

Turntable Times

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Cards and Flowers

If you know of a Chapter Member who is sick, lost a loved one or has a new birth in the family, please contact Elizabeth Leedy. Elizabeth is responsible for Chapter cards and flowers and can be reached at 389-5274.

Meeting Notice

The Roanoke Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society will hold its next general meeting on Thursday, February 18th, 1999 at 7:30 pm. The meeting will be held at the First Presbyterian Church on the corner of McClanahan and Crystal Spring Avenue in Roanoke.

Meeting Cancellation Policy

Since it's that time of year, as a reminder we have the following policy regarding inclement weather.

The general meeting will be considered cancelled if any of the following conditions are met: Roanoke City Schools are closed on the day of or the day after the meeting, or Virginia Western night classes are cancelled for the night of a meeting.

Cover Photo

Richard Shell caught Norfolk Southern 8522 heading up a southbound grain train near Wirtz,

Virginia on a beautiful spring day in April 1997. Richard D. Shell photo.

Deadline for Turntable Times

The deadline for the next issue of Turntable Times is Thursday, February 18th, 1999. Please send articles, information and exchange newsletters to: Kenney Kirkman, 590 Murphy Road, Collinsville, Va. 24078-2128.

Small Rails - February

by Dave Meashey

The Roanoke Valley Model Engineers have continued working on improvements to track and scenery on the modules at their temporary downtown location. New members have joined the club, some of whom cannot make Tuesday night meetings. To allow everyone a chance to work on the modules, the club is alternating work nights. One week the club uses Tuesday night as a work night, the next week it uses Wednesday night.

The Big Lick Big Train Operators have suspended meetings for the bad weather months, as is their custom. Individual members still keep busy with other projects, however. One member is working on his indoor layout, adding structures and additional track. Another member is working on his second Maine two-footer live steam locomotive. Several of us are kitbashing boxcars for a contest which will be judged during one of our spring meetings. There's the stuff that just needs to be fixed for the next "tour of duty" outdoors.

Mixed Freight - February

by Mr. Robin Shavers

Many of you are familiar with the half hour broadcast on public TV known as TRACKS AHEAD. This on again, off again weekly feature on railroading and model railroading has been on the airwaves for a number of years. There is another half hour program that focuses on railroading period called ALL ABOARD. It too is a weekly show featured on public TV. In the Richmond viewing area, it can be seen on

Thursday nights at 9:00 p.m. TRACKS AHEAD is usually scheduled for 3:00 p.m. on Saturday afternoon. In addition to the above mentioned regularly programs, I've also seen a number of programs on railroading on The Learning Channel and The Discovery Channel. To keep these features coming and maybe increasing in numbers, please call and or write to the station or network that presents these programs. Let them know there is indeed an audience for such programs. This is especially important where advertisers are concerned. Most of the programs I've observed are entertaining and informative. Though some of the information given is very basic for those of us within the hobby or profession, it has to be this way for the viewing general public that is no as educated about railroading as most railroad enthusiast are.

The Second Annual North Carolina Rail Fair is scheduled to occur the second weekend of March 99. The dates are March 13th & 14th with the location being The North Carolina State Fairgrounds in the W. Kerr Scott Building from 9:00 a.m. til 5:00 p.m. on Saturday and from 10:00 a.m. til 3:00 p.m. Sunday. I attended the event last year and left satisfied. This is an event involving the sale of model railroad merchandise and railroadians. For more information, call Charles Miller at 703-536-2954 or Sid Suggs at 803-532-5912. e-mail: alabar9@aol.com

Closer to home, last winter Trains Unlimited of Lynchburg offered a series of free and open to the public clinics covering various aspects of model railroading usually held on Saturday afternoons. They are doing it again this winter. The clinics will continue thru March. Contact Trains Unlimited at 804-239-8377 or 800-728-3850 or log into members.aol.com/trmsunltd/ You may also want to inquire about the National Model Railroad Association's Mid-East Region Convention being held in Lynchburg on April 23rd and thru 25th.

Our comrades at the Historic Spencer Shops have recently put voice mail to work for them to make things easier for callers. The new number is 704-636-2889 which replaces all the previous

numbers for the different departments.

With the anticipated increase of freight traffic, the proposed higher speed passenger trains and less than acceptable numbers of grade crossing accidents, a number of grade crossings along the former Southern Railway between Greensboro and Charlotte, N.C. are being closed or altered. This is especially true for Salisbury and Spencer. Some crossings will have their safety appliances upgraded. Some will be camera equipped to video tape motorist whom drive around lowered gates.

