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Railroading in Iowa Before 1900

By G. W. DYE*

My experience in railroad work has been largely on the Rock Island lines. As a young man, I entered its service in 1861, when the company owned but 183 miles of trackage between Chicago and Rock Island built in the 1850's.

Conductors were not very plentiful in those days and new railroads tried out inexperienced men and taught them how to handle trains. The first conductors hired by the Rock Island company were taken from canal boats on the Illinois and Michigan canal. These were Captains Reed, Sheppard, two Wheelers, Kellogg and Phillips. All were running trains when I came on the road. Captain Phillips had been sailing a boat on the canal for a number of years and it was difficult for him to give up his sailor lingo for some time after he had gone to railroading, and at times when he thought his train was going to run by a station, he would call to his head brakeman, Dave Baxter, "Snub her, Dave, she is going by."

Trains were not very numerous in the sixties, one passenger and two freight trains each way, and occasionally an extra. There was little danger from collisions and trainmen were not as cautious and thorough as they are now. In fact, they were quite lax. I remember a time-card rule which read, "Train going east will wait one hour and five minutes at a meeting point for trains going west. They may then proceed, keeping one hour and five minutes behind the card time until the delayed train is passed."

Every time-card had contained this rule and trainmen never anticipated that there would be a change made in this or any other rule. But, on one occasion

*A paper read at a social gathering at Washington, Iowa, by W. G. Dye, veteran railroad man, who in 1904 told of great changes and improvement in methods of operation and equipment.

when a new card was being gotten out, the printer made a mistake in reprinting the rule referred to and where he should have printed "east," he printed "west," and west was used where east should have been. The mistake was not detected by any of the officials in Chicago and the cards were sent out to employees, none of whom discovered the error for over two weeks after the card had gone into effect. Trainmen ran their trains according to the rule in previous time cards. Such a thing could not happen in this day and age of railroad-ing.

For several years previous to 1862, times were hard and business was very light on railroads; the rails and roadbed on nearly all railroads were in bad condition. The Rock Island used iron rails $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches high, weighing fifty-six pounds per yard. Now they use steel rails five inches high, weighing eighty to ninety pounds per yard. The old iron rail would break and it was customary to keep track walkers patrolling the track in winter both night and day, looking for broken rails.

A story is told on a track-walker, and perhaps many have heard it, who upon finding a broken rail one night hurried back to the station to flag a train then about due, and when this train arrived, reported the break and went off and got some of the section men to make repairs. Returning, the engineer cut his engine from the train and started with the men to the point where the rail was broken. After running a piece, he asked the track-walker how close they were to the break. The track walker said, "A little furdur, sir," and continued saying "a little furdur," until the engine went off the track and then he said, "Now yez have it, sir." When the engineer found he was off the track, he reached for a wrench, but the track-walker had disappeared. Wages were 75 cents per day for track men.

LOCOMOTIVE OVERTOOK BOAT

We had an engineer on the Illinois division by the name of O. Moore, and the boys called him Rorey, although Rorey was not his first name. I think Rorey

came on the road in 1861. Shortly after he began running, and before he had become familiar with the line, he was rounding a curve one dark night near LaSalle, where the canal is very close to the track, when all of a sudden he saw the glaring red light on the rear of a canal boat and thought he was dashing into the rear end of a train. Rorey was a man of few words. He threw up both hands and simply uttered this unique prayer, "Gone to hell."

I remember another engineer who ran a train out of Rock Island in the early days, who was known among the boys as the Wild Frenchman. He at one time had a grievance against a freight conductor named Kelly and awaited a chance to get even. The opportunity came. Kelly ran the stock express which left Rock Island about 7 o'clock in the evening and which usually had a full train to start with and seldom picked up cars or did way work at intermediate stations. Kelly had a nice red caboose with a room partitioned off in one end, a stove and other comforts, and after leaving Rock Island, he would take off his coat and shoes, light his big meerschaum pipe, smoke and take comfort.

One cold night in January when there was about a foot of snow, the Frenchman was pulling a second section and following Kelly. At Depue station there was a water tank and all trains took water there. Approaching Depue from the west is a curve and heavy timber on each side of the road, and a train cannot be seen far from the station looking westward. The ground was frozen hard and, as stated, a foot of snow covered it. Kelly's train was taking water and the Frenchman's train was rounding the curve almost noiselessly, as the snow and frozen ground deadens the sound of a train.

