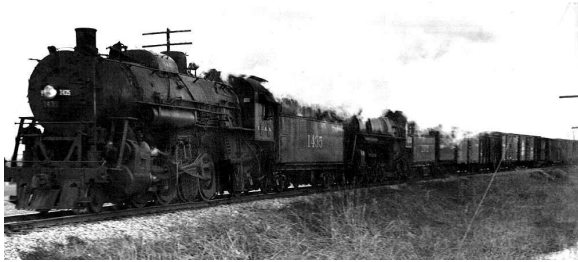


IT WASN'T WORK---

IT WAS AN ADVENTURE WHEN A SIXTEEN YEAR OLD
STARTED WORKING ON THE RAILROAD ON A STEAM ENGINE



A series of stories by Dick Edwards

Introduction

These stories could be said to have started long before I became involved with the rail road. In the early 1930's my father was involved in the taxi cab business in Memphis TN. At any rate the business folded at the start of the great depression about 1932. We moved from Memphis TN back to my Grandfather's farm in rural Fayette County TN. We ended up on seventy acres of new ground which means it needed to be cleared before you could use the land. For several years after that our family had to work very hard just to keep eating. Some examples would be picking cotton for a penny a pound, gathering black berries to sell at ten cents per gallon, working delivering groceries on a bicycle. delivering the morning paper prior to going to school, and cutting yards with a push mower for ten cents or less per hour. So while the actual work as a steam engine fireman was some times hard it wasn't as bad as what I had grown used to and the pay was so much higher than any thing I had ever dreamed possible. In addition I was riding around the country on a steam engine. It was within this context that most of my time on the railroad seemed more like an adventure than work.

My use of the word "engine" in places most would use the word locomotive comes from my early days on the road. It also involves the railroad union of the time ---the brother hood of engineers and fireman which was usually refered to as the brotherhood of engine men.

The Way It Started

WWII had started and there was a heavy drain on manpower. The railroads like many others were hard pressed to maintain their heavy schedules much of which was a direct result of the war. I turned sixteen in the fall of 1942 and when the railroads started hiring sixteen year olds I was in line early. We attended a three weeks class room period and then went for actual work break in periods. The group in the class consisted of those that were to move into train service such as flag men and brake men and also switchmen. The other group consisted of those such as I that were headed into engine service which of course was as firemen. Firemen were further broken down to those that would be in yard service and those that were going "on the road". Actual work training differed for the two groups of firemen.

I was going on the road and my actual on the job training consisted of spending two work days on a hand fired engine in yard service which was all local and was of a stop and go nature. Illinois Central RR which I was involved with owned their own coal mines and at that time all of the engines other than those used on streamlined passenger trains were fueled by coal. After each day it was required that you get signed off for doing the training. There was no pay during these training sessions. The road people such as I then had to complete five round trips and get signed off. There was always a fully qualified fireman on board. The rule was that the first trainees that got their trips in and signed off were put on the seniority list in the order in which they completed thier training.

Thinking about getting on the seniority list first I did my road trips with almost no rest. I slept at the round house took the very least rest I could and pushed ahead to finish my unpaid training. During this time I was aware that my necessary expense money was coming from a real short money supply in the family which gave me another reason to push the schedule. As long as I live I will never forget another trainee named L.J. Madison (more about L.J. later). As the road trips came about it got to be a race between the two of us to see who would complete the requirements first. L. J. was another country boy and was tough to beat I lucked out and beat him by about only one hour. With the training complete the adventures could begin.

Completing the break in runs was the first step in going to work. Other things that had to be done was procuring a watch that would pass the requirements which included being twenty one jewel. and getting a physical . The watch of course cost money and at the time I thought it was real high. When I went to purchase the watch the store wanted assurances that I had a job with the rail road. After getting that assurance they let me have the watch on credit. The cost was eighty eight dollars. The watch is a twenty three jewel waltham pocket style rail road watch. I still have the watch. When I was drafted the last part of 1944 I left the watch with my father. It was stolen one night in 1945 when a thief split the window screen by the table where the watch had been left for the night. After I returned from WWII I found out that the watch had been stolen but at the time I did not need the watch to work since I was so far down on the seniority list that being able to work was out of the question. In 1949 while visiting at my mother and father's home a phone call came in from the Memphis police department for me and I was informed they had located a watch that belonged to me. The watch was in a pawn shop on Beale street in Memphis. I retrieved the watch but still had no real need for it for work. I was able to return to rail road

