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Blanche Holley Martin named to Clinchfield RR Hall of Fame

Railroad society holds annual picnic

09/17/06

By Mark A. Stevens – Publisher

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Until Saturday, Sept. 9, Blanche Holley Martin imagined that halls of fame were places to enshrine athletes.

“You know,” she said, “like football players.”

Indeed, that may be true, but Martin now belongs to another kind of exclusive club – the Clinchfield Railroad Hall of Fame.

She became the 12th person to receive the honor since the Clinchfield Railroad Historical Society began inducting former employees in 1995. Her brother, George Holley, accepted a plaque in his sister's honor.

Martin, who lives in Jonesborough, wasn't in Erwin Saturday for her induction, but, in an interview Sunday, she said she was pleased to receive the honor.

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“Law, I never thought I’d be considered for it,” she said. “The railroad was my whole life. All my life, I worked at the railroad. I graduated from school one day and started with the railroad the very next day.

“If somebody had told me back then that I spend 41 years working at the railroad, I probably would have kicked them.”

It was 1944 when Martin began her long career with the Clinchfield. The U.S. military had begun a nurses cadet corps, so she had her mind set on a nursing career. Her father, though, had other ideas.

“Daddy wouldn’t hear of it,” she said, “so I worked for the railroad instead.” And for the next four decades, the railroad would be part of Martin’s life. Railroading is in her blood, she said, noting that both her father and mother’s families all worked on the rails.

She was Clinchfield’s first female yard-check clerk, which was made famous in a song simply titled “Blanche” in the award-winning play “Hear That Whistle Blow ... Erwin Train a Coming,” which was performed at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C.

During her career, she worked in Elkhorn, Ky., Kingsport and Erwin. She retired in 1985, and she remembers her working days fondly.

“The steam-engine days were something else,” she said. “It was a lively time.” Diabetes forced Martin to have one of her legs amputated last December, but the 81-year-old is able to get around and hopes to attend future meetings of the Clinchfield Railroad Historical Society.

Martin joins an impressive list of railroaders named to the Hall of Fame. Past recipients are: George L. Carter, 1995; W.C. Hatten, 1996; Thomas E. Goodin, 1997; Jack Conley, 1998; James A. Goforth, 1999; P.O. Likens, 2001; Jack Hawkins, 2002; Eugene Peters, 2003; George W. Hatcher, 2004; and Mrs. George R. Cook and A. Ray Poteat, 2005.

Retired railroaders and their families attending the Hall of Fame ceremony, which is part of the society’s annual picnic. Usually held on the grounds of the Unicoi County Heritage Museum, this year’s event – dubbed a “Hobo Convention” – was held at Erwin Town Hall, where participants enjoyed a meal of pinto beans, fried potatoes, cole slaw and bread pudding.

Janice Johnson opened the event with an appropriate song – “Life is Like a Mountain Railroad.”

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