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Glimpses

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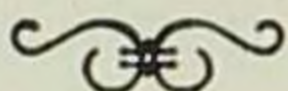
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Glimpses

For Ralph Budd, president of the Burlington, April 15, 1941, was a long, tiring day — but not without its compensations. It had started in the Omaha station well before breakfast when reporters had piled aboard his business car to hear about the new *Silver Streak Zephyr* that was to be christened that afternoon, and to pick up what news they could about railroads in general and the Burlington in particular. After the last of them, along with photographers, had left, there were the inevitable calls on shippers, followed by a luncheon at one of the civic clubs.

Ralph Budd was the featured speaker. Instead of uttering time-worn generalities, he chose to discuss why a railroad that was, and is, one of the principal coal carriers of the region should switch to Diesel engines and, of course, to Diesel fuel oil. In the audience was many a dealer with coal to sell. But Ralph Budd spoke his piece with quiet logic. When he got through his coal dealer friends were generous enough to admit what they

had not fully appreciated before. If the switch caused an initial decrease in coal consumption, the use of Diesels would so improve rail service that the entire economy, including coal, would eventually gain immensely.

But the noonday luncheon was simply a prelude. Under a bright sun in the Omaha station Ralph Budd christened and sent on its way the gleaming new *Silver Streak*, lineal descendant of the little *Pioneer Zephyr* that had made railroad history when on the very same run from Lincoln and Omaha to Kansas City it had inaugurated Diesel service on a regular basis for the entire nation on November 11, 1934.

When the ceremonies were over, it was nearly time for No. 6 to leave for Chicago. There would be fewer stops, and a much faster ride on No. 30 that left two hours later, but Budd was never a man to tie his business car to a hot-shot express. Hence he rolled out of town on the slower train. On board were Edward G. Budd — builder of the *Zephyrs*, but no relation to the Burlington's president — two or three officers with their assistants and, of course, Barney Henry, his faithful and efficient secretary whose diplomacy and good humor were legendary.

It *had* been a hard day, yet for Ralph Budd the most important job was just beginning. What lessons had the day taught? What suggestions had shippers made that were worth pondering?

Was the Burlington making the most of each opportunity or could there be a change here, an adjustment there? What lay behind those questions from the reporters, and how satisfactorily were they answered? What did the coal people think about the Burlington's position on Diesels? Was the new train so designed as to meet most precisely the needs and comforts of the traveling public? If it proved as successful as its predecessor, what would the next step toward expanded service be?

So the questions came from Ralph Budd, put, as was his fashion, to the high and the lowly among the company. Out came ideas to be hammered at until their mettle could be tested. There was nothing unusual about the procedure. It was what those present expected because of their host's insatiable curiosity and his quiet determination to learn. In the process, Budd instructed everyone else.

Only when the long evening meal was over and the "committee" had moved back to the business car's lounge did the conversation take a lighter vein. But, on this particular trip, not for long. Unannounced through the narrow door from the dining car came a lanky man — in his early sixties, perhaps, — apparently a farmer bound for the city. Someone started to say that this was a business car, but Ralph Budd's eye caught him in time. With a friendly nod to all, the farmer seated

himself comfortably and made himself at home. Gradually Budd engaged him in conversation. The colloquy gravitated to crops, then to problems of shipping. Before long the farmer was animatedly expounding his views of Burlington service, some of them cheering, some not so welcome to hear, but all of them obviously sincere.

As usual, Budd was on the trail of information. It must have been a full hour later when the farmer, who had thoroughly enjoyed himself, said so, stretched, and took his leave. How pleasant, he must have thought, to find another Iowan who seemed so interested in the very things that concerned him most. Even if the lounge cars on the Burlington were rather small, they lacked nothing in congeniality.

Among those who were left after the farmer went to bed, little more was said; the host was not the only one who had had an opportunity to see his railroad as others saw it. The only difference was, he had made that opportunity.

Yet in the atmosphere he created that evening, nothing seemed out of the ordinary at all. And in that important respect the episode was typical; what Ralph Budd did appeared wholly natural, certainly to him. Perhaps that is why he seems perpetually puzzled why others should be moved to honor him for doing what, in his estimation, is simply the job at hand. Asked once whether he had any particular philosophy, he first replied he

didn't think so. "Of course," he added, "I've always thought that you get farther if you do whatever you can as well as you can and maybe something else will come along later." To him, it is just that simple.

But is it? His instinctively scrupulous adherence to the spirit of a contract as well as to its letter is a case in point. During the war he was once standing on a wintry day outside the Burlington offices trying to find a taxi to reach an important engagement. Finally one hove in sight, but across the street and headed in the wrong direction. Somebody waved, the driver nodded, and went on down the street to turn around. A moment later an empty cab headed toward town drew up in front of the group and one of the Colonel's party jumped to the door. "Not that one," said Budd, "we made a deal with that other fellow." And there, in the wintry blast, the group stood until the first man had managed to turn around and come back.

But insatiable curiosity, innate humility, and respect for the spoken word hardly begin to tell the story. Ralph Budd is a Republican with a capital R, but he is just as ardent a democrat with a small d. Many an overburdened traveler on a Burlington suburban train had his baggage taken off the car by a quiet spoken, medium-sized man usually wearing a gray topcoat and soft fedora, with a twinkle in his eye. Nor was there an ele-

vator operator or cleaning woman in No. 547 Jackson Boulevard who didn't regard "the boss" in much the same light as an over-the-fence neighbor. Not that they didn't respect him; they did. But somehow he managed to make everyone feel that he, like them, was first of all an ordinary human; he seemed to be as much concerned about Jackie Robinson's batting average and the sitter problem as he was in track alignment. His story, indeed, speaks for itself.

RICHARD C. OVERTON