work in 1950 and again needed the watch. As part of the learning process I found out why engine people always favored overalls for work wear. I didn't own any overalls and spent my first few days working wearing pants and a belt. After several hours bent over and swinging scoops of coal in to the fire box I ended up with a real sore middle and as soon as I could find the money I became a confirmed overall wearer. The scoops were numbered I used a number six. The hand firing required some muscle use but was much more a timing thing. Swinging the scoop loaded with coal towards the firedoor and using your foot to time the tripping of the firedoor opening to let the coal go in was the trick. The other trick was knowing where to direct the load of coal to produce the best results.

The first stop after being cleared to go to work was to be placed on the extra board. Then you would be called to fill in for the person that was regularly assigned to that job and for some reason would not be able to full fill the position. In the case of firemen maybe more than any other worker some of the people that had been around longer would need to "lay off" and some one from the extra board would be called as a replacement. Since we had hand fired engines and stoker fired engines some would ask for the engine number and if it was a hand fired unit they would quickly have reason to lay off. It did seem that the newer people on the extra board were more often on the least desirable jobs. Stoker fired units had the coal delivered to the firebox by mechanical means and of course were much less demanding of the fireman. This very fact worked in my favor during my time on the railroad it was because of this fact I was in two cases allowed to mark up on regular jobs. It was through these two jobs that I learned more and met the two finest people I have ever worked with. Both were engineers but in jobs that some times were not the easiest on firemen. More about each later.

The Way Things Were

In those years of the early 1940's the Illinois Central operated three major lines from Memphis into Mississippi. There also was many local type lines in and among towns in Mississippi. I was assigned to work on the Y&MV which operated south of Memphis and split into two main lines at Lake Carmorant Mississippi the division that I was assigned to ended on one line at Cleveland Mississippi and the other line ended at a railroad junction point just south of Tchula Mississippi. On the many small local lines operation was to move freight from the small towns to the main lines. The engines used were all small hand fired and speeds were usually under twenty five mph. During most of the year these and even the local service on the main lines operated pulling only a few cars usually eight to ten. In the fall of the year when cotton was moving these same locals could easily get up to forty to fifty cars. The small hand fired engines then became a real hard work place for the fireman. Later when I explain my being able to mark up (getting to chose a regular job) even through I was a new man and had little seniority the fact was that the older and more experienced firemen would ride the locals until the fall and then would drop the local job when the work load had to deal with the big fall increase.

The main lines of the Y&MV (sometimes referred to as the yellow dog) consisted of heavy freight traffic and some passenger trains. The main line freight crews operated in crews that were called turns which meant that the crews worked on a first in first out basis. The crews were separated as to engine(engineers and firemen) crews and train crews which consisted of flagmen, brakemen and conductors. So if you were a fireman and was on regular turn you went out with the same engineer but not necessarily with the same train crew.

In most of the towns that were on the railroad the tracks actually went right down the middle of the town. In many cases the tracks split the main street. The station was usually at the center of the town. This was a hold over from the days when the railroad was the main way to travel. After WWII trucks, air and private automobiles replaced many trains for both freight and passenger movement. Today many years later you can see where the old tracks ran and in some cases the old stations have been converted to other use. Originally the stations not only was the place where you "caught" the train but where freight shipments were dropped off and picked up. They also was where you could send telegrams. The most used part of the station for the railroad worker was the office of the station agent that received the train orders via telegram and dispensed the orders to the train crews. Trains on the road were not allowed to move with out written instruction. These instructions in writing were of two types. The regularly published time tables which outlined train schedules by train number and train orders which designated trains by engine number. The train orders came from the dispatcher by telegram to the station agent. The station agent had a system of boards well up in the air that was controlled from the station office. When a train had reached the end of it's written instructions the train had to get a new train order to proceed past the station.

The station agent could as a train approached the station prepare a device with the train order tied into the device and controlling the train order boards by moving the boards up and down which meant keep moving the orders will be passed up on the move. The train order boards also were equipped with red and green lights if the light was red and no movement was indicated the train was required to stop prior to passing the red train order board. A moving train order board with alternating red and green light was called a high ball with the board and the train kept moving.

