

Memories of the Milwaukee Railroad



Milwaukee Railroad Engine

"I went to work on the Signal and Communication Division of the Milwaukee Railroad on May 5th, 1952. I knew a lot of people who went to work on the Milwaukee and was lucky enough to be put on a crew with five guys from Summit. We started in Mitchell, South Dakota. We rode by car- we could have gone by train but connections were not too good for getting off Fridays. The outfit and foreman were not there when we arrived; they were driving track out of Milwaukee. We went to get a room and the next morning there was Stuckey the foreman; that was the first time I met him.

"One of the guys from Summit, the Davis kid (we called him Stinky Davis) didn't get up. Stuckey asked 'Where's he at'. We said, 'He must have overslept'. Stuckey said 'Why can't

you get him up?' So I went to the motel to wake him up. He said 'My mom said I don't have to work anymore' and Stuckey told him to go".

"Ray Stuckey was my boss for 25 years, and when he retired I got his job. I started as a 4th class Groundman, which was hard as I had been a 1st class Lineman on the Western Union. But Stuckey said the quicker you join the union the quicker you will go up the ladder. And he was right. I got to 3rd Ground man, and then Foreman in 1954. In 1964 I took Andy Nelson's job as Line Construction Supervisor- he was an assistant at the time, but they wanted to give me a title. That is when I got my office at the Depot in Minneapolis. After Stuckey retired I became General Supervisor which is what I did for the last 5 years. Then I had the office in Minneapolis and one in Chicago. I wasn't going to take the job if I had to move to Chicago and didn't get decent pay. They said they couldn't give me Stuckey's wages, but felt as long as I covered the district there was no need to be housed out of Chicago, which was fine with me."

Living on the Road

"In the beginning we stayed in boxcars- that was a hard blow to get used to after staying in hotels with the Western Union. The camp we lived in would be parked on a siding, which is a spur track along the main line. They would string red lights on either side of the camp so the train wouldn't hit it. There would be several boxcars- 2-3 to hold materials and poles, one for the kitchen, one for the foreman, and sleeping cars for the crews, and a shower car. The sleeping cars would hold 8-10 men, and there was room for 4 more in the shower car. We were usually parked near the depot, where there would be a bathroom."

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“I was the first foreman to get trailer houses for my crew to live in. We had a guy from traffic saying we could be using those boxcars for hauling pay loads instead of housing the crew. We pulled the trailers with trucks, wherever we went.”

“The trailers were set up similar to boxcars. One trailer was a kitchen; it had a refrigerator, stove, water heater, sink, and cabinet space in about one third of the trailer, the other two thirds had 2 long tables and folding chairs. We had room for 10 men. We had hot water and propane heat. The foreman’s trailer was an office. There was a bed in there, a sink and shower.”

“ Later we stayed in hotels. I wrote a letter to headquarters when I was running the crew and staying in Selby, South Dakota in the winter. I was lighting my cigarette and a breeze came in from the crack in the trailer that blew out my match. I told them about the conditions of the trailers and they wrote me a nice letter and said they were going to remedy that situation and I would be the first in line to get better trailers. That was just a pacifier, but eventually they found it was less expensive to stay in hotels. We would always have the crew stay where there was a continental breakfast. Sometimes if the breakfast was served later than their start time; I would let them start later so they could have a good breakfast. At first, each person was given an allowance, so the cheaper the hotel, the more money they had left-over. They could get a hotel for fifty cents a night, not usually the best; usually close to the railroad tracks. When the crew was given an expense account, and a receipt was required, they started staying in the better hotels that charged \$1.50 a night. That was big money for the hotels in the small towns as we would stay for 2-3 weeks.”

The Cook and the Salty Potatoes

“One time, our foreman told us if we didn’t like the food, we could cook it ourselves. Well, the cook overheard him say that, so he dumped a bunch of salt in the potatoes. At dinner, after one of the guys took a big bite of potatoes, he exclaimed ‘Man, these potatoes are salty!’ He then quickly added ‘Just the way I like them!’

