Steam

J. Elmer Rhodes, Jr.
(1920–1995)

If I was not born a railroad buff, I became one soon after. Early memories that are warm, that to this day bring an inner glow upon recall, are mostly railroad memories.

One could not see the tracks nor, usually, the trains from our house for foliage and other obstructions; but at night the locomotive fire would shine upwards behind the cab roof and light up the steam and smoke streaming overhead every time the fire door opened. For trains outbound east, climbing the three- or four-mile grade from the valley floor to the cut through Red Mountain at Irondale, the fire door opened every few seconds, as the fireman rhythmically shoveled coal. As he came forward with the scoop of coal his foot

operated a treadle that supplied air to open the fire doors.

From the trackside, just a block up or down the street, one could see the fireman straddling, one foot on the cab floor of the engine, the other on the tender. The timing of his motions and the fire door's opening were rhythms I had learned well, so I sensed the swinging of the shovel even when the thing observed was a flash on the smoke and steam half a mile away.

On earlier, smaller locomotives, the fireman could swing open the fire door from time to time to tend the fire, but the engines grew so big that by the time of my childhood the fireman was the bottleneck in power production; the treadle-operated door was absolutely necessary. Southern's 4700 series of freight locomotives, and equally big units on the Seaboard, had been in operation some ten years at that time.

I know not whether it occurred in a very short span of time or over several years, but the time came when I realized that there was no more rhythmical illumination of the sky when trains went out at night; stokers had relieved firemen of the dogged shoveling required to keep up steam.

Father grew up with a romantic attachment to railroading, and he did not lose it until his last years when all interests were past. In 1913 and, later, during the First World War, he put in some months at the exhausting task of fireman on

Southern's 4500s. In recent years I learned from Aunt Ethel that during those times he lost weight, became lean and gaunt. His superlative for body-breaking manual labor was "like firing a jack."

Engineers he had fired for were pointed out to me as they brought trains in or took them out. "Hustler" O'Dell was a remote and lordly being as he leaned out the cab window to better view the road ahead, while pulling his whistle strap with his left hand; he was all concentration on the job of getting his train over the road. Only seldom would he be diverted sufficiently to raise his gloved right hand in an attenuated wave.

Father's romantic view was not uncommon for boys of his time, and it was reinforced by such delicious pleasures as being carried to Montgomery from Georgiana on the engine by Cousin Jeff Hudson. Father's joy must have equaled that expressed by Walter Chrysler over riding the engine with his father: "At the end of the day a boy's face would be sore from constant and incessant grinning."

Father's love affair with railroads was early communicated to me through his reminiscences, and this was reinforced by the proximity of the tracks — Seaboard, one long block to the south; one block north, two double tracks of AGS, to Chattanooga, and Southern, to Atlanta. The last also carried Central of Georgia trains to Leeds, where they took their own track to Columbus, Georgia. Father's watch has a dent in the back, put there by the shaker bar of 4563. Fire grates

were in four sections. A fireman could not shake all the grates at once. A three or four foot steel bar would be fitted over each of four stub levers in succession. Each stub was linked to its section of the grates under the fire. He had heaved the bar against the breast pocket of his overalls, the pocket containing his watch.

There were stories of adventure out on the road and in the yards. "You would have to read every one of those lights to bring a train in here," he would say to me, a small child, as we drove across the end of the AGS or Seaboard marshalling yards at night, and the hundreds of colored switch lights made a Christmas tree of the yard. There was a locomotive that one night quietly backed out of the Finley roundhouse, unmanned, and was rolling for the cinder pits down the hill, where men were working. Father, on his way to work, boarded it, climbed into the dark cab, and took it back to a roundhouse. (No air was up for brakes, but steam was up, and with it Father stopped the locomotive, and drove it forward.) The foreman had not missed it!

