

Tiny Tweetsie: ETSU railroad museum volunteers working on most complete model replica of iconic railroad

Johnson City Press

Published July 30, 2012

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The track has been laid for what will likely be the most complete model replica ever built of the iconic Tweetsie railroad.

Fred Alsop, director of the George L. Carter Railroad Museum at East Tennessee State University, said volunteers at the museum have been constructing the replica for about 18 months now. Their efforts have resulted in a large twisting layout of tracks in a 1,300-square-foot room in the ETSU Campus Center Building.

“One of the most famous narrow-gauge railroads in eastern North America was the East Tennessee and Western North Carolina railway,” Alsop said. “It’s actually known as the Tweetsie.”

The Tweetsie line was constructed in the late 1800s. The Tweetsie tracks are mostly gone now, having ceased operation in the middle of the 20th century, but when it was active the line ran from Johnson City to Cranberry, N.C., first and was later extended to Boone, N.C. The distance from Johnson City to Cranberry by these rails was around 35 miles.

The railroad was built to access the richest magnetic iron ore vein known at that time, which was near Cranberry. The track was only three-feet wide. Most tracks are four-feet, eight-inches wide.

It was not easy to send a locomotive through the mountains, but it was done by talented engineers who utilized the size of the narrow gauge to maneuver around the winding mountainous terrain.

“A narrow railroad with smaller engines and smaller cars can get into places that bigger railroads cannot think of getting,” Alsop said. “But once it was there it was the most dependable transportation that a lot of people in East Tennessee had.”

The Tweetsie line took children from the mountains down to schools in Carter County and also brought workers to the factories of Elizabethton. The railroad crews also regularly arranged to deliver groceries to folks who lived along the tracks. One record claims a stove was delivered and installed by the train’s crew.

“It was an important rail link,” Alsop said. “We felt that this is really Tweetsie country. And if we were going to model any local railroad there would be no finer railroad to model than this one.”

Museum volunteers are recreating the Tweetsie in HO scale, where one foot equals 87 feet. The track and cars are smaller to reflect the narrow-gauge width.

A company in Maine actually made a limited production run of the Tweetsie locomotives. Alsop said four of those will operate on the display.

Alsop, who also is a biology professor at ETSU, said plans for the museum always included recreating at least a portion of the Tweetsie, but the full path was decided upon after space became available. Work on the model began about 18 months ago. Trains should be running by Christmas.

There are no kits for most of the structures planned for the layout, so they will all have to be built from scratch using photos, drawings and observations as guides.

There are thousands of trees to make, too. The landscape should be largely finished in a year, though, a train layout is never truly finished, Alsop said.

“We’ve got featured landmarks all the way along,” Alsop said. “Some of them include the towns that the railroad went through. Some of them are not towns but they’re important points. It won’t be exact, we’ve got all kinds of limitations, but it should be recognizable. It should look like the Tweetsie.”

One example of a featured landmark is from the Doe River Gorge. There is a cliff face there that was cut into to make a bench for the tracks. This is called Pardee Point after the owner of the Tweetsie. “It was the most photographed part of the whole line,” Alsop said.

Volunteers continue to walk the Tweetsie track bed, interview people who rode the train or worked on the line and investigate any literature available on Tweetsie.

The layout is shaping up to be the most complete replica ever created.

“There are a couple of Tweetsie railroads that I know of that have been made in part. This will be the largest one that I’m aware of anywhere in the world. And it will be the most complete one anywhere in the world,” Alsop said.

The museum opened 4½ years ago with 2,400 square feet of space filled with two model railroad layouts featuring aspects of Appalachia. The Tweetsie line will be in a separate room across the hall from the original museum space. The museum is open most Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.