

Passenger Accommodations—Passenger trains no longer plied L&N's North and South Branches in 1936 when R. H. Kennedy took this photograph in Birmingham, but the passenger trains that once ran over the Red Mountain Route probably looked very much like this unidentified train with ten wheeler No. 321 on the point. (R. H. Kennedy photo/Gary Sease collection)

RIDING THE RED MOUNTAIN ROUTE

by Lyle Key

A light rain is falling through the predawn darkness of August 1, 1996, when a railroad van drops the train crew and me beside the lead unit of CSXT train No. V29001. We've dead-headed from the roundhouse at Boyles to South Alice Yard which is just south of Birmingham on the S&NA main line. Our train consists of GE AC4400CW's 49 and 167, plus 73 empty hoppers. We're headed for Jim Walter Resources Mine No. 3 at Adger, Alabama, and I'm about to fulfill my long-standing desire to ride over the North Branch, the last surviving segment of Birmingham Mineral's Red Mountain Route.

Conductor Ben Curry, Engineer Jim Hale, and Trainman Red Ervin quickly settle into their jobs, and eight minutes after our arrival, they conduct the required running brake test. At 0425 (local time), we head south onto the right hand main, and at 0427, the dispatcher gives us the Duncan Block—which covers the North Branch—and the Bessemer Yard Limits. At 0433, we reach the junction at Magella

(m.p. 394.6) and roll through the turnout onto the North Branch.

This is my first trip on one of the new AC units, and it doesn't take long to realize that there have been some dramatic changes inside the cabs of modern locomotives. Hogheads who ran ore trains over the North Branch during the 19th Century would scarcely believe the air-conditioned comfort, the subdued noise level, and the detailed displays on the computer screens. Among other things, the two screens on the cab console show that we're maintaining a steady 25 m.p.h.

Residential areas predominate along today's North Branch, but the line does pass the expansive Fleet Oil storage yard, Western Iron, where two covered hoppers are spotted, and a propane distributor. Some stretches of the branch are lined by thick vegetation, and in a few of these areas, overhanging trees create a canopy effect. Not too far west of Magella, a weedy spur runs back into one of those wooded areas, and the crew tells me that it leads to an unseen building supply firm.

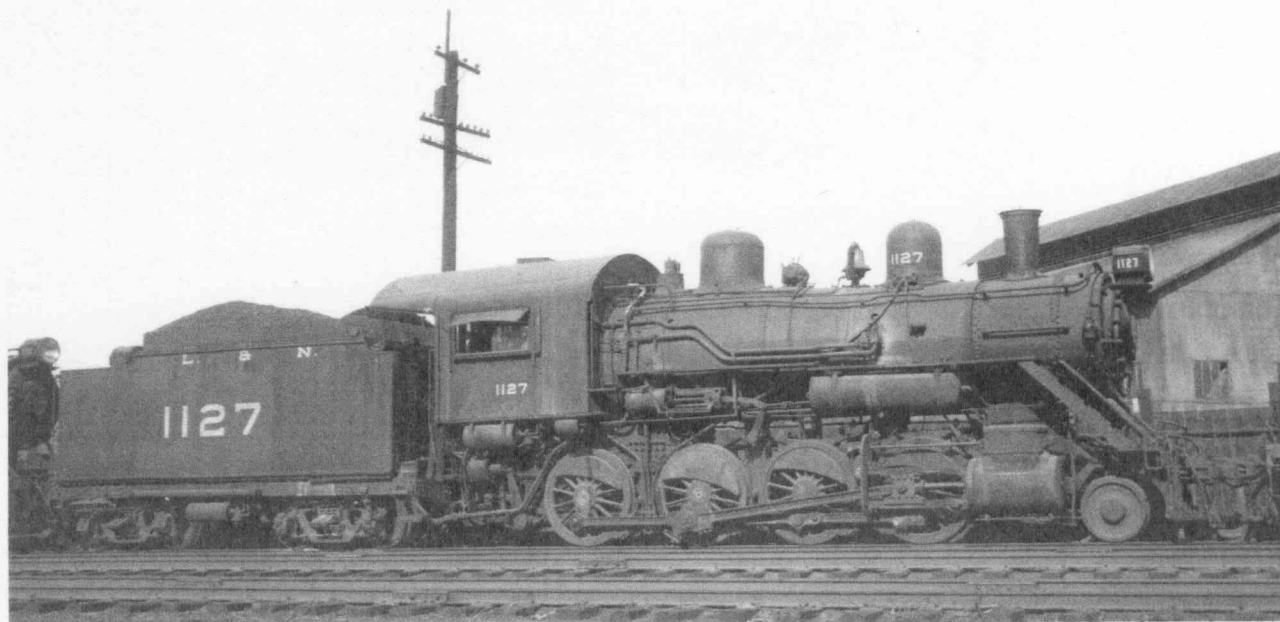
Near m.p. 400 at Winetka, No. 49's headlight illuminates the bridge which once carried TCI's High Line over the North Branch. The old TCI bridge is still a distinctive rust red from decades of dustings from the ore trains that operated between the mines and the mills. The High Line is gone now, and high weeds are visible on top of the overhead structure.

