

## A Second Chance

In 1910, thousands of men from the West Virginia Pulp and Paper Company would board flat-cars and ride the Greenbrier, Cheat & Elk Railroad up the Appalachian mountainside. Pulled by a steam-driven Shay locomotive, the train cut through the vast wilderness, its black smoke billowing into the chilly air, and its whistle piercing the rural silence. Hours later, the train and exhausted men hauled lumber back down the mountain, where it fed the mill in the tiny town of Cass, West Virginia.

Over a century later, thousands of tourists from around the country flock to what is now called the Cass Scenic Railroad, one site among West Virginia's many state parks. Those who arrive at the platform early can sit on the wooden benches that line the converted flat-cars. Those who arrive late, just as the original Shay locomotive blows its final whistle, must stand for the roughly five-hour journey. The lumber mill in Cass has long closed, and many feared that the town would disappear. However, a new industry tied to the railroad and mountains has given Cass another chance at life.

After hours in the car, driving through the mostly rural parts of Virginia and West Virginia, my family was not sure what to expect as we stretched our legs in the parking lot and looked up at the long white building called the Cass Country Store. My knowledge of a country store was limited to Mr. Olsen's shop in *Little House on the Prairie*. To me, the large store was another piece of the antiquated scenery that seemed to have been frozen in time. The train had not yet arrived, but high in the mountains that loomed above the country store, a thick plume of smoke wafted into the air. A whistle echoed.

My sister shivered beneath her jean jacket, the August heat masked by the chill of being hundreds of feet above sea level.

“I can’t believe you paid over a hundred dollars so all of us could ride some stupid train,” she said to my mother, who was packing snacks into her tote bag.

Behind her, a woman in a blue shirt turned and scowled. I looked down at my feet, feeling embarrassed and ashamed, when I saw the white words printed across the woman’s shirt: *Cass Scenic Railroad*. I could not get over the feeling that, as an employee of the park and perhaps a citizen of the small town, the woman probably felt as though my sister had not only insulted the railroad, but insulted *her*.

In a way, I did understand where my sister had been coming from. Back at home, if one drove about an hour past the district of shopping centers and strip malls, a refurbished train gave tourists a ride through the Pocono Mountains. Like my sister, I wasn’t sure as to why my mother insisted on purchasing tickets for a train ride roughly six hours away.

However, the way the woman in the blue shirt turned over her shoulder and stared at my sister, and the way the families of tourists lined the platform in excited groups, told me that perhaps this train ride would be different than the one closer to home.

From 1908 to 1922 was what many historians in the area consider the town’s heyday. The railroad and mill operated six days a week, twenty-two hours a day, cutting nearly 1.5 million feet of lumber. There were between 2,500 and 3,000 men employed by the West Virginia Pulp and Paper Company, and they lived in twelve logging camps in the town. Oftentimes, the wives and children of the lumber workers lived in the camps, too.

In order to accommodate the workers who had to ride the train up and down the mountain, the company built a town at the very top of the mountain. With thirty-five company homes, a forty-room hotel, a supply store, and a post office, this town was named Spruce. It was

one of the highest towns in the country, at slightly more than 3,800 feet above sea level. On warm summer days, while others in West Virginia may have waded in springs and rivers to cool off, the town of Spruce woke up to frost.

The railroad was the backbone of not only Cass, but also Spruce. Spruce, so high in the mountains, had no roads. Only by train could people and all the necessary supplies reach the residents. In the case of a death, the train carried the deceased down the mountain. There were no cemeteries in Spruce.

As the Shay Engine #6, the largest Shay locomotive ever built, pulled into the depot in a cloud of black smoke, a little boy a few feet away, in a replica conductor's hat, cheered. The train screeched to a halt and an army of people in blue t-shirts and jeans darkened by coal dust stepped out of the flat-cars. Each stood to the side of a car and watched on proudly as tourists stepped forward and climbed the short ladders to the cars.

The train started slowly. The pistons, the gears along the train's wheels, began to pulsate and the wheels screeched along the tracks. Suddenly, I found that my heart began to echo the pulsing of the train along its steel tracks. Extra coal and steam was needed in the beginning of the journey, as the train ascended the steep mountain. Smoke encircled the train, temporarily blocking the view of the rising terrain. Light soot began to coat the clothes of the passengers.

"We are going to get lung cancer," my sister said for the third or fourth time that day. However, in my opinion, the air had never felt cleaner. The coal dust did nothing to hamper the cool air that filled my lungs. It was crisp and it smelled clean, absent of the vehicle exhaust so common in the air back home.

