

# CABOOSE RIDE AND OTHER TRAIN TALES

By

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*Late October, 1950:*

During the time we lived on 24<sup>th</sup> Street---from the time I was born through most of the first grade---our neighbor across the street, Mr. Pipkin, who was called “Red” by everybody for his shock of unruly flame-colored hair, worked as a conductor at the Southern Railway switchyard in Sheffield.

One day, he asked me if I’d like to go with him for a day in the railyard. “It’ll be fun,” he said, “we’ll ride around in a caboose.” My daddy stood there, nodding, so I guessed it was all right. (Probably our railroading neighbor had already talked with him about it.)

The next morning, which was cool for that time of the year, Mr. Pipkin, dressed in his gray pinstriped railroad overalls and long-billed cap, along with his nephew Jimmy and I, each of us with a workman’s lunchbox in hand, walked across nearby Second Street to the switchyard. As we stepped along the tracks’ cross-ties, with lumps of coal and ash between them, dodging between railcars of all types, I was awed by the sights, sounds and smells of the steam-and-and smoke belching locomotives huffing about in and around the noisy place. “This is the biggest railroad switchyard between Memphis and Chattanooga!” the man fairly shouted, above the cacophony of couplings slamming together, steam whistles screeching every few seconds and the “Whoosh!” of the locomotives as the huge iron machines chugged about the vast collection of parallel tracks jammed with “rolling stock,” as Mr. Pipkin called the railcars. “We build trains here with railroad cars!” he went on, above the pounding, non-stop racket reverberating around the yard.

A train machine that was making a grumbling noise instead of the usual “whooshing” sounds of a locomotive rumbled past us on the next track. I stared at the strange-looking machine that seemed to be missing several things I was used to seeing on locomotives. For one thing, it didn’t have a coal tender on the back of it like the steamers had, and it wasn’t shooting puffs of smoke and steam into the air as the others were doing. “That’s our new ‘diesel’ switch-engine!” Mr. Pipkin called out to Jimmy and me over the noise. “It’s different from the steam engines . . .

uses less fuel.” I stared at the unusual switcher that was not like any other locomotive I’d ever seen. “They’re saying we’ll soon be replacing all the steamers with the diesels.” I had no idea what he was talking about, but since I didn’t want to show that to the railroad man, I kept quiet.

Mr. Pipkin pointed at a red-painted railcar on a sidetrack. “That’s the caboose we’ll be riding, today.” We swung up a metal ladder at one end. Inside, the all-gray-painted place looked like a rustic, elongated little office with square windows. On one side, facing the rear, was a metal desk with a wooden chair; papers on the desktop looked to be arranged in separate stacks. “My job is to assign each car to a train . . . we put the cars together into trains, depending on where they are going.”

At the other end, down a narrow center walkway, I spotted a pot-bellied stove that somebody had already fired-up on this cool morning, adding its distinctive coal-burning smell to that of the half-dozen or so smoke-belching locomotives working all about the yard. In the middle of the caboose, ladders on each side led straight-up to a “cupola” as Mr. Pipkin called it. “That’s where the conductor sits so he can see an entire train at it goes along.” He stuffed our lunchboxes into a locker.

I asked the obvious question: “Where’s the bathroom?”

Mr. Pipkin pointed at a narrow gray door toward the other end. “In there,” he grinned.

Hardly had he said that than the three of us heard, through the open door at the end of the caboose, ever-growing “Whooshing” sounds, along with “Clacking” noises and a rumble I could feel through my shoes. “Here we go!” Mr. Pipkin shouted. The three of us turned about and stepped out onto the platform at the end of the caboose. In a second, I was gaping in awe at the massive front-end of a switch-engine locomotive that had chugged right up to the end of our railcar. A cloud of steam swirled around us as the huge machine’s coupler groped for the one at the end of the caboose. My railroad friend pointed at the handrail across the end. “Hold on!”

There came a pounding “*SLAM!*” as the two connectors joined with a jarring jolt that felt like it could have pulled me out of my shoes. A man dropped from the step on the front-side of the locomotive and clapped together the ends of two hoses. Mr. Pipkin called to me over the noise. “That’s the ‘brakeman’! He’s connecting the air-brake-lines!”

Jimmy and I watched in wonder as the fellow grabbed a handrail and hopped back aboard the bottom step, turned toward the cab at the rear and gave an arm-wave that looked to be a signal. At once, there came a couple of “Toots” on the steam whistle, followed by a “Whoosh!” then more of the airy gasping sounds as with puffs of smoke shooting up and out the stack, the locomotive, the caboose in tow with us aboard, started moving with a deep, heavy, continuous rolling sound backwards down the track a short distance, passing over several thumping, intersecting sets of tracks that veered off in other directions, to a screeching stop.

