

Working on the Railroad

Part 2

The Pits

I was now the second-shift Hostler-Helper, an unusual name for someone who takes care of locomotives. I just assumed it came from the early days of railroading. Hostlers worked with horses, and locomotives were once referred to as iron horses.

I worked in the Pits, one of those names that very accurately describes the place. Located next to the Machine Shop, it was the area where the locomotives were brought to be cleaned, reloaded with sand, and refueled after a trip, or to have their engines repaired in the Machine Shop. There was also some engine work done in the Roundhouse, located behind the Machine Shop, but this was used more often for cleaning the outside of the locomotives.

In the Pits, air pressure forced sand up a pipe into the sand tower, and the sand fell by gravity down a hose into one of the engine's sand compartments. Sand helped to give the engine's wheels more traction when pulling a heavy load up an incline, or when starting from a stopped position. Over the years, sand had completely covered the area around the sand tower, making walking difficult. But the strong legs that I had developed going up and down caboose steps all day helped here, and I never was much bothered by the sand.

A turntable behind the Pits was used to turn the engines around for their next trip, or to put them on one of the service tracks leading to the Machine Shop or the Roundhouse.

The Pits had two tracks, one for inbound engines to be serviced, and the other for outbound engines. You could turn them on the turntable, but sometimes it was better just to run them out to the switch, and then run them up the outbound track.

I used to do this with switch engines, when no driver could be found. I'd run them out to the switch, stop and throw the switch, then get back on and run them up again. It was fun.

But once, when I was still very new on the job, I nearly killed myself. I was working first shift, filling in for someone who was on vacation. It was winter, and there was some ice and snow on the ground, but not all that much. The first-shift foreman was driving a tandem (two locomotives together) out to the switch, with me standing on the front step. I was to jump off and throw the switch, jump back on and ride up the outbound track.

It was common practice to step off a slowing engine to throw a switch. I'd seen others do it many times. But I stepped off onto ice, and my feet went out from under me, my legs coming

dangerously close to the front wheels of the lead locomotive. My feet skipped awkwardly along the right of way. Instantly I had a tight grip on the railing, and that's the only thing that kept me from going under, until I could pull myself back up on the step.

"Wait till we stop before you get off!" a pale foreman shouted from the window. "Wait till we stop!"

"Now you tell me!" I shot back, thoroughly irritated with him, myself, and the TP&W Railroad Company. It was a mistake I never made again. And I can still see the wheels of that lead locomotive – those cold, lifeless, merciless wheels.

Of everything in the Pits, I think the turntable was the most fun and the most annoying.

It ran off two big electric motors, going around a single track, located down in the turntable pit. The control for the motors was a horizontal lever attached to an electric control box, mounted inside a little wooden shack set on one end of the turntable. If you turned the lever to the left, you went left, right and you went right.

It was a test of skill to get the turntable to roll to a stop exactly lined up with one of the tracks. A good man could make it stop on target with effortless ease. I could do this, although I missed far more than I hit. Naturally, if the tracks were not lined up, the engine would derail and ruin everybody's day. I never caused this myself, although I came close several times.

The problem with the turntable was that the motors were old and unreliable, and so was the control for them. They looked like they'd been there a long, long time.

Sometimes, a little turn of the lever produced a big turn of the turntable. Sometimes, a big turn of the lever produced nothing at all, except a few sparks jumping out of the control box. Sometimes, I'd get so fed up trying to line up those tracks, I'd just settle for something close, something that looked fairly straight. Then, when the engine began to move, the driver would feel the bump and yell down at me, "Next time, line it up!" But he didn't know what torment I was going through.

There were only four of us working second shift: the foreman, an electrician, a machinist and me. All of the troublemakers from first shift would go home, leaving us in peace. Or, at least, relative peace.

The second-shift foreman liked to amuse himself by giving me a slice of Brown's Mule, a very strong plug of chewing tobacco. Then he would carry on a conversation with me, watching me, eagerly waiting for me to get sick. But I never did. He was forever disappointed. I'd just smile and walk away. The switchmen in the yards had already tried the same thing, with their Red Man and Beech-Nut and their assorted varieties of snuff. This was usually with the dubious recommendation, "It'll kill your worms." But I wouldn't vomit for them, either.

A dilemma for me was that the third-shift Hostler-Helper would get drunk and call in sick, and then I had to work his shift, too. This could be a little rough, especially after being up

and busy all day.

The company could force me to work two shifts, but they had to give me a free meal sometime during the night. I always went to Opal's Truck Stop out on Main Street. It was an all-nighter that was very popular at the time. It was busy even at 2 a.m. Here I could find truckers, cowboys, cowgirls, stopping in for a meal and a few country-western songs on the big jukebox just inside the door. The food was good, the atmosphere was friendly, and the customers were interesting people. And it was fun to watch the truckers park their big rigs in the crowded parking lot, certainly a test of their driving skill.

I'd go back to work trying to find something to do, just to stay awake, but usually there was nothing. Usually at that hour there were no trains arriving or departing. The third-shift machinist and electrician had their hideouts, and they were in them. The foreman was behind his desk in the office, more or less alert.

Around 3 a.m. I began feeling very, very tired. Bone tired. I'd go climb up on one of the engines idling on one of the service tracks, and sit in the engineer's seat and rest. I could hear and feel the confident rumble of the huge diesel engine, and study the lighted instrument panel in from of me. I could look at the stars, or a pale moonrise, or sometimes at the clouds low and heavy in the night sky. I could see the Machine Shop, the Roundhouse, the switchyards, all dark and silent. I could sleep, and dream of the day when I could get out of this place.

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