No Negro was promoted to engineer in those days, but there were a fair number of Colored firemen, and they were good ones, Father judged. They were bred to hard labor, and they had a knack for keeping a hot fire. But they liked to make lots of black smoke, Father said. And out on the road they would work like fury, shovelling coal, shaking grates, putting water into the boiler.

This to be ready, when they rolled through a town, to jump up onto the box beside the window, and lean way out on the left elbow, intent on the road ahead. I think I would have done so too. It was not just the Colored firemen.

Maybe several stories got compounded into one epic run to Atlanta from Birmingham with eighty cars of mules. World War I was going on; a ship was ready to sail from Savannah as soon as this trainload of mules, which had come in from the west, was loaded. The dispatcher gave them the road; orders were to make only necessary stops for water and coal.

But people on epic journeys are always tried with difficulties. As the last tipple-car of coal hit the tender, a chain snapped, and a ton of coal was dumped into the gangway. Several chains would be strung across the front of the tender to hold the coal when the tender was full; they would be taken down when enough coal had been used so that the rest stayed in the tender by itself.

No time to fix that; Hustler O'Dell had gone over his engine, and was growling that he wanted the gauge to read 210 pounds all night long. (Because of the urgency of the run, Father and O'Dell must have been on the engine before the hostlers were through preparing it.)

They coupled up, tried the brakes, and moved out of the yard through the dusk. O'Dell could keep his drivers torqued within a hair of slipping, and never loose hold. They moved out fast, then

up the long grade to the cut through the mountain. Father fought furiously to keep up steam, and between each shovel-full into the firebox, he would throw another off onto the trackside. "I knew that if there were coal in the gangway when he turned down the mountain, I would be unable to stand up."

He got the coal out from underfoot, but he still could not stand up when they rocketed down grade, up to eighty miles per hour he judged. He hung onto grab-irons, and tried to tend water and do other tasks that it was possible to do with one hand. Maybe there were not many miles like this, but those miles were memorable. The route is a crooked one: one hundred and sixty-nine miles, one hundred and sixty-nine curves.

Water taken in haste; coal taken impatiently at Anniston and at Waco, where the fire was cleaned of clinkers by Colored laborers. No turning into sidetracks; all traffic in both directions sidetracked for Father, for O'Dell, for eighty cars of mules.

They steamed into Inman Yard in just five hours, passenger train time in those days. Another crew and engine must have gotten the train to Savannah (on another railroad), and the mules must have gotten to France.

Not just stories; there was the glory of the thing itself. A fast passenger train braking to a stop, downhill at Woodlawn in the winter dusk: ten cars, six-

ty car wheels, on my side of the train, rimmed with fire. The immensity of a steam locomotive, and the massive tasks it accomplished, were awesome, and all the machinery was out where you could see it. An accident led to my being able to observe the machinery at low speed for several years, as will be recounted below. A nail on the track would be flattened, and knocked off by the pony trucks of the locomotive, but the nail would still be hot after the train had passed, if it was a fast passenger train. The open, nearly flat area where the railroad parallels Fifth Avenue south between 56th and 57th Streets was a good place to do such impressive blacksmithing.

Nails crossed on the track would be welded together, too.

There was, besides romance, anxiety and the constant near presence of death, for the crew and for the unwary who tangled with a train. When I was a small child, I vividly recall Cousin Ellen, Jeff's widow, telling of the terrible moan in the night of the wrecker whistle, calling its crew, while her Jeff was somewhere out on the road. She had owned a big house in Montgomery near the railroad yards, and she may have boarded railroad men.

Neighbor, Clarence Allgood, lost a leg when he tried to board a moving freight train right down the street. Our maid, Ella, had worked for the Allgoods, and lived in their servant house, at the time. It was close to home, although I never knew

Clarence, who became a well known Birmingham attorney.