Off to one side, another man was tugging on a lever. Mr. Pipkin pointed at him. "He's the switchman!" He gestured at some bars that led into the tracks. "The 'switch'---that's what they call it---will turn the caboos and the locomotive onto another track."

The locomotive whistle once more sounded with a couple of quick blasts and the caboos, shoved by the engine, started lurching across the re-positioned switch onto the next line of tracks. Mr. Pipkin motioned to the other end of the caboos. Through the open door at far end, I saw the slab-end of a boxcar becoming bigger by the second as we chugged up to it. With a loud squeal, again came the familiar slamming jar as the couplers grabbed. The brakeman dropped from his perch on the bottom step of the locomotive, hustled to the other end of the caboos and connected the air-lines as before. Then, arms waving at the locomotive engineer, he dashed back and jumped aboard the bottom step just as the big machine began backing; at the same time the air-brake-lines between the locomotive and the caboos pulled apart with a loud "Pop!". The locomotive continued to move away from us in reverse.

"This caboos will be the end-car on the train we're building," Mr. Pipkin said, as we stepped back inside. He nodded at his desk. "Those papers are the 'waybills'---one for each car in the train---we keep track of every shipment as to where it goes and on which train." As I was five years old, I didn't understand much of what he meant, but it sounded important.

Mr. Pipkin pulled out a big gold railroad watch on a chain and glanced at it. "The train we're making-up will be leaving in two hours," he said, stuffing the timepiece back into a small pocket in his railroad overalls.

Jimmy looked hopeful. "Will we be going with it?"

"No . . . after I've finished all the paperwork and the train is made-up, we'll get off this caboos. Another crew will take-over and ride the train to its destination, which is Memphis." The man glanced out the window. "We'll make-up another train. That'll take the rest of the day." Even as he spoke, the caboos lurched from another car being coupled onto the other end of the train.

Mr. Pipkin grinned. "It's time for dinner." The man retrieved from the locker the lunchboxes for all three of us and brought them back to the desk. "Let's eat!"

After dinner (that's what they called "lunch" in those days), Jimmy and I climbed the vertical ladders on each side up into the "cupola" that was planted on top of the caboos like an afterthought. Since its windows all around gave us a great view of the whole switchyard, while Mr. Pipkin did his paperwork, my friend and I watched from our lofty leather observation seats as the locomotives pushed and pulled the various cars around the tracks. After some time of observing everything that was going on, Jimmy and I had pretty well figured out how they put the trains together on the tracks. Taking in the bustling scene, I decided right then and there that I wanted to work on the railroad when I grew up.

At length, there came the voice of Jimmy's uncle calling us down from our lofty perch. On the main level, Mr. Pipkin told us we would be going across to the other side of the yard to make up another train. Just then, two other men scraped through the door at the front end. "These are the men who'll take the train to Memphis," Mr. Pipkin said, as one of the newcomers, an older man, pulled out the wooden chair and took a seat. Putting on glasses, the man shuffled through the "waybills," as I remember my friend had called them, and made a comment or two that seemed to satisfy the other railroad men. The third railroader, a younger fellow, told me he was the "brakeman" who would be in charge of the safety of the train as they traveled to Memphis.

Mr. Pipkin put back on his pin-striped railroad cap that matched his overalls, motioned for us to take our lunchboxes with us and headed for the rear platform with Jimmy and me in tow.

On the ground, he gestured for us to follow him. Our trio stepped across multitudes of tracks, all with cinders and coal lumps in and around them---stopping once or twice for a locomotive with a line of railcars to pass---to the far side of the switchyard. At another caboos that looked just like the first one, we climbed aboard. Inside, since it appeared to be almost the same as the other one, I decided that all cabooses were alike. Without any prompting, Jimmy and I hauled ourselves up the vertical ladders to the cupola, where, while Mr. Pipkin did his paperwork, we spent the rest of the day watching the switch-engines in the yard doing their work. Before long, across the way, the train we had been on before started moving. "They're heading-out to Memphis!" Mr. Pipkin called up to us.

All-in-all, it was a day that started my real education about trains; now that I was pretty much acquainted with the switchyard, the engines, and the "rolling stock" that I had watched all my life from our backyard across the way on 24<sup>th</sup> Street, I enjoyed them even more.

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Time passed; I started the first grade and my world grew bigger with new friends and new experiences. But all along, I still enjoyed watching the "Choo-Choos", as my grandmother liked to call them, as they snorted about doing their work across the way in the switchyard; always remembering that big day when I saw the steam locomotives up-close and rode the cabooses.

