“Railroad Changes” by Truman Koehn

CNWHS Archives

Eastbound Freight on the Sheboygan Cut-off 1947

Changes that occurred in the railroad industry and the C&NW during my career

My Father's career on the railroad spanned over 50 years. My career was 44 years and between us we worked on the railroad during nearly all of the 20th century. I wished my Father had written about changes during his career: a time when railroad employment went from 2 million employees down to 1 million employees, nationwide. During my time, from 1954 until 1998, I saw employment drop on the nations railroads from 1 million down to 150,000. By the time I retired, the railroad industry was but a footnote of what it had been when my Father began in 1913. Despite the population in the USA nearly tripling in the 20th century, three quarters of the railroad tracks were pulled up and the rail industry had nearly ceased to be an economic factor when I ended my career. Railroads disappeared at an alarming rate, to such a point that Utah Phillips wrote a song in the mid 1970's titled, "Daddy, What's a Train". It was recorded by the famous folk singer, Pete Seeger. In one short song, Utah Phillips has summed up what happened to the American railroad industry during my lifetime.

The 16-Hour Law

One major change I experienced is that the hours of service law went from 16 hours to 14 and then down to 12 hours on duty. I remember working train number 180, an all Proviso (Chicago) hot time freight that went on duty at 5:45PM, and normally departed North Green Bay on the C&NW around 7PM. At Manitowoc, #180 picked up cars of valley paper that came over earlier that evening from Kaukauna-Appleton (on train # 48) as well as set out cars for local industries. At Sheboygan #180 also set out and picked up freight cars, while along the way meeting a variety of passenger and other freight trains. Usually #180 would reach Butler Yard in Milwaukee between midnight and 1AM and tie up shortly after. A Chicago crew would then take #180 down to Proviso Yard - West Chicago, upon our arrival at Butler. Often we'd walk over to the restaurant in the nearby community of Butler, grab a bite to eat and then return to the roundhouse at Butler yard and try to catch a bit of sleep on the bunks there. Around 5AM we would hop on train number 187, which came up from Chicago, and head back to Green Bay, setting out and picking up at both Sheboygan and Manitowoc, while meeting a significant number of trains on the way home. By the time we reached Green Bay in the forenoon, we would have had under 16 hours on duty making the round trip, with 4 hours minimum off duty at Butler, as required by law. And due to the 16-hour law, this was done by a regularly assigned crew, going on duty in Green Bay, every other day. But once the hours on duty were reduced to 12, this turn around could no longer be done under 12 hours, so pool crews were established. Once we went to pool crews, many road jobs with assigned days off were gone, and most road crews had to be ready to go to work at any time, 24/7 and try to be rested in order to do so. This was a huge change as nearly all the road crews had no known days off and we went to work at various times. Working in a pool crew is punishing to both mind and body as well as is highly disruptive to one's personal life. To such an extent we no longer had any personal life worth mentioning. It would be nearly 30 years before the government would come to grips with the problems associated with over worked and sleep deprived pool crews, and by the time they did, I had retired. So reduced hours of service (on duty) and no longer having road crews with regular hours and assigned days off were two major changes during my career in the operating department. Looking back, the gain of reduced hours, was cancelled out by the establishment of pool jobs and being subject to duty 24/7 with no assigned days off.

I mentioned that when the crew arrived in Butler on train #180, for a short layover prior to turning back to Green Bay on #187, that the engine crew would go to the roundhouse to catch a bit of sleep. Going way back to how crews lived on the road, each major roundhouse had angle iron metal bunk beds with bare steel springs in place of a mattress. Engine crews would place newspapers over the bare metal springs, fold up their jackets for a pillow, and this was the standard mode of catching a few hours of sleep between runs. If the layover was of some length, there were older hotels near railroad tracks, left over from better days and built way before motels began to appear along highways. This is where an engine crew could buy a bed for around a dollar or two. The train crew