Telling About Our Railroad Heritage

by Dave Meashey

One day during the week after Christmas, I took some track and a train to the Sunshine Station nursery school, where my wife teaches, and put on an exhibit for the children. The exhibit's mission was twofold: I shared the fun of model railroading. But I also told the children something about the trains and how important they were to the building of our nation - which fits in with the mission of the NRHS.

It was not that hard to do. Setting up took the most effort. But the enjoyment those children got from watching the train made the effort well worth my time. It also gave me an opportunity to talk to the children about how important the steam trains were, and how important today's trains are. I used a long spout engineer's oil can as a pointer, while I told the children about each car and the kinds of goods they would haul. I also used the oil can to point out the different parts of the locomotive and tell what they were for. I didn't use highly technical terms, but I didn't "talk down" to the children either. I had to keep my presentation short for groups of younger children, who had less attention span than those children who were almost kindergarten age.

I also explained why steam locomotive engineers wore the soft billed hats and goggles. I told them how the high-cuffed gauntlet gloves protected from heat, and sometimes from cold.

I also explained how the red bandanna was used to keep dust and coal dust out of an engineman's mouth and nose. Simple stuff to us, but grand mysteries revealed for these children. We all had fun, and perhaps the seeds were planted to grow future railfans and model railroaders.

U.S. Railroad Retirement Board and Genealogical Information The U.S. Railroad Retirement Board administers a Federal retirement benefit program covering the nation's railroad workers. The records that the RRB maintains deal primarily with the administration and payment of these benefits. The Board will provide information from its records on deceased persons for the purpose of genealogical research. However, the RRB will not release information on any living person without the written consent of that person. The Railroad Retirement Board, like the Social Security Administration, was not established until the mid-1930's, and it began maintaining its own records of all covered rail service in 1937. So the Board's service records are limited to individuals who worked in the rail industry after 1936. If a person was not actually working for a railroad after 1936, he or she would not be listed in these records. Nor would the Board generally have any pertinent records on persons whose rail service was performed on a casual basis or was of short duration. Also, the Board's records pertain only to persons whose employers were covered under the Railroad Retirement Act. Employers such as interurban, suburban, or street electric railways are not covered under this Act.

The Board's records are filed under the railroad employee's social security number, and a person's social security number often appears on his or her death certificate. In some cases, if that number is not available, a records search can be made by using the employee's full name, including the middle name or initial, and the complete dates of birth and death. However, in dealing with relatively common surnames, a positive identification number may not be possible without the employee's social security number.

Requests for genealogical information should be sent directly to: Railroad Retirement Board, Office of Public Affairs, 844 North Rush Street, Chicago, IL 60611-2092. The fee for searching RRB records is \$16 for each employee on whom records are requested. A check or money order for this amount should be made payable to the Railroad Retirement Board. This fee must be paid before any search is attempted. It is not refundable, even if the information requested cannot be located or if the file has been destroyed. Generally the Board requires at least 30 to 60 days for a complete reply to genealogical inquiries. You may request further information via the Internet at: <http://www.rrb.gov/geneal.html> (Above from The Automatic Block, Western Maryland Chapter, NRHS).

Rail Sale

Amtrak has unveiled an on-line discount ticket program, "Rail Sale." Passengers now may purchase reserved seats for selected one-way Amtrak coach seats at a substantial discount. The program is only available on the internet at <http://reservations.amtrak.com> RAIL SALE tickets can only be purchased with a credit card. Tickets can be sent by mail or picked-up at a staffed Amtrak station. In addition, Amtrak has started a Rail SALE e-mail newsletter, providing customers with ongoing updates and reminders of special discounts. Subscription requests can be entered at the above web address. Rail SALE fares are valid only for reserved coach seats on Amtrak service in the U.S. (Potomac Rail News, Potomac Chapter, NRHS).

The RPO, Sorting at 60 MPH

by Jim Whitmore

How dangerous could life get for a Railway Post Office clerk? Well, the answer depends on what year you're talking about.

Now 1893, that was a dangerous year. Only 6,645 RPO clerks were employed by the Post Office Department that year, but they lived through or died in 403 train collisions, derail-

ments, fires and explosions. The Postmaster General's annual report for that year spends no fewer than 30 pages itemizing the destruction and death on the RPO's, and the reasons for the near-daily accidents.

But the RPO clerks - whose daily grind, in the early years, could be a death-defying act - had a more succinct explanation. As one clerk wryly put it: "A wreck is usually caused by one train trying to pass another on the same track. It has never been done successfully, but the railroads keep on trying. Sometimes a train will get off the track and run along the ground. That has never worked very well either."

