

An exciting day and an unusual routine on "Black's Railroad," the little-remarked LL Subdivision

Southern's *not-so-great* locomotive chases

By Dennis R. Mize

MENTION THE SOUTHERN RAILWAY in Kentucky, and most people think of the famous CNO&TP (Cincinnati, New Orleans & Texas Pacific). This super railroad, with its excellent track and high-density, heavy-volume traffic easily overshadows another main line, the "LS" (Louisville Southern), which runs west from Danville, Ky., through Louisville and on to East St. Louis, Ill. This line too, remains important to today's Norfolk Southern.

Connecting these two lines between Lawrenceburg and Lexington was a 24-mile branch line officially called the LL Subdivision, for its two endpoints, but known locally as the Versailles Branch. During the late 1970's and early 1980's, two very unusual operating situations confronted the LL Sub's local crews.

JANUARY 1977 WAS ONE OF THE COLDEST months in memory in central Kentucky. River traffic on the Kentucky River had been halted owing to 8-inch-thick ice around Lock 5. Nearby, the rural, river community of Tyrone was cut off to highway traffic by ice and snow on the hillsides.

Southern's Versailles Branch, though, remained in service, its daily-except-Sunday local freight making the round trip from Lawrenceburg to Lexington and back. For decades, the line was the bastion of SW1 2007, a 600 h.p. EMD switcher built in April 1947. It was widely believed in the 1970's that the 2007 had held one of the longest continuous assignments for a diesel anywhere in the nation.

By the mid-'70's, traffic had surged on the branch, and Southern was desperate for more power. In 1975, it briefly employed a pair of SW1's between Tyrone, site of a Kentucky Utilities coal-fired power plant, and Lexington. A year later, as coal traffic to Tyrone increased, the second SW1 was replaced by a GP7.

Southern's problem on this branch was two big bridges

on the west end of the line—Cedar Brook Viaduct, at milepost 2.0LL, and the Kentucky River bridge at milepost 3.1LL—which had severe weight restrictions. Four-axle diesels could not exceed 200,000 lbs. (50,000 lbs. per axle), which created the need for the lightweight SW1.

A second SW1 could have been used if an idler (spacer) car with multiple-unit cables was placed between the units (similar to another situation of the era, with Alco RS3's and an old coach, on Southern subsidiary Central of Georgia in southern Alabama). This approach had been discussed for the LL Sub in the 1960's but was never implemented. Instead, trains 21 eastbound and 22 westbound would double or triple (and on one occasion, quadruple) their trips between Versailles and Lexington, where the 2 percent climb up Pisgah Hill was the line's ruling grade. Even with the low-speed, maximum-traction gearing of 65:12, an SW1 was rated at only 900 tons up Pisgah Hill.

In charge of the LL Sub crew was a veteran Southern conductor, a Mr. Black. A trainmaster in Louisville referred to the Versailles Branch as "Black's railroad." Black ran a tight operation, and did so by the book: "Every car had a proper place, and every car had better be in its place." Because of the tonnage restrictions with a small engine, this train became a harbinger of the future because the crew, by special agreement, never used a caboose—it was an unnecessary additional car. The full crew rode the engine, placing a flag on the rear car's coupler.

And so it was on January 15, 1977. With a bitterly cold temperature of 17 below zero, snow and ice everywhere, and impassable roads, the crew, with SW1 1014 (which Southern had renumbered from 2011), went on duty at Lawrenceburg and ran to Tyrone. It then picked up the coal hoppers from the Kentucky Utilities power plant, plus GP7 8272, and continued to Versailles. After switch-



TWO PHOTOS COURTESY "ANDERSON COUNTY (KY.) NEWS"

After GP7 8272 got away and plunged off the Tyrone power plant spur and destroyed itself (right), "chase engine" SW1 1014 narrowly escaped the same fate, just slightly derailling (top) on its futile rescue attempt.

ing Versailles industries, the train went on to Lexington. The crew set out the train in the yard, then went to lunch while their locomotives were fueled. With the GP7 assisting the SW1, they needed only one trip to get back to Versailles. There, the crew switched three customers—Rand McNally, McCauley Bros. Feed, and Sylvania—and got under way around 5:30 p.m. in fading light. Proceeding to Tyrone, the train arrived as darkness set in.

