



# Buchanan Branch Railfan Guide

*by Ed Painter and Chase Freeman  
Norfolk & Western Historical Society*



*NS 82G, a Bluefield Crew, prepares to leave Weller with 101 PGNX Loads. That's Coke loads on the right. - Ed Painter photo.*



*U54 (Left) has Coke Loads ready to head west while U55 (Right) gets ready to shove back up Page Hollow [from Vansant Yard] to load at Consol. - Ed Painter photo.*



*Here's a shot that can't be recreated. NS 821 rolls West on the Cut-Off by the now demolished Island Creek VP 1 Operation. - Ed Painter photo.*

# N&WHS Railfan Guide | Buchanan Branch | Operations

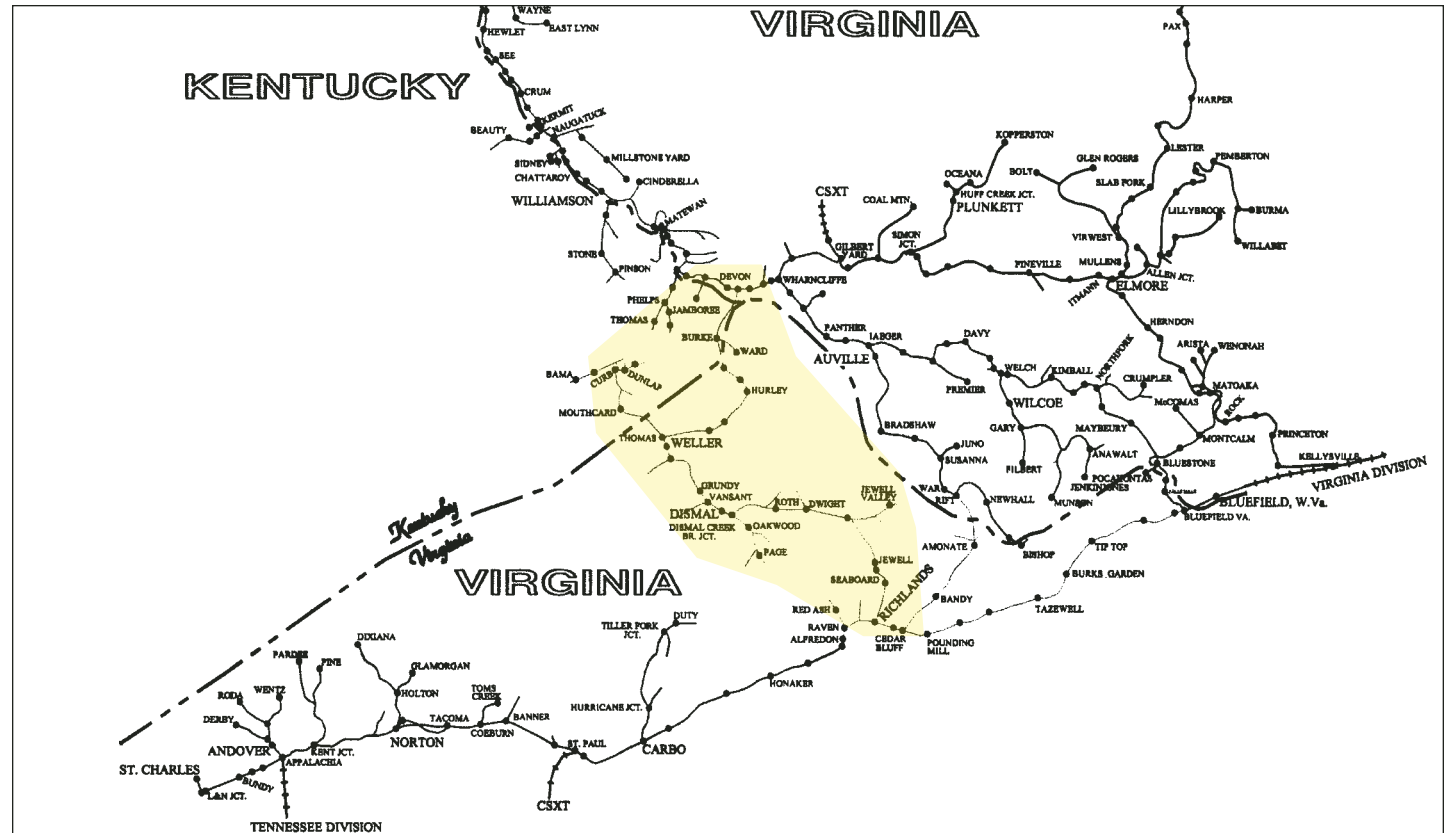
## The Buchanan Branch Mainline – Devon to CONSOL

The **Buchanan Branch** currently has highest volume of coal (and coke) activity of any section of the Pocahontas Division.

