RAILFANNING ORLANDO, KENTUCKY

THE TWIN TUNNELS

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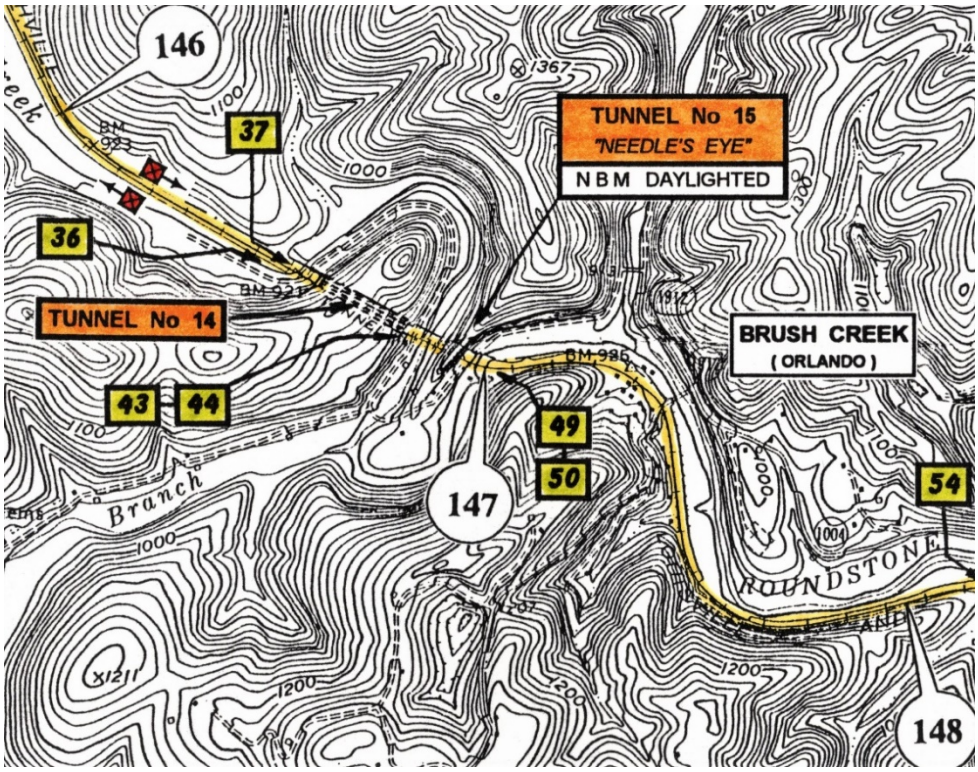
Tired of being cooped up in the house by Covid-19, Mary Ann and I decided to railfan CSXT's track from Richmond, Kentucky, to Corbin, Kentucky. One of the small trackside communities we visited was Orlando, Kentucky, site of Tunnels #14 and #15 "Needle's Eye." As we dropped down the hill for Orlando, we heard a CSXT train blowing for the grade crossing. Upon arrival at the crossing, we encountered the tail end of a CSXT train of tank cars running north. Once again, I failed to get a photo of a CSXT train going through tunnels #14 and #15; however, I did take some photos of the two tunnels minus a train in them.

Tunnels #14 and #15 are the result of an odd geology quirk. The Kentucky Central Railroad, when building south from Berea, Kentucky, once it had tunneled through Boone Gap, followed Brush Creek southward. At Orlando, Kentucky, Brush Creek encounters two ridges that both lie in an east-west direction but do not meet. A 100-yard gap separates them from each other. Therefore, upon reaching the north ridge, Brush Creek turns east and flows around the east end of the ridge to continue its run south. Once around the north ridge, the creek encounters the south ridge and takes a path west to go around that ridge's west end. Once clear of the south ridge, Brush Creek turns east to reach the path of its original southward flow. Thus, the KC engineers, upon reaching Orlando, were forced to bridge Brush Creek, tunnel through the north ridge, again bridge Brush Creek, tunnel through the south ridge, and once again bridge Brush Creek. It takes three bridges and two tunnels to cover 1,000-feet. This is well worth seeing, even if you do not encounter a train.



Map of the Orlando, Kentucky, area showing Tunnels #14 and #15

South entrance to Tunnel #15 just beyond the Brush Creek Bridge

North entrance to Tunnel #15, the Needle's Eye. I forgot to include the Brush Creek Bridge in the photo.

South entrance to Tunnel #14

View of the north entrance to Tunnel #14 with Tunnel #15 beyond. The bridge over Brush Creek can be seen in the foreground.

