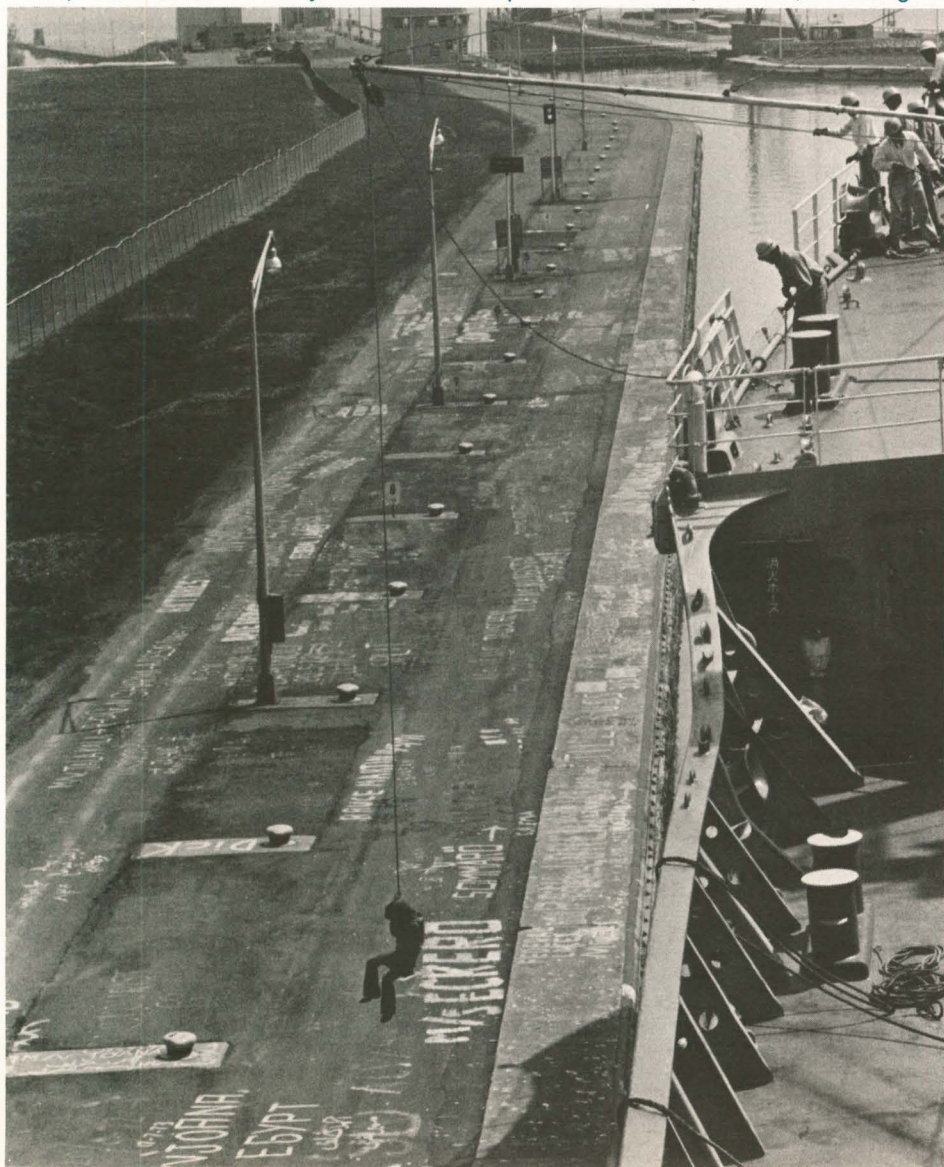


Transportation

The Folklife of Transportation Workers Project celebrates the lore, lifestyles, and occupational skills of the American workers who operate, maintain and regulate the nation's transport system. The airline pilot's complex take-off procedure, the flight attendant's responsibility for safety in the cabin, the railroader's ability to calculate

and make complicated box-car switches are to be found here; as well as bus and taxi drivers' tales of ways to handle over-demanding passengers, truck driving songs, and seafarers' yarns. Transportation workers keep the nation's economic lifeblood moving. They also harbor a rich lore, replete with heroes, tall tales, and songs.



