

# Cathy LeFevers

## Still Plays with Trains



### Foreword by Pat Scherzinger, Editor

**IT OCCURRED TO ME** after profiling Jim Henry in the last issue and subsequently having a conversation with Cathy LeFevers, that many of us share more than just common work goals. We share a passion for trains. And what's not to be passionate about. Trains are big, powerful, and efficient. They help create commerce and connect people. They are relaxing to ride and conducive to conversation, especially when dinner and drinks are included! Many of them are beautiful, coal trains included.

This passion manifests itself in a variety of ways. Maybe it's pulling over to watch a train go by and grabbing your camera for a shot. Maybe it's putting that train under the Christmas tree every year - especially when you can get replica cars with the same PGEX markings and signature rose decals as the trains you actually purchased back in the day. Maybe it's carving out a space in the house (or an entire basement) for a year-long display. Maybe it's jumping at every opportunity to ride a train - the wine train in Napa, the Cog

Railway up Pikes Peak, and the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge trains have all been part of or accessible easily from NCTA events. Maybe it's on a vacation when you indulge in your passion; it could be checking out the local rail museum or making a train ride part of the vacation plan. And maybe you have a passion like Cathy's or at least wish you could. There is no scaled down models for this girl, she deals in the real thing. I invite you to enjoy her story and think about your passion for trains and plan on sharing it in the next issue. ▲

Cathy LeFevers grew up in Brookfield, Illinois twelve miles outside Chicago. She was the youngest of three girls and most definitely a daddy's girl who loved spending time with her father. Whether it was out for a quick run to the store or their annual excursion to the Chicago Auto Show at McCormick Place, she was just happy to be with her daddy. Family vacations always had some educational aspect which at times seemed a bit boring to a little girl, but there was one trip that really made an impression. To this day she keeps a small wooden train on her dresser- a memento she got when the family visited Greenfield Village in Dearborn, Michigan. The railroad transportation section was the best part and so began a lifelong love of trains.

Her family relocated to Charlotte, NC when LeFevers was 16. With a new high school came new opportunities. She was always interested in drafting and spent a lot of time playing with triangles and t-squares as a child. Her father worked for Dietzgen in the early 1960's as a packaging designer, so drafting equipment was just part of the family art supplies available in the house. She excelled in drafting in high school and upon graduation was offered a job at Duke Power as a designer trainee. Her parents moved to New Jersey the year after she graduated from high school, but her heart was planted in the south.

Through the next 27 years she built upon her experience and moved from piping design to failure trending to major projects. After three years of traveling 4-5 days a week, it was time to find a new direction that didn't require so much travel. One day, she was talking to Clarence Ray, President, Duke Energy Generation Services, and he asked her, "What do you know about trains?" her response was, "I don't know a lot about them, but I really like them." So, in 2005, LeFevers began to work in the fuels department at Duke Energy.

One of her first opportunities was working on the railcar acquisition project, where Duke Energy invested in a private railcar fleet of 1260 cars. During that period she learned about railcar design and function. Once the cars were in service, she was responsible for scheduling and expediting coal train deliveries. Along with the logistics functions, she learned about rail accident investigations. As time went on, the railcars began to need maintenance and LeFevers worked to learn more about the maintenance requirements of a railcar fleet. By 2013, the fleet had grown to 5000 railcars and there was a need for a full time railcar maintenance manager. She happily accepted the challenge and responsibility.

### Activity at the Local Depot

LeFevers and her husband David live in his hometown of Newton, NC. After a few years of settling back in to more of a normal life of work and home, she started to notice changes taking place at the old depot near their house. She didn't know much about what the depot group was doing up the street, but she never missed a train show that the group hosted. At one of the train shows, she met Matt Bumgarner, an officer of the Alexander Chapter of the National Railway Historic Society (NRHS) and he added her to the group's email distribution.

Over the next year or so she watched this group getting things done. They were a true working group with many contributors, on many levels, all with a passion for trains and preserving the history of regional railroads.