however, consisting of the head end and rear end brakeman, plus the conductor, would usually have an assigned caboose. Upon the arrival of #180 in Butler, a switch engine would take off the Green Bay caboose and put the caboose assigned to the Chicago conductor on #180 in its place. The switch engine would then take the Green Bay caboose and spot it under the Hampton Avenue bridge, out of the way, where it was dark and quiet. Unlike the engine crew who had to sleep on metal springs in a lighted and noisy roundhouse where crews were constantly coming and going. With an assigned caboose, the conductor could equip the caboose like a 2nd home with comfortable sleeping arrangements with caboose cushions. He could set up the caboose for cooking meals away from home, and the caboose had a nice icebox to double as a refrigerator. The engine crews had none of these luxuries and had to buy their meals, or a bed, on the road away from home. But in the 1960's, the unions won a lodging agreement where the railroads provided nearly first class sleeping accommodations and a paid meal for crews away from home. For engine crews, this was a major change in how they lived while on the road and away from home. For the train crew, this was a terrible let down in some respects as the conductors then lost having an assigned caboose on through runs. For the first time, both train and engine crews were then transported to a better motel, with heat and air conditioning, TV, a private lounge, and a restaurant nearby. This was light years from how crews on the railroads had once lived and for the engine crews a wonderful agreement. Conductors could no longer cook in their cabooses on the road on through trains, so they did not view this as being as wonderful as the engine crews did. But this was nonetheless a significant improvement in the life of the crews when away from home. In time. the conductors accepted these improvements even if they could no longer cook meals in the caboose. However, the company allowance for meals never amounted to much. It was $2 for 24 hours in the 1960's and when I retired in 1998, it had been increased to $4 for each 24-hour layover period away from home. Basically our meal allowance covered tips.

Holidays

Another major change was paid holidays. On the C&NW, the first operating men to receive paid holidays were the switchmen, who in the early 1960's gave up a pay increase to get a few paid holidays. In 1964, all operating crews received paid holidays, which numbered 7 at that time. In 1968 a birthday was added, but by 1971 the birthday was dropped in order to obtain Christmas Eve as a paid holiday.
In 1973 Veterans Day was added, but then Veterans Day was dropped in 1983 in favor of a New Years Eve holiday. At this time, the day after Thanksgiving was added as well as Good Friday. So by 1983, railroad employees on the C&NW had 11 paid holidays. But for many operating men, there were a host of restrictions, which made actually receiving a paid holiday somewhat difficult. I will not go into all the restrictions, but by the time I retired in 1998, at least 70% of the operating employees received paid holidays. And the non-operating employees all received paid holidays. I understand there has been some holiday changes, involving substituting personal days off, for certain operating employees, since I retired.

Bob Ferge from the Bob Baker collection

Westbound Freight at Sheboygan May, 1965

Health care

Shortly after I hired on the C&NW, some of the unions contacted Blue Cross-Blue Shield to sell operating men health insurance coverage at a group rate. But we had to pay for this 100% out of our own pockets. Railroad employees were the last group of employees in the USA in a major industry to receive paid medical and dental coverage provided by their employers. And this did not come about via union negotiations, but due to government arbitration. The federal government was shocked to find out that railroads in the USA did not provide paid health insurance benefits, and when we did receive these benefits, it was truly a memorable day for us. So I would have to include receiving paid medical and dental coverage via our employer as a significant change during my time in the railroad industry. I also understand this too has changed somewhat since I retired in 1998.

Housekeeping and sanitation also improved greatly during my time on the railroad. Some railroads were notorious for poor housekeeping and dirty conditions. The C&NW was among the worst, while the Union Pacific was among the best. But around 1980, under pressure from the environmental movement, the C&NW began a campaign to clean up many parts of their properties. Bags were placed on locomotives to collect trash, and bit by bit much of the property began to get cleaned up. Toilets were placed on most of the locomotives and the time honored common drinking water jug was eventually

replaced by bottled water. The old iceboxes disappeared and small electric coolers were built in the cabs of the new locomotives for the bottled water. As strange as this sounds, I would have to rank having bottled water replacing the common drinking jug to be a major change, long overdue, during my time on the railroad. The Union Pacific was very dedicated to keeping their property and equipment very clean.

Government help for the Employees

I should also point out that to my knowledge, no operating employees, working under a national union agreement, ever received a single day for sick leave in the 20th century. If you got sick and or disabled on the railroad with a union contract, you were on your own, except for permanent disability benefits via the Railroad Retirement System. I do however understand that non-operating union railroad employees did have excellent sick leave benefits. However, when Congress promoted the establishment of non union short lines (after 1980 via the Staggers Act) with major infusions of taxpayer grants from both the states and the federal government, some of these newly created short line railroads provided sick leave, as well and short term and long term disability benefits to their operating employees. But we never had any of this on the C&NW.

