



Santa Fe Brakeman

Steam and Steel

I live in the Blue Ridge Mountains which run along the very western edge of the state of North Carolina. The Blue Ridge Mountains and the Great Smoky Mountains are all part of the Appalachian Mountain system which runs from Newfoundland, Canada all the way south to Georgia in the USA.

Early one morning I traveled the ninety miles from my home in Hendersonville, North Carolina, for my first visit to Bryson City, the home depot of the **Great Smoky Mountain Railroad**. I had to park about six blocks away but as I loaded up my camera equipment, I found myself a bit giddy. I started walking, then increasing my pace to a mix of jogging and running as I moved toward

the depot. Although one of America's last steam engines, the **1702**, wasn't leaving for over an hour. I didn't want to miss the opportunity to photograph one of the last vestiges of Americana, the steam engine. The conductors, brakemen, and engineers were all busy preparing for the scenic run through the Nantahala Gorge.

I moved to the right side of the massive engine and was fortunate to catch the release of hissing steam around the undercarriage of the 1702. *Steam and Steel* seemed an appropriate title for that captured moment. Looking up from the same side of the train I was so impressed by the seriousness of the 1702 Engineer, who was testing the systems of this behemoth of steel. His tussled hair, his



By Ken Weaver, MPSA



How to Run a Train

I will return again and walk along the steel tracks and creosote-soaked wood ties. When 1702 departs the station with its carloads of excited passengers I will snap off a few more quick shots of one of the last giant steam engines in America!

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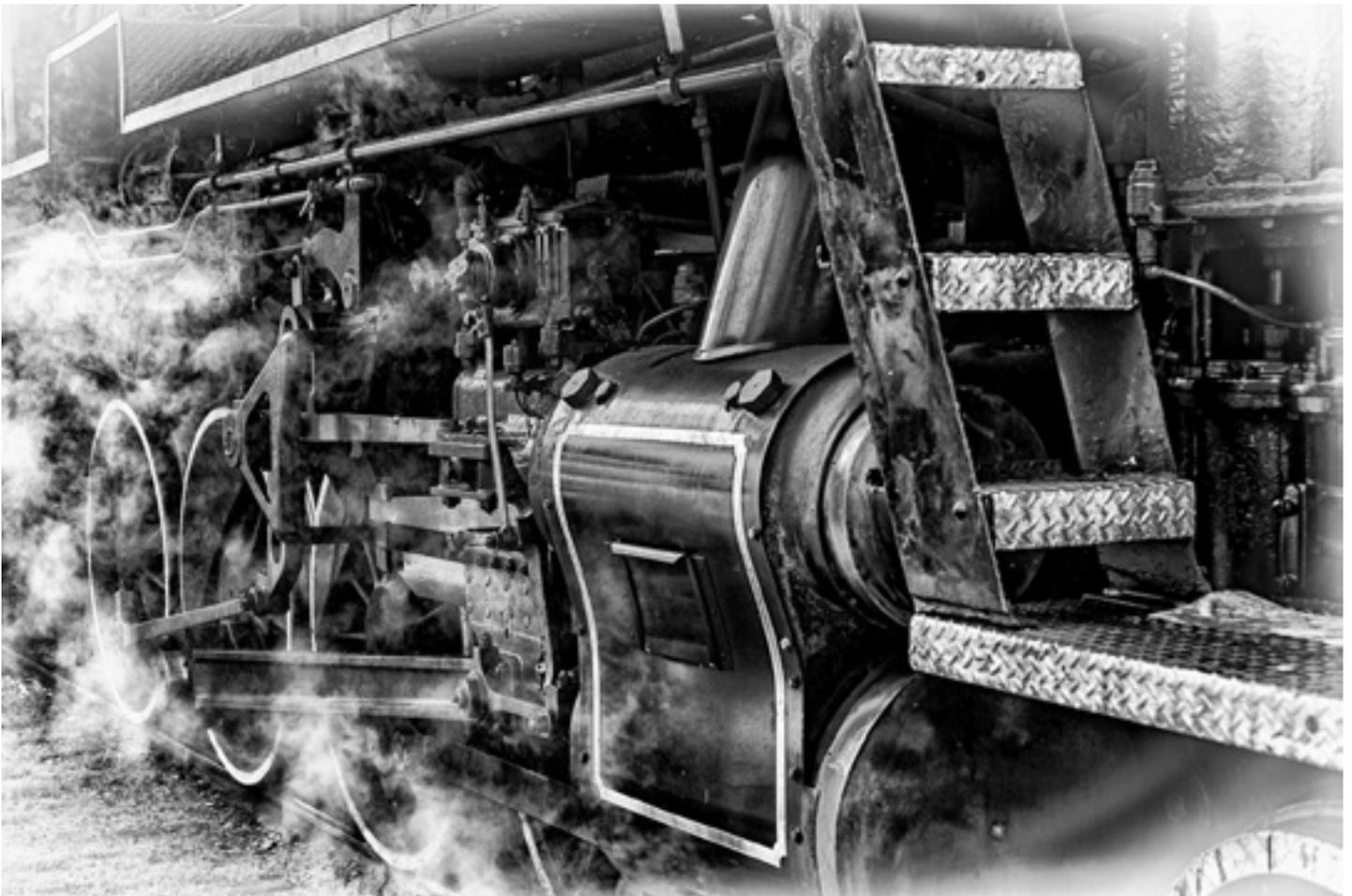


