A Day on the Elk River Coal & Lumber Co. Log Line

by Dave Marquis, Photos by the Author, Copyright 2012

Figure 1. This map of the Elk River Coal and Lumber Company railroad operations shows all of the locations mentioned in the text below. The company's common carrier railroad, the Buffalo Creek and Gauley RR, is shown in orange, the logging line in red, and the connecting Baltimore and Ohio RR in blue.

I didn't sleep much that summer night in 1958 in the back seat of my '55 Plymouth parked near the Buffalo Creek and Gauley RR engine terminal at Dundon, W.Va. My insomnia was due to the fact that I had made arrangements to ride the Elk River Coal and Lumber Company log train I was due to meet at Avoca in the wee hours of the morning. I tossed and turned, and finally got up around 4 AM, shaved, ate some trail mix, and headed toward Avoca in the dark.

I'd never been to Avoca, but I knew it was the site of a wye turning track used by the BC&G main line locos, and a junction with the Lily Fork log line. Avoca is just a mile or two from Dundon, and it consisted of the wye, a siding, and a few houses in the woods along the tracks. But much to my surprise, the "steel" train (which I didn't know existed) was stationed there. On this day, it was going to be removing rail from a temporary log line further up the valley from the current logging

site. The steel train usually left Avoca about the same time the log train left Swandale, so it would be out of the way of the log train.

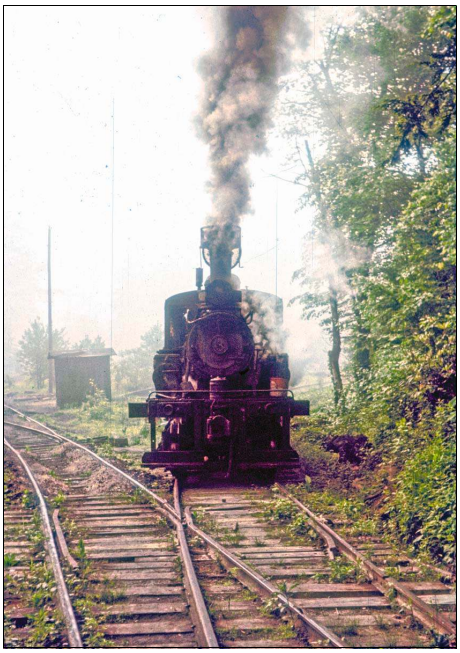

Figure 2

When I arrived in Avoca, it was still dark, but I heard some activity down by the tracks, so I headed there in time to see the crew of Climax No. 3 steaming her up for the day's run. She sat there on the siding at dawn with steam emanating from numerous ports, and with the morning fog just beginning to lift. It was an ethereal sight I have never forgotten. **See figure 2.**

At Swandale the previous afternoon, I had seen the lumber superintendent, Mr. E. D. Currence. He welcomed me warmly and we chatted for awhile about my interests in railroads and logging and the future of geared steam locomotives on the ERC&L. He said he could not imagine any other form of locomotive on the log line, and that he expected steam would be running there far into the future. How quickly things change! It was only a few years later that company manager Joseph Bradley died and the entire property was sold to others, who dropped steam in a few short years and eventually abandoned the entire operation.

But on that early morning at Avoca, there was no sign of those impending changes. As I and legendary railfan and photographer John Krause, with a few other railfans who had arrived watched, the steel train shuffled off up the Lily Fork.

Figure 3

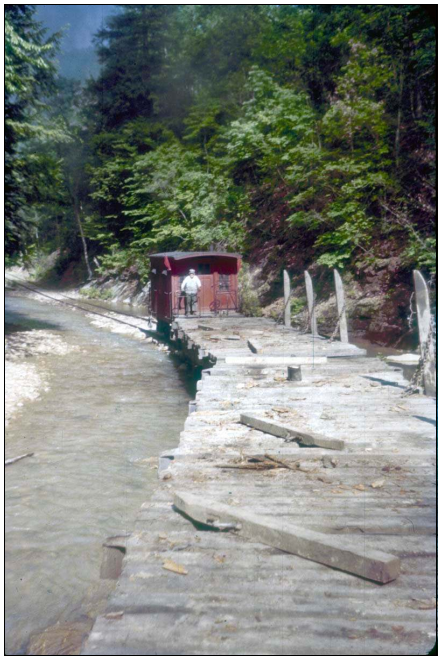

Figure 4

Before we knew it, the hurried exhaust of Shay No. 12 approaching had us scrambling to organize our gear so we could climb on board.

