Station Agent

Fires, Freight, and Wife-Beaters Are All in a Day's Work to the N&W's Luetta McNeil

NO GIRL in all the wide country seemed less likely to become a railroader than Luetta McNeil at seventeen.

When she graduated from a country high school deep in the Virginia Blue Ridge, she had never seen a train, much less ridden on one. There was not a railroader in the family and she didn't know a caboose from a cow-catcher. Yet a year later she was a telegrapher for the Norfolk & Western, holding down difficult solo jobs, working all three tricks on a line jammed with wartime traffic.

Now, eleven years later, Luetta is a veteran—the one-woman agency at Wirtz, a village on the N&W's "Punkin Vine," that winding busy line which connects Roanoke, Virginia with Winston-Salem in Carolina.

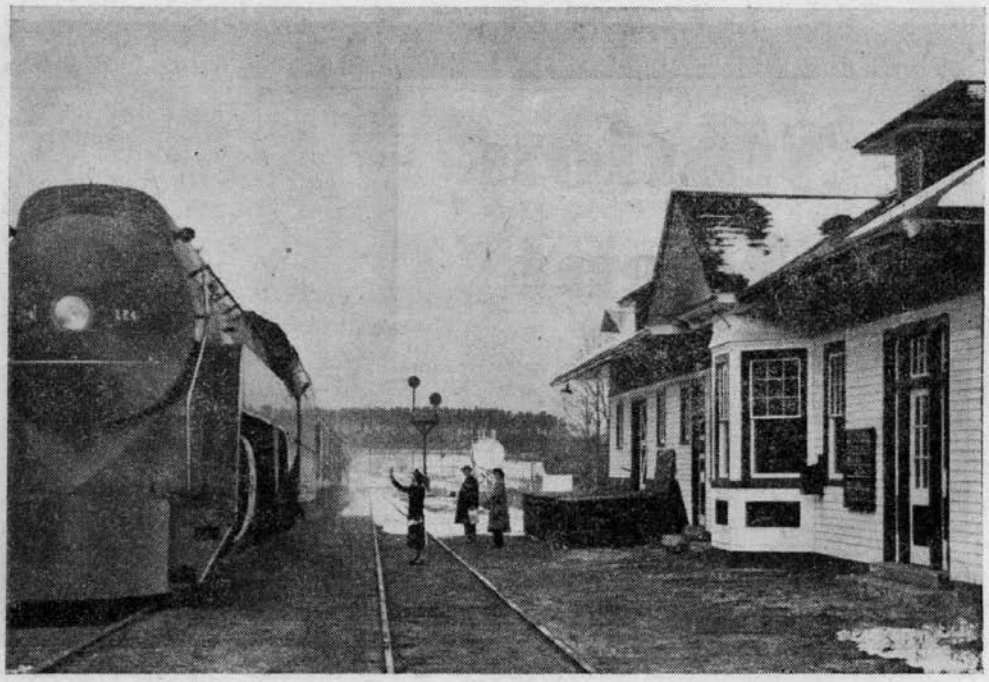
"Yes, it was downright peculiar how it happened," she said as she sat in the immaculate bay window of her combination freight and passenger station. "It began, I guess, when I took that train ride . . ."

Luetta McNeil was born in the tiny community of Terry's Fork on a dirt road in Floyd County, Virginia. Even in the days when promoters were laying rails to nowhere they didn't get around to Floyd County. The peaks of the Blue Ridge are its eastern boundary and its area is a high plateau sparsely populated with hardy farmers. Luetta's father owns a store on the farm road which passes Terry's Fork.

But Roanoke, hometown of the N&W, is only thirty-five miles away over the winding country road. Didn't she see trains on her trips to town, perhaps absorb an ambition?

By BEN DULANEY

With Photographs from the Norfolk & Western



MAC WAVES the hogger of Roanoke-Winston-Salem Train Number 11 to a halt on a cold noon in front of her station at Wirtz. Brooks-built in 1911, the engine is a streamlined K2, now modernized for passenger service

Attractive, hazel-eyed Luetta shook her head as she sat in her green and white station, a station all hers to tend, from the freight house and waiting room to the ticket case and telegraph key.

"No, I just don't remember seeing a train ever," she said. "We went to Roanoke to shop and to Christiansburg too, but in both towns the main stores are on this side of the railroad. We just didn't go near the tracks and the road doesn't cross any on the way." (Actually the road from Luetta's house crosses the Virginian Railway on a high-sided bridge. She could easily have missed seeing a train.)