I have absolutely no knowledge of any state government or the federal government rendering any assistance to a railroad employee who lost his job, or to obtain another job. Nor have I ever been told of such assistance existing from any persons, from railroad management or the unions. No counseling, no retraining to enable them to get another job. Not one penny was ever spent to assist a railroad employee who lost his job, to obtain another job, in the history of this nation, from any level of government that I ever heard about. 1 million, 850,00 rail jobs disappeared in the 20th century and their passing went completely unnoticed by our legislators. There were unemployment benefits from the railroads, which in the 1950's were $10.75 a day or $53,75 a week. This was a good benefit back in the 1950's. When I retired, this benefit had doubled and by the year 2000 was over $100 a week and this amount had been eaten up totally by inflation. Also by then, railroad unemployment benefits were subject be fully taxed and required traveling long distances every week in order to claim these taxed benefits. To this extent, these very small and heavily taxed unemployment benefits for rail workers were basically useless by the time I retired.

Crew Consist

Another major change involved what the carriers call "crew consist". When I hired out, we had 5 men on each crew. By the time I retired, this had been reduced down to 2. Due in no small part to the disappearance of the way freights and the loss of smaller industrial customers, most trains today are unit trains. Such as coal, stack, and piggy back unit trains. With the other trains, freight picked up from the larger customers is usually lined up in blocks of many cars, with little switching required. At one time at North Green Bay on the C&NW, which is a flat yard, 400 to 500 cars were actually lead

switched in an 8 hour period by a single yard crew -- one, two or three cars at a time. Today trains are switched in blocks, setting over blocks of 10 to 30 cars at a time. Unless you work on a short line where this would not necessarily be the case. So the entire scope of the business of switching has greatly changed on class 1 railroads and is now a footnote of what it had once been. Then in an industry that went from 2 million employees down to 150.000, there is not the activity that once occurred in rail operations. Railroading operations on class 1 railroads having been greatly streamlined due to providing highly selective service to preferred customers.

Unit trains do not stop between points and will usually cross half the nation without any alteration to the train. An engineer and a conductor on a unit coal train at Boone, IA will get on their train and 3-4 hours later get off in Clinton, IA, 198 miles away, running on double track. And in 5 minutes, another crew of 2 men is back on that train in Clinton going to the next terminal. On double track, a train does not have to take siding to meet another train, so it is rare on a great many trains to have to throw a switch. However, once that unit coal train arrives at its destination, this is a different story. Back when we had more men on a crew, we would get on a loaded unit coal train at Butler (Milwaukee), take it to Sheboygan, and leave it on the main line. Go down to the Edgewater Power Plant and pull the empty coal cars, take them up to the main line, and shove them into the clear, and then go get the loads. Take the loads down and spot them on several tracks at the power plant, then come back up to the main line. And next, grab the empty unit coal cars and return to Butler, all within 12 hours with just one 4-person crew. But once the crews were reduced to 2, crew 1 took the loaded unit coal train up to Sheboygan from Butler, and maybe got some of the empties pulled in 12 hours. Crew # 2 would then finish pulling the empties and spotting the loads down in the coal yard at the power plant, in 12 hours. Crew 2 was taxied up to Sheboygan from Butler and crew 1 was then taxied back to Butler. Later, crew 3 is taxied up to Sheboygan from Butler and crew 2 is taxied back to Butler to tie up. And then crew 3 gets the coal empties and returns to Butler, also taking 12 hours. When there is little or no switch work to do, a reduced crew works fine. But when there is switch work to do, it can take 3 times the number of reduced crews to do what a larger crew had previously done. Lots of changes.