Conductor and Engineer

burly arms, and his bib overalls all reflected the toughness of the operator of this powerful machine. I wonder if he was one of those mentioned in Steve Goodman's famous song *The City of New Orleans* sung by Arlo Guthrie: "And the sons of pullman porters and the sons of engineers ride their fathers' magic carpets made of steel."

The activity on the depot side of the 1702 was increasing as passengers were arriving and boarding the various train cars. I was able to pick up some conversation from the Conductor and Engineer. Doug, one of the conductors reached into his vest and pulled out the schedule apparently to double check their time of departure. Moments later another conductor joined Doug and the engineer to fine tune their preparation for the excursion through the gorge. I am not sure what discussion transpired but I was certain that it was all about *How to Run a Train!*

The 1702 left the depot right on time that day but the whole experience begged me to return. A year later I returned but the train running that day was a more modern diesel engine. I took a few photos but the experience was not the same as seeing a steam engine. I happened to notice a red train car parked on a side track about two blocks away. When I got closer, I saw that it was an old



Steel and Steam

Santa Fe Rail caboose and it was being tended by a wonderful old man in his bib overalls, railroad hat, and heavy gloves. The Santa Fe Brakeman was probably older than the caboose but carried himself with pride and determination. The caboose will probably never make the trip through the Nantahala.

Please check the website for schedules as the 1702 steam engine doesn't run on all the scheduled routes. If you plan on riding on the train you must make reservations. Of the two routes the Nantahala Gorge Excursion is the most frequent. For four and a half hours the train takes you through rock gorges, beautiful forests, along a river and stops for a layover at the Nantahala Outdoor Center where kayakers are often working out. The Tuckasegee Excursion is about 4 hours long and takes you to the quaint village of Dillsboro.

Since the train leaves at 10:30 a.m., you will generally have good morning light. There are few runs during the winter months. However, in December the schedule features many Polar Express Excursions. I find the best time to photograph the train and employees is late Spring or Summer. I have been to the area in October and can tell you that Fall Foliage in North Carolina is unpredictable and cannot match New England.

Photographing the train crew was relatively easy as they are all seriously going about their business and didn't seem concerned that I was taking their pictures. With the exception of the



Conductor and Friends



Bearded Engineer



1702 Engineer



Proud Conductor



Train on Trestle

Santa Fe Brakeman, all the other photos were shot without setup. I would not recommend tripods as you will be working in a crowd of travelers. A monopod would work fine if you need that stability. On a couple of occasions, I had train employees approach me and ask if I would photograph them and send them digital copies, which I always do.

Yes, I will return again and walk along the steel tracks and creosote-soaked wood ties. When 1702 departs the station with its carloads of excited passengers I will snap off a few more quick shots of one of the last giant steam engines in America! ■

Ken Weaver, MPSA, is a photographer who lives in Hendersonville, North Carolina. He was introduced to serious photography when he joined the Photography Artist Network (PAN) in Riverside, California in 2008. Later he began to hone his skills through education and training with the Boise Camera Club in Idaho. Ken later became a member of the Robson Ranch Photo Club, the Denton Camera Club, and the Heard Nature Photographers Club, all in Texas. Most recently he has been a member of the Camera Club of Hendersonville, NC and served as the Chairman of that club for four years. Since 2011 Ken has also been a member of the Photographic Society of America holding the distinction of MPSA. In 2022 Ken founded the Carolina Photographic Artists Network.