If you would like to visit Orlando and the twin tunnels, make sure you are driving a car with high clearance. Four-wheel drive will not hurt but is not needed. Take I-75 to Exit 59, Mt. Vernon, Kentucky. Take KY 1004, located to the east of I-75. Ky 1004 looks like a driveway but it is a very narrow state highway. Follow KY 1004 to the CSXT track. Cross the track and immediately turn left on what looks like a gravel driveway. This is a county road. When you reach the first crossbuck, do not cross the track but keep going. This is still a county road. At the next crossbuck, stop and park. The southern entrance to Tunnel #15 is dead ahead and can be seen from the far side of the road. I used a drone to take the photo of the south entrance to Tunnel #15. Return to KY 1004, turn left and cross the bridge. Once across, turn left and go .25 miles. Take the road on the left. Yes, it is narrow. Go under the railroad bridge and continue to the church. Make a hard, sharp right turn onto Twin Tunnel Road. This is a very narrow, county dirt road. Look out for fallen rocks and ATV riders. This road will take you to the north entrance of Tunnel #15 and the south entrance to Tunnel #14. Some 10 feet beyond the track is the abandoned east Tunnel #14 and the abandoned daylighted east Tunnel #15. Continue on the dirt road to the north entrance of Tunnel #14. After stopping, just past the tunnel, continue on the road to a bridge on the right. Cross the bridge and go over the track for a good view of the Brush Creek Bridge and north entrance to Tunnel #15. To get to I-75, you need to back track to Orlando, as the road you are on dead ends. Turn right at the main road or else you will head for Climax, Kentucky.

For those who are adventurous, do not turn right on KY 1004 at Orlando for I-75 but continue on Big Cave Road. You want to head for Great Saltpetre Cave. I would guess you will drive about 4-miles for Mullins Station Road. If you reach Saltpetre Cave, you have gone about a half mile too far. Take Mullins Station Road on the right. This is a county blacktop road that turns to dirt. If you start hearing banjo music as you drive up the hill, you know you are going the correct way. The banjo music will grow in volume when you cross the cattle guard. Do not

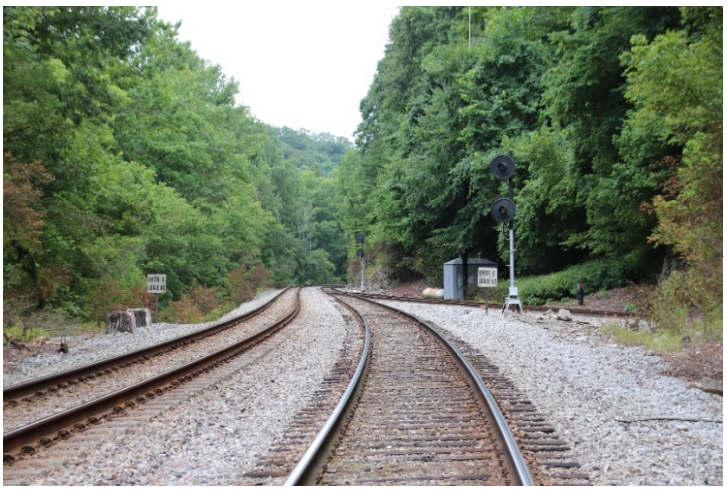
get out to admire the antique farm equipment and trucks alongside the road; the kudzu that covers them grabs and devours all that approach. Once over the second cattle guard, the banjo music should slowly fade. Located at the bottom of the hill is Mullins, Kentucky, and Tunnel #18. Mullins was, for many years, the location of a limestone quarry. You can drive up to both cave entrances. Admire, but do not cross, the covered bridge.

Continue on down the road and cross the railroad track. Park on the right. You are at Sinks, Kentucky. Some 200 yards south of here is where the Kentucky Central (KC) meets the Lebanon Branch (LB). Some 1,000 feet north of the crossbucks is KC Mile 151, while some 600-feet south of the crossbucks is LB Mile 137 and LB Tunnel #4. I flew my drone from here to get my photo of Tunnel #4. To return to civilization, continue on the road to US 25 and turn left for Livingston, Kentucky, and I-75. On the way to US 25, you will cross LB track twice. This track serves the stone quarry at Mt. Vernon.

Abandoned quarry openings at Mullins

The new L&N Tunnel #18 at Mullins. The old KC Tunnel #18 is out of sight to the left.

Southbound CSXT manifest train encountered at Sinks



The white sign next to the signal marks the end of KC subdivision and the beginning of LB subdivision. The LB track to Mt. Vernon can be seen running to the right, just beyond the signal.

A view into LB Tunnel #4 from LB Mile 137. The sign to the right of the signal reads “Entering KC Subdivision.”