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One day just before we moved to "High Point"---it must have been on a Saturday, since I was not at school---while my sister and I, along with our grandmother, were sitting in the backyard, we spotted across Second Street a strange procession moving along on the rails of the main line. What we saw was a sad-looking succession of locomotives, nose-to-tail like a parade of elephants, moving past and through the switchyard. Most of them looked to be dead-tired, dark, and cold---only a couple of locomotives at the front were shooting smoke and steam and seemed to be towing the long line of others that appeared lost and forlorn. After a while, the unhappy-looking train passed on through the yard and was gone. Just as they were out of sight,

in a touch of irony, one of the new diesels throbbed smartly past on its way to its new job of switching railcars; its air-horn giving out a blast as if in a triumphant send-off to the vanquished steamers.

Much later, I learned that the train of lifeless locomotives we had observed that day was part of a vast demolition program, national in scope, that was devouring almost all of the steamers. For the new, more efficient diesels had cast aside the venerable steam locomotives and the ones we had seen were only a few of the tens of thousands of the less-efficient, now-out-of-date machines that were on their way from all over the country to the scrapyards of Pittsburgh and other melt-down centers. From now on, the switchyards and main lines would employ only the new-style diesels such as I had seen that day when we had ridden the cabooses. Even though they were more clean-burning and used cheaper fuel than the coal-burners, I always felt there was something lost when the huffing steam locomotives went away in favor of the growling diesels. I came to miss the melancholy wail of steam whistles in the night and the pounding of their big driver-wheels on the mainline---sounds most people of a later era have never heard.

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### ***Fast-Forward to 1967:***

One day while I was on the air at the radio station, I received a call in the control room from a man identifying himself as the president of the local railroad club who wanted to know if I'd be interested in joining their organization. And so, I became a member of the "National Railway Historical Society's" local chapter. Coupled with my membership in the antique car club, I was the only local person to belong to both organizations, combining my interests in trains and old cars. In time, I became a liaison between both clubs, providing an interesting connection for members of both organizations that, interestingly, although in different areas, had complimentary interests in preserving their machines that came from the same general era. The two groups even held some common get-togethers.

The railroad club had just obtained an actual steam locomotive, "Number 77" as it was called for its number on the tender. The little steamer had until recently been owned by a small railroad company in Mississippi that had used it in a logging operation. After belatedly making the switch to diesels, the steam engine faced scrapping when it was rescued at the last minute by the railroad club. From what I was told, a club member had heard through the grapevine that a steam locomotive was available. After some sleuthing and passing some cash, they made the deal. Now the medium-sized switch-engine was sitting on a sidetrack at the now-unused 1948-vintage Sheffield railroad station. Southern Railway had donated the station to the railroad club provided they maintain it. So the club now possessed both a station and a real steam engine.

But "Old '77", as it came to be called, needed work---lots of work---before it would be ready to pull an actual train. Amazingly enough, as late as 1968, Southern Railway still had a "Vice-President in Charge of Steam Operations." The white-haired man came from Atlanta to

Sheffield to evaluate the old steamer and to find out what the club would have to do to get it in shape for pulling excursions. From research and other information we found that the locomotive was built by the “Baldwin Locomotive Works” in Philadelphia in 1920, as a “2-8-0”, called a “Consolidation” type, with two leading wheels at the front and four driving axles with a total of eight driving wheels in all, and no “trailing” wheels under the cab; thus the designation, “2-8-0.” In a stroke of good fortune, a complete set of “flues” for the boiler came with the engine, which was a huge advantage as the steam man said all the flues inside the boiler would have to be replaced, along with other upgrades and maintenance.

After many months of work by members of the club, some of whom had had steam experience, by late-March, 1968 “Old 77” was ready to be fired-up for the first time since the club had acquired it. For the test, on a cold Saturday morning, the Steam Supervisor had come from Atlanta to handle the locomotive’s first steam-up. After several hours of gradual firing of the boiler’s firebox, in the late morning there came a sudden “*POP!*” and a plume of steam burst from the top of the locomotive. “The safety-valves have lifted!” the man in charge shouted, to a round of general hand-clapping. “This means the boiler is at full steam-pressure!” he went on, to the awed onlookers who were on hand to watch the first firing of the boiler. “We’ll hold the pressure for the rest of the day, then we’ll bank the fires!” Listening to the resounding wails of the steam whistle and the clanging of the bell, the veteran railroad people were in a near-giddy state as they watched their project steam engine finally alive after so much work. In the late-afternoon, the supervisor gave the signal, and the firemen who had been rotating the coal-shoveling duties stepped back. The engineer pulled on a lever and at once volumes of steam shot out the top of the engine and at the front by the steam pistons. By nightfall, the fire in the firebox was merely a collection of glowing cinders. The steam man pronounced the test a success. “Next time, we’ll do a run on the main line!” he told the tired but happy bunch of enthusiasts.

