



In 1917 Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company purchased most of the former Birmingham Mineral mine-serving branches on the west end of Red Mountain. TCI subsequently laid about 1.4 miles of new track to connect the Muscoda and Fossil Branches, and in 1925 it began operations on the new "High Line" between the furnaces in Fairfield and the ore mines at Wenonah. This picture from December of 1978 shows TCI's long dormant main track at Lipscomb. TCI's former Birmingham Mineral lines on Red Mountain were finally abandoned and removed in the '80's.

## BIRMINGHAM MINERAL RAILROAD'S RED MOUNTAIN ROUTE

Part III  
by Lyle Key

**T**urning our attention briefly to TCI's former Birmingham Mineral trackage in the Wenonah-Ishkooda area, virtually all of it was apparently still in place as late as 1967. Wholesale retirement of unused trackage in that area apparently began around 1974.

On the eastern end of the Red Mountain Route, the Ruffner red ore mines ceased operations in the late '40's or early '50's, and the surviving portion of the Gate City Branch beyond Red Gap Junction was gradually swallowed

up in a thick growth of brush and trees. Up until June of 1984, however, L&N's successor Seaboard System Railroad, Inc. ("Seaboard") was hauling covered hoppers loaded with sand to Southern Precision Company, a Jim Walter Corporation ("Jim Walter") subsidiary located at Red Gap Junction. Seaboard normally made the Boyles-Red Gap Junction turn about twice a week, and one diesel locomotive was usually sufficient.

In 1975 L&N had given serious consideration to abandoning this line

after a major slide at Red Gap covered the track with tons of dirt. The work gang first tried to uncover the section of track that had been buried by the slide, but dirt from the mountainside kept filling in the excavation work. The workers were ultimately forced to leave a section of the track under the slide and relocate the line around the south side of the slide area. Two months passed before service to Red Gap Junction could be restored. The re-aligned section of track at Red Gap could not be moved any further south without encroaching on Georgia Road, and the

railroad was understandably concerned about what would happen if another major slide occurred at Red Gap.

On March 1, 1983, Seaboard filed with the ICC its application seeking authority to abandon the 4.2 mile long segment of its Gate City Branch between milepost 389.8 near Boyles and milepost 394.0 near Ruffner No. 2. The Commission found that during the three previous years, the line's traffic and financial results were as follows:

#### GATE CITY BRANCH

Year	Traffic, in Carloads	Avoidable Losses
1980	213	
1981	251	\$8,000
1982	173	\$6,788

The ICC accepted Seaboard's estimate that during the next year, \$46,890

would have to be spent to maintain the line at minimal FRA Class I condition, and that within the next five years, major rehabilitation would be required at a cost of \$102,433. The maintenance and rehabilitation program would include extensive timbering, surfacing, stabilizing the roadbed, and building a retaining wall at Red Gap to prevent further slides.

The Commission thus concluded that Seaboard was operating the line at a loss and was facing substantial rehabilitation costs. It also found that there was no evidence to indicate that the Gate City Branch could be made profitable in the foreseeable future. Jim Walter considered purchasing the line to preserve rail service to Southern Precision Company but ultimately decided against it. By Certificate and Decision served October 6, 1983, the ICC authorized abandonment of the 4.2 mile long segment of the Gate City Branch be-

yond milepost 389.8 near Boyles. Effective June 4, 1984, Seaboard exercised that abandonment authority. This left a 1.3 mile vestige of the Gate City Branch serving several industries south of the Birmingham Municipal Airport.

Aside from that short segment of the Gate City Branch, little remains of the Red Mountain Route. On the western end of Red Mountain, TCI's successor United States Steel has even pulled up all of its former Birmingham Mineral track except for a short half-mile segment between Winetka and Wenonah Road. There is still one significant remnant of the Red Mountain Route, however, the nine mile long North Branch between Magella and Bessemer. You will recall that the original North Branch between Magella and Sloss was completed in 1884 and was one of the two original Birmingham Mineral lines. Fortunately, the North Branch is still an active line which should remain an important part of the CSXT system for the foreseeable future. CSXT transportation people typically refer to the North Branch as the "Duncan Block."

Up until the Illinois Central Railroad Company ("IC") - Gulf, Mobile & Ohio Railroad Company ("GM&O") merger on August 10, 1972, GM&O freight trains used trackage rights over L&N between Tuscaloosa and Birmingham and ran over the North Branch en route between those two cities. In the '50's and early '60's, GM&O freights rolled over the North Branch behind colorful maroon and red Alco FA's and FB's. Illinois Central Gulf Railroad gave up those trackage rights after the merger since it also had access to Birmingham *via* the former IC route.

As of this update on May 9, 1996, an average of three empty hopper trains per day run south over the North Branch en route to coal mines on the Blue Creek Extension between Blue Creek Junction and Brookwood. These trains operate seven days a week, and they usually traverse the Duncan Block between 4:30 and 9:00 in the morning. On some occasions, the loaded coal trains return *via* the North Branch on their northbound runs, but they usually operate over Huntsville Branch No. 1



On the east side of 20th Street near the crest of Red Mountain, this vine covered bridge abutment survives as an enduring reminder of Birmingham Mineral's Red Gap Branch. The Red Gap Branch ran along the south side of the Mountain east of 20th Street where it crossed over to the north slope to serve long closed ore mines such as the Valley View Mine below Vulcan.