Railroad Men Tell Stories Together

by Luis S. Kemnitzer

Ask any railroad man to tell you a story, and in most cases he will say that he doesn't know any. "I just can't remember those old stories. I forget them as soon as I hear them." Or, "Oh yes, I've been working for one railroad or another for twenty years, but nothing exciting or interesting ever happened to me." Then, just as you might be leaving him, he says, "Well, there was the time I rode a reefer (refrigerator car) down the side of a mountain after it had jumped the track, but it wasn't much."

If rails (veteran railroad men) "don't know" any stories, then how do railroad stories get told? When do they become full-fledged stories? It seems to me that most rails don't look at their reminiscences as "stories" that can stand alone, but as contributions to bull sessions, which are remembered when something reminds the teller of a personal experience or a story he heard.

Bull sessions take place on and off the job. They are part of the way railroad workers build and maintain an occupational fellowship that eases closely coordinated team work, team work that is essential to getting a job done safely and efficiently. One retired switchman told of being visited by a fellow worker: "By the time we went to bed there were box cars stacked up all over the room." They had told railroad stories all evening.

We can call such sessions communal oral "anthologies" just as a collection of tales in print is called an anthology. They

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Seamen on the St. Lawrence Seaway leave painted greetings to the crews of other ships that pass through the locks. Photo by Jan Faul.

happen only at the right time and place, and their topics vary even as the session itself goes on. A collector looking for one of these oral anthologies may have to wait for weeks before one starts.

A rail may contribute to bull sessions for years without thinking about the fact that he is participating in a communal creative process. To him, there is a storehouse of stories in his memory, and he remembers and tells them as they become appropriate. He may also tell the same story in different sessions under different topics.

There is a rough division of railroad stories into True Stories (which actually happened to me), Might-be-True Stories (which a fellow told me, but I couldn't be sure it happened this way), and Lies (tall tales told with a straight face that start out sounding real but quickly become fantastic). Some Might-be-True Stories and many Lies are part of an oral tradition that passes from one railroad to another. Even True Stories can become part of communal tradition.

Nobody actually announces the topics of an anthology which may shift as one story reminds somebody of another that changes the subject slightly. But a folklorist could probably answer a rail's question "What did you talk about at beans tonight?" with a phrase that could serve as a topic name, such as Crossing Accidents, or Narrow Escapes, or Faulty Equipment, or Complex Switching Moves, or Famous Characters, or Good and Bad Officials, or How Railroad-ing is Going to Hell.

The stories that follow are part of such an anthology and illustrate some of the categories listed above. I collected these stories and have edited them here to fit the confines of space. The topic of this particular anthology begins as Tying Up Crossings. The teller fits a relevant story to the topic at hand by means of his introduction. This is a True Story.

"We sure had the crossings¹ tied up one day at Schellville. You remember those

close-coupled Mikes² where the cab³ door was so tight⁴ that you couldn't look over the train when it was going around a curve? Well, we had one of those one day on the Schellville Turn, and we were putting our train together⁵ after beans to go home.⁶ The main line leaves the yard at the bull switch⁷ just east of the highway, and then curves around one leg of the wye⁸ and crosses the highway again, and we doubled one track to another,⁹ which gave us a hundred and twenty-five cars, and put us blocking both crossings and trapping some cars in between. Then we had to make our air test,¹⁰ and that held us some more. It was Sunday morning, and we had been working all night, and everybody in Sonoma County was going from one end to the other, and they were all stopped at this crossing.

The engineer liked to play with his whistle, and when he got the highball¹¹ from the rear end, he really laid on that whistle cord, and played a tune. Just as he finished whistling off we heard a big whoosh and the



The lore of the train has captured the imagination of Americans young and old for 100 years and will be a featured part of the Transportation Exhibit on the Mall this summer.

fireman yelled, "Hey, we just dropped a plug!"¹² There we were: no water, both crossings blocked, and cars trapped in three places, and a hundred and twenty-five cars. Luckily the Northwestern Pacific crew was around and able to get around us to cut the crossing.¹³ That was one more time we died on the law¹⁴ at Schellville. I don't know how the hoghead¹⁵ let the water get that low, or whether the boiler was faulty, but it sure gave us all a scare."