All trains entering or leaving the **Buchanan Branch** do so by way of **Devon**. These trains come from or go to Williamson or Bluefield. Leaving or entering the Pocahontas mainline (in West Virginia) is done on bridges forming a Wye across the Tug Fork and into Devon Tunnel (1691') on the Kentucky side of the river. There is road access to the Kentucky side from Woodman but getting to the West Virginia side is somewhat of an adventure unto itself and not for the faint hearted.

**Weller Yard** is the center of operations on the **Buchanan Branch**. There was formerly a yardmaster stationed here (these duties are now handled by the PD Dispatcher in Roanoke) and a trainmaster is still stationed here. **Weller Yard** maintains a small shop force for maintaining motors/locomotives and cars. Loaded and empty trains are staged here. All crews and shifters on the Buchanan Branch are based here. Trains depart and terminate at Weller going to and from the junction with the Pocahontas Division mainline at **Devon**. Loaded coal or coke trains depart westbound from **Weller** and trains of empty empties enter eastbound. As many as 6 to 8 trains may enter or depart during a 24 hour period.

All (westbound) trains are pushed over the hill through **Raitt Tunnel** (the highest



point) with the pushers coming off the train at **Hurley/Lester Fork**. Three motor/unit pusher sets are used to accomplish this. Pushers usually run light back to Weller but in some cases they push empty trains eastbound back over the hill.

Some data: **Raitt Tunnel** is 3766' long and the grade crests in the tunnel. The westbound grade from **Thomas Wye** to **Raitt Tunnel** is ~7 miles long of pretty continuous 1.7%+ (NS uses 1.8% for the ruling grade in its track charts). The

eastbound grade that is also ~7 miles long from **Lester Fork to Raitt Tunnel** runs from 1.5 to 1.86% continuous (NS uses 1.94% for the ruling grade).

After being pushed over the hill, loaded trains are often staged between **Luke and Pine Oaks/Race Fork** to be re-crewed for the trip to Williamson or Bluefield. In some cases trains will continue on to Bluefield and Williamson with the crew that brought them across the hill from **Weller**. Sometimes additional loads are added or even

2 trains combined prior to being re-crewed and heading on to Bluefield or Williamson. After staging a train here—in some cases—all or some of the head end motors/units that brought the train across the hill may return to **Weller** with the train crew that brought them from **Weller**. The Race Fork coal loadout located is worked regularly with coal being staged here for pickup by trains to Williamson or Bluefield.

**Dismal Yard** Dismal Yard was formerly a second base for Shifters and Pushers on

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the Buchanan Branch. The yard was closed in 2015 with all jobs including the Yardmaster being moved to **Weller** (subsequently the **Weller** Yardmaster position was eliminated with those duties being assigned to the PD Dispatcher in Bluefield and later to Roanoke following the merger of the Virginia and Pocahontas Divisions). It still serves as a staging point for CONSOL trains and an assembly point for Coke Trains. SunCoke's coke loadout is located adjacent to the yard and is worked daily. A 100+ car train of coke is assembled every third day.

## Some Points of Interest on the Buchanan Mainline

- **Woodman/Devon Tunnel** This short tunnel is right at the junction of the Buchanan Branch and the mainline. It makes a good shot of empties popping out of it on the East side.
- **Upper Elk Creek** This is a steep spur that comes off the siding at Burke. The tipple at the head of the hollow loaded until 2014.
- **Vansant** Vansant is the junction of the inactive Prater Creek Spur and the Buch. Main. A nice set of CPLs still guard the junction.
- **Hanger** Hanger is the junction of the Hanger Spur and the Buchanan Extension. The Hanger Spur formerly went to Island Creek Coal's Beatrice Pocahontas Mine which is long gone. It only sees sporadic use now by MOW.
- **Page Junction** Page is the junction of the

Buchanan Extension and the inactive Garden Creek Spur. The Garden Creek Spur formerly served Island Creek Coal's VP6 mine that closed in 2006.