I stood from my seat, moving rather wobbly on the bumpy track, and leaned over the train's rail. The speed was increasing as the Shay locomotive pushed the train up the mountain, at an eleven percent grade. We passed creeks, tall trees, thick brush, and deer grazing in the shelter of the green canopy. So far, the view was not very different from the scenery at home, but there was a mysterious sense of something new yet to come with every push of the old engine. The men and women helping to power the train worked faster and faster, like they knew something the rest of the passengers did not and could not wait to reveal the secret.

We passed the abandoned lumber mill, badly damaged in a fire. Between the mill and a water tower was an engine house. Unlike the mills and company homes, the engine house was not abandoned. Half a dozen men, wearing greasy clothing and clunky, brown gloves, waved as the train went past, as the mechanics had done over a century before when their company co-workers piled in the flat-cars for their eleven-hour shifts.

The company's and railroad's rapid line of succession and the ownership's changing of hands greatly damaged the lumber industry of Cass. In 1925, the mill in Spruce closed. The population dwindled to zero, the homes and hotel fell into disrepair, and the Shay locomotive stopped venturing the steep heights to the abandoned town.

In 1960, the mills in Cass followed suit. Employees were only given a day's notice. A scrap dealer was asked to dismantle the railroad. There was no doubt that the railroad would not be the only piece of Cass to disappear. The town itself and the lives of the people who lived there, would meet a similar fate. Just as the railroad had built the town, the loss of the railroad could erase Cass from the map. However, before the railroad could be torn apart and the town of

Cass abandoned, Russel Baum saw in the railroad the opportunity for a tourist site. He led businessmen and local officials along the tracks, to Bald Knob, in hopes to persuade them.

The ride to Bald Knob took about two and a half hours. The higher the train journeyed, the more distinctive the differences all around became. The tall, leafy trees disappeared. The squirrels that had roamed and frolicked along the sides of the tracks were gone. The air was silent, the songs of chirping birds suddenly absent. A chill settled in the air and everyone hugged jackets around themselves. Ancient needle-bearing trees towered above the train. I couldn't help but imagine people thousands of feet below fanning themselves in the warm summer air, as those of us on the train were plunged into winter.

I leaned over the railing again and looked out at a collage of different shades of green plastered against a cloudless blue sky. It didn't seem as though it was possible for the train to pulse on any higher. The pressure clogged my ears and made the noises of the train pushing its way up the mountain fuzzy and muffled. Sometimes the train would stop and the workers in the blue shirts had to pour water into the train, as though they were refreshing it and trying to ease its fatigue.

Finally, the train screeched to a halt at Bald Knob. The wooden tracks didn't go any further, for the mountain reached no higher. The end of the line. Carefully, I climbed out of the flat-car and caught my breath.

At 4,700 feet in the air, all the eye could see were mountains. Not one range of mountains, but perhaps a dozen, one line of mountains after another after another after another. It was endless, infinite. It seemed impossible to me that there could be a country of malls and highways and cities beyond, because it seemed as if the mountains rolled straight towards the coast. The few clouds that did linger cast dark shadows on the green mountain range. However,

they moved rapidly across the vast horizon, as if the clouds themselves knew that they were interfering with the view. Below the mountain, in the valley, it was as though someone had lifted the very ground of the earth, like a blanket, and draped it back over the land where it lay wrinkled. The land rose and fell and rolled, not sharply, but gently, billowing almost like waves on solid ground.

No one talked, not even my sister who had so complained about the long, expensive train journey. Perhaps in a way, she felt as I did: that the few hundred dollars we had spent were not so much for the train ride itself, but for the view, a priceless view, one hidden near the very heart of the country, a view one could only find if they ventured nearly 5,000 feet above sea level. We simply stood at the top of the mountain and breathed in the clean air and let the slight breeze rustle the long, wild grass growing in tufts along the mountain's edge.

The men and women in the blue shirts, who had exerted their muscles on the long journey, stood huddled together as they looked at the never-ending range of mountains. Despite the fact that they had only been to the top of the mountain that very morning, and were destined to return with the late afternoon train one more time, they looked speechless and in awe. One took a picture with a phone while another's arms were folded in front of him, almost smugly, as if he were silently boasting, proudly showing off his home.

*This* view, the view of the entirety of West Virginia, is what gave the town of Cass a second chance at life. It was why the woman my sister had insulted had been so protective of her train and her railroad. This was what stopped the railroad from being dismantled and made sure the men in the engine house still had jobs and guaranteed the Shay locomotives would never become scrap metal. This view not only ensured a livelihood for the present-day town with a

population of fifty-two, it guaranteed that the livelihood of the 3,000 men who made the journey to Bald Knob everyday would not be forgotten.