The next man picks up one thread of the previous story, and changes the topic to Narrow Escapes. When Dick Murdock told it, it was a True Story, but I can only tell it as a Might-be-True Story, since it didn't actually happen to me:

Dick Murdock tells about the time he was working on the Shasta Division, in Dunsuir Yard, where it's all down hill. One day when he was hostling,¹⁶ the roundhouse foreman tried to couple into a flat car with a crane on it, with a high-wheeled Pacific engine, but when he hit it the pin didn't fall,¹⁷ and the car started to roll away. He took another hit at it and the same thing happened again, and the car started rolling a little faster. About that time he whistled and called Dick and his helper, and the helper ran and got on the pilot¹⁸ of the engine and Dick got in the cab,¹⁹ the helper gave him a come ahead sign and they took off after the flat car, that was now rolling about five or six miles per hour.

There was a herder's shanty²⁰ down below there, and he saw the car coming and lined the derail²¹—if he had left it alone the car would have jumped the track and stopped, but he didn't—so with the car on the loose they kept after it. They tried to couple again and failed, but they bumped it and made it go a little faster, and it was all down hill all the way through the yard. The crews down at the yard knew they were coming and had them all lined through the yard, and all the way they kept trying to couple into the car and made it go faster, up to about 30 miles an hour, which is darn fast for yard

tracks.

They finally made the joint and flattened all the wheels on that engine as they stopped,²² and finally wound up pretty close to the derail. It was about a mile and a half from the roundhouse to the last derail at the west end of the yard, that's kept open so anything that gets away goes in the river instead of out on the main line to cause a real catastrophe.

The original telling was embellished much more to recreate the suspense of the actual happening, and included the names of the helper and the roundhouse foreman. The next story could be inspired by the topic of the Narrow Escapes, or, as Ray Levett told it, just out of sheer devilment:

You remember old Henninger, said he was an experienced engineer, turned out he was a correspondence school engineer off the Central of Georgia? He said he was in a wreck back there where the engine derailed and rolled over three times, said, "The only reason I didn't get fired was I whistled out the flag²³ when she rolled over the third time."

No need to tell anyone this is a Lie.

With proper embellishments and explanations of detail, some of the stories are meaningful and interesting for outsiders. But most pieces of anthologies have meaning only for the teller and his fellow workers within the context of bull sessions. The stories not only strengthen the bonds of occupational fellowship, they are also teaching aids to inexperienced workers, if they listen. In these sessions, a young rail learns what is valued by his fellow workers: how to act properly around other rails, how to handle emergencies, and how to make complicated switching moves. In addition, the young rail ("student" he is sometimes called) acquires the lore that is part of his identification with the job and its culture; all of this, that is, if he pays attention to what he hears. Even when the old heads are studiously ignoring the younger workers, these stories are meant for them.

1. Railroad crossings, where an automobile road crosses the tracks.
2. Short for Mikados, a type of steam engine.
3. Cab of the locomotive, where the engineer sits.
4. Mikados were coupled to their coal tender cars very.
5. Coupling together strings of boxcars which have been classified in a freight yard according to their destination.
6. After a meal—lunch in this case—to return to the base terminal.
7. The switch between the classification yard and the main track.
8. A track configuration that resembles a Y with its two upper arms connected by a horizontal line (Y)
9. Put two full trainloads of cars together to make one double-length train.
10. Test the air pressure in the breaking system from the locomotive to the caboose.
11. Signal to proceed.
12. The plug is a safety valve in a steam boiler; if the boiler overheats because of lack of water, the soft metal plug will pop out because of the pressure.
13. The other crew was able to reach the end of the stalled train by way of another track and to use their locomotive to uncouple the cars that blocked the crossings.
14. Ran out of permitted working time according to the Federal Hours of Service Act.
15. Engineer.
16. Moving engine in and around the roundhouse where they are repaired and serviced.
17. The coupling of the cars didn't happen.
18. Platform on the front end of an engine.
19. The place where the engineer normally sits.
20. A herder works in a yard where switches must be manually thrown. He controls the movements of cars and engines according to the orders of the yardmaster. His shanty is his shelter from the weather when not operating a switch.
21. A moveable device put on the track at places of potential collision to derail cars that might otherwise collide.
22. The locomotive's brakes had locked the wheels and it slid to a halt.
23. Gave the signal for the flagman to leave the caboose and guard the rear end of a disabled train from subsequent collisions.