Two weeks later, I positioned myself, along with other news people, atop a hill on a curved portion of the mainline west of Tusculumbia. As cameras rolled, there came the now-familiar sounds of the steam whistle, then down the way we saw volumes of gray smoke shooting above the treetops moving toward us. In a matter of seconds the engine burst around the bend into view, pulling a couple of empty boxcars as ballast, then thundered past to the “oohs” and “ahs” of the onlookers. Back at the station, the operating crew and the supervisor conferred, then declared the engine ready for real work pulling railfan excursions.

A few weeks later, on another cool Saturday, after much publicity “Old 77”, its steam whistle cutting through the crisp air and the bell sounding, huffed out of the Sheffield station onto the mainline eastward with a couple of hundred or so railfans, myself included, aboard a half-dozen Pullman cars and an open observation car brought in for the occasion. To enormous interest from observers, many with cameras, who were parked at every crossing and at other points along the way, the steam-engine-led train chugged its way along to its destination, the “Alabama Space and Rocket Center” at Redstone Arsenal in Huntsville, where its arrival created a media and publicity-driven sensation.

While we railfans toured the rocket park, the train huffed off to turn-around for the return trip. In the late afternoon, we were back in Sheffield. The event made the national news.

Over the next several years, to much publicity, the Muscle Shoals Railroad Club sponsored popular day-long railfan trips, some returning to Huntsville; others heading-out in other directions. Railroad enthusiasts from all over the country came to ride the steam trains.

One Saturday around 1975, when I was in the newsroom at the local television station where I was now working as News Director, there came a telephone call from the State Trooper's office. The news was unsettling: "Old 77" had de-railed west of Decatur on a fantrip. I took a camera crew to the scene and shot video of the mishap. One of the main drive-axles had snapped, sending the locomotive off the tracks. In a hurry, railroad officials dispatched a diesel engine that pulled the passenger cars the rest of the way to Sheffield---an anti-climax to what had started as a happy steam-railfan trip.

But "77" was in a bad way. As it turned-out, that was the last railfan trip of the Sheffield club. The locomotive was righted and towed to Huntsville, where its fate became uncertain. To this date, I don't know what ever became of it, as it is no longer in the inventory of the Huntsville club. In time, the Sheffield club disbanded and some years later the railroad company tore down the Sheffield depot. Today, the only clues to the existence of the late train station are a few bricks here-and-there and a slab of concrete where it used to be. Even the switchyard where I had once rode the cabooses transferred out-of-town.

The next year, 1976, I moved out-of-state to a new job traveling all fifty states, Mexico, and Canada. From time-to-time, I would happen upon a museum or a steam locomotive on display, usually in some small town. When I could, I would stop and take pictures of it. Over time, the portfolio of steam locomotives became fairly large. I also had the opportunity to see some railroad museums; the biggest was the "California State Railroad Museum" in Sacramento, a very large and glittering display of some of the most famous engines and rolling stock, anywhere. Another big railroad collection I saw was at the "National Transportation Museum" in St. Louis, where I saw one of the half-dozen remaining Union Pacific "X-4000 'Big-Boys'", the largest and heaviest locomotives of all time, that was parked outdoors, surrounded by other types of locomotives and railcars.

One Saturday in June, 1979, while I was in Cheyenne, Wyoming, taking pictures of the remaining buildings of the 1880's-vintage Union Pacific shops, a workman told me there was a really big steam locomotive on display nearby. I drove over to where he said it was located and found an enormous engine on a side-track, Union Pacific Number, "X-3985." As I walked around, taking pictures of the gargantuan machine, I observed some men climbing around and over it. It seemed as if they were readying the engine to be moved, as the fence that had surrounded the static display was down, and nearby sections of track and cross-ties lay stacked, as if ready to be laid to move the huge engine onto the main line.

Two years later, I picked up a railroad magazine in a California bookstore and found pictures of that locomotive, “Number X-3985” in the shops at Cheyenne, with a full-head of steam---the initial static-test. “The Great Machine Lives Again!” proclaimed the article. It was then I realized that what I had seen that day at the display was the very first step to returning the engine to service. In time, the Internet came to pass and I saw videos of “X-3985” at full speed (up to eighty miles an hour) on the mainlines of the West, pulling railfan trips and other trains. The locomotive, the biggest in the world in active service, spent the next thirty years traveling the country, even visiting Houston, one time. (In 2013, the locomotive was in a major maintenance re-build that would last until about 2016. In the meantime, one of the “Big- Boys” was being restored to service in the Union Pacific shops.)

In December, 2009, my wife and I rode the “Polar Express,” a narrow-guage steam train, from Durango, Colorado, to Silverton, an all-day trip. The line, that features beautifully-maintained locomotives and passenger cars, runs the twenty-or-so miles along a scenic route that on that day was a snowy, very cold trip, but very enjoyable, to the hundred-something railfans who made the trip that day.

Railroading brought the country together in the nineteenth-century and still holds great influence and interest---and not just for me.