It seems almost unreal to really think back to the 1940 period on the railroads. There were no cell phones, no radio communication with the trains, all orders were written, train stations sit in the very middle of most towns, trucks to move freight were almost non existent, air travel was practically non existent, refrigerated products almost all moved in yellow iced down railroad cars, many families did not own private automobiles, long distance travel was mostly by rail. Many rail roads still did not have automatic signals such as the block system. When you had an emergency stop head brake men and flagmen from the rear with a hand full of fuses raced to get flagging distance to protect the train. When you had a meeting with another train the engine head light was the way of telling the on coming train you were clear of the main line.

TYPES OF TRAINS

On the Y&MV the types of trains were regular freight, fast moving yellow car trains, lots of oil tank trains, some troop trains, many local freight trains both on the main lines and side lines, several passenger trains most of a local nature stopping at each town. The freight locals switched out the cars in the various towns and worked the cars on to the main line for pickup and later to be processed and on the way to their final destinations. I always enjoyed the locals. During this period being single I would accept calls for work any where in the system. This fact created opportunities to work on several different local freight trains in various parts of the Y&MV but also work on the two other major divisions with headquarters in Memphis. These trips typically ran into Fulton Ky, Paducah Ky, Cairo Illinois, and Grenada, MS. The work on the other divisions not only made for a chance to see new places but there was a wider variety of engines. The Y&MV was almost exclusively in the Mississippi delta and the terrain was mostly completely flat with the rail road track often the highest point of land around. The work on the other divisions was through different types of terrain and required some different work procedures.

TYPES OF ENGINES

The main line freight engines on my home division were 2-8-2 Mikados and in the delta could and did handle hundred car trains. On the Illinois Central at that time these engines were numbered in the 1200 through 1600 series. The local freight engines were usually 2-8-0's and numbered in the 700 series all these engines were hand fired. The local type passenger trains as well as most troop trains used the 4-6-2 in the 1100 series. This engine was really a speed demon. Other type engines were found on the other divisions.

A 2AM Surprise

Approaching a station one dark night at full speed on a Mikado pulling a full freight train we received a high ball with the order board and since the station was located on my side of the track I prepared to stick my arm into the device and pickup the train order. The holder and the station agent for that shift was a very presentable young lady, standing there holding the order up. I was so surprised I almost missed the pick up. Late on a dark night at a deserted train station just wasn't the place I expected to find a young lady. Later on we had many more young women acting as station agents. I later met the young lady and we had a good laugh at my reaction as we went by.

SOME MEMORIES OF LOCAL FREIGHTS

As mentioned earlier some of the local freight work was less than desirable. In some cases this was because you were located away from home as we used to say down in the delta. In other cases the work load became super heavy in certain seasons and again one with out much seniority could mark up and have a regular type job at least for a while. The work on the locals located out

of town mostly were unique since the regular rail road crews seemed to know most of the towns people. The road beds were poorly maintained and speeds were adjusted accordingly. There usually was not station offices available and there were some of the runs where there were trains going each way and there was an agreed on meeting place so the trains could pass. This was necessary since they were all single track road beds and you needed a location with a passing track available. I recall being shocked to hear the term "run against smoke". The reference was to the a fore mentioned agreed upon stops for passing and you would watch for oncoming smoke. First to be sure some one had not made a mistake and missed the agreed upon stop for passing and secondly to determine if the other train was already waiting.

In my very first year I was called for the main line local running between Memphis and Cleveland Mississippi. I had been on the extra board. Mr. Wallace was the regular engineer. After the first day Mr Wallace suggested I mark up on the job. He knew we were getting into the busy season and I might be able to stay a while. The job was a hand fired engine and Mr Wallace helped me in learning more about the work. When we had a heavy load he knew how to "help" the fireman in the way he ran the engine. From him I learned so much about not only the engine but about the rail road in general. Every thing from the braking system , to water control, fuel saving and some things about dealing with the local people along the road. Mr Wallace's local ran south to Cleveland and laid over for the night at Cleveland, The next day ran north back to Memphis. The round house in Cleveland was some half to three quarters of a mile from the main part of town and where the hotel was located where most of the crew spent the night. The established routine was to leave Memphis then stop for lunch at Tunica Mississippi and go on to Cleveland for the night. When you got to Cleveland late at night the walk back to town along the railroad offered some interesting time. Usually the crew that was going to town walked together. The railroad still had people walking around that were looking for a chance to help themselves to what ever you might have with you. This type knew you had expense money at least. Most of the crew carried a small revolver in their bags and so did I. In the mornings the routine called for leaving Cleveland fairly early and with the walk to the round house it made it inconvenient to have the breakfast meal in Cleveland so the local ran north about fifteen miles to Shelby Mississippi for breakfast.

