

ARKANSAS RAILROADER
ARKANSAS RAILROAD CLUB NEWSLETTER
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SEPTEMBER MEETING: The regular September meeting will be held at Scott, Arkansas at 2:00 p.m. Sunday, September 9, 1973. All members are urged to attend.

AUGUST MEETING: A called meeting was held at Scott on Sunday, August 12th. The proceedings of the Joint meeting of the Arkansas Railroad Club and the Arkansas Valley Model Railroad Club were discussed.

Earl Saunders reported on the Status of the building project. The City of North Little Rock has cleared the property ready for grading and Big Rock Sand & Gravel will provide the gravel necessary. He reports that The City Council still must formally approve the project at their next meeting.

Bob Dortch generously offered the use of the facilities at Scott for the September meeting.

MEMORIES ALONG ARKANSAS RAILS
BY
CLIFTON E. HULL

Very few people traveling through Coal Hill, near Ozark on Highway 64 realize that parallel to the highway, a couple of blocks south, is a row of deserted, dilapidated buildings resembling a western movie set. About a hundred feet from the warped and faded facades of the buildings is a row of telephone poles. These old structures and the row of poles recall memories of furious and frantic days.

In the summer of 1875, the rails of the Little Rock & Ft. Smith Railroad (now the Central Division of the Missouri Pacific) were laid west from Clarksville to terminate at Altus. Just five miles east of Altus a small coal mine operation was begun by a family named Stewell. A branch line of rails was laid south from the main line and here a small settlement was begun, It was called Whalen's Switth.

Facing the railroad on both sides were general merchandise stores, hotels, homes and several saloons. There was an influx of desperados and gunmen, always curious about a new railroad town. They soon grew bored and moved on.

By 1880, the place had grown considerably and the home folks incorporated the town and on January 8 it was named Coal Hill. The coal mining business was booming, new mines were being opened and a regular switch engine was assigned to take care of subbing empty coal cars and bringing the loaded cars from the mines to a yard of storage tracks at Coal Hill.

The days of hustle & bustle had arrived and the place resembled more and more the glory days of a western mining town. In 1892, Cy Warman wrote a poem in honor of Creede, Colorado in which he told of the town's wild and roaring days.

"While the world is filled with sorrow,
and hearts must break and bleed.....
Its day all day in the day-time,
And there is no night in Creede."

These words were just as true in Arkansas, for verily, "there was no night in Coal Hill". As the Little Rock & Ft. Smith rails were extended to Van Buren, the little town of Coal Hill was designated as a "meal stop" for the westbound passenger train which arrived about 6 o'clock in the evening. All passengers were given 15 minutes to unload, make their way to the two-story Central Hotel, consume a meal of well prepared food and get back on board the train. The clatter of pots, pans, crockery and cutlery prohibited any conversation of which the rapidly munching jaws were capable.

Finally there were 12 long tracks in the Coal Hill yard, switch engines were operated 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to take care of the enormous coal shipments. Also the town was made a terminus for two local freight trains, one from Van Buren and the other from Argenta (North Little Rock). Often there were as many as 12 freight train crews in Coal Hill at one time. J.W. D. McClure, proprietor of the Central Hotel, and his wife were, indeed, busy folks. More freight business originated at Coal Hill than at all other stations combined.

The railroad company finally decided the heavy grades between Hartman and Altus were not worth the rapidly dwindling traffic following the Great Depression, so in 1936 the road was relocated between Hartman and Ozark, leaving Altus and Coal Hill without railroad service.

The Central Hotel is still standing, serving as a private home. Its weathered clapboard siding and sheet metal roof nestle in the shadows of large shade trees.

This weary old house and the row of tired, empty store buildings evoke many a fond memory of the few old-timers still around town.

"It was day all day in the day-time,
And there was no night at Coal Hill."

Arkansas Railroad Club is a not for profit organization, Meetings are held on the second Sunday of each month. For information, write P. O. Box 5584, Little Rock, Arkansas 72205