Setting Poles

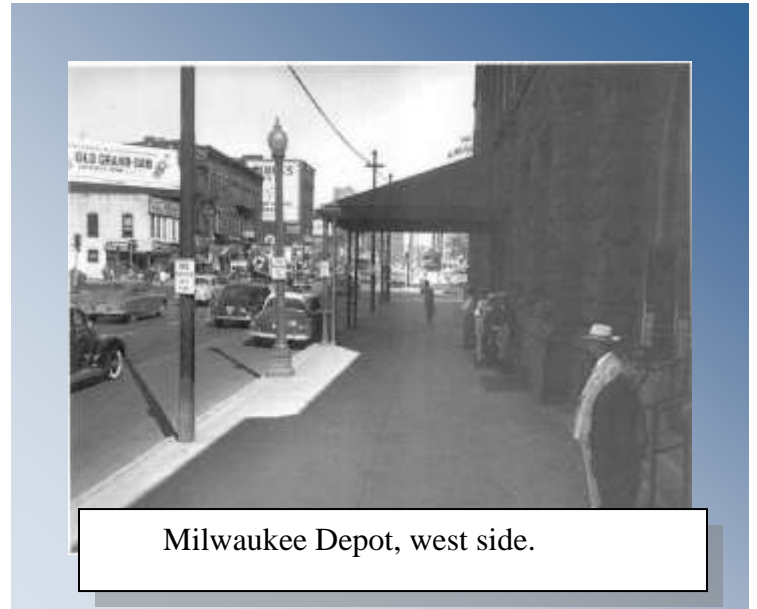
“The poles were set by hand in the early days. We used an 8 foot shovel and spoon to dig a hole about 4½ feet deep. That was for a 20 foot pole. For every five feet of pole, we had to dig another ½ foot deeper. At the road crossings most of the poles had to clear the road by 22 feet- and at the railroad crossings they had to clear by 25 feet.”

“At first we used butt-treated poles, just the ends were treated, later they were totally treated with creosote, so they would not rot. But, I found some poles where the creosol just covered up the bad wood.”

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“Those poles had to be hauled by motor cars and push cars, so we had to get a lineup of all the trains and operate between the trains. Sometime we’d no sooner get out there with poles that we’d have to get off the track. Sometimes we’d have 20-25 poles to distribute.”

“We would eyeball the poles to be sure they were straight. We had pike poles to push it one way or the other, then we would tamp it down with dirt and rocks. Sometimes, if it was on a hill where we couldn’t get to it, the lineman would climb an old pole and throw the rope over the cross arm in order to get it straight. We could set about 40 a day in those days. In 1956, we started buying caterpillars and jeeps with a pole digger. Don was working on the railroad with me around that time.”



Foreman

“Once I had to relieve a foreman named McDowell down in Iowa. He had a stove back up and he suffocated in bed. I had to sleep in that bed and in that trailer until they appointed someone else as foreman. I was good enough to fill in, but not to be the foreman I guess. My brother Don was on that crew, too.”

“In 1954, two years after starting, I got the foreman’s job, down by Terra Haute, Indiana. I had been relieving other supervisors on vacation, also had been foreman for the Western Union. I said to Stuckey ‘How do I get home from there?’ and he said ‘Don’t worry about getting home, worry about getting there’.

“I had to take a rules exam every year. The tests were different for supervisors and working people, there were safety rules and codes for different classes.”

“One time I asked for a set of binoculars so I could see if the lines were down from far away. Stuckey said that would be a good idea, then I could see if the men were working too. I said I don’t believe in spying on my men.”

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Morse Code

"In the early railroad days we used the Morse code to communicate the railroad lineup. Some places all they had were telegraph keys, and no phone -when you got a lineup it would come by the telegraph. We would get a copy and would have to sign our names so they knew who was out on the track."

"I had a 23 jewel Leveret Elgin watch. I bought it in Minneapolis and paid \$25.00 when I was on leave from the Army. When I bought it, I didn't know how important it would become to me on the railroad. You had to have a watch on the railroad. We were supposed to check our watches with the clock at the depot every morning, which were set by 'standard' time. The depot agent would set the railroad clocks every day at 11 AM by Morse code- it was the same with the Western Union. There were 'standard' clocks located at different places. Newport, St Croix, South Minneapolis, Shakopee and the C-office* all had standard clocks. It was the job of the supervisor to set the clocks after Daylight Savings time; that is how important time was on the railroad. The trains needed to be on time and we needed to know when the trains were coming or it could be fatal. Years later, I sold my watch at a rummage sale for \$250.00. It needed a new balance staff and the watch fob was worn out, it needed to be filled in with gold."