**Buchanan Extension** is the name given to the trackage between **Dismal** and **CONSOL's** (now Coronado Coal's) **Buchanan Mine** and was the last part of the **Buchanan Branch** mainline to be constructed. This mine is the highest single producer of coal on the Pocahontas Division. Daily as many as 3, 105 car trains are loaded at the Buchanan mine (**CONSOL**). These trains depart **Dismal Yard** with a single pusher leading the train up to the mine. The loaded trains return to **Dismal Yard** with the head-end leading. From **Dismal** they go to **Weller** where they're staged for movement across the hill. Coronado Coal recently purchased the **Buchanan Mine** from **CONSOL** but to railroaders and locals it's still **CONSOL**. The grade ranges from a lot of 1.5% to a max of 2%.

## The Wyatt Cutoff – Dismal to Richlands


The **Wyatt Cutoff** was created during the late 1960's by building **Blair Tunnel** along with around 8 additional miles of railroad connecting the **Dismal Creek Branch** (coming east from **Dismal Yard**) with the **Big Creek Branch** coming west from the **Clinch Valley** mainline at Richlands. The original thought was that it would relieve congestion on the Pocahontas main west of Bluefield allowing eastbound coal to

travel over the cutoff and not through **Devon**. The curvatures and eastbound grades of 2% made this problematic. As a result it became a route for empties to gain access to the **Buchanan Branch** while eastbound loads returned to the route through **Dismal**. The line was recently removed from service due to significant issues with the stability of **Blair Tunnel** and NS's cost cutting efforts on the Pocahontas Division due to the overall reduction in coal volume. The only traffic on the Cutoff today is sporadic loading of cars at a sand loadout west of Richlands.

**Blair Tunnel** is 3100' in length. The grade crests just east of the east end of **Blair Tunnel**. The eastbound ruling grade is 2% and runs at that percentage for basically 8 miles between Whitewood and **Blair Tunnel**. The westbound ruling grade is 2.18% with the steepest sections of the grade being just east of **Blair Tunnel**.

## The Levisa Branch

The **Levisa Branch** originates at **Thomas Wye** off the **Buchanan Branch** mainline. At the end of the branch are 2 major loadouts, **Kyber** and **Big Creek**. These coal loadouts are worked on a sporadic basis with the trains leaving **Weller** for the loadouts with the power than running around the train at the loadout and then pulling through during the flood-loading process. **Buch 2** at **Strict** is also worked on a sporadic basis. To load at this flood-loader trains are brought from **Weller** and run through the loadout. During

