



Chapter Ten
“The Lewis Tunnel Incident”
by Rich Melvin

A Night To Remember? Maybe Not.

In early October of 1989, we ran a special charter train for a major insurance company. This company held its annual sales meeting at the Greenbier Resort in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia. As part of the festivities, they chartered a small train for a ride over Alleghany Mountain to Covington, Virginia and back. The train was usually about 10 cars and it was all first class equipment with diners, domes, lounge cars, even an observation on the rear.

Even though the actual revenue trip was a short one, the entire operation spanned almost 18 hours. The charter trip itself was only a 2 hour trip, starting at 6pm on Sunday evening. However, after the charter trip, we had an all night deadhead run all the way back to Huntington. It took two 765 operating crews and 3 CSX crews to make all this happen.

These trips were always an interesting event because we had to bring the 765 into the station at White Sulphur Springs precisely at 6pm. We would typically get there a few minutes early and stop a little west of the station, just out of sight around a curve. Then we could march into the station on the dot at 6pm. They always had a band on the platform and everyone came over from the Greenbrier in big, long limos. It was quite a posh event.

The revenue trip was an easy run. We pulled the train with the 765 from White Sulphur up and over the mountain and down the east slope of Alleghany to Covington, Virginia, where we uncoupled the 765 from the train. A CSX diesel then coupled onto the rear and took the train back to the Greenbrier while we continued further east to Clifton Forge, a major yard and terminal. In Clifton Forge we gave the 765 a ride on the turntable to get her facing west. Then we moved the engine over to the main track by the passenger station to take water from the fire hydrant there.



The 765 is spotted in the yard in Hinton, West Virginia, preparing to depart eastbound to White Sulphur Springs. Behind her is a 10 car train of first class cars including two domes, several lounges and an observation car on the rear.

Grant Geist photo

After the 765 was lubed and watered and the crew had eaten dinner in the restaurant near the station we were ready to head west.

In 1987, Terry Feichtenbner, a friend and fellow steam enthusiast, was the CSX Road Foreman of Engines out of Clifton Forge. Terry enjoyed having the 765 on his division because it was something different and just a bit “special” for him and his crews. I arranged with Terry for

some empty hoppers to pull for the return trip, so we would have sufficient braking power for the mountainous territory over which we had to operate.

On the westbound move, we had to climb Alleghany Mountain which was the ruling grade westbound on the C&O main line. With this as a background, you are now going to read the never-before told story of “The Lewis Tunnel Incident.”



Shined and polished to the point where she looked almost new, the 765 sits at the platform at White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia. The Greenbrier Resort is just across the street. This is where the special charter trip began, promptly at 6pm.

Grant Geist photo

It was October 5, 1987. We were taking water on the main in Clifton Forge when the switch engine shoved a cut of hoppers up to couple on to us. I was standing next to Terry as the brakeman made the tie, and cut in the air. I asked Terry, "How many did you give us tonight, fifteen? Twenty?" Terry looked at me with a sly grin and said, "We just tied forty-four of 'em on to you." "FORTY-FOUR!" I said. "You gotta be kidding me!" Terry replied, "I like to hear this thing work, and I figure 44 cars ought to make her really talk!" I said, "With 44 cars she'll be wide open for almost an hour, from

Covington all the way to the summit! You'll get tired of hearing it by that time!" On the surface we were both looking forward to climbing that mountain with this train. Privately, I was already worried about Lewis Tunnel.

There are five tunnels on the westbound climb up Alleghany. Mud, Kelly, Lakes and Moore tunnels are no big deal. They are all very short tunnels and we would not spend a lot of time in them. But there was one more...Lewis Tunnel, and it is a long one. Lewis Tunnel is 3/4 mile long and

it's on the uphill side of the grade. You can't just shut off and drift through it westbound, you have to work hard all the way through. This grade is one long pull. It's 22 miles of 1.4% grade with lots of curves. And lots of flange greasers. They would be our undoing.

I was the engineer on this trip and Grant Geist was the fireman. Here's a first-hand account of what happened on Alleghany Mountain that night

Grant:

We left Clifton Forge just after 11pm. Things were going along normally up to Covington, where the grade starts. It was a clear crisp moonlit and starlit evening. I remember how spectacular it was to look back and see the train snaking around the curves. When we hit the bottom of the hill in Covington, I had 240 pounds of steam pressure and a little more than half a glass of water.

Rich:

There's a 35 mph speed limit going through Covington, Virginia. As we were going by Covington Yard, Terry leaned forward from the jump seat behind me and said, "I don't mean to tell you how to run this thing, but if I were you I'd hit the mountain pretty hard and start goin' after it right now!" I hollered over to Grant and asked if he was ready. He nodded and gave me a thumbs up, so I opened the throttle...all the way to the last notch. The battle was about to begin.

Grant:

I remember Rich yelling over and asking if I was ready. He then notched the throttle to the roof, and that is where it stayed for the next 20 miles or so. I remember running the stoker blast a little harder, and took another half turn on the water pump. The exhaust was almost deafening; I had never heard the 765 work that hard.

Rich:

We don't often have to work the 765 wide open, but tonight I had to ask for everything she had to give. I put the throttle on the roof and started working the reverse gear, hooking her up a notch at a time as our speed increased. Grant had the stoker running at a pretty good clip and the locomotive was steaming perfectly. That Magnificent Machine leaned into the load and began to accelerate up that grade. The 765 was sure-footed in the climb, and by the time we were half way up the hill we were doing almost 50 mph! My concerns about the tunnels eased a little because at 50 mph even the long one - Lewis Tunnel - would be a breeze. Then it happened. All at once the drivers slipped! I slammed the throttle shut to check the slip, hit the sanding valve and immediately widened back out on the throttle. And she slipped again! And again! What was going on here? We had 10 miles of this grade behind us with not one slip. Terry leaned forward and said two words which I will never forget: "Flange greasers!"