All railroad crews seemed to enjoy pranks and they were usually real good at setting one up. Being sixteen and kind of dumb about the world I must have been a perfect candidate for pranks. On one of my first trips on the local I was real hungry and made the comment that I would probably need two "plate lunches". A plate lunch in those days had a meat plus a couple of vegetables, a drink and desert this was a standard package with a standard price. When I ordered only one lunch some one in the crew reminded me of my remark about two lunches so foolishly I ordered two lunches then ordered two glasses of butter milk to drink. I had a real problem eating everything I had ordered but I forced things to go down. That was a little hard but the harder part came when back on the engine I had to bend over and start shovelling coal. For the first few miles it was a real strain I wondered if my middle would ever go back down. About the bending over part the whistle signal for a train to move forward is two short blasts. The saying back then was the two short blasts was sending a message to the fireman " to put his head down and his b--- up.

During my second time around on the Cleveland local with Mr Wallace as engineer a new hire fireman reported to the engine for a break in trip. I was about five ten and weighed in about one sixty five. This new hire was about six two or three and weighed in around two thirty or forty. After getting to the engine and getting ready to go by hooking onto our train I suggested that he watch me for a little and I would explain things as we went along then he could give the hand firing a try. He informed me that he had finished his two days in the yard work and if I could handle the job he could eat it up. Mr Wallace gave me a rather funny look which I took to mean let him try. As I stated before hand firing a coal fueled steam engine required more than pure muscle it was more a matter of timing and knowing where to place the coal in the firebox. I told him to go ahead . As we got rolling he got busy shoveling coal his timing was bad and he had little idea of where the coal was needed to support the fire and produce enough steam to operate the engine. He did pile lots of coal in the middle of the fire. This of course blocked the draft there and the edges all around was being starved for fuel and with the middle draft blocked the engine rapidly started losing steam pressure. With bad timing on the fire box door one tended to open the door too early and fail to release it quickly. This caused two problems all by itself. One thing leaving the door open too long allowed the fire to suck in too much air which affected the draft and placed cooler air in the box. The second problem was that when the door was open too long the fireman's leg that was used to trip the door was located so close to the hot fire that the leg would get hot enough to be burned. About the same time that loss of steam pressure started to become a problem he started to wear out from his heavy shoveling . He was more than ready for some relief. I immediately placed coal in the fire to get control of the draft and used his big pile in the middle to get the steam pressure back. By using his big pile of coal I was loathing and still gaining on the pressure problem. After that he began to learn.

It was also on my second time with Mr Wallace that the next big prank was pulled on me. On the trip south we made the usual stop in Tunica for lunch. We would park the engine and our cars in a holding track clear of the main line and then just walk across the street to the cafe. Usually in these cases the fireman was the last to leave the engine since he needed to get the fire and water set to hold for the stop. Mr Wallace on this day finished eating early and said he would see me on the engine he had some shopping to do. When he returned to the engine he had a sack in his hands which he placed in the engineer's seat box. The fireman's seat and the engineer's seat were called seat boxes. They were actually a box and the seat was hinged so that the seat could be raised and you could use the resulting enclosure for personal use. Mostly we used the boxes to store our over night bag . Firemen didn't question engineers. He didn't volunteer any information so that was that.

The next morning on departing Cleveland and heading back north we made our usual breakfast stop in Shelby MS. The cafe we used in Shelby was on the first floor of a hotel and across from the train station. There was a very nice young lady that worked there about my age. Her folks operated the hotel and the cafe. Following our usual procedure I was the last to leave the engine and Mr Wallace was going to order my breakfast. The cafe was full of customers and the train crew was setting in a row at the counter I noted as I entered the door. I had just got inside when

the young lady come running and hugged me around the neck. She started thanking me for the candy and wanted to know if I wanted some. The whole place was in on the joke and I was

completely taken back. I realized that the sack had something to do with it. Trying to save a little face I accepted the thanks and asked her if I could start coming back to Shelby and see her while we laid over in Cleveland. Margaret agreed. Later I found out Mr Wallace had told her I bought the candy but was too embarrassed to bring it in and give it to her. I don't remember ever telling her any thing different.