Just before the Frenchman's train reached a point where it could be seen from the station, he took an old coat from the tender box and handing it to the fireman, said, "I have an old score to settle with that chap

ahead and I want you to cover the headlight with this coat so no light can be seen. I will pull up as close to Kelly's caboose as I can, then whistle down brakes and when I do, you jerk off the coat." The fireman obeyed orders. The engine gave one wild shriek and with one bound Kelly reached the car platform, another and he was in the snow scrambling up the slope of the cut. He did not stop for shoes or coat. Reaching the top of the cut, he turned to witness the collision, when he saw the Frenchman's engine standing dead still. He took in the situation at once, but I will not repeat what he said on that occasion. The Frenchman listened attentively to Kelly, and later on said that on a test of profanity he would back Kelly for any amount, against all comers.

In 1873, I was employed on the Michigan Lake Shore railway for about eight months. I was in charge of the roadway department and it was my duty to clear the road of snow when it was blockaded, and there was plenty of this kind of work to do along the Lake Shore. We generally used three engines coupled together behind the snowplow. On one trip when riding in the plow, we went into the ditch three times in twenty-four hours. Of course this did not scare me away from the road, but about that time I made up my mind that the water did not agree with me, so I quit.

The road was managed by A. H. Morrison, ex-member of congress. Morrison was a nervous, hot-tempered old gentleman and when in a passion, would discharge an employe, only to reinstate him a little later on. On one occasion a conductor for some cause failed to take a car offered him by an agent, the agent reported the matter to Morrison by wire and when the conductor reached Holland station, the operator handed him a telegram from Mr. Morrison which read: "A. W. Brown, conductor, Holland. Sidetrack your train at Holland and turn your keys over to the agent. You are discharged." The conductor sidetracked his train and handed his keys to the agent, then sent a telegram by

Western Union which read: "A. H. Morrison, Gen'l Manager, Saint Joe, Michigan. Have you any objection to my walking back to Saint Joe over your railroad if I whistle at all the crossings?" Brown had not received an answer to his message when I left the road.

CRUDE CONSTRUCTION OF LOCOMOTIVE

Locomotives were very crude in the early days of railroading compared with the locomotives of today. It is customary to oil the cylinders occasionally and this is usually done while the train is on the down grade, as steam has to be shut off during the oiling process. These observations are not for the benefit of persons who have been in the train service. In the long ago some engines had a narrow rail about three inches wide running along from the boiler head to the front end and a rod above the rail to hold to. On this narrow rail the fireman would walk to the front end and oil the cylinders and often when the train was running at a pretty high rate of speed, and this part of the fireman's duty was considered a little hazardous.

There was a fireman on the road who at nearly all times while on duty had a cigar or part of one in his mouth. He did not smoke like other people, but would take a few whiffs and let his cigar go out and as he never carried matches of his own, he was nearly always calling on someone for a light. One day while he was walking out on the railing of his engine to oil, he slipped and fell. The engineer saw him go, stopped his train as quickly as possible and backed up, expecting to find a dead fireman. He found the fireman sitting in the weeds at the foot of the bank. He hurried to him and anxiously inquired if he was badly hurt. "Hurt, the devil no; give us a light."

The old-timer when he stops to think and allows his mind to wander back over the past thirty-five or forty years, is ready to tell you that great progress has been made in railroading in all directions. Cars and engines have been materially improved; coaches; sleepers and dining cars today are palaces of luxury.

In construction work, labor-saving machinery has taken the place of the cart, mule and shovel. Engineering feats on railroads are now being accomplished that would have been considered impossible thirty-five years ago. The telegraph system of handling trains has made it possible to handle a vast number on a single track, enabling them to make twice the speed that the few trains of thirty-five years ago made. The best talent that can be secured regardless of cost is directing the management of railroads at this time.

The gay, festive and hilarious official has given way to the sober, dignified and thoughtful official. Sobriety in all departments is now required of employes. All business is transacted systematically. The mileage made by everything on wheels is known. The car accountant can tell you where everyone of the thousand cars owned by the company is at a given time. The olden days were festive times for railroad men. I have known trainmen to carry gimlets and bottles; the gimlets were to bore holes in certain barrels in transit and the bottles to put the stuff in. A trainman caught with a gimlet nowadays would be hung.

Land For Education

Recommendation was made to the First Legislative session of the Wisconsin territory, by Gov. Henry Dodge, the propriety of asking from the congress of the United States a donation of one township of public land, to be sold, and the proceeds of the sale placed under the direction of the Legislative Assembly of the territory, for the establishment of an academy for the education of youth; the institution to be governed by such laws and regulations, and to be erected at such place as the Legislative Assembly may designate.

"It is a duty," said the governor, "we owe to the rising generation to endeavor to devise means to improve the condition of those that are to succeed us; the permanence of our institutions must depend upon the intelligence of the great mass of the people."

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