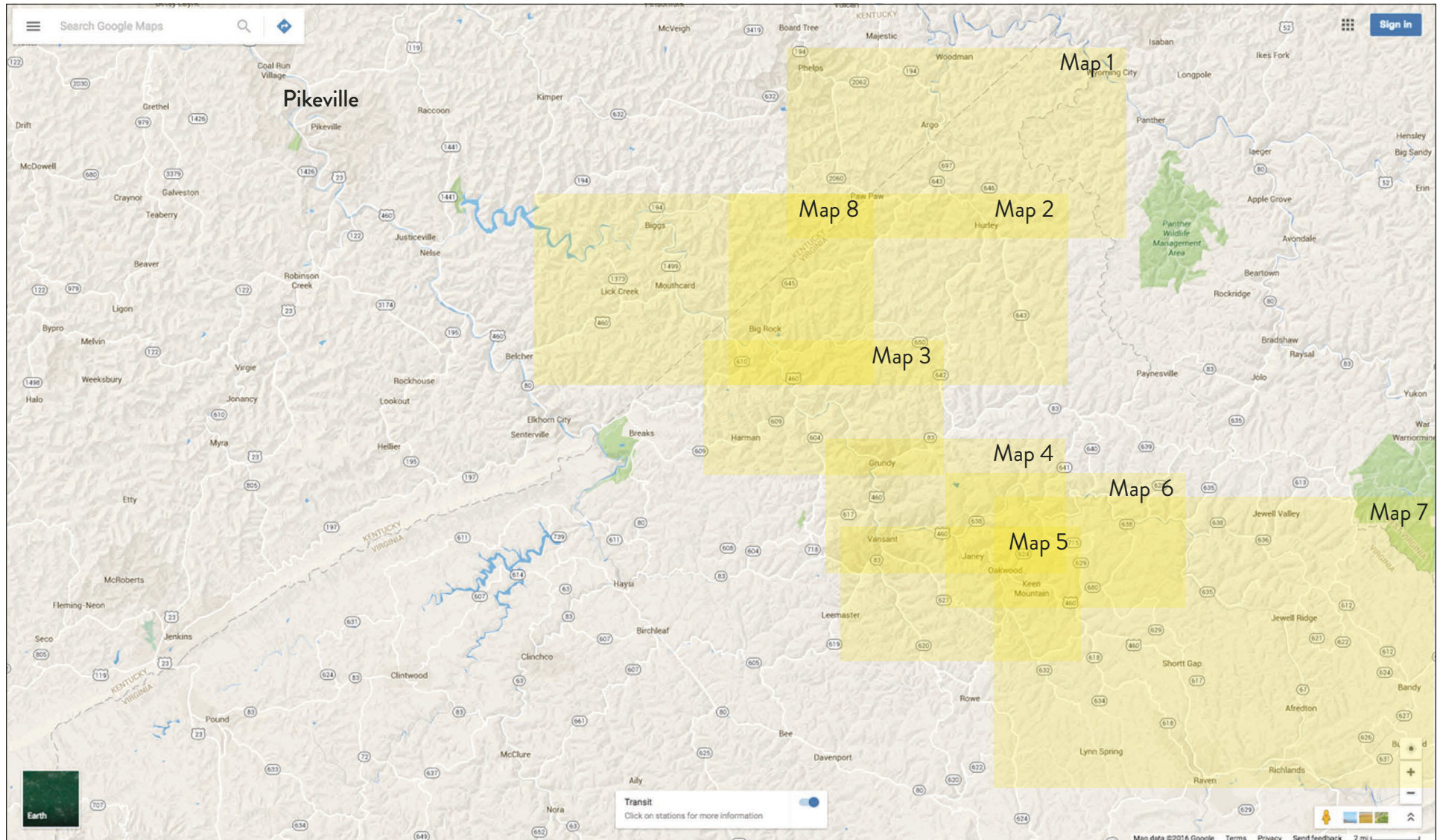

<b>POCAHONTAS DIVISION</b>
<b>Eastern Region</b>
<b>Timetable Number</b>
<b>1</b>
<b>In Effect</b> <b>At 12:01 AM</b> <b>Monday, August 4, 2008</b> <b>Eastern Standard Time</b>
<b>For The Government of Employees Only</b>

the loadout process trains are pushed back through the loader with a cab (caboose) and conductor leading the way. Once loaded, trains are pushed back to **Weller** with the cab leading.

There is one Tunnel on this branch, **Levisa Branch Tunnel** (1000' long). It's near the end of the branch prior to reaching the **Kyber** and **Big Creek** loadouts and is pretty much inaccessible unless one wants to take a pretty good hike.