We scrambled onto the empty flats, along with several of the crew. **See figures 3 and 4.**

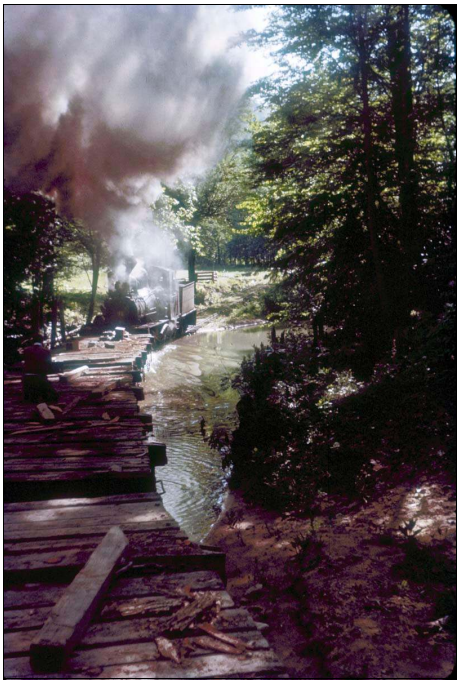

Figure 5

The ERC&L Co. line runs up the valley of the Lily fork of Buffalo Creek. The log line crosses Lily Fork numerous times on the trip to the logging site with no culverts or bridges; track is simply laid across the stream bottom, and the train fords the stream. The Shay was on the front of the train, but ran tender first from Avoca. **See figures 5, 6, and 7.**

Figure 6

We stopped at one of the stream crossings to take water; the crew separated the loco from the train, dropped the siphon hose from the left side of the loco into the stream, and pumped the tender full. Taking water from streams along the right-of-way was a common practice on logging railroads. **See figures 8, 9 and 10.**

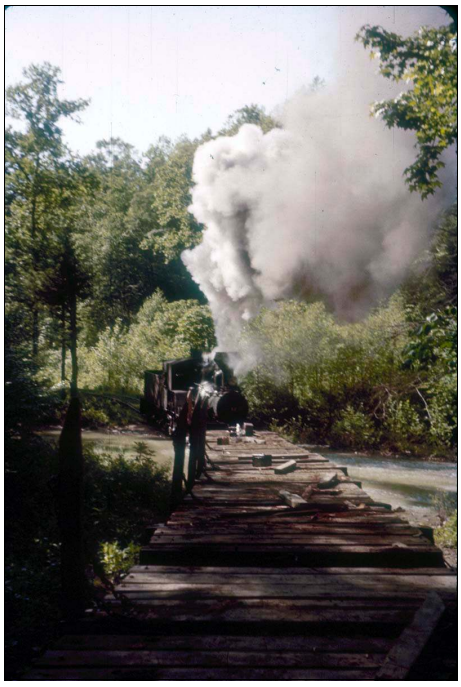

Figure 7

Figure 8

Figure 9

Figure 10

Figure 11

After about 10 miles of running through second-growth forest and crossing Lily Fork repeatedly, we came to a siding where the company's American log loader was kept. The Shay and caboose were switched to opposite ends of the train, and the log loader was inserted between the first and second log car. At this point, the train consisted of Shay No. 12 (at the Avoca end), an empty log flat, the loader, four more empty log flats, and the caboose. **See figures 11 and 12.**

Figure 12

The train was pushed on up into the loading site with the cars in this position. **See figure 13.**

The loader would load logs onto the car behind the loco first, then move across the tops of the empty cars toward the caboose, loading each car in turn. At the completion of the loading operation, the locomotive was at the front of the train, facing forward for the return trip, while the loader would end up near the caboose at the rear of the train, where it could easily be dropped at the siding on the way back.

The log landing was a rough and tumble affair, with the track in the valley at the bottom of a steep hillside that had been cleared of all vegetation, stumps, and slash. A tractor and logging arch brought logs from nearby logging site along a skid road part way up the slope. The logs were rolled down the slope to end up in a pile at the bottom where the loader could reach them. There were already enough logs in the pile for today's log train, and more logs arrived at intervals during our stay. **See figures 14 and 15.**

Figure 13

The Elk River log loader rode on two sections of "snap" track on top of the log cars, one with a slightly narrower gauge than the other.