Luetta graduated from rural Check High School in 1942 when she was barely seventeen and returned home to help in the store on the remote road. There she might have stayed, perhaps married a nearby farmer, and been content.

But her complete lack of railroad knowledge had become something of a family joke, especially since she now had a brother-in-law working in the N&W's vast Roanoke Shops. One spring day in '43 the joshing raised her nerve.

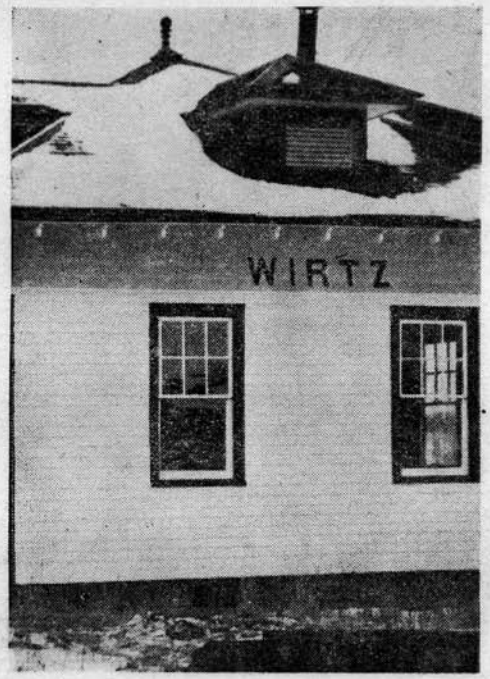
Her brother protested, but Luetta had him drive her to Christiansburg on the Norfolk and Western's main line. There she boarded her first train—destination: Salem, twenty-six miles away, where a married sister lived.

It seems a simple adventure, but it must have been a terrifying one for Luetta McNeil, a mountain girl away from home for the first time.

"No, I wasn't scared," she says. "I just sat down and looked. And looked."

Luetta McNeil couldn't have taken a better ride to breed the railroad bug.

The main line of the N&W crosses the eastern continental divide just east of Christiansburg—all of western Virginia is drained by Ohio River tributaries—and plunges immediately into rough, almost uninhabited mountains. The heavy double-track winds through deep cuts, some of the orginal right-of-way blasted by sweating slaves with black powder. Then at the



bright end of a tunnel Roanoke Valley spreads out below, and over the flat land bordered by a second mountain range the Lee Highway runs by busy farms and small industries. The mountain shelf widens for three tracks, and Luetta's train passed not only heavy drags of empty hoppers and gons and a merchandise freight laboring up the mountain, but also a monster Y6b on the middle track as it shepherded its 125 loads of coal toward tidewater. The hopper wheels smoked and screeched as they came off Christiansburg hill, a rugged grade on a mountain railroad. It was all new to the first-time rider.

Number Four leveled off for her mile-a-minute sprint on the straightaway below Salem, paused impatiently at the little station, and the trip was over. Luetta McNeil went home next day by car, but the seed had been planted.

Now a veteran at twenty-eight, a railroader who has worked at many points and on every trick before gaining the seniority for a permanent post, Miss McNeil laughs about that first ride. It might have been the last one for a long time, except for an advertisement in the *Roanoke Times*.

Her sister sent it to her. The N&W, hard-pressed by the draft, wanted single young ladies, high school graduates to attend a free telegraphy school—object: a job on the railroad.

"I wrote them right away before I had time enough to back down," she said. "I really didn't expect to get an answer but there was a phone call the very next day. They wanted me there the next morning, but I had an excuse. It was March, and there was snow on Bent Mountain. I did go the next Monday, though. I was homesick even before I left home."

There were twenty girls in Luetta's class, presided over by patient, long-suffering Claude Harris, a top brass pounder from the railroad's Radford Division. They sat at a long desk, ten to a side, separated from each other by glass partitions and were taught the Morse code as a starter.

Luetta was discouraged at first. The code was confusing. Girls began dropping out. Had she not been staying with her sister, Mrs. Herbert Manning whose husband worked in Roanoke Shops, she probably would have run back over Bent Mountain to home on Terry's Fork. But suddenly the clamor of dots and dashes began to make sense. Words fell out of the air. She became interested, then fascinated. In four months she was sending 40 to 45 words a minute. She was ready for the extra list.