# N&WHS Railfan Guide | Buchanan Branch | Overview

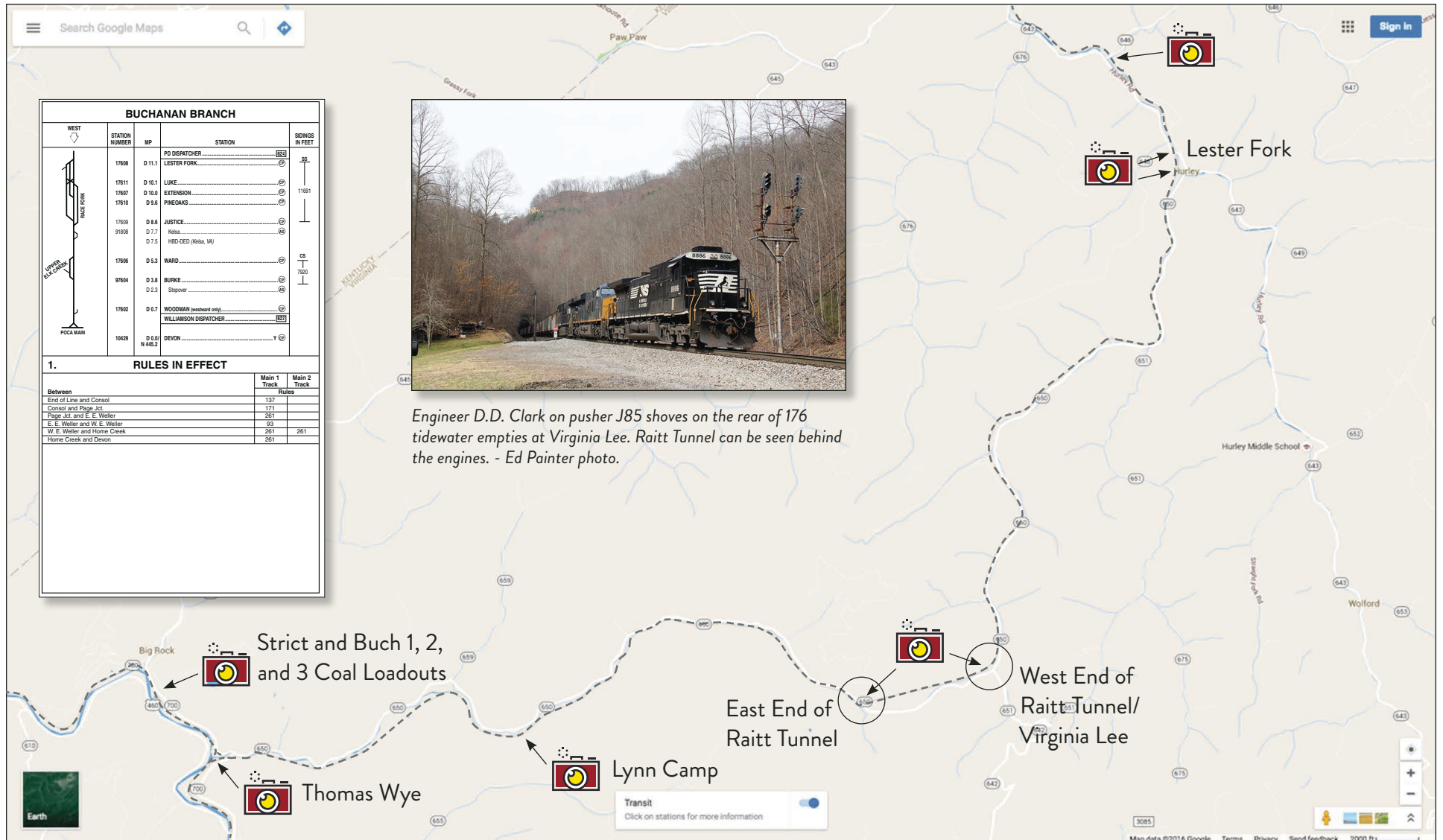


# N&WHS Railfan Guide | Buchanan Branch | Mainline Hurley to Devon

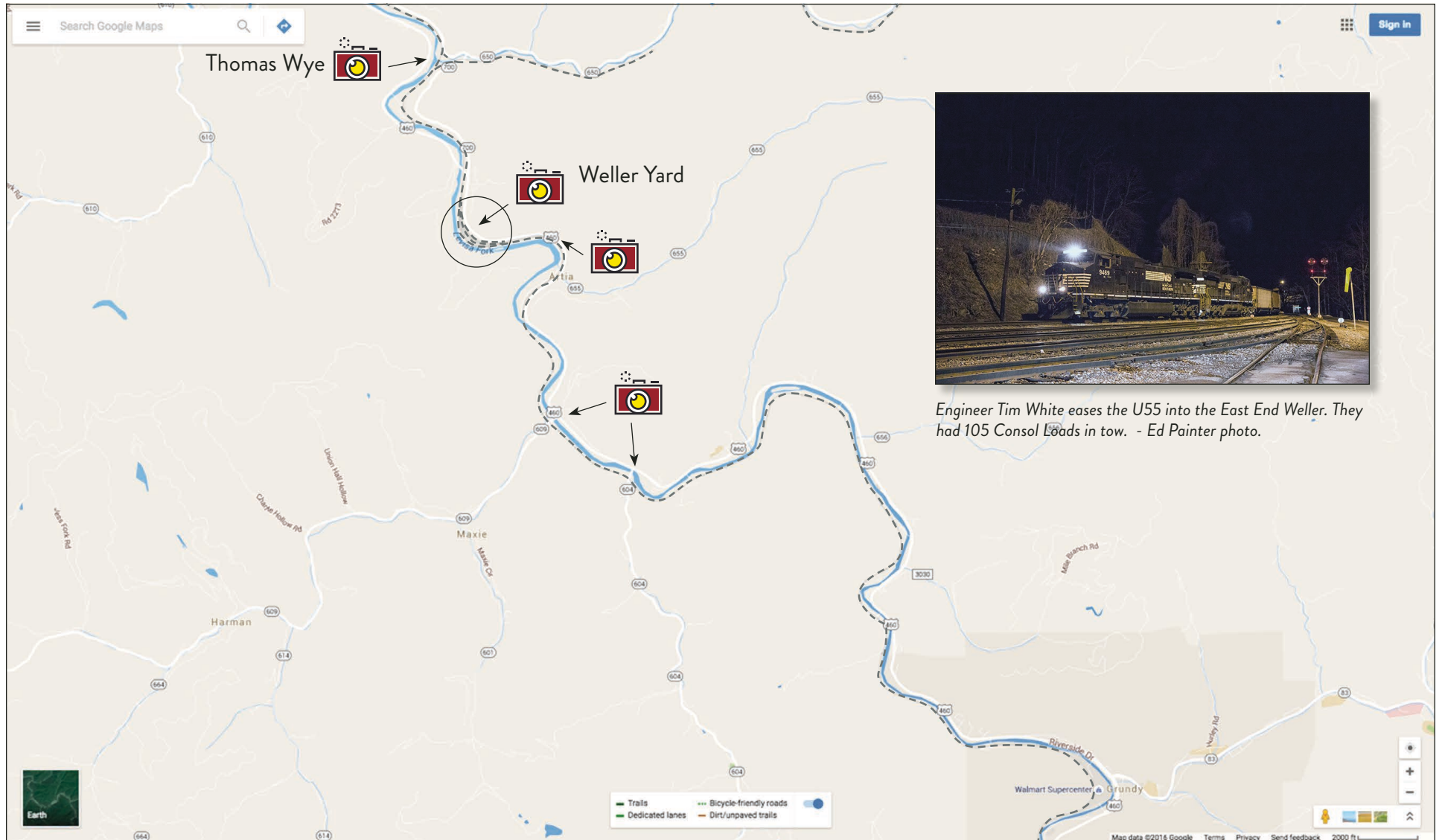




