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Significance of Work

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Budd—Master Railroader

Ralph Budd was born on a farm near Waterloo on August 20, 1879. He was one of six children, three boys and three girls. Being patient and gentle by nature, Budd was usually given the chore of coaxing the young cows into being milked. When he was thirteen the Budds moved to Des Moines, and it was there he went to high school. Meanwhile, his older brother, John, had graduated from Highland Park College in Des Moines, as a civil engineer.

Ralph often helped John in surveying locally, and he regularly attended lectures at Highland Park College while still in high school. An aptitude for mathematics plus a strong interest in engineering aided him in combining high school and college in six years. Even before graduating he was enthralled by his older brother's tales of railroad building in Iowa, Nebraska, and Wyoming.

Upon getting a degree in civil engineering, Ralph persuaded the Chicago Great Western to take him on as a draftsman. Later he went out on the line and helped ballast track and relay rail between Des Moines and Oelwein. Rapid advancement on the CGW led to an even better job with the Rock Island. By 1903 he became the

first division engineer of the latter road, then building between St. Louis and Kansas City. On the Rock Island he met Vice President John F. Stevens, an outstanding engineer of his time. Stevens took a liking to young Budd and observed how competently he worked. As a result, when Stevens was later appointed chief engineer of the Panama Canal he sent for Budd to help rehabilitate the railway across the isthmus. Thereupon Budd went from Iowa to Panama to "railroad" in the tropics. When Stevens left, Budd continued under his successor, Major George W. Goethals.

In the interim Stevens was back in the states working for James J. Hill. The Empire Builder was projecting his Oregon Trunk Line into central Oregon to give the Hill roads access to that area. Stevens needed a capable assistant, and he again sought Ralph Budd. Heeding his former chief's call, the Hawkeye engineer left Panama to take up reconnaissance work in Oregon. He subsequently became chief engineer of the Oregon Trunk and soon afterward, of the Hill-controlled Spokane, Portland and Seattle.

In the course of his work, Budd met the shaggy-bearded Hill, then past seventy but as alert and domineering as ever. Jim Hill, likewise, was much impressed by Budd's ability, not to say his amiable disposition and modesty. The result was that late in 1912 Hill called Budd to St. Paul as assistant to the president of the Great Northern.

Thereafter the rail magnate took a personal interest in his 33-year-old appointee. Soon Budd became chief engineer of the GN and a confidant of the man who dominated its management.

James J. Hill was a hard taskmaster, yet Budd met his exacting requirements and pleased the old man. Hill could be severe, arbitrary, and almost ruthless at times, but there was also a lighter, more human side to his nature.

A former GN employee tells of an occasion when Budd, then chief engineer of the road, was discussing a matter of policy with Hill. The engineer held one point of view, the railroad tycoon another. Lunch time came, and an attendant brought in some sandwiches, milk, and beer. In observing the latter, Hill remarked with a twinkle in his one good eye, "Ah, Anheuser-Busch to make Budd wiser."

But Hill never seriously doubted the wisdom of his talented protege. In fact, he was all the time grooming Ralph Budd for the top job. Moreover, he ordained that when a new president was needed the opening would go to Budd. The time came in 1919, three years after Hill's death. Then, as Richard Overton expressed it, "Budd inherited the office and responsibilities of the Empire Builder."

When Budd came to the Burlington in 1932 after his Great Northern stewardship he came to head a road which was bigger, hauled vastly more

tonnage and earned substantially more revenue than the "Big G." The CB&Q, with its affiliated Colorado and Southern and Fort Worth and Denver City lines, had a combined mileage of 11,314.

All during the Depression the Burlington had made a better showing than its two "parents," the Great Northern and the Northern Pacific. In fact, the parental "interest" in the "Q" had helped the two Northerns remain solvent during the lean years of bank closings, business failures, and mortgage foreclosures. In Iowa nearly all of its railroads sought the protection of the courts. Among them were the Milwaukee, Rock Island, North Western, Great Western—but never the Burlington. Even so, things were far from rosy on the big Granger Road. In the month that Budd took office (January 1932) the net railway operating income had slipped 72 per cent in comparison with the same month of the previous year.