The crew uncoupled the two units from the train and backed into a yard track to set out the Geep. Whether they forgot to tie down the Geep's hand brake or made a conscious decision to rely on the unit's air brakes to hold is not known, but as they uncoupled the SW1 and pulled

forward, the GP7 started to roll on its own, heading down the steep grade to the KU power plant.

Now, the Tyrone KU spur descended around a hill to the river bottom and ended up at the base of the Kentucky River bridge, more than 200 feet below the LL Sub's main track. The spur was only about 6000 feet long, so its grade was about 3.5 percent. Two safety (runaway) tracks were in place, one near the top and one farther down. Per Rule 130.1, switches were supposed to be lined for the safety tracks. And in the days of Conductor Black, they had been. But by 1977, Mr. Black had retired, and this crew had left the runaway track switches lined down the hill. Special instructions also required each descending



THREE PHOTOS, DENNIS R. MIZE



On the afternoon of Thursday, April 29, 1971, veteran 2007 ambles into Versailles yard (above) with L&N coal bound for Kentucky Utilities' Tyrone Power Plant. The name of Southern subsidiary Chattanooga Traction was almost too big for the hood of LL Sub backup SW1 No. 4 (left).

train to use retainers on all cars, set to a 45-degree-angle "high pressure position." A full brake test was to be made, with all brakes inspected for a set and release, before starting down the hill. Maximum speed was to be kept under 8 mph at all times.

Yet on this cold, dark Saturday evening, at about 6:20 p.m., GP7 8272 was unmanned and rolling freely down the grade! The crew on SW1 1014 immediately stopped, reversed direction, and opened the throttle to chase the Geep, hoping to catch it on the hill. For all the racehorses she passed on her daily trip to Lexington, however, a racehorse the little 1014 was not. Around and down the hill rolled 8272, gaining speed as it descended the spur.

Near the foot of the grade, at the turnout for the switchback into the power plant, the speeding Geep jumped the track. It rolled over an embankment, overturned several times, and flattened a stone wall before coming to rest near a pond on the KU property. The little chase engine was not far behind, and when it hit the track damaged by the derailling Geep, it too derailed, but upright on the edge of the ballast. This vain pursuit was probably the fastest trip the little switcher had ever made down the Tyrone spur.

The chagrined crew walked to the KU power plant and notified utility and Southern Railway officials of the incident. Luckily, no one was hurt, and nothing at the power plant was in danger. KU employees immediately called their plant manager, Howard Asher, at home. As he would

relate years later, "The locomotive took a flying leap into the pond."

In a fashion typical of the Southern in this era, the story was "contained," although the local paper, the *Anderson County News*, carried two pictures of the mishap. The crew faced an almost certain formal investigation. GP7 8272 was a pile of junk and was written off the books as a total loss, with a fully depreciated value of \$762. Six gondolas were brought in, and the Geep's remains were hauled off to Danville, Ky. One local railfan heard of the story, tracked down the gons at Danville, and managed to find a builder's plate as identification of the unit involved.

Soon the LL Sub's actors changed, but not their character. In 1979, the chase engine, SW1 1014, was sold, and on the second day of 1980, the three-decade LL Sub veteran unit, SW1 1011 (the ex-2007), was also sold, to Koppel Co. of Enola, Nebr. Southern replaced them with SW1 1002, renumbered in 1972 from Chattanooga Traction Co. 4 (CTC was a Southern subsidiary in the northern part of that Tennessee city). CTC 4, also built in 1947, by 1980 was the yard engine in Somerset, Ky., but was no stranger to the LL Sub, as it also served as backup unit for the 2007. Whenever the 2007 was out of service, CTC 4 would be picked up by a mainline freight and hauled to Lawrenceburg for the next day's local. This was not an entirely new duty for CTC 4, for during 1967, when the 2007 spent several months at Chattanooga's DeButts diesel shop being overhauled, CTC 4 was 2007's replacement.