# N&WHS Railfan Guide | Buchanan Branch | Mainline Weller-Thomas Wye to Hurley



# N&WHS Railfan Guide | Buchanan Branch | Mainline Thomas Wye-Weller to Grundy

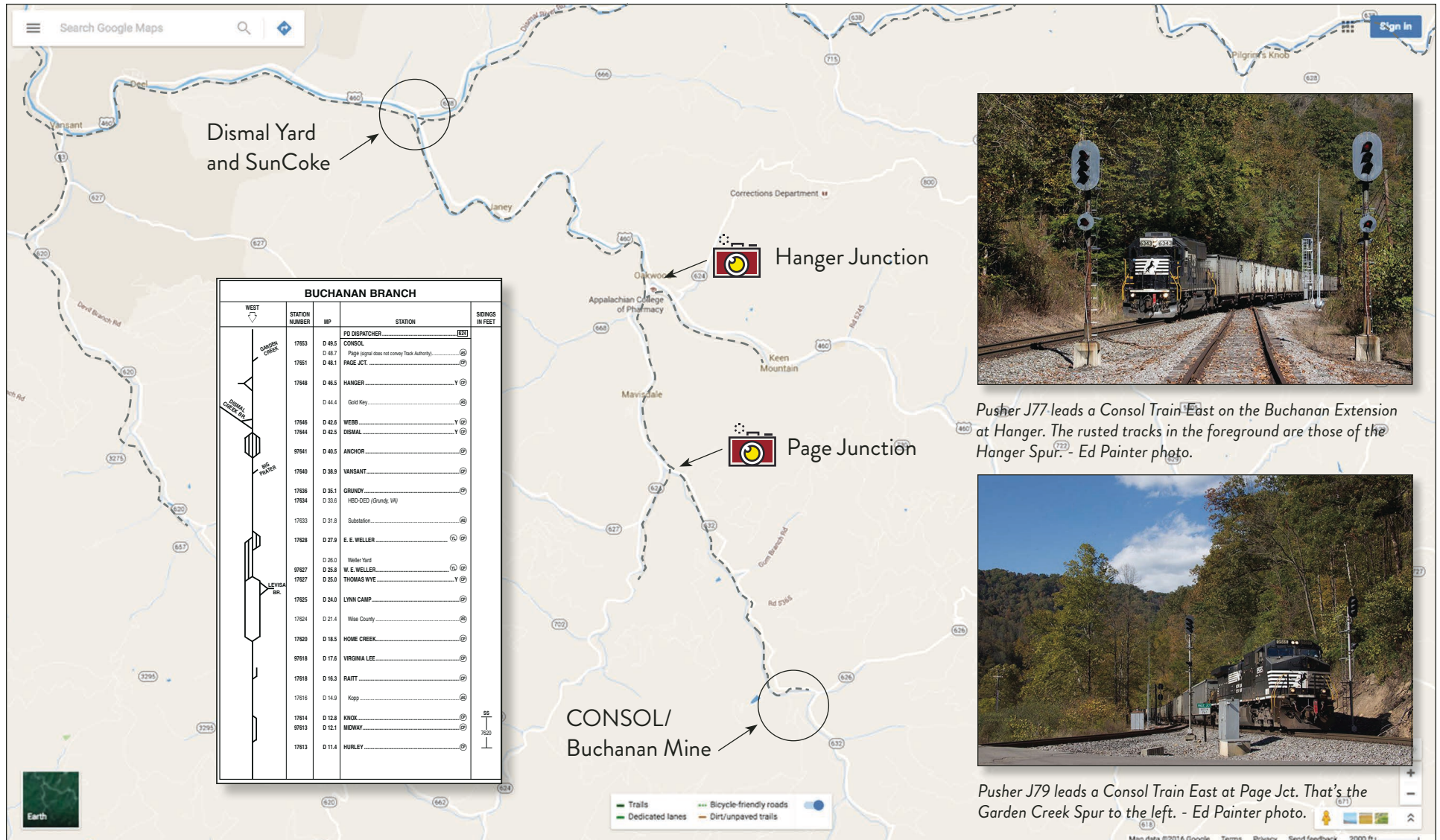


# N&WHS Railfan Guide | Buchanan