Budd trimmed costs by reducing the operating divisions from seventeen to eleven. On the positive side he sought more traffic. For one thing, he felt the Burlington was not getting its share of transcontinental tonnage. True, the "Q" interchanged with the friendly Rio Grande at Denver, which in turn connected with both the Western Pacific and the Southern Pacific at Salt Lake City for the West Coast. But the Rio Grande, as we have seen, went south to Colorado Springs and

Pueblo before it headed west. It interchanged with the Rock Island at the Springs, and the Missouri Pacific at Pueblo. Inasmuch as the Rio Grande received the same rate for through traffic from all these gateways, it naturally favored Pueblo first, Colorado Springs second, and Denver last. The reasoning behind this was, of course, to reduce the length of haul for the same rate of pay. So, in the eyes of the Rio Grande's traffic men, the "Mopac" was their fair-haired connection, with the Rock Island second in favor, and the Burlington a poor third.

Budd studied the matter. He looked at the map. Yes, there was a way out. A railroad called the Denver and Salt Lake had completed the remarkable six-mile Moffat Tunnel through the Rockies on its line going west from Denver. It terminated at a small community named Craig but on the way went only forty miles from the Rio Grande's main line. By building a cut-off one could, as if by magic, shorten the Rio Grande's main stem from Denver to the west by 175 miles. Furthermore, the proposed line would have better grades than the roundabout route through Pueblo.

The Iowa railroader carefully planned his strategy. He discussed the matter with his friend, Arthur Curtiss James, the power behind the Western Pacific and a Burlington director of long standing. James was amenable. On the other hand, James thought the Rio Grande was doing a

fairly good job in keeping up its main line and was reluctant to intercede. Budd clinched his support when he said, "I've learned that one party in such a deal can stop improvement work, but it takes two of them to go ahead and do it."

James quickly grasped the idea. Work soon began on the project, and in 1934 the Dotsero cut-off was completed. In a few years the "Q" quadrupled its transcontinental tonnage through Denver. Formerly that gateway ranked only sixth as an interchange point on the system, but within a decade it moved up to third, being exceeded only by Chicago and Kansas City. Later the cut-off was of tremendous importance in handling unprecedented traffic occasioned by World War II.

Even before America entered the conflict Ralph Budd was active in expediting defense traffic on a national scale. Appointed Commissioner of Transportation by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in May 1940, he was soon shuttling between Chicago and Washington.

From the date of Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941, until the end of 1946 the Burlington hauled 3,526,151 military personnel in 11,591 special trains. Another 1,667,176 servicemen were handled on special cars on regular trains. Overton in his *Burlington Route* summed this feat up by saying, ". . . every type of rail transportation smashed records." Budd himself pragmatically declared, "During the war years we at the Bur-

lington did twice as much as we thought we could."

Both the pre- and post-war years were noteworthy for the role the Burlington played in developing the streamlined train and in inaugurating diesel power. Another significant improvement envisioned by Budd was the construction of a cut-off to shorten the Burlington's route to Kansas City.

Being seventy in 1949, Budd retired from the Burlington, as he himself had advocated that retirement age for the road's officers. But he continued on the directorate for another five years. Meanwhile, John M. Budd, president of the Great Northern, was made a director. So it was that father and son sat on the board.

Apart from railroading, Ralph Budd was a man of many interests and every inch a scholar. All his life he was an avid reader. It was only natural for him to serve on the boards of such institutions as St. Paul's James Jerome Hill Reference Library, Chicago's Newberry Library, and its Museum of Science and Industry. After his "retirement" he was asked to lecture at Northwestern University. Another invitation came to become chairman of the Chicago Transit Authority. He chose the latter. During the next five years he did much to modernize and consolidate the Windy City's urban transportation facilities. In 1954 Budd moved to Santa Barbara where he died in 1962.

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