The fact is, the railroad companies - some of which claimed they could make more money hauling pig iron - were dragged kicking and screaming into the mail-moving business. They thumbed their nose at the Postmaster General's repeated pleas for faster service and modified routes. And they added injury to insult by providing the Department with rolling stock that nowadays would be labeled "unsafe at any speed".

In the words of one historian, RPO cars "were of flimsy wood construction, often rebuilt from other coaches scrapped as too old...One crew (found it impossible) to report their car's length as required, because it was inches shorter going uphill than when level." In a serious crash, the mail cars would splinter like sheaves of kindling.

Despite these hazards, mail by rail progressed. The Railway Mail Service moved from "closed pouch" rail transport in the 1830's to "open pouch" sorting en route beginning in 1864.

The first official "open pouch" Railway Post Office ran between Chicago and Clinton, Iowa. And as the RPO network expanded, the speed of mail service in the United States increased dramatically. Railway Post Offices were soon heralded as one of the wonders of the age.

Of course, the foot-soldier, the nomadic workhorse of this historic enterprise, was the railway mail clerk. Many of the first RPO clerks were veterans of the Civil War. And the Railway Post Offices - whose ranks remained exclusively

male right through 1977 - were operated from the outset with military-like discipline and precision.

Even modern-era clerks recall the rigors of the RPO. "We were sort of like the Marines of the Post Office Department", reminisces Glen Wester, a veteran of the Memphis & Dallas line who last rode the rails in 1955. "We were a very proud outfit. And it was very tightly run...very spit-and-polish as far as following all the rules.

Demerits were handed down for everything from failing a scheme examination to missing a mail drop. "There were probably 50 things you could get demerits for", says Wester, "and only one or two things that got you a merit."

Adding to the RPO clerk's mystique were his ever-present RPO badge and 38-caliber Smith & Wesson "banker's special".

Modern-era RPO veterans downplay the importance of their guns, "(The Revolver) was more a deterrent than a real weapon", insists one RPO veteran. "It probably wouldn't hold up accurately for more than twenty feet." Another former clerk referred to his .38 caliber as a "little pea-shooter".

In the old days, by contrast, RPO clerks took their weapons very seriously. Trains were frequently held up by road agents and harassed by warring Indians, and clerks defend the mails with their lives.

The March 1889 Scribner's Magazine reported an incident in Arkansas where "the robbers, before visiting the postal car, had secured \$10,000 for the express safe. When they came to Clerk R.P. Johnson, he suggested they had secured booty enough, and that under the circumstances they might let the mail matter alone. The masked men agreed."

As recently as 1921, the Postmaster General described mail train robberies as "a national epidemic", and President Harding assigned U.S. Marines to guard the RPO's. The troops were issued orders that said, "you will carry your pistol in your hand at all times", and "When you shoot, shoot to kill." Not surprisingly, the railway crime wave ended in short order.

Indeed, by the 1920's and 1930's, the RPO's

had settled into a predictable and productive routine. Robberies were less common. And with improvements such as air brakes and double tracks, and rail cars made of steel, accidents were less destructive and less frequent.

Even the "routine", however, had a certain adventure to it on the RPO's. For newcomers, there was the challenge of "getting your RPO legs." That is, conquering motion sickness and, in the words of Washington & Florence veteran Tommy Clifton, "learning how to rock and roll with the train while you're pitching mail." (Another RPO veteran claims that, thanks to his years on the trains, "I didn't get seasick like most guys when I went overseas during World War II.")

Clerks also faced the challenge of staying alert and on their feet for as many as sixteen hours at a stretch. "Mail lock coffee" - so called because it was ready to drink when it was thick enough to float a mail lock - helped a lot. So did the steady onslaught of deadlines: what one clerk called "working under the gun."

While the train thundered ahead at 60 to 80 miles an hour, the clerks sorted mail into hundreds of pouches and slots that lined the sides of the mail car. Pouches were dispatched at each town along the route, and local mail was continually taken on board for sorting.

Of course, the trains did not stop at every town, so many mail drops and pickups had to be accomplished "on the fly". The exchange was a one-two maneuver, executed in a split second.

The RPO car's V-shaped "catcher arm" would snatch the mail pouch off a specially-designed post. And, nearly simultaneously, a clerk standing in the RPO car's open door would throw out a pouch of freshly-sorted local mail.