The aunt of schoolmate, later scout-mate, Ted Bumann was walking one summer morning north on 56th Street, dressed to catch the street car and go to town. She crossed the Southern tracks, and as she traversed the hundred feet to the AGS tracks, she speeded up to a fast walk or half run, apparently to get across the AGS tracks ahead of a passenger train from Chattanooga. She misjudged. In the middle of the track she threw up her hands in horror. My mother saw the body tumble beside the train 120 feet past the crossing. Mother had been waiting in her car for the train to pass. I heard the story many times, including the time it was told to a railroad agent who investigated the accident.

A bad accident involving a train and a street car at a flagged crossing had many consequences. It occurred three short blocks from home at Grand Avenue (now First Avenue South). For days the neighborhood ladies told and retold of the terrible mutilation. It was generally thought that the accident spelled the end of the "Tidewater" street railway line. (A projected interurban: Birmingham, Tidewater & Coast. It ran from East Lake to Bessemer, and had ambitions to go on to Tuscaloosa and beyond.) They soon sold out to their competitor, BR&P Co., who did some rerouting. Their hardy cars carried me to college on the South East Lake line twelve to sixteen years later.

Another consequence of the accident was that by ordinance or agreement, trains and street cars thereafter stopped at all grade crossings where the two met. Rerouting of street cars took care of the crossing where the accident had occurred, but for several years, until an overpass was built, Seaboard trains stopped at Grand Avenue (now Fifth Avenue South) about 52nd Street. Outbound trains were on the long grade that took them over Red Mountain, and heavy freights had a difficult time getting underway after the stop; they never picked up much speed until they crossed the ridge three miles beyond.

A regular freight stopped at the crossing about 6:15 AM. It would only be travelling at walking speed half a mile after getting under way and leaving the crossing. Sometimes for a block, sometimes for a mile, I would walk beside the driving wheels, admiring the valve linkage, the oily brass piston and valve rods, and the forged steel I-beam that was the driving rod. To earn a hiking merit badge I had to log five miles of walking a day for several months. During this interval I was often out before breakfast to roam the mountainside woods, and I would wait for this train at the head of 55th Place. The reverse lever must have been hard forward, as every exhaust was an explosion.

Another seaboard freight fought its way up that hill every evening about 8:20. Lots of men were riding freights during the Depression, and nearly every night two detectives would scan the

slowly moving train with flashlights. They would station themselves on the banks on both sides of the track at 55th Street. If a rider were discovered, they would board the train and take him off; or he would jump off and run, and they would pursue him. They caught one in Mr. Batcheller's corn patch at 56th Street once. I do not know whether they were free-lance deputies, who got a fee for each arrest, or whether they were railroad employees discouraging hobos because cars had been broken into, or coal thrown off loaded cars. To me, this was just an act to watch, the most interesting thing being the boarding and dismounting of the moving train. (Clarence Allgood's story must have gotten to me; I never had the slightest urge to board one.) But Father knew the brutal reputation of railroad detectives; and, whenever 'bos would stop at our door for a handout (and there were many), he would warn them where the dicks were likely to be.

During the early thirties an occasional exhibition train pulled by a Diesel locomotive would come through, usually pulling three shiny light passenger cars. Father would pooh-pooh the preposterous notion that one of those "street cars" would ever pull a freight train. "Why, I've seen a Mack truck nearly tear itself up moving one freight car around the lumber yard." An internal combustion engine would never do what steam could do. "Imagine what the clutch would have to be."