Winter Railroading

Wintertime in Wisconsin on the railroad was a very difficult time in which to work. When I hired out, the change over from steam to diesel locomotives was being finalized. The first diesel locomotives, for the most part, were designed to be operated in warmer climates than Wisconsin. With the exception of the EMD built "F", "E", and the GP-7's units, every unit I ever worked on in the winter, prior to 1985, needed modifications to keep from freezing to death while working on them. Most C&NW locomotives came equipped in the early days with simple hot water heaters found on autos during the 1930's. It took decades for the manufacturers and the C&NW to come to grips with

keeping locomotives warm in a Wisconsin winter. Diesels also operate more efficiently when they are kept warm. Eventually canvas side curtains and metal radiator covers were installed to bring up the water temps on locomotives, during below zero weather. Raising temperatures from not much over 100 degrees to closer to 180 degrees. Improvements were made to weather stripping around doors and windows. The old wooden cab floors with cracks so wide one could see the roadbed under; these too were eventually replaced with more modern and insulated flooring. The first 20 years I worked on the railroad we had to wear Canadian Arctic Pak boots on locomotives to keep our feet from freezing in the coldest part of winter. To say that most locomotive cabs on the C&NW were brutally cold during winter in Wisconsin is an understatement.

Jim Yanke Photo

8505 at Sheboygan February 23,1994

On main line movements, often snow would blow into the cabs and pile up in drifts inside the cab. This, along with the bitter cold often meant that the automatic brake values on the cab controller would freeze up and no longer work. If we were out on the road on time freights when the brake valves in the cab froze up, we could not move or control the train. We had to use railroad flagging fusees to thaw out the frozen brake valve on the controller. Ice would usually form so thick on the inside of the cab windows, it was often difficult to see out. Eventually the C&NW installed larger bank type water heaters, and in some cases electric heaters, in some of the cabs. In time the manufacturers began to construct cabs which were beneficial for both crews and

equipment. On the C&NW, the company devised a system to inject alcohol into the air brake lines. Then, as time passed, our winters in Wisconsin changed greatly. To the extent that by the time I retired, Wisconsin winters were but a footnote of what they had been traditionally. Today railroad locomotive cabs are tight, insulated, weather stripped and even air-conditioned. The bottom-line being that cab comfort changed enormously during my time on the railroad. And so did the Wisconsin winters. Both for the better.

Freight trains

On the C&NW, we had two types of freights. Time freights and way freights. Time freights made time and moved quickly between two major points or terminals. Way freights worked every station up and down the line. At one time every community with a railroad track saw way freight service either every day or every other day, even the smallest of communities. Way freights serviced small town feed mills, lumber and coal yards, canning factories, foundries, farm implement dealers, bulk fertilizer dealers, grain elevators, propane and gasoline distributors, pulpwood shippers, and small manufacturing companies. Of all the things that disappeared on the railroad, when the way freights were gone, I was somewhat surprised. With the end of the way freights, all the small town depots were tore down and the agent's jobs were abolished. Class 1 railroads today move as quickly as they can between major terminals, rarely if ever stopping to do any way freight type work anywhere. Only the little short lines today do way freight work of any note, and these short lines have little economic impact. Short lines, as of this writing, live off the "crumbs" discarded by the class 1 carriers. In fact, way freight work is basically what short lines do today. Here in Wisconsin as of this writing, the state will spend several millions of dollars rebuilding a significant piece of track for a short line railroad, which may see less than 300 way freight cars of business a year - total- on the entire reconstructed line. After the smaller communities committed to trucks, getting the business back on the rails has been very difficult. It remains to be seen what effect higher fuel costs will have on the future of transportation, but once the rails are tore up, " all the king's horses and all the king's men" would be hard pressed to lay them back down again. It is just too expensive to do so. Today, class 1-rail carriers have no desire to service the small or seasonal shipper. This too has been a big change since I began my career on the railroad.

My home district was the Green Bay district. So my seniority was restricted to runs and assignments between Green Bay and Milwaukee via Sheboygan, including Manitowoc and Sheboygan yards. From Green Bay to Eland on freights --and up to Antigo on passenger trains. Up to Laona and Long Lake via Pulaski. From Oconto to Oconto Falls (at one time all the way to Clintonville). From Kaukauna over to Manitowoc and from Manitowoc to Two Rivers. My home district was similar to other C&NW districts and I would never find myself just to far from where my home and family might be. But as the railroad industry began to disappear, we found ourselves assigned to work within zones. Zones can cover several states. My zone was NE # 2.