The Alexander Chapter of the NRHS was established under the sponsorship of the Alexander Railroad in 1979 and is the oldest railroad preservation society in Western North Carolina. The club has nearly 50 members from the surrounding area, each member with their own personal story about how their interest in trains brought them together. Over its first 15 years, the chapter sponsored many railfan excursions on the Alexander and Norfolk Southern railroads. In 1995, the Newton Depot Authority was formed by the City of Newton. The Newton Depot Authority worked to relocate and restore the original 1924 Depot building to a site along the tracks that was more suitable for the vision of the complex. As a tribute to railroad heritage in the piedmont of North Carolina in particular and the southern United States in general, the Southeastern Narrow Gauge and Shortline Museum was established by the Newton Depot Authority. It is aided by the collaborative efforts of the Alexander Chapter of the NRHS; both organizations are 501(c)3 non-profit corporations. Through the efforts of the two groups, along with the community, they have raised over \$525,000 for the museum complex. The four acre museum

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complex is made up of the Newton Depot with associated welcome center, a covered car pavilion for the restored cars, and a future park.

The museum is located at the geographical mid-point of the original Chester & Lenoir Narrow Gauge Railroad, later known as the Carolina & North-Western Railway. This was the longest narrow gauge railroad in the Carolinas. The narrow gauge lines provided a means for the transport of raw materials, merchandise and passengers. Matt Bumgarner is also a railroad historian who has authored eleven books related to railroads of Western North Carolina and the Civil War. "Those raw materials fed the growth of both the textile and furniture industries which led us to become the so-called furniture capital of the world. Our economic legacy was built on those things and the ability of the railroads to bring the materials in and out was an essential part of that."

The museum collection of rolling stock will be a selection of the equipment that would have been used in the region. Among the cars in the collection are one of the country's oldest narrow gauge boxcars, a gathering of East Tennessee & Western



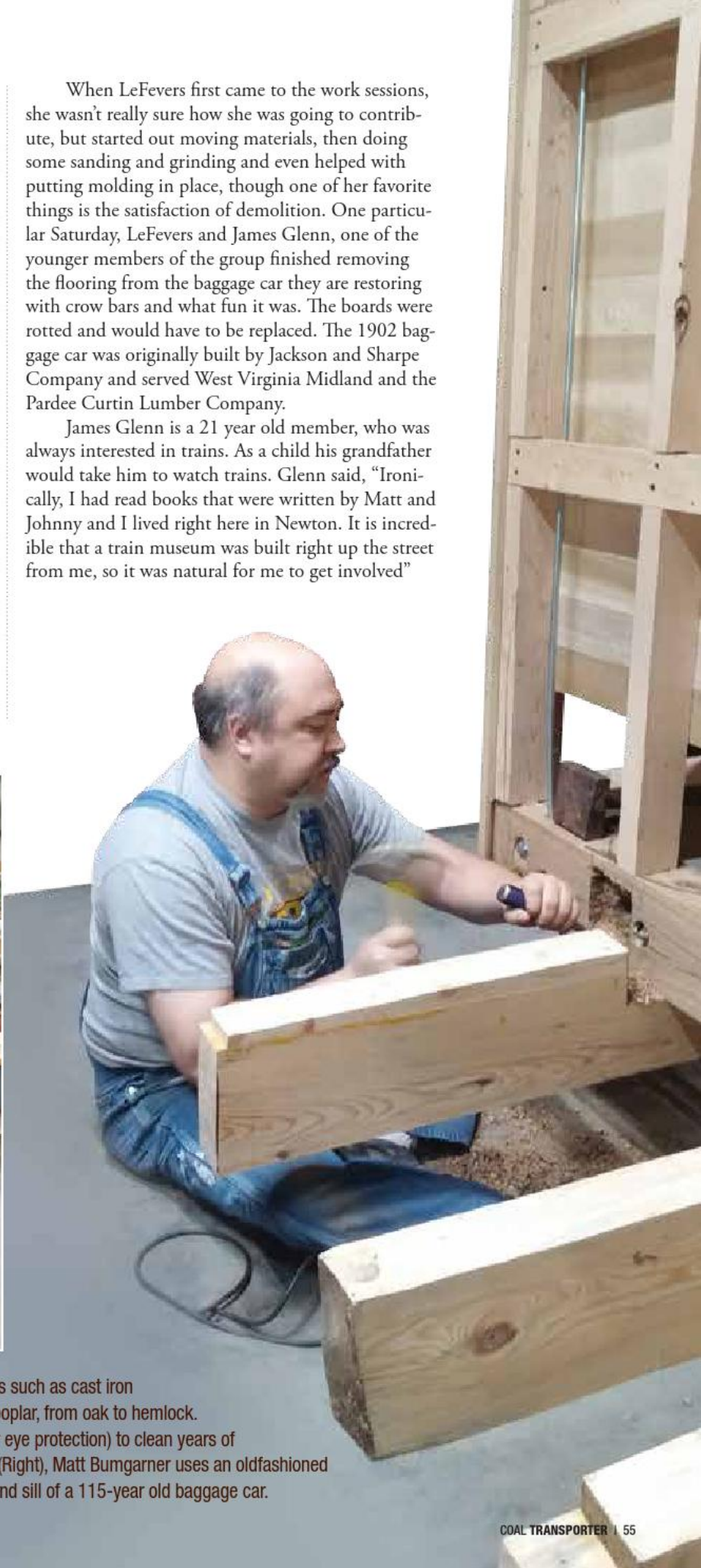
North Carolina Railroad equipment from the famed *Tweetsie* line, an Edwards Railcar built and operated in North Carolina and a steam locomotive, the Virginia Carolina #50. Johnny Graybeal is another member who is also a railroad historian and author. His work focuses on the famed Tweetsie Railroad. He considers himself the names, dates, and places person of the museum.