Branch | Mainline Grundy to Vansant Dismal

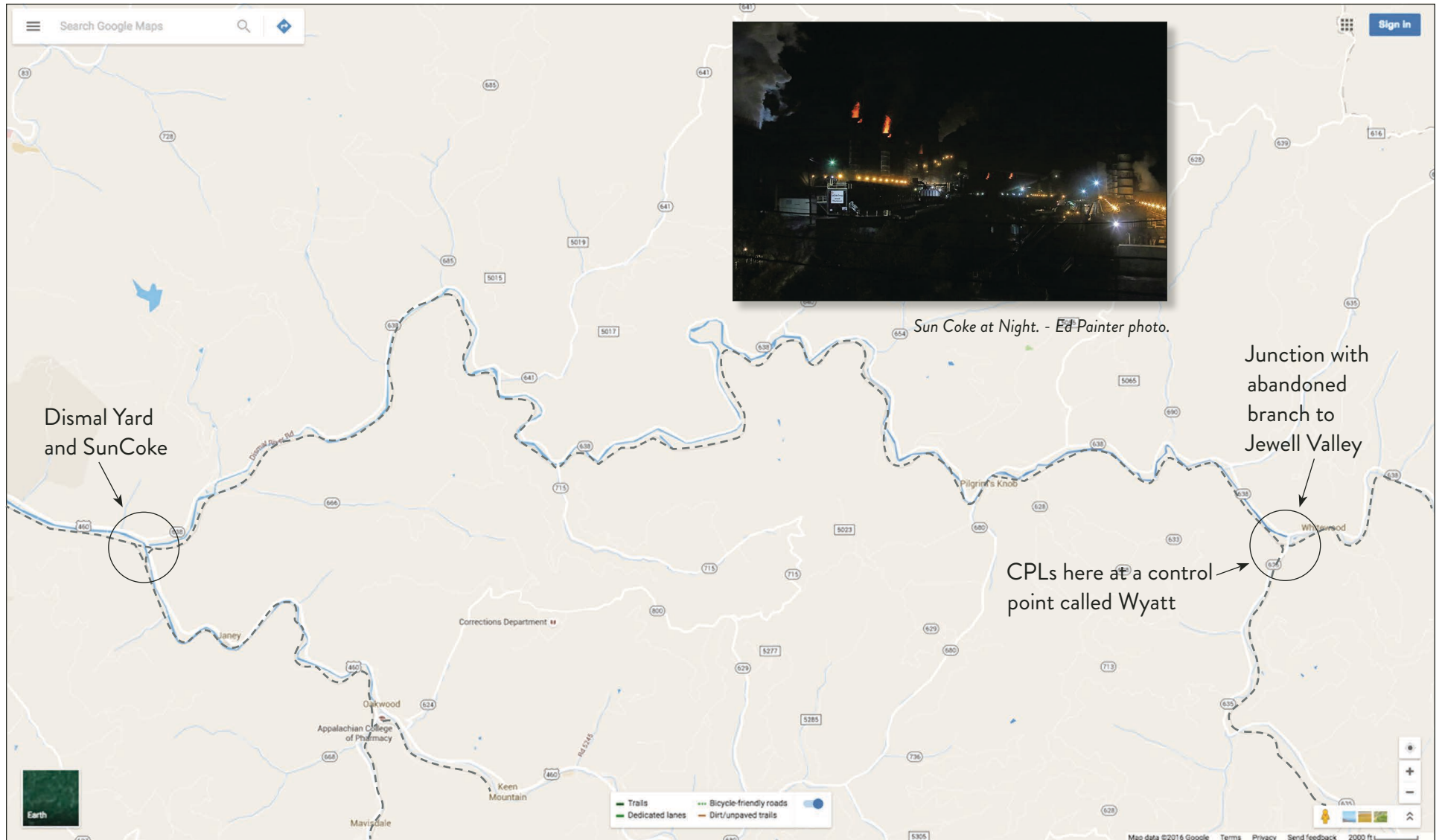




# N&WHS Railfan Guide | Buchanan Branch | The Buchanan Extension

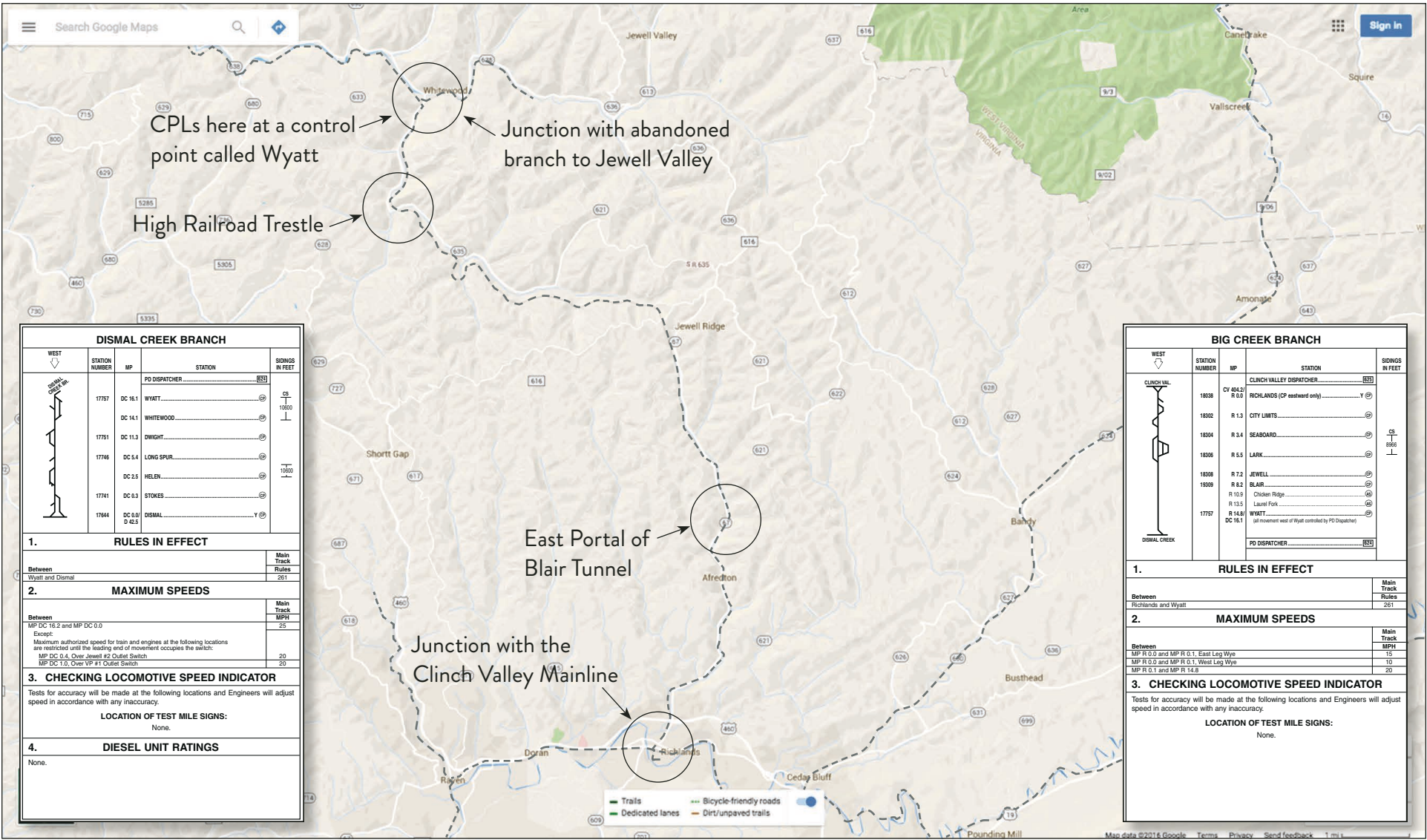


# N&WHS Railfan Guide | Buchanan Branch | The Wyatt Cutoff to Dismal-Dismal Creek Branch





# N&WHS Railfan Guide | Buchanan Branch | The Wyatt Cutoff to Richlands-Big Creek Branch





# N&WHS Railfan Guide | Buchanan Branch | The Levisa Branch

