



# Quarterly Newsletter

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**The East Broad Top is back!**

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# The East Broad Top is *back!*

With those words, Henry Posner III confirmed that the precarious existence of Pennsylvania's narrow-gauge East Broad Top Railroad has turned a page to a new and secure future.

A board member of the newly formed non-profit EBT Foundation Inc., Posner said the railroad – dormant since 2011 after a remarkable 52 years of tourist service – will be revamped and reopened. Modest “soft-opening” events are planned for this summer, but the group hopes to revive one or more of its six Baldwin 2-8-2 steam locomotives in time to operate for the 2021 season.

In a sale that was concluded Feb. 8 and announced on Feb. 14, the Foundation bought 27 miles of the original 33-mile main line, rolling stock, and the office/station, roundhouse, and machine shops in the carrier's operational headquarters of Rockhill Furnace, Pa. Terms of the sale were not disclosed.

Built between 1872 and 1874, EBT hauled coal, ore, timber, and later, ganister rock. Surviving into the 1950s, it was the last common-carrier narrow-gauge line in the East.

The story of the East Broad Top is one of survival amid change and difficulties. A coal-hauling railroad, it connected local semi-bituminous mines on Broad Top Mountain with the main line of the Pennsylvania Railroad at Mount Union, Pa. When the mines closed in 1956, so did the railroad. Within a month, it was purchased by scrap dealer Nick Kovalchick of Indiana, Pa., who surprised everyone by not scrapping it.



EBT 2-8-2 engine No. 15, a 1914 Baldwin, pauses at the turntable during a 2008 fall weekend.

Instead, he reopened a few miles of the original main line for tourist service, initially to celebrate the 1960 bicentennial of the twin boroughs of Rockhill Furnace and Orbisonia. It became so popular that he, and later, his son Joseph, contin-

ued to operate it each season through 2011. Along the way, it attracted renown by achieving National Historic Landmark status in 1964 and a listing on the National Register of Historic Places in 1966.



EBTF board member Henry Posner III served as emcee during Feb. 14 ceremonies.

Photos by Dan Cupper except as noted.

The unique nature of the property is due to the fact that almost everything is original to the site, from the engines and cars to the buildings and the archival records. Two successive curators of transportation at the Smithsonian Institution – John H. White and William L. Withuhn – have praised the fact that it is the best surviving example of an intact early 20th-century steam railroad complex.

The Kovalchick family closed the railroad at the end of the 2011 season after it became increasingly difficult to operate as a privately held site. Ever since, Joe Kovalchick has been seeking a way to protect the line's long-term future. Over the years, plans and proposals have come and gone, and in 1996 the National Trust for Historic Preservation listed the railroad on its “11 Most Endangered Places” list.

One way of keeping the flame burning was for the family to allow the Friends of the East Broad Top group to continue to conduct work weekends to rehabilitate and straighten leaning shop buildings, glaze windows, refurbish a wooden combine car, and rebuild a rusting side-dump ballast hopper car.

Excluded from the sale to the Foundation is the dual-gauge yard at Mount Union, Pa. In 2013, Kovalchick sold it to a group – the East Broad Top Preservation Association – that has filed its intent to open a standard-gauge short-line connection with Norfolk Southern. NS in 1999 took over the former Conrail/Penn Central/Pennsylvania Railroad main line between Harrisburg, Pa., and Pittsburgh – the heart of the original PRR, dating to 1854.

In 2015, during the dormant period 2011-2020, the



Brad Esposito, East Broad Top's new general manager.



1911 Baldwin 2-8-2 engine No. 12, “Millie,” is spotted for the announcement of EBT's sale to the Foundation on Feb. 14., along with private car No. 20 and caboose No. 28, in front of Orbisonia station, Rockhill Furnace, Pa.

Photo by Rich Roberts



EBTF board member Bennett Levin makes a point during remarks at the announcement.



EBTF board member Wick Moorman, former CEO of Norfolk Southern. Photo by Rich Roberts



EBT gas-electric car M-1, assembled in the company shops in 1927, poses for a Nov. 2, 2019, photo session. M-1 may be called on to perform for some early public events before any of the six steam engines is ready to operate. This summer will mark the 60th anniversary of the Aug. 13, 1960, start-up of public tourist service after the railroad's common-carrier days ended in 1956.



Board members David Brightbill, left, and Lawrence Biemiller both have a long history with East Broad Top.