I did go back and see Margaret on a couple occasions. The distance was only fifteen miles and I knew the train schedules and could ride free. When a train wasn't available I would ride the bus.

It wasn't long before I got bumped off the local and back on the extra board and to through trains that did not stop in Shelby. I worked out a deal with her on a special whistle sound and I would write a note and tie it to a stick. There was the requirement to sound a long blast on the whistle at yard limits. This was when I would ask the engineer to let me sound the whistle for the yard limit. Maragret hearing the special sound would come out to the edge of the street and I would toss the stick out to her. The message would be about me coming back to visit. This deal worked a few times but it seemed every body on the whole rail road heard about it.

We are now some sixty years away from these happenings but this prank still causes me some problems. I was drafted into the navy and right away out one night a group of us was at a tattoo parlor some of the group wanted a tattoo I didn't. After much hassling I agreed to get a tattoo I tried to think of the least conspicuous thing I could get and have it out of sight. I chose Maragret and had it put high on my right shoulder. I had kind of promised to write to her but I didn't. The mail was censored and I was too busy learning new things. She was a very nice ,well behaved and good looking young lady.The tattoo is still there and I can't remember the number of times that some one seeing it has remarked about my wife Maragret. The fact is that is not my wife's name. My wife and I have been married some fifty six years . It has created some problems .

Sleeping At The Roundhouse

The roundhouse was the place where work was performed on engines and they usually included a turn table where engines could be turned around. The actual roundhouse complex also usually included a coal chute, water spout, a ready track (holding track for engines ready to go to work), and on the coal burning railroads a wash room where you could wash off some of the road grime. Some wash rooms included a few bunks where a person could get some short rest. Most included a maintenance office that watched over the engine maintenance and the hostlers that readied the engines to go to work by cleaning, fueling ,watering and tending the engines on the ready track. It was usual for the hostler when they saw the engine crew approach to check with the engine crew member and it was usual for the engine crew to note they would be caring for the engine. The fireman usually followed a fairly set routine when taking over from the hostler. The first thing was always to check the water and fire status. Then the air pumps, then the supplies such as

water and coal in the tender and sand on the engine. Final cleaning of the engine by using water and an air hose and seeing that the seatboxes were wiped down and the engineers controls were

clean. Waste (a type of wipe material) was available and most engineers wanted some near their seatbox. There was usually a water cooler and making sure it was clean and ready was always necessary. Most workers on the engine carried coffee in an old pint whiskey bottle. The flat sided bottles nestled best among the various steam lines and this kept your coffee close at hand and warm.

My own circumstances were different from many of the workers at the ICRR yards in Memphis. Many of them lived within walking distance of the railroad facilities or within a short public transportation ride to the facilities. There was two Memphis roundhouses during my time there. one was located near down town and Grand Central Station and the other was located several miles south at Nonconnah yards (later called Johnson Yards). Between the two the railroad operated a unit called the "Hoodlum". This unit consisted of an engine and two or three old passenger cars and travelled on a regular schedule between the two roundhouses, stopping at various places in between that was convenient for workers to board.

My own home was eight to ten miles away as the public transportation travelled. With the last couple of miles requiring that you walk since the public transportation stopped short of our house. The mandatory rest period between runs was eight hours. To be called(notified) of your next job the call needed to be two hours before departure. The public transportation up until midnight operated on a real good schedule but after midnight the schedule changed to only running once per hour. It is easy to see that I often had trouble getting home and getting back particularly when we got in after midnight. On many of these occasions I slept in the wash room. Usually I had packed an extra set of under clothes and socks notified the call office where I would be and bedded down.

This arrangement wasn't the neatest living set up but it had one major advantage work wise for me. If there was a need for a fireman in a big hurry I was available. This worked to give me some interesting job assignments. On one occasion a fireman on one of the local passenger trains got sick just prior to departure the train was sitting at Grand Central Station and the departure time was close. I was contacted at the wash room and on my way to Grand Central in a few minutes and made my first passenger train run. On another occasion there had been a derailment of several cars and a work train was needed I again was called for the short call time to get a work train to the site. The call office could or did have the option of by passing the regular line up on the extra board. Later I will explain how this living arrangement tied in with my association with another engineer.

Things Were Not All Easy

There were problems of different types that presented themselves from time to time. I was only on the railroad for a relative short time, Those that spent a much longer time on the rail road than I had many more things that happened along the way. I will list a few in which I was involved.