Figure 14

Figure 15

Figure 16

Figure 17

Figure 18

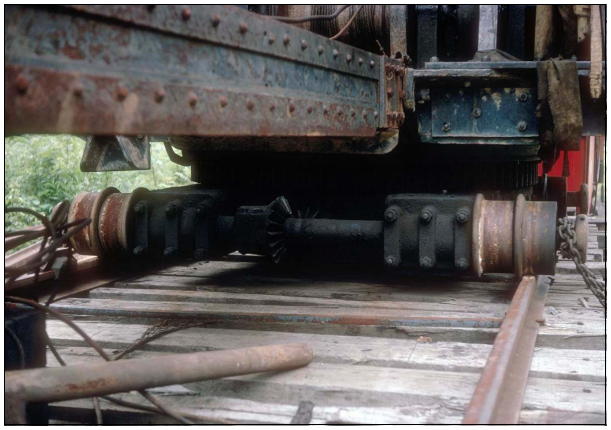

Figure 19

When it completed loading one car, it rolled to the second section of track, lifted the section it had been on and placed it across the gap between the two cars. It would then roll to the next car, move the other section of track to the car it was now on, and load the car just vacated. The two track sections were laid so they overlapped; dual wheels on the loader made it possible to ride on either, or both, track sections. **See figures 16, 17, 18 and 19.**

The crew of Shay No. 12 waited patiently for the loading operation to be completed. Their only duty during loading was to pull the train forward as each car is loaded, to keep the loader in position to reach the logs in the dump. It must have taken two or three hours to load the train. **See figure 20.**

Figure 20

Figure 21

The loading process gave us rail fans time to locate the steel train and get a few shots of it in the woods. On this day, it consisted only of the Climax and a single flat car. **See figures 21 and 22.**

We headed back to Avoca with five car loads of second-growth Appalachian hardwood logs. Five cars was apparently a typical load, probably between 15 and 25 thousand board feet. Single band sawmills like the one at Swandale were considered capable of cutting 50 thousand board feet daily. I don't know if the Swandale mill always operated at that volume level, or if the cut was reduced at that time due to markets or other factors. **See figure 23.**

Figure 22

Figure 23

The leisurely trip back was extremely pleasant. We rode in the caboose; dropped off the log loader at its siding, and stopped for water at a stream crossing. **See figures 24, 25 and 26**.

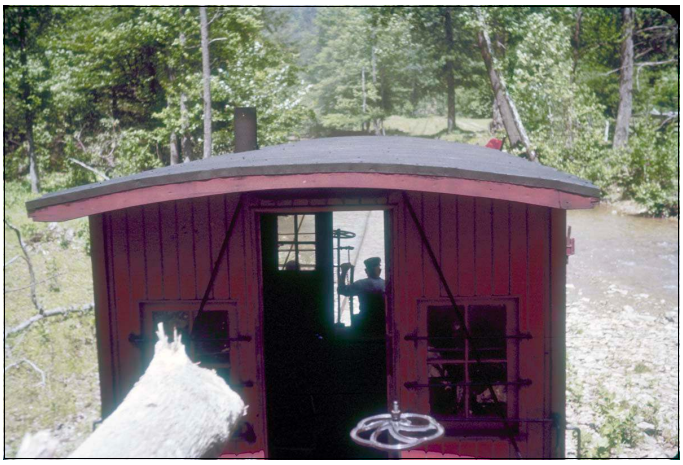

Figure 24

Figure 25

Figure 26

Our gathering of rail fans got off at Avoca and waved goodbye to our new friends as they continued on to the company sawmill at Swandale. **See figure 27.**

John and I jumped in our vehicles and raced to get ahead of the train so we could get photos of it on its way back to Swandale on the BC&G main. When we reached the tracks and listened, we could hear the Shay in the distance.

Figure 27

Figure 28

We located a field between Cressmont and Swandale that offered a patch of sunlight large enough for the entire train, and took up positions. As I framed my shot in the viewfinder, quite happy with what I was seeing, I heard John cursing loudly on my left. We were on the wrong side of the Shay! We were on the left, and all the gears and motion were on the other side. In spite of that, John's black and white photo from that spot has been published several times, and my nearly-identical color slide is one of my favorites of the Elk River Coal and Lumber Co. **See figure 28.**

Figure 29

After the train passed, we followed it into Swandale, where the log cars were dumped into the pond. Well, they were dumped where the pond was normally located. There was no water in the pond that day; it had been drained to clean the pond bottom of bark and debris. **See figure 29.**

With the logs dumped, the Shay ran to the service area behind the pond to take on water and coal, and the crew disappeared, no doubt heading home for dinner. Smoke continued to pour from the mill smoke stacks, but sawing had ended for the day, and the town settled into the evening calm. **See figures 30 and 31.**

I stuck around for awhile, hoping for some additional action, but it was pretty quiet in Swandale. As I drove away, I realized how tired I was after the long but extremely rewarding day. I don't remember what I found to eat in the little town of Clay that evening, but my sleeping bag in the car by the railroad tracks certainly felt like the *Ritz-Carlton* as I dropped off to sleep, dreaming of the next day's rail fan adventures on the Elk River Coal & Lumber Company property.