With zones, an engineer might find himself in Kansas City one week, Des Moines the next, and Minneapolis the following week. Just trying to get clean clothes, or to obtain funds to live, covering assignments in zones became highly disruptive to all aspects of an operating employee's life. There are simply not enough adjectives to describe how zones changed the lives of railroad employees during the final years of my career. For starters, where does one choose to locate a home when one covers such a vast territory? And how many miles are to many miles to drive between your home and whatever state your assignment might be any particular week. Big changes in my lifetime if you are employed by a class 1 railroad.

Radio Communications

One other change in my lifetime on the railroad was the introduction of radio communications. Passing signals at any time, and particularly in bad weather or on long trains and around curves, was a real challenge. Once the crews obtained hand held radios and radios in the cabs, our workload became much less complicated. As the radios developed and became commonplace, we could talk to nearly anyone over half the USA and they to us. Dispatchers were located in a single building covering 20 states or more. My last dispatcher was on the number 42 desk in "the bunker" at Omaha, Nebraska, known as the Union Pacific Harriman Dispatching Center. It was rumored the cement walls were over 3 feet thick so in the event of a terrorist attack, the center would not be jeopardized. Dispatching centers became highly computerized with illuminated train boards and unlimited communication possibilities.

Radios also ushered in changes in our running orders and meets, as paper orders handled by operator / telegraphers were replaced with issuing positive blocks for advancing trains directly to the crews on the locomotive. Slow orders and such were also given to crews over printers when going on duty, totally eliminating the "middle" men. Dispatching was greatly simplified and basically was in the hands of the crew. Yard offices became more and more deserted and no longer were the active gathering places they had been generations before.

The End of the Caboose and the EOT

The cabooses disappeared and the end of the train was equipped with an End of Train device, or EOT. Some EOT's were called FRED's or Flashing Rear End Devices. The railroad men had other meanings for these letters. If the FRED sent radio signals and other important information to the engineer on the leading unit, it was called a Smart Freddy. The engineer soon found himself surrounded with computerized metal boxes with flashing lights emitting all sort of beeps and sounds, and displaying various sorts of information. Between the locomotive "talking" to the engineer, the E.O.T. "talking" to engineer, and the radio in contact with dozens of other employees, the cab of the engine had become transformed from a haven of quiet into a madhouse of sights and sounds with flashing lights. Informational overload had become part of the engineers lot in life. When I hired on, the cab of a locomotive was a sanctuary of tranquility. By the time I retired, the cab was like a high tech command center.

Jim Yanke Photo

Eastbound Freight at Sheboygan November 11, 1986

Henry Timken and the Roller Bearing

Another big change involved a man by the name of Henry Timken, a St. Louis carriage maker.
In 1898 he invented what we call today, the Timken Roller Bearing. When Henry invented the roller bearing, bearings on railroad cars were called an oil waste journal box bearing. In oil waste journals, a semi circular brass and babbitt bearing rode around the end of the axle, surrounded by a cloth waste material bathed in heavy oil. These waste journal boxes required a lot of up keep, constant oiling, and were prone to get hot and burn off the axles, often causing derailments. When I first hired out, visually inspecting trains while moving was very important. Not only by crews on the moving train, but from track side workers as well. When a waste type journal box got hot, due to a lubrication problem, which was often, it would smoke and then emit a foul odor. Railroad men called them "stinkers" and if you had a "hot box" in your train, when a track side worker saw a "hot box", he would signal a passing locomotive or caboose by holding his nose with his fingers. . This way the crew knew they had a "hot box" or "stinker" somewhere in the train. Crews on the locomotive as well as in the caboose were constantly on the lookout for "hot boxes. When a train broke into a curve as well as coming out of the curve, the guys on the head end had an opportunity to view the entire train. This was similar on the caboose. When I hired out, it was a rare trip

between Green Bay and Butler on a time freight when we did not have to set out a car due to a "hot box". When this happened, a lot of time was lost setting out the car, and then a car repair crew had to come to where the car was set out and make necessary repairs. This too was expensive and caused delays.