.Two of these instances happened on runs going north from Memphis and not on my home division.

In one case we were inbound to Cairo Illinois and were required to go into a passing track and await an on coming train. We were a little tight on water when we entered the passing track . We then endured an unusually long delay awaiting the on coming train. We were a very short distance from the river bridge which led to the Cairo yards. After the long wait our water supply was critical. To cross the river bridge there was a sharp incline leading up to the bridge and with a sharp drop on the other end of the bridge which led into the yard at Cairo. As we started up the incline the engine was being worked hard to make the incline and we were moving really slow the injector lost it's prime. Which indicates the water had gotten too low in the tender. The injector is used to move water from the tender to the boiler. When the boiler gets too low there is a dangerous situation for the condition of the engine and the safety of the crew. All the way up the incline and crossing the bridge it was touch and go for water in the boiler. After crossing the bridge the engineer headed straight for a water spout. It was close.

On another run north after I had returned to the railroad in 1950 we encountered another problem this time the problem involved our coal supply. In January 1951 that part of the country experienced some unusual cold weather. We left Memphis at night headed for Fulton Kentucky. During the trip and later that night the temperature dropped to 10 below. Now this temperature would not have been unusual further north on the ICRR but it was out of the usual range in the Memphis area. Hostlers in Memphis were used to wetting the coal as they loaded the tender. This prevented some flying coal dust. We started having trouble when the frozen wet coal started hanging up and not dropping down onto the stoker. I would have to take a pick and get in the tender and pick some coal down into the stoker trough. When we arrived at Dyersburg Tennessee where there was a coal chute we tried to take on more coal to cut down on the pick work. The coal chute was not working it was froze also. This meant another 35 miles of riding in the coal tender and picking down coal to the stoker. On arrival in Fulton another piece of bad luck I was covered in grime it was about 2AM and the water pipes were all frozen so no shower.

We left Gwin Mississippi on a "mike" (mikado) pulling about a hundred car train and headed home to Memphis. Almost immediately after leaving the yard at Gwin I had trouble keeping the steam at the correct pressure. I would increase the amount of coal, used the blower to try and help the draft nothing worked. The fire looked good but the pressure just kept dropping. I was working with a good engineer who realized there was a problem with the engine. He advised me to keep the fire looking good and not to just pile up unburned coal in the box. At the first opportunity he advised the dispatcher of our problem. Later we had to set the train out in a passing track and there was another engine dispatched to bring the train in. When the replacement engine arrived the first person off the engine was the traveling engineer. The travelling engineer was the supervisor of all firemen and engineers. He didn't bother to speak just grabbed the lever to the fire door and looked in the box at the fire. Then turned around and said flue problem. The engineer had been wise and his advice timely a bad fire could have resulted in some demerits for me.

The back side of the coal carrying part of the tenders sloped towards the rear of the tender. This produced a condition where there was an overhang right beneath the sloping back section of the coal tender. This slope was designed to help move the coal forward toward the engine. Right

behind and with a flat top was the water carrying part of the tender. Near the center of the water portion of the tender was the opening for putting water in the tender. There was a ladder at the back of the tender used to get to the top. One cold night we had stopped for water and as I climbed the ladder just as I reached the top a hobo jumped from the top of the tender. It was a long jump the last I saw him he was limping away. He had used the sloping area as a shield to help keep out some of the cold wind. I was surprised he could walk away.

I put my school training to good use on a trip north towards home. The engineer was making his first run and had done pretty good. During the last twenty miles or so he decided we needed to do a blow off/blow down. This is designed to get rid of some impurities from inside the boiler. Our blow downs were of the manual type with a valve on each side of the engine one used by the fireman and the other by the engineer. The operation removes lots of water real quick from the boiler. When the engineer released his valve to end the blow off something stuck and water was leaving the boiler at a rapid rate. There was an emergency shut off below the deck of the engine which you could reach by climbing down on the entrance ladder. This had to be done quick and while the train was still running. I immediately recalled the instructor showing the emergency shut off and went to it quickly and shut off the flow of water.

At most stations that had a coal chute engines would drop some coal as they began to build some speed and started rocking. Once the coal had a few miles use it would drop down below the sides of the tender. Frequently we would see people with buckets gathering some of the dropped coal. I have heard it said that some firemen shoveled a little coal out.

