

Working on the Railroad

Part 1

Caboose Track

I was a clerk for the Toledo, Peoria & Western Railroad Company. But I didn't start as a clerk. At age 22, I began as a laborer, which is not a good place to be when you're working on the railroad. Railroad work could often be difficult and dangerous – but it was never dull.

I held many jobs on the railroad and knew many people in both the Mechanical Department and the Clerical Department. I had many adventures, but some stand out more than others.

I once had the job of Caboose Laborer. The Caboose Track was located out in the switchyards, actually the first track behind the Lead Track, and toward the rear of the yards. On Caboose Track, all the cabooses from all the trains were gathered, awaiting their next trip. It was my job to clean them inside and restock them with supplies.

One day, standing along the Lead, I was told by a rough old railroader, "Watch out when they're humpin' those cars." Humping was when a diesel switch engine would push a string of cars down the Lead, getting to just the right speed, and then the engine's brakes were jammed on. A switchman would pull the pin of the first car, and the car would roll by momentum into the first track that had an open switch. It was a fast and efficient way of breaking up an inbound train, or setting up an outbound one. It was also very dangerous, because a 100,000 pound railroad car is moving basically uncontrolled down the track, and nothing is going to stop it until it hits another car. And knowing this, you kept your eyes and ears constantly open. And when a car is moving by itself, it is really very quiet, so your eyes become more important than your ears.

But when they connected, they made plenty of noise. The loud booming of cars smashing together could be heard all day long. The boxcars made the loudest noise, while the hopper cars and the tank cars had a kind of metallic, hollow sound that lasted few seconds after the collision. If a boxcar rolled onto a track that contained tank cars, then you had just that much more noise.

Cabooses were treated the same as any other car in the yard. Since Caboose Track was right on the edge of things, I didn't have to venture out into the yards very often, except to restock a caboose that was going right back out again. But I had my share of near misses, working on Caboose Track, one time turning around and grabbing an overhead safety bar just as another caboose came barreling too fast onto the track, knocking the other ones back twenty feet.

A switchman came by to see if I was dead or hurt. I wasn't, but I told him how unhappy I was with the driver of that switch engine.

But then the Blue Flag Rule came into effect, and it made my life simpler. Too many workers were getting killed or injured, so the Federal Railroad Administration made it a requirement that if someone was working on a car on any track, the switch to that track had to be locked and a blue flag placed behind the switch. It probably saved many lives.

But working on Caboose Track did have its finer moments. If there were a lot of trains running, most of the cabooses would be gone, and I could sit down in the brakeman's seat – the one with the window – and relax.

More than once, I'd see a solitary railroad car rolling down the lead, rolling on and on, and on and on, obviously headed for the next town, and points beyond, to be followed sometime later by an anxious crew on a rocketing switch engine. Someone had failed to throw a switch.

Occasionally I'd be visited by a truckload of Mexican sectionmen, a wild group. They'd come in just to sit and talk and joke with me for a while, and tell me about Mexico. They'd been out fixing a derailment and drinking, or cleaning switches and drinking, or replacing a broken rail and drinking. The foreman of the gang, a wise American, had the good sense to let them drink. They were very hard workers, doing heavy toil in all kinds of weather, whenever and wherever they were needed. And most of them sent money back to Mexico, to support their poor families. Overall, they were much kinder to me than many of my fellow Americans.*

Every caboose had a restroom, more like a narrow closet, containing a chemical toilet. In the old days of railroading, there was just a wooden toilet seat mounted over a hole, but the times had changed. Once in a while I had to recharge these toilets, usually when the smell was so bad that entering the restroom was in itself a hazardous occupation. A slide valve at the bottom of the toilet emptied the contents down a short pipe, onto the open ground below, hitting with a big splash of blue and brown.

Well, even though I couldn't see very much outside, and even though I had no evil intentions, nevertheless there were times when a switchman would be walking down the line, looking for a certain caboose number, just as I pulled open the valve. My only notice of the disaster would be the splash and then an irate "Hey!" from outside. Naturally, I never did enjoy a very good reputation among the switchmen.

But eventually Caboose Track became too tame for me. I had an adventurous spirit. I took a job called Hostler-Helper. Now I would be working on the locomotives. Now I would be working in "The Pits."

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*One of these Mexicans was "CQ", who was about my age. I was working inside a caboose on the snowy winter morning that CQ was struck and almost killed by a boxcar coming down the Lead Track. He'd been cleaning the snow out of the switches with compressed air.

The air compressor on the company pickup truck was so loud he couldn't hear the boxcar coming at him, and he was probably so intent on cleaning the switch, he wasn't looking out for danger. The boxcar struck him down and dragged him for several feet.

Just after the ambulance arrived to take him away, I walked up the Lead Track to see what was going on. CQ was crying and screaming in agony and had to be restrained. He'd suffered many broken bones and a broken back, and a part of his left hand had been severed. I saw men, big strong railroaders, who had been trying to help restrain him, dazed and pale. I saw the blood on the snow.

Though he eventually received a large settlement from the railroad for his injuries, with his body broken, he could never again work as a sectionman, and with the chronic pain of his trauma, both mental and physical, alcohol became his refuge.