

Railroads and Coal – Part II

by Richard L. Beadles

Volume I, No. 10

May 29, 2009

If you want a leading indicator of the future relationship of Virginia's freight railroads and coal, keep an eye on Dendron, population about 350, close to the Cypress Creek tributary of the Blackwater River in Surry County, southeastern Virginia, six miles northeast of Wakefield and the famous Route 460 eatery, Virginia Diner.

Dendron once had a railroad, the Surry, Sussex and Southampton, which stretched 28 miles inland from a James River wharf at Scotland to Wakefield and beyond. The SS&S existed for one reason only, to gather logs for the large sawmill at Dendron and move lumber to the river for transshipment to the northeast. Dendron, with a population some say reached 3,000 in its heyday, may yet have another rail connection with the world beyond, or perhaps not, depending upon the fate of a proposed coal-burning electric power generating station contemplated by Old Dominion Electric Cooperative.

Old Dominion's proposed Cypress Creek plant could be as large as 1,500 megawatts, potentially the largest coal-fired electric generating plant operating in Virginia -- potentially the consumer of up to five million tons of coal annually. That's where questions arise. Virginia's growing demand for electric power has not yet been tempered by conservation. Environmentalists worry about water issues, ash, and atmospheric emissions, particularly carbon dioxide, the so-called carbon footprint of the plant.

As a frame of reference, it is estimated that Virginia railroads currently deliver somewhere between eight and nine million tons of coal annually to electric power generating stations within the Commonwealth. Cypress Creek could be a huge windfall of coal traffic to the rails, but it may never happen. Even if it does, this Dominion Electric plant might well turn out to be the last such rail-served plant within the Commonwealth.

Existing as well as proposed coal-fueled electric generating plants are under attack all across the nation. Dominion Resources' new coal plant now under construction in far-off Wise County Virginia will, we understand, initially be truck-served. As part of the bargain, Dominion Virginia is substituting gas for rail coal at Bremo, as it did earlier at Possum Point. Natural gas is suddenly in abundant supply, is cheaper and cleaner.

Surely, coal has a future in the nation's energy supply matrix, but cleaner coal, with CO₂ used productively or safely sequestered underground, may not be possible at Cypress Creek, or nearby. The Dendron coal plant has a very long way to go before all approvals are in hand. Some give it odds of no better than 50-50, as proposed. Such odds are beginning to look appropriate as well for the long-haul future of rail transportation of coal to electric power generating stations far removed from Appalachia.

Decades from now, Virginia railroads may have to learn to exist without some of the coal traffic they now enjoy. The implications for Virginia's rail network are worth considering. Change is relentless. Consider Dendron, and the SS&S!

#####