But in July, 1943 there was no extra list. Right away she was assigned to the first trick at Price, N. C., a dot on the N&W's Roanoke—Winston-Salem line. Price is only a few hundred yards from Virginia, but it is in another state. Luetta had never been in another state.

She arrived on the evening train in time for the outgoing operator to show her around a few moments and point out a rooming house. Then she was on her own.

"Scared?" she shook her head. "No, I honestly wasn't—unless I was too

AGENT turned janitor, Luetta fires the waiting-room stove with N&W's famous coal every morning first thing she gets in

scared to be scared. I just opened up the station at seven the next morning and went to work. There was plenty of work to do there then—at least I thought there was. I've never seen so many trains before or since."

BOTH Price and Wirtz, Luetta's present post, are on the N&W's "Punkin Vine", 122 miles of twists and turns between the railroad's five-way center at Roanoke and its busiest Carolina gateway. There are automatic block signals to protect the single track. It is a populated pike today, carrying through North-South freight as well as local cargoes from knitting mills, furniture factories, and tobacco plants, but in wartime 1943 it was teeming.

Luetta stayed at Price six weeks, and the management apparently was satisfied, for she was assigned relief jobs all up and down the "Punkin Vine." A new station

every few days became routine. She had the same dispatcher, the same trains, although they came at confusingly different times.

It was the next April that she was assigned her first third trick, a 9:00 P.M.—5:00 A.M. shift at Payne, a coaling station not far from Martinsville.

Now Luetta was a good-looking girl almost nineteen, but she had never been out after midnight. The clock ticked slowly, and the little office became lonesomer and lonesomer. There were only the dim lights of the coal wharf, and they seemed far away. At 2 A.M. she stepped out on the tracks "just to see what the world was like at two in the morning." There was a light on a nearby hillside. It flickered higher, a fire in the brush just off the right-of-way. In a moment it seemed the world was aglow. Luetta called the dispatcher fifty-six miles away.

"I guess I must have exaggerated that fire a little bit," she says today, "because before I knew it, a very sleepy and very mad roadmaster from Martinsville was there on a motor car all ready to extinguish the whole countryside. But the countryside had sort of burned out of its own accord. I promised myself I wouldn't call the dispatcher again, even in an emergency, and I didn't—not even the next night when a woman came in whose husband was going to shoot her.

All had been quiet when the wild-eyed female burst through the door, locking it after her. Her husband, she said, was drunk again, had his gun out, and was after her for keeps. She wanted to be hidden, and she wanted the police. Luetta pushed her behind a door and considered. She couldn't call the police; there was nothing but the company phone. And she was darned if she'd call the dispatcher. After a moment she remembered that somebody must be on duty at the coal wharf. She rang the wharf, and, after what seemed hours, a man answered. He was sympathetic and said he would be right down. It was never-ending time—time filled with the woman's whimpers from behind the door and with phantom guns in the night—before the wharfman and a deputy arrived.

In her eleven years service Miss McNeil has never been annoyed by a masher—those eleven years include many lone jobs.

"I thought a wolf was after me for sure only last week when I was driving home," she said. "This man kept right behind me for miles. I speeded up, he speeded up. Finally he passed me and forced me off the road. He was a policeman. Said I'd been doing sixty. Said he didn't sound the siren because it sometimes scared ladies. Whew!"

Luetta's family home at Terry's Fork is only fourteen miles airline from Wirtz, but she must drive forty-six miles in her little car to reach it each Friday night, returning in time for bed Sunday evening. Her living set-up at Wirtz should be the envy of the legion of workers who spend hours daily reaching their jobs. She rooms with a young widow and her family in a comfortable home only a hundred feet from the station.

She's up at six-thirty daily. After breakfast she packs her lunch, fills a water jug (there is no water in the station), and climbs up the railroad embankment to work. First chore—as it is for all good agents—is the date change on the train board. Then, in winter, the big, pot-bellied stove in the waiting room. Ashes out and coal in. Small electric heater turned on in the office. Then she checks the yard—she is responsible for her own team track and for Taylor, a blind siding toward Roanoke.

Wirtz, a small farming community, has no industry. Last year the entire outbound carload traffic was pulpwood. Inbound came fertilizer, feed, sand, cement and asphalt, the last for the State Roads Commission which maintains a tank beside the team track.