It could sometimes be a dangerous procedure. There were countless incidents where the catcher arm snagged not the mail pouch, as intended, but another train or a building. The story is also told of a clerk who, while waiting to make an exchange at Port Washington, Ohio, sneezed his denture out the door.

The engineer would usually alert RPO clerks to

an approaching station with a long blast on the train's whistle. But more often than not, the clerks knew where they were based on landmarks and "feel".

Frederick Puckett of Asheville, Ohio told RPO historian B.A. Long about a fellow clerk "who always knew when he was approaching Haverhill, Ohio, because he would see an old white horse standing the same spot. One day the horse was not there, having died, and the clerk missed the exchange.

Another clerk is said to have set an empty bottle on the floor during the last leg of his route. When it fell over, he knew that train had rounded the final curve and was close to the depot.

Of course, until the final years, RPO clerks worked in a world without zip codes. Their scheme knowledge was a web of colorful place-names like Claystick, Tobosco, Nashport, Pleasant Valley, Dillon and Zanesville (the towns on the old Baltimore and Ohio line going each way out of Newark, Ohio). The mail was something personal, and it was treated with a near-sacred sense of mission.

RPO clerks also took great pride in their breadth of their scheme knowledge. They often had a near perfect command of six to eight schemes at a time. "Those fellows were like human computers", recalls Tommy Clifton. "They were examined a regular basis, and considered it a disgrace to fail one of those exams."

"The men were completely devoted to advancing the mail", says RPO authority Arnold Petersen. "They were dedicated to finding the fastest available dispatch - constantly examining the schedules and finding ways to move the mail faster."

Yet, for all his high-minded sense of duty and mission, the typical RPO clerk was a rugged, down-to-earth man.

He worked in cramped, dirty, noisy conditions - cheek-by-jowl with as many as twenty other clerks in a 60-foot RPO car. Heating, lighting and ventilation were poor and unreliable.

"It was a hard life", recalls Glen Wester. "You were away from home much of the time. Your hours had to conform to the train schedule."



Norfolk and Western Photo

One of the N&W Railway Post Office Routes over the years was on trains 3 and 4. On a sunny April 2, 1954, a gleaming number 602 leads an eight car "Pocahontas" eastbound near Montvale, Virginia. The RPO is the second car in the consist. On the diner, second car from the rear, one of the cooks is taking a break before the lunch crowd begins on what would seem to be a fairly light train on this date.

The majority of assignments were night runs. And at the end of the line, more often than not, were a strange city and cheap hotel for a few hours sleep. (There were also consolations. After several of those long runs a clerk might get off for as long as a week at a time.)

The Railway Mail Service reached its high point in the years immediately following World War II. The RPO's boasted 1,500 routes, 30,000 employees and 4,000 railcars. They handled the great bulk of non-local mail, and were the backbone of the American postal system.

In the 1940's and 1950's, however the nation's transportation system underwent radical changes. The advent of commercial airlines, interstate highways and affordable automobiles all spelled doom for the old-time network of passenger trains.

The number of trains available for mail transportation dropped steadily from 2,600 in 1956 to 1,400 in 1961 and 741 in 1967. And as the infrastructure of trains and rail facilities shrunk, the RPO's had to be cut back accordingly.

The last RPO run took place on June 30, 1977, between New York and Washington, closing the book on one of the most colorful episodes in U.S. Postal Service history.

For the last RPO clerks, it was a time of great sadness and - in some cases - bitterness. They had taken great pride in their work. And, despite the rigors of their job, they remained fiercely loyal to the RPO way of life.

"We had a special esprit de corps, a special camaraderie. We all worked together, and nobody was up (finished) until everybody was up", says Clifton. "But on the same token, on the

RPO's you could be your own man."

The last RPO run is only a few years behind us. But the Railway Post Office already seems a thing of a bygone era. To a remarkable extent, the RPO clerk - like the Pony Express riders and the pioneers of air mail - has become an object of nostalgia and even glorification. There is no harm in romanticizing the RPO clerk - some of them, after all, were heroes and legends.

But the truth about the RPO clerk is both simpler and grander: he was, by and large, an intelligent but unpretentious worker who happened to take enormous pride in moving the mail. As such, he remains an example to all of

(Above story via The Bulletin, Bridge Line Historical Society; The Tower Topics, Utica & Mohawk Valley Chapter; The Green Block, Central New York Chapter; The Timetable, Lake Shore Chapter; The Orderboard, Tampa Bay Chapter, from an article originally appearing in the May-June 1991 issue of Postal Life.)

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