

Carolina shortline marks 100 years

Railroad serves Willamette's Bennettsville mill.

DONALD G. MEADOWS

The Aberdeen and Rockfish Railroad Company marked its 100th birthday last year as an independent line. The company has never been reorganized and never gone bankrupt, said Edward A. Lewis, president. That's unusual for most any railroad, but especially a shortline.

Lewis, who's been with the A&R since Jan. 19, 1987, is well aware of the problems small railroads may face. Before heading the A&R he ran a shortline in Vermont that succumbed to competition from the big carriers when deregulation went into effect.

That line was the first in New England to write a contract with a mill to warehouse finished rolls of paper in boxcars parked on rail sidings, he commented. The mill wanted to continue production during a down market, so it kept filling boxcars until the orders started coming in again, Lewis explained.

The A&R was chartered June 22, 1892, by John Blue as a means to transport his timber and turpentine products to market. It's remained a family-owned company ever since.

The railroad has remained in business by adapting to changing markets. It started out serving the lumber industry. When that started to die out, it switched to agriculture markets. As that waned, it found new customers among industry.

Based in Aberdeen, NC, the A&R counts among its customers Willamette's mill in Bennettsville, SC, as well as Chesebrough-Pond's and Borden, Lewis said.

In 1987, CSX moved to abandon a branch line along the Pee Dee River in South Carolina. Marlboro County, through which the branch runs, considered the line vital to its future industrial growth. To preserve that transportation link, the county took the unusual step of purchasing the 19 miles of track from CSX for US\$ 173,000. It then contracted with A&R to provide rail service and maintain the track between Marlboro and McColl. A&R runs the line as the Pee Dee River Railway Company. It connects at McColl with the CSX line. In December of 1987, A&R acquired



a second line—five miles of track connecting Swift Industries in Erwin, NC, with the CSX railroad at Dunn, NC.

The success of the Pee Dee River line is in part due to Willamette Industries' decision to build a US\$ 325 million paper mill in the Welsh Neck section of Marlboro County, outside of Bennettsville, SC. And one of the factors that led Willamette to select the site was, of course, the railroad.

During 1988, the county spent US\$ 49,000 to keep the Pee Dee River line running. By the next year, the line was generating enough revenue to break even. Traffic gradually increased in 1989 and 1990 so that no subsidy was required. With the paper mill in full operation in 1991, rail traffic increased dramatically, from 1485 cars moved in 1990 to 5761 cars moved in 1991. As a result, the county received nearly US\$ 132,000 as its percentage of revenues. Traffic was expected to increase to about 6900 cars in 1992. ■

Meadows is editor of Tappi Journal.