Maybe My Memory Is Not Correct

During my time on the railroad there was a method where black firemen and white firemen did not compete for the same jobs as to seniority. The rules were that when a fireman reached the top of the seniority list and the railroad needed more engineers the top firemen had to take the examination for engineer. If the top firemen failed the test they would get another chance to pass the test in six months if failing again they would then be placed on the bottom of the seniority list which really affected a person's job. This sometimes meant no work. There were some black firemen working that due to school opportunities could not pass the test. Which would eventually put them at the bottom of the seniority list. It would have been unfair to allow them to remain at the top of the firemen's seniority list on a permanent basis and not have to stand for promotion. Long before I was involved the decision had been made that based on the number of black firemen ratio to the total number of jobs available a given number of firemen jobs were designated as black firemen jobs. On these jobs the black firemen had first call and could and did bump each other in accordance with the seniority rules. They then did not have to stand for promotion and run the risk of losing their seniority. Recall that most had been hired in the years when all engines were handfired. I recall thinking that the system was fair. Also most of the black firemen were at

the time elderly. As you will see this condition strongly affected my time on the railroad.

My Next Favorite Engineer And Why

This engineer was named Guy Smith he had worked on the railroad since he was about eighteen and had married the daughter of an engineer. The Smiths did not have any children and lived less than a block from one of the stops for the "Hoodlum" which made it real good for getting to work. Mr Smith was totally tops in handling his trains. He could place the engine almost directly under a water spout with the first attempt. Most others could not and would require several minutes to get in position to take on water. He would complete runs in six to seven hours that others required eight or nine hours to complete. He could save time , fuel, water and patience. When I worked with him he was on a regular freight turn.

I was called from the extra board to go out on his turn. It turns out that his regular fireman was one of the older black firemen and was out sick and since there were no black firemen on the extra board I got the call. I had never heard any thing about Mr Smith other than that he was a tough task master. I later learned he was good at his job and could not stand poor work by others.

After the ride out to the yard I visited the engine men's wash room and encountered Mr Smith I introduced myself and started to leave for the engine, He called me back and said brush your teeth which I did rather reluctantly. Later I found this to be one of his standing instructions both before leaving on a trip and upon finishing a trip. Turns out to be a good habit.

On the first out bound trip I noticed how well he handled the train. His ability made my job easier. Things started happening on the first trip north bound. We had started from Gwin MS and was only about twenty eight miles into the trip. At the station in Greenwood MS we encountered a red order board and it remained in a fixed position so we had to stop before passing the station. Mr Smith stopped under the water spout and told me to top off the water while he entered the station. I don't to this day know what took place in the station but at about the time I completed filling the tender with water Mr. Smith came out of the station a very unhappy engineer. There had been some kind of delay in the train order which had forced us to stop. Usually if an engineer planned on a quick departure they would get your fire ready to stand the strain of starting off or allow a few minutes for the fireman to get the fire ready. Mr. Smith hit the engine hard and this caused the light fire to have holes and produced a condition where I was "behind" on both water and steam pressure. Now I was unhappy my fire was ruined and I was behind. A few miles later we encountered a slow order that required reducing speed to ten miles per hour. It didn't take long for me to "catch up" and get my water and steam pressure back. So still mad I "popped off" the engine which was caused by exceeding the allowed steam pressure and the pop off caused a drop in steam pressure. It also was/is a sign of poor firing technique. It was a major waste of fuel and water. After the third pop off Mr Smith crossed over to my side of the engine and said he was sorry for his poor handling of the engine in Greenwood. then he said don't pop off this engine again. As I recall nothing else was said until we completed the trip in Memphis. In the wash room Mr. Smith suggested I mark up on his turn. I was surprised I would have guessed that was the last

thing he wanted. He pointed out the situation with his regular fireman and also mentioned that most of the young firemen did not want any part of working with him on a regular basis. After

thinking about it I decided to try the job. A decision I have never regretted.

The result was I ended up on a regular turn with Mr Smith as an engine crew. My learning curve and my appreciation for his skill increased rapidly.

Shortly after marking up on the turn on a lay over in Gwin MS I got involved in a dice game and managed to lose sixty six dollars which was about all I had. I was sitting at the coffee counter thinking about my bad luck and dumb decision when Mr. Smith sit down next to me and wanted to know what was the problem. I told him the story and after questioning me as to where and who was involved he left. In a few minutes he was back and put sixty six dollars on the counter. I was uneasy that he had done something to get my money back. He explained that he knew the people involved in the game and they were crooked and it was known by every one but new people. Lesson learned kind of like brushing your teeth on a regular basis.