### Lady with a Crowbar

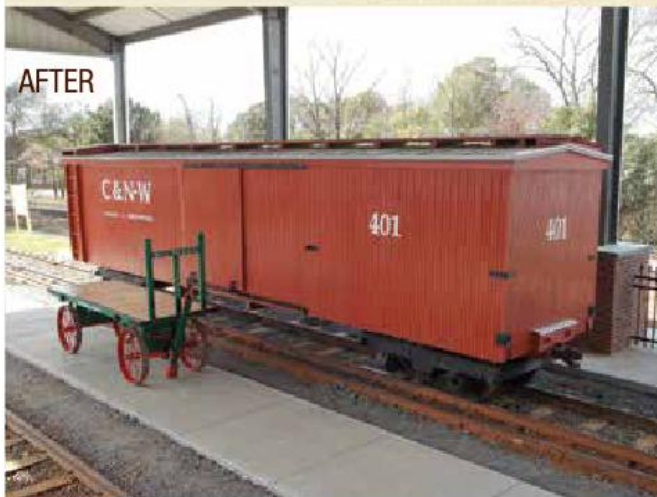
Lefevers decided to become a member of the Alexander Chapter of the NRHS in 2013. She told Bumgarner that she was interested in being the Operation Lifesaver representative and would like to help with fundraising. After all, she had no interest in working on the actual railcars they were restoring. She did work to become an Operation Lifesaver Authorized Volunteer and she has been scouring the web trying to find foundations that support preserving rail history and promoting railroad safety, but the part that she didn't expect was enjoying working on the actual railcars. Bumgarner encouraged her to attend a work session and the group was so welcoming. George Ritchie is the owner of Foothills Woodcrafters and has provided shop space and the equipment necessary for the chapter to restore the railcars.

When LeFevers first came to the work sessions, she wasn't really sure how she was going to contribute, but started out moving materials, then doing some sanding and grinding and even helped with putting molding in place, though one of her favorite things is the satisfaction of demolition. One particular Saturday, LeFevers and James Glenn, one of the younger members of the group finished removing the flooring from the baggage car they are restoring with crow bars and what fun it was. The boards were rotted and would have to be replaced. The 1902 baggage car was originally built by Jackson and Sharpe Company and served West Virginia Midland and the Pardee Curtin Lumber Company.

James Glenn is a 21 year old member, who was always interested in trains. As a child his grandfather would take him to watch trains. Glenn said, "Ironically, I had read books that were written by Matt and Johnny and I lived right here in Newton. It is incredible that a train museum was built right up the street from me, so it was natural for me to get involved"



Restoring century-old railcars involves working with metals such as cast iron and steel, as well as any variety of wood, from pine to poplar, from oak to hemlock. (Left), Cathy LeFevers uses an electric grinder (with proper eye protection) to clean years of dirt and corrosion off a piece of iron before it is repainted. (Right), Matt Bumgarner uses an old-fashioned wood-chisel and hammer to handcraft a notch in the the end sill of a 115-year old baggage car.



(Left column) The top photo shows the first restoration project, a circa-1875 narrow gauge boxcar, as it prepares to go into the shop for repairs in 2008. Six years later, the car emerged and was put on display at the SE Narrow Gauge & Shortline Museum in Newton, NC. (Right Column). One of the more challenging aspects of these “narrow gauge” projects is finding or creating historically accurate wheelsets, or rather “trucks.” In the top photo, the gang is mounting sets of wheels and journal boxes to the new wooden frame. In the lower photo, a lively discussion is being held about accurately drilling a 28 inch hole through three massive timbers that will make up backbone of a restored log car.

