the other from Cheat Bridge south to Spruce and back. On all other days of operation, it makes two trips to High Falls and return.

From Durbin, where it all began, Climax No. 3 and its train make two round trips a day south to the Hevener Station picnic area, at the end of the line. The U.S. Forest Service plans to build a rail-access-only campground at milepost 89.3, on the other side of the washout beyond Hevener Station, when trackwork is completed to that site. To complement the USFS campground, the railroad will construct a siding with enough space for two castaway cabooses.

Under the leadership of Denver Barnett and Jim Schoonover, the West Virginia Railroad Museum continues to grow. In January 2007, contractors finished work on the bridge that will allow rail access into downtown Elkins — concrete piers and the steel

through-truss main span and deck spans.

Some 34,900 passengers rode Durbin & Greenbrier Valley trains in 2006, which translated into an additional \$6 million for the local economy, including 8,000 occupied motel rooms. West Virginia Railroad Museum improvements to the Elkins yard may well account for another \$4 million.

All this positive energy has resulted in a boom for downtown Elkins. A new, 68-room Holiday Inn Express motel has been completed; a 525-seat Branson-style theater is under construction; groundbreaking for a 300-seat food/entertainment complex is scheduled for this spring; and a number of retail shops are set to open on parcels in the immediate vicinity.

Moreover, the successful D&GV passenger operations have stimulated renewed interest by local shippers in rail freight service, and this could translate into growing rail employment, increased local business activity, and additional paychecks and tax revenues in the coming years.

All in all, not bad for rail lines that were teetering on the brink of extinction just a few years ago, and a real credit to some forward-thinking West Virginia state officials and two unlikely, but truly visionary, railroad entrepreneurs. **I**

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West Virginia Central's Edwards car handles the *Cheat Mountain Salamander* at High Bridge on April 7, 2001. Lars Byrne

