

11

BIRMINGHAM'S STEAM REVIVAL



⤴ SUMMERTIME DOUBLE-HEADER — The Birmingham Barons baseball club had their double-headers, and so did Heart of Dixie Railroad Club. In July 1969, S&A #750 and Southern #630 teamed up to pull an excursion out of Birmingham. (*Jim Gibson*)

There is an ancient symbol for rebirth and renewal known as the phoenix, a mythological bird that rises anew from the ashes of the past. The later years of the “last golden era” witnessed an event of such mythological proportions, for even as Terminal Station was tumbling to the ground, Birmingham was experiencing a rebirth of steam trains akin to a “phoenix rising.”

When the last steam locomotive ceased operating in Birmingham on April 1, 1964, few imagined they ever would again experience the sights and sounds of a steam engine chugging up Avondale Hill or highballing through Bessemer. They would’ve been right, were it not for one man’s vision, and a bit of good fortune.

That one man was Graham Claytor, president of Southern Railway and an unabashed steam fan. In his previous position as vice-president-law under former Southern President D.W. Brosnan, Claytor dutifully had executed Brosnan’s plan for eliminating most of Southern’s money-losing passenger business. At the same time, he prevailed on his boss to permit a former Southern steam engine, #4501, to operate over Southern’s main line from its home on Kentucky & Tennessee Railway in Stearns, Kentucky, to its new home at Tennessee Valley Railroad Museum in Chattanooga.

Fortunately, Southern’s first main line steam operation in 11 years went without incident, and Claytor was successful in convincing Brosnan to allow more trips over Southern’s lines. Thus, Southern’s wildly popular steam excursion program was born, and for the next three decades, it would bring the thrill of steam to thousands over the far-flung Southern system.

As the steam program began to take hold in the late 1960’s, Claytor, who had succeeded Brosnan as Southern’s president in 1967, realized the expanding steam operation would need a dedicated repair shop. Birmingham’s “bit of good fortune” was his decision to locate Southern’s steam shop at the little-used diesel engine facility at Norris Yard in Irondale. Overnight, Birmingham became the hub for Southern’s steam excursions as engines were brought in, repaired, and dispatched to their assignments.

One other important component of Southern’s successful steam program was the support of the various railroad historical societies and enthusiasts groups scattered over the railroad. The groups functioned as sponsors for the trips, selling tickets, providing car hosts and safety personnel, staffing the commissary, and generally organizing excursions. Because of its proximity to the “heart” of Southern’s steam program, one group in particular, the Heart of Dixie Chapter (“Heart of Dixie”) of the National Railway Historical Society (“NRHS”),