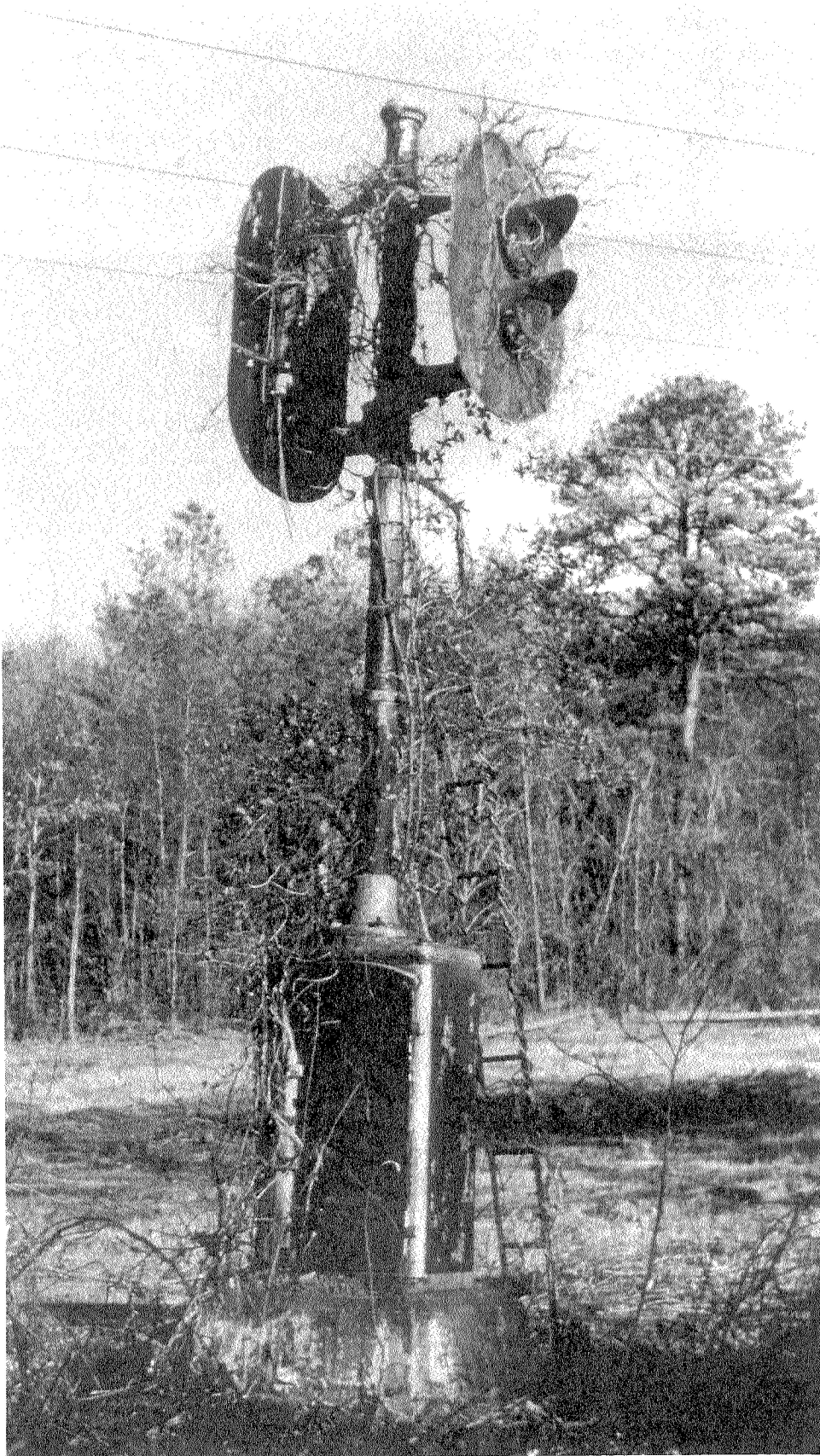
through Thomas and Ensley between 3:00 p.m. and 9:00 p.m. Two of these coal trains serve the West Jefferson steam plant on the Cain Creek Branch, and the third runs to Mobile.

The North Branch or Duncan Block is also used by daily train Z776 which handles The Kansas City Southern Railway Company ("KCS") interchange traffic between Boyles Yard and the KCS interchange at Brookwood. The KCS interchange train is called the "Z-Man", and it runs over the North Branch en route to and from the Brookwood interchange. The northbound Z-Man typically arrives at Boyles around 1:00 a.m. and heads back to Brookwood around 3:00 a.m. In addition to these overhead movements, train M719, the "Bessemer Day Job", switches the few remaining rail-served industries on the North Branch.

Perhaps the most fitting epitaph for the old Red Mountain Route is found on page 86 of Kincaid Herr's *The Louisville & Nashville Railroad*:

"Some of these branches, spurs, etc., once projected to serve then vital needs, have long since been abandoned and nowadays no trace of them remains."

Well, almost no trace. A vine covered bridge abutment is still visible on the east side of 20th Street near the crest of Red Mountain, the former Woodlawn depot building still stands beside the abandoned right-of-way of the Gate City Branch, and portions of the old grade can still be seen at various places. For the most part, however, Kincaid Herr is right. As the years pass, these few remaining traces will become increasingly difficult to distinguish or will vanish altogether. Hopefully, however, this article will serve to stir our imaginations to visualize the Red Mountain Route not as some crumbling bridge abutments or overgrown rights-of-way, but rather as it was when Birmingham was the young and vibrant "Magic City", and Birmingham Mineral was busily feeding the city's roaring blast furnaces with train loads of iron ore from Red Mountain.



When this photo was taken in December of 1978, this dark block signal stood as a silent sentinel along TCI's dormant mainline through Libscomb, Alabama. A decade later, the signal remained, but the track it protected had been removed.