Railway & Locomotive Historical Society held its annual convention in nearby Altoona. Members took a bus tour that included a visit to the EBT roundhouse and shops. They also rode on an electric car of the adjacent Rockhill Trolley Museum, which began operating in 1963 over a standard-gauged portion of the EBT's former Shade Gap Branch. RTM has continued to run every season while the railroad was shut down.

Among the foundation's first priorities are restoring track and rolling stock to operating condition; stabilizing more of the shop-building complex; outfitting one roundhouse stall specifically for making locomotive repairs; and engineering and installing a fire-suppression system in the shops and roundhouse.

The foundation plans to work closely with FEBT and with the trolley museum to coordinate ongoing work and, perhaps, marketing. All volunteer help will be channeled through FEBT projects.

Since the announcement, FEBT has been flooded with

membership applications, receiving some 250 over the group's existing 700-member level, according to Lee Rainey, longtime EBT historian and former head of the Rockhill work session crews. That represents about a 30 percent increase in just a few weeks. Work on buildings, rolling stock, and track will be accelerated now, and those interested can check out the opportunities at [www.febt.org/volunteer](http://www.febt.org/volunteer).

Formation of the foundation took place relatively quickly, over a period of about eight months. "It was a remarkable sequence of events," said Posner. "Sometimes the door opens and you think it's a trap or a hall of mirrors, but everybody was consciously, proactively [participating]. We walked through the door because of the confidence we have [in a] board who is capable."

Board member Bennett Levin has a personal connection with the railroad. "Sixty years ago, when it first reopened, I was a senior at Penn State, going to summer school in 1960," he said. "I borrowed somebody's car and went down there [during the opening season]. I've been a great admirer of what the Kovalchicks have done to keep it from becoming [scrap for] razor blades."

"It is the most significant industrial archeological artifact to be saved. The whole 33 miles is a linear museum, worthy of whatever effort it takes to get it back up and running. Especially the southern end, which is virtually untouched from 1929."



Photo by Jerry Angier

Machine-shop belt-driven devices represent circa-1900 technology.



Former EBT owner Joe Kovalchick

Baldwin 2-8-2 No. 18, newest (1920) and one of the road's three heaviest locomotives, rests in the Rockhill Furnace roundhouse.

## Meet the people behind the EBT Foundation, Inc.

EBT Foundation, Inc., is governed by a 10-member board, comprising three members from the railroad industry, three founders, three community members, and one member of the Kovalchick family, owners of the line from 1956 to 2020.

The three railroad/preservation members are:

- **Bennett Levin**, Philadelphia-area owner of Juniata Terminal Co. with two Pennsylvania Railroad E8 passenger diesels and three private cars.
- **Charles Wickliffe "Wick" Moorman IV** of Charlottesville, Va., retired chairman and CEO of Norfolk Southern and retired CEO of Amtrak.
- **Henry Posner III** of Pittsburgh, chairman of Railroad Development Corp., whose holdings include the Iowa Interstate Railroad and rail operations in Europe, and formerly, Central and South America.

The three founding members are:

- **Lawrence Biemiller**, longtime EBT advocate and frequent tour guide for groups visiting the property.
- **David Brightbill**, EBT office manager.

- **Bradley Esposito**, general manager, veteran railroader from the Buffalo & Pittsburgh Railroad with 12 years' experience as a Genesee & Wyoming locomotive engineer and eight years in G&W management.

To date, only one community member has been named, **Jane Sheffield**, executive director of the Allegheny Ridge Corp., an Altoona, Pa.-area-based heritage tourist and economic-development agency. **Stephen Lane** was another railroader who aided in the formation of the group. An Amtrak employee, he has worked with the Everett Railroad and owns a combination baggage-passenger car from a long-gone neighboring narrow-gauge line, the Tuscarora Valley Railroad. It is stored at the EBT shops and eventually may be restored to operation at EBT.

**Linn Moedinger**, retired CMO and president of the Strasburg Rail Road, will serve as an advisor on the condition of EBT's steam locomotives. Also participating will be **Rod Case**, a partner at the management consulting firm Oliver Wyman, who leads the company's railway practice.



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Photo by Eddie Brouse

*One of the highlights of East Broad Top's annual railfan weekend was a whistle salute to all current and former EBT employees, featuring four engines under steam. In this view from 1995, from left, engines 17, 12, 14, and 15 sound their whistles. Each whistle was tuned approximately one musical step in pitch above the previous one. The EBT has been dormant for nine years, but similar events may be possible with the formation of a new non-profit foundation. See pp. 8-11.*