Number 75, the southbound local freight arrives a little before eight. LCL traffic has dwindled as it has everywhere on the line, but there are still shipments. Crew members are invariably cavalier in helping the lone girl heft bulky objects

into the freight house. Occasionally, however, she finds herself alone with a large hunk of steel on the cinders. Once she had to build a tent over a new stove but usually some helpful male comes along before either rain or darkness.

Luetta remembers only one really irate customer, a man who claimed a carload of feed which had arrived somehow with no bill. He had no indication of ownership either.

"He screamed and yelled that his stock was starving and that his men on the truck were waiting," Luetta recalls. "But I had no way of knowing who the car belonged to or if it was paid for. It took a couple of hours to get straightened out, but I just put my foot down and wouldn't let him break that seal. He apologized afterward and said he knew it wasn't my fault."

Wirtz retains some local passenger business too. The village is on no main road or bus line. Residents can ride Number 11, the lone remaining southbound passenger train, to either Rocky Mount, the county seat, or Martinsville, a larger town beyond, have shopping time, and return on Number 12 at five-thirty in the afternoon. And the northbound train not only carries a through Cincinnati sleeper but connects at Roanoke with trains in four directions.

EXPRESS Messenger Charlie Richards passes Mac the company mail, considers her tops. Below, in a picture taken about the time she began railroading, Luetta wears the cap N&W requires all agents to buy

The streamlined K2 locomotive on 11 responds to Luetta's green and white flag at 12:56 P.M. She handles head-end business, then chats with the trainmen for a moment. The regulars call her "Mac" and accept her as a competent railroader. Usually she has an almost-new magazine as the five-car train labors off into the hills.

The northbound local freight slides in a few minutes later. After that, with time freights roaring by at intervals, Luetta does her paper work. Wirtz is not an order station so her only exercise with the

key is the daily car report to Roanoke. She keeps her bug at the office and practices telegraphy with other operators when there is opportunity, but she says her speed is slipping.

LUETTA holds her seniority on the N&W's Shenandoah Division, that sprawling four-state segment of the railway which extends from Hagerstown, Maryland, to Winston - Salem, North Carolina, crossing the main line at Roanoke. There are only four other lady agents on the N&W and of these only one has been with the road longer than Luetta: Mrs. G. W. Harriger at White Top, Virginia, on the Abingdon Branch of the Radford Division, has thirty-six years senority. The other lady agents are Mrs. Caroline C. Matze at Lennig, North Carolina; Miss R. M. Kelly at St. James, Maryland; and Mrs. S. K. Tolliver at Coalwood, West Virginia. The N&W has a relief agent, Miss Ruth Perkins, on the Norfolk Division, and four relief agent-operators on the Radford Division: Miss Virginia L. Gray, Roanoke; Miss Lillian I. Cornett, Abingdon; Miss Violet Hayter, Meadow View; and Mrs. H. C. Jackson, Chilhowie. Luetta has served almost all her time on the Winston-Salem district but away back in the beginning spent several months on the far northern end in Maryland. She didn't like it then—the people were "northerners" and it was too far from home—but she'd like a change now, a bigger town, more responsibility.

For it is mighty lonely in Wirtz. Sometimes there is no one in the station for hours. There is no highway traffic to watch, only the four walls in the little station and the steep cut across the tracks. Rolling mountains ring Wirtz but you can't see them from the station.

Each Monday night, Mac drives to Rocky Mount, the Franklin County seat where she is a volunteer nurses' aide. On Wednesdays there is a Bible study course at her church in Roanoke. Other nights there is television.

Now she has travelled just enough to want to travel more. Since wartime restrictions ended she has utilized each summer vacation. She has been to the coast of Carolina and to Niagara Falls, to Minnesota and Baltimore and the Great Smokies. She has visited the two ends of the N&W at Cincinnati and Norfolk "mostly just to ride the *Powhatan Arrow,*" the road's red streamliner.

Luetta McNeil wants to keep on being a railroader, but she would like a spot where more is happening.

"It's the most interesting and enjoyable life I can think of," she says. "And railroad people are the best. Everybody from my very first day at work has been so nice to me and put up with so much while I was learning."

And the railroad—at least one of Luetta's bosses on the railroad—seems to share her enthusiasm.

Says Superintendent of Agencies G. H. Gilmer, Jr.: "If all our agents were like Miss McNeil, I guess I wouldn't have any job."