About a month before my trip, CSXT rescinded the order requiring North Branch trains to stop and flag the grade crossing at Avenue K in Lipscomb (m.p. 401), but Engineer Hale still lets his big G.E. locomotives drift through the crossing at 20 m.p.h. In "downtown" Lipscomb, the North Branch passes through an attractive park-like area with nicely mown grass and shrubs lining both sides of the right-of-way.

The spur to the propane distributor at Brick Yard Y (m.p. 403) was once the southerly leg of the wye where the now abandoned South Branch connected with the North Branch. Just west of Brick Yard



Fireman's view of the former TCI High Line. This was the view from the locomotive cab on August 1, 1996, as CSXT train No. V29001 approached the bridge where TCI's High Line crossed the North Branch. The High Line has been abandoned, and the old bridge is now topped with tracks instead of rails. (*Lyle Key photo*)



Red Mountain Route Workhorse—H-23 Class Consolidations like L&N 1127 frequently pulled the ore trains during the peak years on the Red Mountain Route. The 1906 Baldwin is shown in Birmingham on September 17, 1946. (*C. E. Rutledge photo/Gary Sease collection*)

Y, our train ducks under the Norfolk Southern main line and passes from the Duncan Block to the Bessemer Yard Limits. Just beyond the NS bridge, we see the spur to the north that was once a segment of ACL's main line between Birmingham and Manchester, Georgia.

Bessemer is understandably quiet at this early hour. The yard tracks are empty south of the Highway 11 overpass, but a few cars are on hand north of there. At 0501 we're given the McAdory and Adger Blocks for the run beyond Blue Creek Junction. Blue Creek Junction is on the north side of Bessemer where Interstate 59 crosses the railroad. The wye at Brick Yard Y is long gone, but at Blue Creek Junction, there is still a wye at the junction of the north lead for Bessemer Yard, Huntsville Branch No. 1, and the Blue Creek Extension.

We arrive at Jim Walter Mine No. 3 in Adger at 0535, but the loading operation is delayed by a hopper door that's cracked open and won't close. The offending hopper defies everyone's best efforts to secure it in the closed position, and the train crew and Jim Walter personnel finally decide to let that car remain empty. At 0705, V29001 begins the loading operation by easing the first of its 73 cars beneath the mine's coal loader. During the lengthy loading process, Engineer Hale is especially thankful for the locomotives' speed control feature. Similar to the cruise control on your family auto, the speed control feature enables the engineer to program his locomotives for speeds accurate to tenths of a mile per hour! For most of today's loading process, we'll be inching along at 0.2 m.p.h. At 1053 the loading process is finally completed, and Conductor Curry reports that we have 72 loads, 1 empty, and 10,017 tons. We depart Adger at 1108 and slowly roll down the loop track at five to six m.p.h. After crawling along at 0.2 m.p.h. for almost four hours, even five m.p.h. seems like an exhilarating pace!

Our train would normally return to Boyles via Huntsville Branch No. 1 while a train of empties bound for another Jim Walter mine would run west via the North Branch. Train operations are reduced this week, however, since the Jim Walter mines are on a vacation schedule, and the dispatcher grants our crew's request to return via the North Branch (the Duncan Block). Trainman Red Ervin explains



