

Montour Memories of Hendersonville

By Pam Nixon - Montour Railroad Historical Society

Local historian and genealogist Pam (Mack) Nixon is a Westland resident and Montour Trail patron. She relates some past memories of the Montour Railroad.

One morning, I stepped outside to get the paper out of the paper box and felt the cold air. As I turned to go back in the house, I caught the smell of burning coal in the air, probably from someone's stove in the neighborhood. That smell is very comforting to me. It reminds me of my grandmother's house in Hendersonville. She had a coal furnace for years and even after she had a new gas furnace installed, the smell of coal still permeated her house when you walked in from outside. As I took a deep breath, I thought to myself that burning coal is a smell that today's generation would probably not recognize.

My grandmother was Florence Mack, a coal miner's daughter and a coal miner's wife. My grandfather, Matthew Mack was the hoist engineer at the Henderson tippie. They were fortunate to obtain one of the single family patch homes on the top of the hill in Hendersonville when they married in 1919. They raised their family and lived the rest of their lives in that four room house.

By the time I was old enough to have memories, the coal mine at Hendersonville had been long closed and the rusting hulk of the tippie and the gob piles were all that remained. But the coal trains of the Montour still ran through Hendersonville every day and night, carrying hoppers full of coal out of Montour #4 and bringing the empties back through.



Henderson Mine ca. 1915. The tipple buildings sit on the current site of the Hendersonville Park ball field and McPherson picnic pavilion. The Montour main line, now trail, runs behind the buildings just above roof level of the powerhouse on the left. Photo courtesy Pam (Mack) Nixon.

We visited my grandmother every Saturday afternoon. It was just a part of the day, chores in the morning and then the trip to Granny's house. Since her house was at the top of the hill, her back porch overlooked the entire valley. As children, my sisters and I would entertain ourselves by sitting out on that back porch with my grandfather's binoculars watching the sheep on McPherson's farm on the opposite side of the valley. It was always exciting though, when we got to see a coal train coming through on the Montour. It would have as many as three engines on the front and we would make a game of counting out loud the number of coal cars going by. But what we really waited for was to see the caboose. We would jump up and down, waving our hands, and hollering as loud as we could, trying to get the attention of the men on the caboose. Sometimes they would notice us and wave back. It was always a good afternoon when we got a wave back.

When I was twelve, I spent the summer at Granny's house. After chores in the morning, I would look for ways to entertain myself while Granny watched her afternoon soap operas. I would curl up on the glider on the back porch, reading the afternoon away, but I would always stop to watch the coal trains rumble by. There was something almost musical about the sounds of those trains; the crescendo of those diesel engines

gearing up or down depending on which way they were traveling and then the rhythmic click-clack of the hopper car wheels as they traveled over the rails and finally the fade as the train whistle would sound at the road crossing off in the distance.

The trains ran through the night, too, sometimes as many as four. Even though they were miles off, the sound of those Montour trains working uphill would wake me and just as I was able to get back to sleep, another one would come rolling through. Eventually, I got used to the sound of the coal trains and I was able to lull myself back to sleep by the hum of those diesels going over the track. When I finally went back home at the end of summer, I had a hard time sleeping again because it was too quiet at night.

To this day, I still like to watch and hear trains. I now walk the Montour Trail quite frequently on the stretch from Venice to Southview and Westland and I've often thought about the tons and tons of coal that the Montour moved along the path I now walk. What a flood of comforting memories from just a whiff of burning coal on a cold crisp morning.

Pam (Mack) Nixon

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