The higher you go on this mountain the steeper the grade gets and the more curves there are. CSX has a lot of flange greasers installed in this area to minimize rail wear on the curves. Every time we hit a greaser, I had to ease off the throttle for several hundred yards to keep the drivers from slipping. Each time I did that, I lost 2 mph that I couldn't get back due to the grade! Kelley, Lakes and Moore tunnels fell behind us, but our speed was down a long way from 50, and there were a few more greasers ahead before we got to Lewis Tunnel!

We entered Lewis Tunnel at 23 mph. This was the perfect speed for the exhaust from the stack to hit the tunnel roof, curl around the walls and come right up into the cab! The 765's speedometer

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has a large, brightly lit face that is no more than 18" from my face. After we had been in the tunnel 15 seconds, *I couldn't see the speedometer!* Breathing became difficult, and even though I was going through the motions of breathing, it felt like someone was squeezing all the air out of my lungs. There is a lot of carbon monoxide in the gasses of coal combustion, and that's what we were breathing! And the heat! It went from 70 degrees to over 130 degrees F in the cab in a matter of seconds! With the 765's throttle wide open, we were steam cleaning the roof of that tunnel, blasting years worth of oily diesel soot off of it.

The only way I knew that we had finally come out of the tunnel was when the sound changed. The smoke in the cab was so thick you literally could not see your hand in front of your face! As we exited the tunnel I stuck my head out the window, gasping for air. I never knew how sweet a breath of just plain ol' air could be!

Grant:

By the time we reached Lewis Tunnel our speed was down to 23 mph. We had only been in the tunnel a few seconds when the smoke in the cab became so thick I pulled my jacket over my head and tried to use it as a filter. I put my face within six inches of the gauges and still couldn't see them! When we came out of the west portal, I started hanging out of the fireman's window as far as I could lean, gasping for air.

Rich:

As the smoke cleared from the cab and I got my breath back, I looked over to see how Grant was doing. He looked over at me and we both

burst out laughing! All I could see was his eyes and teeth. Everything else was absolutely, totally black! Our faces, hands, clothing, gauges, levers, valves, radio, everything was covered in a layer of black, oily diesel exhaust soot.

The summit of the grade lies between Lewis and Alleghany Tunnels. Just as we crested the grade and I began to back off the throttle, Grant yelled at me to stop the train. Something out front on his side was on fire!

Grant:

Shortly after we cleared the tunnel I noticed I was being hit in the face from sparks from some sort of fire. What had happened was that some excess lube oil that had accumulated on top of the left valve cylinder had caught fire because it had gotten so hot in the tunnel and the engine had been working so hard. We stopped and put it out in less than a minute.

Rich:

During the stop to put out the lube oil fire, I tried to do a little housecleaning in the cab. I had no visible gauges for anything, steam pressure, speedometer, water, air - nothing! They were all covered with the black diesel soot. I figured it would wipe off fairly easily, and I grabbed a handful of waste to clean them off. I began to wipe the face of the speedometer and all it did was smear. This stuff had a lot of oil in it and it would not come off. We had to use some powerful cleaning solvent from the tool car to cut the greasy film. After quite a struggle, we got the gauges clean enough to be legal again and proceeded west.

When we finally reached Hinton, we spent an hour in the CSX locker room scrubbing soot from our faces and arms. This stuff was awful! Because it was laced with oil from the diesel exhaust, it

With the 765's throttle wide open, we steam cleaned the roof of that tunnel...



The Legend of John Henry began here, at Big Bend Tunnel. It was here that John Henry, a “Steel Drivin’ Man” beat a steam drill in a contest of tunnel-building speed. But the superhuman effort taxed ol’ John to the limit and he died here, near the tunnel. The 765 is eastbound through Big Bend, on the way to The Greenbrier Resort at White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia, with a special charter train.

Tony Picone photo

would NOT come off! After cleaning up as best we could, we got back aboard the train. Our good friend and retired Chessie Road Foreman of Engines Johnny Riddle ran the 765 from Hinton west to Huntington that night.

We ran all night and arrived in Huntington around 8 am Monday morning. It was there we had our first chance to see the 765 in daylight, and we could not believe what we saw. The 765 was a total mess! The "765" lettering on the cab was gone...totally obliterated by the diesel soot. All the lettering on the tender was gone. Our Burgundy tool car was now a black car...with a black roof...trimmed in black. I had never seen the 765 so dirty, before or since. Come to think of it, *I* have never been so dirty, before or since! When I finally got home and into the shower, I had to wash my hair seven times before it was clean. I even had cinders in my shorts!

As for the 765 and the tool car, we had to hire a professional industrial cleaning outfit to pressure clean the entire locomotive, both tenders and our tool car with soap and a grease cutting solvent. Even though they had several guys on their crew and two pressure units, it took them two full days to get the engine, tenders and tool car clean again.

We ran a couple more of these charter trips in subsequent years, but I made sure that we never again handled 44 cars on Alleghany Mountain. Once was enough.

As the old saying goes, all's well that ends well, but this was a night I will never forget.



THE DIRTIEST STEAM LOCOMOTIVE YOU'VE EVER SEEN!

ABOVE - Spotted in front of the old C&O passenger station in Huntington, West Virginia, the 765 shows the battle scars of her encounter with Lewis Tunnel. All of the locomotive lettering is covered with oily diesel soot blasted off the roof of the tunnel. If the locomotive looked like this, imagine what the crew in the cab looked like!

RIGHT - Looking a bit shell-shocked and a little worse for wear, Grant Geist (left) and Rich Melvin post for a picture in front of the filthy 765.