Then one day — about 1945 — I saw steam die. These were war years, and steam locomotives would haul trains millions of miles more, but steam was doomed, I knew. Father and I were in an auto stopped at the grade crossing at 56th Street. An outbound southern freight was stopped with its Diesel engines across our road. Freight cars trailed down the grade behind the locomotives; the end was out of sight around a long curve that started half a mile away. Ready to go: the board just ahead changed; the engines revved up; a sense of tautness appeared in the trucks, and in three or four seconds the locomotives began to creep forward up the mountain. Father's mouth dropped open as he watched that string of cars. There was no slack in the train! And it started off up the grade! To start under such circumstances, he was used to backing the engine down to move each drawhead as far as it would go into each car frame member. Draft is transferred from the couple to the carframe through two forged horizontal protrusions on the drawhead; they pass through reinforced holes in a box girder of the car frame. (Fancier, hydraulic-cushioned couples are available now.) "Slack" came from play of the protrusions in the holes, and play in the couple itself. After backing down, the engine would start up with no load, and every time it moved forward an inch, say, it would snatch one more car forward. With a dramatic "h-r-r-r-umph," the wave would rocket back the train. This long train started upgrade

with no slack. Father stared while several freight cars moved past in front of us, then he weakly whispered, "He's pulling the whole yard out behind him."

About 1946 a man close to the Association of American Railroads told me there was not a single order outstanding for a steam locomotive to be delivered in this country. I knew it was coming, but this was faster than I had expected. (Baldwin Locomotive Works did not expect the change so soon, either. They went under soon after, apparently because they stuck to steam too long. It is sad to see a company over a hundred years old go down.)

It has been sad, too, to see the opportunities that railroad management has missed over the years. Since before 1900 railroads have preferred the freight business, and their innovation and the development of rolling stock, signaling, and data handling have been spectacular. Billions were invested in locomotives, freight yards and other capital items in the years following World War II.

Father, as a boy, paddled a boat for colorful and irascible L&N president Milton Smith, when he would come to fish in the millpond at Rhodes' Mill. Smith said then that he would as soon never run another passenger train.

There was enough public feeling of romance about railroading to have created the foundation of public support that any far-flung enterprise has to have. But railroads, in their ephemeral might,

did not know it was necessary, and scorned passengers, their best opportunity for constructive contact with the public. Freight customers do not constitute the public.

No innovations made it easy to buy a ticket. Seldom was it evident that a train crew gave a hoot about maintaining a schedule, and too, too often, trainmen were adverse to common courtesy to their passengers, their customers.

The latent public support, waiting and wanting to be ignited, was evident on an L&N train, hours late, southbound to Birmingham during World War II. Passengers got the notion that the trainmen were intent on making up all the lost time they possibly could. (It is more likely that a manifest freight was on their heels.) The engineer had a clear road to practice that intent. Passengers were thrown from the aisle when they tried to go to the water fountain or the rest room. Were they angered by this? They were not. When a large man landed in a lady's lap, both laughed, and he climbed up to try again. At the end of that run those passengers would have cheered in a mighty voice for the L&N Railroad. A little sincere care for the traveling public and the nation would have cheered, too. But such care was carefully withheld.

What might-have-been could be glimpsed in the B&O operation in the north end of Baltimore, even during wartime. You could sit in summer clothes on padded wicker benches on the con-

course of their Mount Royal Station and cleanly board your train or meet incoming passengers. All freight north, as well as passenger trains, traversed that roofed concourse. Coal-burning steam locomotives powered their trains, but they were pulled through the tunnels of the city and this concourse by electric locomotives; their coal fires would be banked. Two blocks away was the Pennsylvania Station. There, trains were hauled by those wonderful electric GG1's, inherently clean locomotives. But one felt unclean after walking through their station.

My brother-in-law Jim Hard got to the core of the problem by recognizing that passenger and freight were two entirely different businesses, retail and wholesale, respectively. Both used tracks and locomotives, but the two businesses needed separate personnel and management. A middle-aged conductor "promoted" to passenger service, after years in a caboose, was unlikely to be able to satisfactorily meet the public.

Some years ago, since World War II, a monument was dedicated at the burial place in Tennessee of "Casey" (John Luther) Jones. Mrs. Jones was there; their son, a GM&O engineer, was there; Sim Webb, Casey's Colored fireman on 382, was there.

The president of the IC refused to participate because Casey had wrecked their locomotive.

How little understanding can a man have?