Henry Timken had quite a challenge selling his roller bearing idea to the railroads. In 1930 he had ALCO build a special large steam engine, which he outfitted with roller bearings, and Timken took the locomotive to more than a dozen railroads to show them the many advantages of roller bearings. This locomotive was numbered 1111 and became known as "The Four Aces". It caused a revolution in railroading and soon all newer locomotives had the expensive Timken roller bearings. However, passenger coaches on the ATSF were being equipped with Timken roller bearing as early as 1925, which greatly reduced friction and axle failure at high speeds. But it was not until 1954, 56 years after the invention of the roller bearing, that the railroads began the change over on freight cars to 100% roller bearings. This took about 10 years to accomplish and a great deal of money. And by the time the problem of "hot boxes" had nearly been eliminated by using Timken roller bearings, technology appeared in the form of the trackside high tech "hot box" detector. These "space age" detectors became so refined that in a few years, they would tell the crew via radio exactly which car it was in the train that had a problem, and what axle. By the time I retired, we had fewer "hot boxes" and more sticking brakes causing hot or sliding wheels. In the days before radios, the signal to the crew on a train for sticking brakes was to slide the palm of one hand over the palm of the other, repeatedly. Train inspection had gone high tech during my time on the railroad and roller bearings had improved speeds, reduced problems, as well as reduced fuel consumption.

Amtrak, and the combining of the Railroads

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I have not mentioned the disappearance of the interstate passenger train up to this point. Once Amtrak was created, what few passenger trains that were left on the C&NW

system, they were immediately gone. Passenger trains were called "first class trains" and they were all of that. Railroad men loved Streamliners, they were fun to work, the frosting on the cake. Railroading changed greatly after the bulk of the passenger trains were pulled off, which took place bit by bit, between 1950 and 1971. After the passenger trains were gone, things were never the same; the handwriting was on the wall. Or as Arlo Guthrie put it so wisely when he recorded "The City of New Orleans". He said, "This trains going to disappear and the railroad too". And this nation's class 1 railroads did disappear, like a house of falling cards.

When Pete Seeger recorded "Daddy What's a Train" in 1976, there were still 63 first class railroads in the USA. The number of class 1-rail carriers that were gone before 1976 was equally substantial. By the end of the 20th century, 7 class 1 railroads remained. Known today as "the magnificent seven". Talk about changes. From approximately 140 Class 1 railroads down to 7 during my time in the railroad industry. Now that is a lot of change.

Retirement

Retirement was always a touchy subject on the railroad during the time I worked. Due in no small part to the fact that jobs on most railroads disappeared at a much faster rate than men retired, creating huge surpluses for half a century. Each railroad had its own retirement rules, but the Railroad Retirement Board (RRB) had set age 65 as the age it paid out full retirement benefits, when I hired out. Not all employees wanted to retire at age 65 and many worked well past this age. Operating employees on the C&NW were forced to retire at age 70, which created some bad feelings.

Some employees going as far as falsely showing that they were younger than they actually were, having been born in an era when birth certificates were not common. Andy Dietrich, a clerk, operator, agent, who worked for over 70 years in the areas around Sheboygan to Port Washington on the C&NW, probably holds the years of service record for the C&NW. This was possible and accepted because non-operating employees had no maximum age at which retirement was necessary. But this was never the case with operating employees on the C&NW when I worked. Later on, the C&NW began to lower the age at which operating employees must retire, one year at a time, from age 70 down to 69, 68,67,66 and eventually settling at age 65. This was greeted with much dissension by the older engineers who felt they were being forced into retirement during the prime of their lives. While males could receive their full RRB pension benefits at age 65, at some point full benefits were permitted at age 62 for females only. This never created a single problem until the advent of the national Women's Liberation Movement. In order then for the government to maintain age equality, the RRB had two choices. Either raise the age for full pension for women to age 65 to be equal to the men, or to lower the full pension age for men to age 62. Without raising even a hint of suspicion, the RRB very quietly lowered the full pension age for men to age 62. And then made it

possible to receive a reduced RRB pension at age 60. The Women's Liberation Movement actually brought equal pension benefits to men, which they never had previously enjoyed, on the nations railroads. Shortly after I retired, the RRB lowered the age to receive full pension benefits even further, to age 60 for everyone. This was also due, in part, to the many surplus employees in the railroad industry. In any industry where employment opportunities drop from 2 million down to 150,000, employees become their least valuable asset. A major surplus of trained and skilled employees was one of the largest problems that American railroads had to contend with during most of the 20th century. This was also apparent on the C&NW.

Truman Koehn
Retired engineer
C&NW - UP
Green Bay
09-08-08

Jim Yanke Photo

The Author Climbing Aboard C&NW 8530 at Sheboygan