James is a working musician and multi-instrumentalist, who adds the comedic side to the group, at any given point in a work session, James lightens up the moment with well placed, “really bad” railroading jokes and amusing puns.

With this group everyone contributes in one way or another. George Richie is a master craftsman who oversees the rebuilding of the railcars. Ritchie spent his career building custom cabinetry and now is passing on his knowledge and expertise to the group as they rebuild the hundred year old railcars.

### Restoring a 1914 Log Car

One of the more recent projects the group is working on is the restoration of a log car from 1914. This car was built for the Westside Lumber Company in California and was one of the most famous logging railroads. At 32 feet long, the car had but one purpose - to haul huge timbers out of the virgin California forests. Though not from the region, this car will represent the logging industry that helped build the reputation of Newton and the surrounding area as the “furniture capital of the world.”

Mark Lewis was researching the logging car and found the plans for building a model of a logging car that turned out to be

almost identical to the one the group is restoring. Mike Brady is another club member who works as a steel fabricator and collects antique gauges and tools.

Restoration of the log car was not simple, as every piece of wood on the car was rotten beyond use and could be used for little more than patterns. Huge replacement timbers of oak, nearly a foot square, and more than 30 feet long were required for the project. The museum’s restoration team first needed to lash the beams together to prevent warping, and then set about connecting them permanently to each other. The crew needed to drill extremely straight 1 inch diameter holes through nearly 3 feet of wood and none of the conventional tools in the shop would work. While members were brain-storming the problem, and probably enduring one of James Glenn’s jokes, Brady managed to solve the problem. At the next work session, he brought in a huge antique drill from his collection which was perfect to accomplish what was needed for the restoration of the railcar.

Brady also has a story about his fascination with trains. One day there was a group of chapter members traveling to the *Streamliners at Spencer* event at the North Carolina Transportation Museum. Brady was talking about growing up in a house

that backed up to the train line from Lenoir to Hickory. Robert Cline said he grew up in a house that backed up to the same line. They started describing the houses where they lived and not only discovered they knew the same neighbors, but when Robert's family moved out of the house, Mike's family moved in, to the same exact house! Several of the members have stories where they were in the same place, at the same time, even as children, witnessing the same things and now as adults, their interests have brought them together.

### Is it Work if it's this Much Fun?

Work sessions are a combination of history lessons, construction lessons and sharing of good times. The car shop is located on the Norfolk Southern main line in Hickory, NC and when the group hears a train coming, work stops and they all rush outside to watch the trains go by, then it's right back to work.

The chapter has an annual "hobo lunch" in December. The meal is complete with German Bologna sandwiches and a hearty side of pinto beans and cornbread, not to mention sweet tea and a variety of desserts. During the event, family members are introduced to the projects that they have been hearing about all year, along with many embellished stories of the antics of the chapter members. A fun time is had by all.

The Alexander Chapter hosts the NC Railroad Expo every spring in Hickory, NC. The show is made up of railroaders,



The Alexander Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society has approximately 50 members, with ages from 2 to 88. In this photo, one of the younger volunteers, Chris Stinson helps drill some precision holes in an oak beam.

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railfans, and model railroaders. This past year was the first time LeFevers promoted Operation Lifesaver as an authorized volunteer. She spent the day greeting the visitors, giving Operation Lifesaver hats to the children and sharing rail safety information. Mark Lewis said he was walking through the model section of the show and heard a little girl say to her father, "Daddy, I think that train lady up at the front knows more about trains than these guys back here." Mark thought it was too funny and quite insightful of the little girl.

LeFevers enjoys her career at Duke Energy overseeing the railcar maintenance program and finds her volunteer work with the Alexander Chapter of NRHS and Operation Lifesaver very rewarding. So she really can say she, "Still plays with trains." ▲

The work gang poses proudly in front the restored boxcar, Carolina & North-Western #401 as the project comes to an end.

*Like all museums, the SE Narrow Gauge & Shortline Museum is always looking for volunteers and funding. If you are interested in attending meetings or work sessions, the group meets on the first Thursdays of every month and alternating Saturday mornings. All donations are tax-deductible and naming opportunities for displays and rooms in the museum are available. For more information, please visit [www.newtondepot.com](http://www.newtondepot.com)*



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