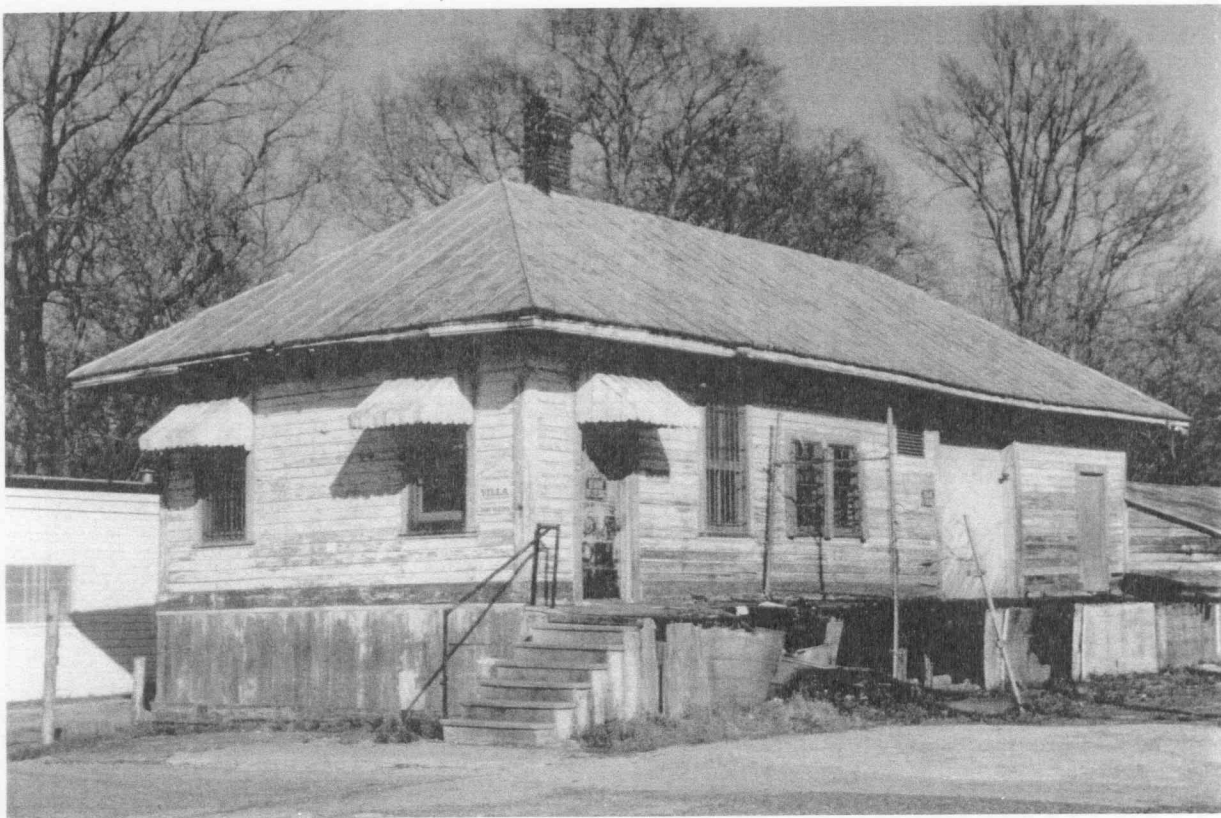
North Branch Tenant—GM&O had trackage rights over L&N between Tuscaloosa and Birmingham, and between Bessemer and Magella, GM&O's freight trains used the North Branch. In this photograph from August 1961, purple and red ALCO FA No. 745 is leading a Tuscaloosa-bound GM&O freight down L&N's double track main line just south of Birmingham. The train will soon reach the junction at Magella where it will leave the main line and head west on the North Branch. (Lyle Key photo)

that, "There are seven railroad crossings on Huntsville Branch No. 1, and most of them are set against us. It's just a lot easier to go back over the Duncan Block."

We're in Blue Creek Junction at noon, and at 1233, V29001 rolls back onto the main line at Magella. We tie up at Boyles at 1310 and leave the loaded train for the next crew to dump at the Miller Steam Plant on CSXT's Cain Creek Branch.

The North Branch was one of Birmingham Mineral's two earliest branches, and after 112 years of operation, it's still going strong. The other segments of the Red Mountain Route followed the Red Mountain ore mines into oblivion, but despite the long-standing absence of ore

traffic, the North Branch has survived and thrived as a convenient connecting link with the Jim Walter Resources coal mines west of Bessemer. Industries along the branch still generate a small volume of traffic, and while the old GM&O trackage rights operation with colorful Alco cab units is only a distant memory, trackage rights operations have resumed on the North Branch with the nocturnal passage of Kansas City Southern's "Z-Man." It's difficult to say that anything is 100% certain in contemporary railroading, but it seems a safe bet that the old Birmingham Mineral North Branch will be around on January 1, 2000, to celebrate the arrival of its third century.



The former Woodlawn, Alabama Depot was worse for wear but still standing on Easter Sunday in 1996. Woodlawn was served by the Gate City Branch, which was abandoned in June of 1984. To the best of the author's knowledge, this is the last surviving building from the Red Mountain Route. *(Lyle Key photo)*

On the afternoon of August 1, 1996, CSXT train No. V29001 approaches the junction of Magella where the North Branch connects with the S&NA main line. *(Lyle Key photo)*