Figure 30

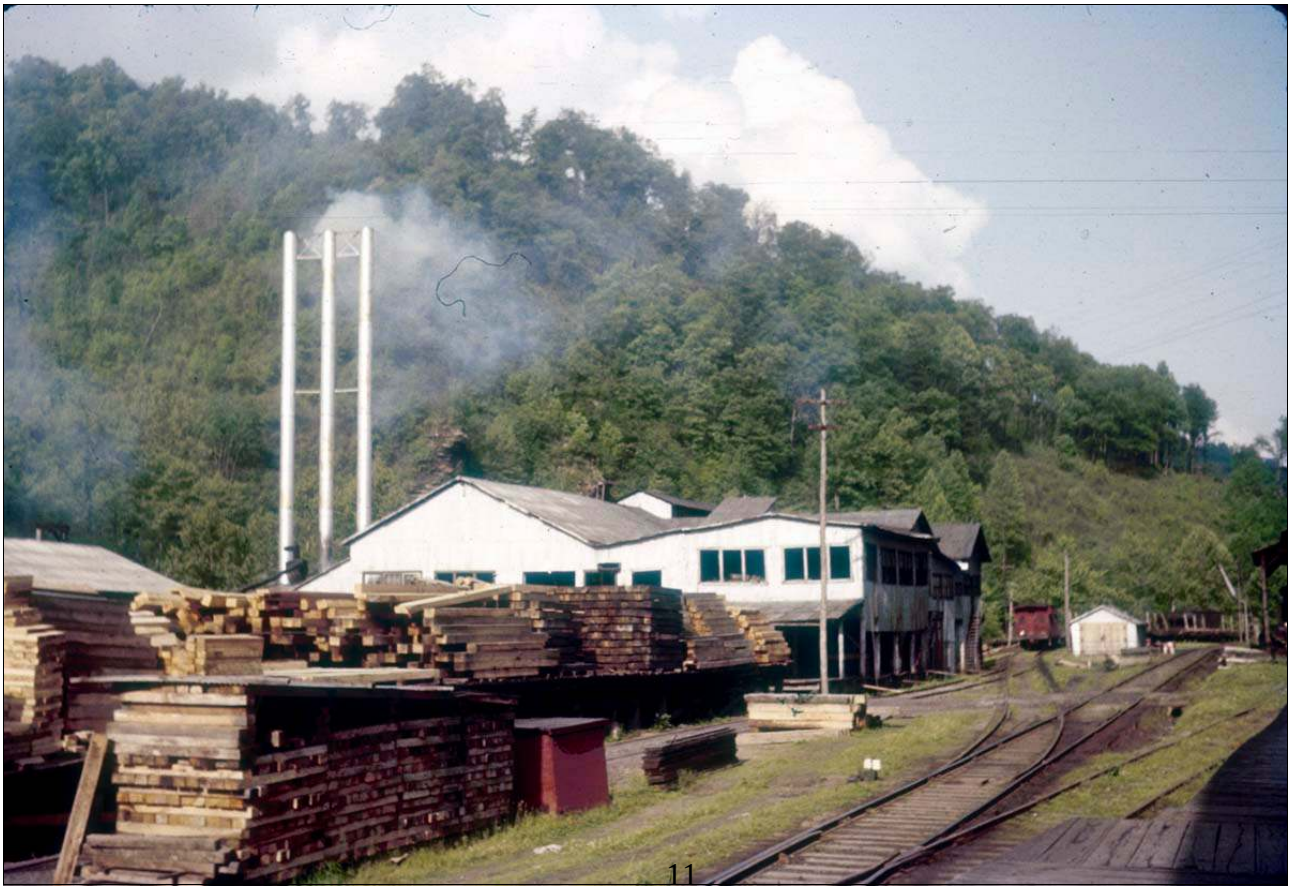

Figure 31