ANOTHER INTERESTING DEVELOPMENT, perhaps unique in American railroading, came to pass in the early 1980's on the LL Sub, at the Kentucky River bridge in Tyrone. Again, an unmanned train was involved. Completed in 1889, the structure came to be known as Young's High Bridge, after Bennett Young, president of the Louisville Southern Railroad, the line's original operator. The spindly structure towered 280 feet above the water and stretched 1659 feet across the gorge. Just to think about crossing it on a train wasn't for the faint of heart.

Indeed, the train crew during the 1980's had become



At 5:35 p.m. on June 25, 1971, train 22, with the 2007 in charge of 8 cars, eases across Young's High Bridge headed for Lawrenceburg.

wary of the bridge, which had begun to shift slightly. Finally, the crew became afraid to ride across it on the SW1. So, a hi-rail truck was parked at the distillery on the west side of the structure, and each morning when they'd arrive from Lawrenceburg, the crew would stop the train on the west side. A crewman would then drive the hi-rail truck across the bridge ahead of the train.

After he crossed, the engineer would put the SW1 into the Run 1 (lowest) throttle position with a light brake application, and he and the other crew members would get off the engine. The unmanned train would roll across the bridge, and the hi-rail "advance man" would board the locomotive and stop the train once it had cleared the bridge. He would then drive the hi-rail back back to fetch the rest of the crew and return them to the train. The reverse procedure was followed in the afternoon.

This practice continued until the last run of a train across the bridge, in August 1985. Further shifting of the structure forced it to be condemned, and it was taken out of service. With an estimated cost of over \$1 million to raze the structure, the railroad (by then Norfolk Southern) chose to leave it standing.

NS continued to provide service on each side of the bridge. In 1987, the Bluegrass Railroad Museum purchased the track from Tyrone to West Versailles. This 5.5 miles of track gave the museum a permanent home and allowed weekend excursion trains to haul passengers over to see the Kentucky River Gorge and Young's High Bridge. On May 11, 1996, short line Lexington & Ohio, a member of the Gulf & Ohio short-line group of Knoxville, Tenn., began operating the Versailles-Lexington segment, using another Southern-family SW1, Atlantic & East Carolina 1007, as one of its locomotives. Seven years later, on March 25, 2003, another short-line firm, R.J. Corman, bought the line from Gulf & Ohio.

The LL Sub on the west side was kept in service by

Norfolk Southern to serve the Wild Turkey distillery in Tyrone, with SW1 1002—perhaps the last SW1 in Class 1 road service in the country—doing the honors. This locomotive had been overhauled and received roller-bearing trucks. For a few years it was parked in Lawrenceburg, then it was moved to the distillery and kept inside one of the buildings there, operated once or twice a week as needed. The line has since been abandoned by NS and is being considered for rails-to-trails conversion.

Kentucky Utilities' Tyrone power plant is still in operation, available to meet peak demands for electricity. The KU spur was removed several years ago and the rails given to the Bluegrass museum for re-use. Trucks now haul the coal to the KU plant.

TODAY, NS SW1 1002 is parked in Versailles for possible sale. Norfolk Southern has linked the unit's disposition with Young's High Bridge, hoping to donate rather than demolish the structure, which was cited by photographer David Plowden in his January 2004 *TRAINS* Magazine article, "Underrated Railroad Bridges," as a "little-known masterpiece" and "undoubtedly the most perfect specimen of the 19th century cantilever bridge, as it was never reconstructed or strengthened."

The Bluegrass Railroad Museum owns the track between Versailles to Tyrone and offers weekend train rides during the summer months over a portion of the track between Versailles and Milner. The museum hopes to eventually restore the remaining 2 miles of track to Tyrone so visitors can ride the train and see Young's High Bridge and the Kentucky River Gorge, and visit the very spot where Southern Railway's not-so-great locomotive chases took place. ■