Mr. Smith was aware of my travel problems back and forth to work. One night as I was getting ready to bed down in the wash room he suggested I go home with him. This changed things in a hurry not only was I close to the hoodlum but Mrs Smith made a great meal, made a lunch to go out with, and washed my clothes. Many times I was invited to spend the lay over with them I recall those as some of my favorite times. All of this and working with the very best engineer on the road. I was glad that the other firemen had a bad opinion of Mr. Smith. When asked I never gave a good answer as to how we got along on the job. Our pay was on a mileage basis and as I recall one hundred miles equaled eight hours for pay purposes. The mileage on the turn was about one hundred forty six miles each way so when we completed the run in about seven hours we were being paid for more miles and doing it in less time. The difference was Mr .Smith's smooth handling of the trains.

Things Started Changing

At age eighteen I was drafted in 1944. On returning from the military service I did not have enough seniority to get any work on the railroad. I spent another tour in the military and was discharged three days after the start of the Korean war in June 1950. After this discharge I had not made the railroad part of my plans. I just assumed that the railroad job was a dead issue. I started to school and got other work. I had married a recent graduate registered nurse that was working on the rail road ward of a local hospital. While talking with one of her patients about the rail road she mentioned my name this engineer remembered me. He was an official of the local union and was knowledgeable about work rules. I did not know or remember but he told her that with my service in WWII my job rights were protected to July 1951 and that I could go back to the railroad with my original seniority . He was right and back to the railroad I went. My old lost

watch was back in business. After a quick rules test, a physical and getting the watch inspected I was back on the call list.

The Second Time Around

Sometimes in life being lucky may be better than being good. I was called the very first night for a fill in job on a hand fired yard engine. I had not been on a steam engine in about five years. When I first got on the engine things seemed pretty blank then with the very first touch of a piece of equipment it came rushing back. Next came the luck part I have no idea of the number of engineers that were working in the yard at the time . I had only been on the engine a couple of minutes when some one said what are you doing here? The engineer was a distance family member that thought I was still away in the military. It did help my comfort level to be working with someone that I knew.

The round house clerk suggested that I would be better able to have regular work if I transferred into yard service. This also had another advantage being newly married it would allow me to work and have more time at home. He did note that if needed I was still road qualified and would be used in that capacity.

I worked both in the yard and on the road for the next period of time until I was recalled into the military for the Korean conflict.

I encountered my first work on a diesel locomotive during this period. They were more efficient, cleaner, less noise and more comfortable. The fireman was reduced to a lookout with no real work to do. All of this should have made a better work situation for me but it just wasn't the same. The adventure was not there so when recalled into the military I did not return to the railroad.

Last Visit To A Mike

My last visit to a mikado steam engine occurred in Austin Texas when I took one of my grandsons for a trip pulled by the Austin Steam Train Association steam engine #786. This was a most enjoyable day . My grandson was into the ride as well as the "train holdup" and the resulting "gun fight" between the law men and the train robbers. I on the other hand during the layover at Burnet ,Texas spent my time walking around looking at old 786 and thinking back to other days and other mikes that I had rode on. The fireman noted my interest and invited me up on the engine. With the exception that the engine was fueled by oil where as those I worked on used coal as a fuel things looked totally familiar. He needed to put water into the boiler and allowed me to work the injector to accomplish the task.

You Always Wonder

As years went by I always wondered how things would have worked if I had remained on the railroad . I got some answers on trips through the towns in MS where I had worked on the railroad. The tracks had been removed in most of the towns. Depots used for other purposes such as

the one in Shelby MS now the town library. Steam engines now only used as symbols of a long gone past. I also had contact with L.J. Madison. He was with the railroad over forty four years he

lived the down turn in the life of the railroad and the fortunes of the railroad fireman. I recently enjoyed a long talk with him about the "steam days". I have yet to ask him about the conversion to diesels and get his thoughts on the subject. Will plan on that at our next visit. He did inform me that he had pneumonia during our break in periods which allowed me to beat him to the seniority list. I don't doubt it in the least.

I extend a hearty thanks to the Austin Steam Train Association for preserving such an important part of the country's transportation history. They are welcome to use these stories in any way they may desire.

Richard P (Dick) Edwards