** The C-line was the office in Minneapolis. Each of the main offices had a letter- Chicago, Milwaukee, Aberdeen, Mile City and Deer Lodge Montana.*

Ice Storms

"Ice storms were emergencies and we would have to go immediately if the lines were down. I even had to go after I got Stuckey's job."

I remember once in Montana- it was snowing and blowing, and we had to get from Miles City to Round-up. That was a cowboy town, with wooden sidewalks. The power was out- no lights. At the old saloon we got a guy to fix us something to eat in the fireplace. That is where we talked with a farmer whose cattle went with the storm, 17 miles from town, to keep the storm to their backs. The whole herd crowded up in a fence corner and suffocated.

One year, on May 15th there was an ice storm west of Mobridge, South Dakota. We couldn't get any further; the roads were closed on the other side of the bridge. They weren't running snow plows, but we had to get to the other side to check the lines. The depot said they were going to run the snowplow and they put me on the 2nd engine."



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“There were 14-16 foot drifts- I was trying to count the mile posts, but I lost track after the first snow bank. The doors of the engine opened out, so they had to dig me out. Then I got in the caboose, but I couldn't see much more and the mile posts were covered with snow. We had 125 miles from Mobridge to Lemmon that we were supposed to assess. All I could figure out was what was down between towns. We ended up hitting some cattle with our snow plow.”

“We wore parkas, wool pants on top of long johns, but we didn't have hooded sweatshirts back then. We had to wear a lineman's safety strap, it would go around us and we would hook it to a strap around the pole. Our shirts would come out of our pants- it sure would have been nice to have those extra long shirts they sell today. I started wearing glasses when I was 39, the cold didn't bother me until I came in and my glasses were all fogged up.”

Working Out West

“I had to ride the rail and assess the poles. We either went by hy-rail or motor car. The hy-rail was a pickup and it's wheels ran on the rail. The motor car ran on the tracks and we would have to back-track to get to our truck, then load up the motor car and go another 25 miles past where we parked the truck.”

“Each mile was marked by a mile post and there were 40 poles to a mile. I would mark down the ones that needed to be replaced due to rotted wood, or maybe the insulator was shot off. In the west there was so much snow, most of the tops of the poles would be rotted out. The line man would drive me, and he would go 5-10 miles hour so I could write everything down. If the motor car had a cab on it I had to stand on a board (they called it a car door) placed on the handle bars so I could see. I would take notes standing up as he drove. I usually understood everything I scribbled down- and then would rewrite it later. I never worried about trains coming down the track; that was up to the line man. Of course, I would read the line up before we got going”.

“I remember riding the hy-rail from Harlowton to Louistown, Montana. The deer were so thick you could almost touch them”.

“The Milwaukee decided to dismantle its electrification and they thought I could handle the tear down; I spent a lot of time in Montana. The trains going through the mountains used electrification with big copper lines that were worth a lot of money. There was a lot of theft as they were tearing it down. I would go to Miles City, Montana after church on Sunday. I would drive all day and make it there by around midnight. Then I would get up around 4 am to get where I needed to be to check on the crews. They never knew when I was coming. But they were usually working and doing what they were supposed to do. I had a brand new Dodge company car then- that was 1973.”

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“As Line Construction Supervisor, I would make estimates on line construction: if a new industry wanted a side track, or if we needed to route a pole line due to road construction, or cable for freeways. I would figure out how many feet of cable, how long the job should take, and estimate the cost of labor and materials.”

“Ernie Breyer was a lineman in Plumber Junction, Idaho (he lived at Plumber and worked at the junction). He could call elk and they would come charging. He married a woman with a family. During the Expo in Spokane, he wanted us to come out and spend a week with them. That was the way they were. I'd have my lunch at noon and he asked 'What did you have to pay for that?' and I told him, then he said, 'Don't buy any more.' After that, his wife would pack me a lunch. When I'd thank him he'd say 'Someday you can buy me a steak dinner'. Then before I left Othello, Washington, he said 'Now you can buy me a steak dinner' ...and that's what I did”.

Bankruptcy and the Merger

“In the 1970's, the Milwaukee was having more financial problems. That was a real nightmare, always telling me I was going to be moving. They thought I should be out on the west end, they thought they needed a supervisor. I even looked in the paper for churches when I was in Spokane in 1976.”

“In 1979, when I was 52 years old, I was in Missoula, spending the week. The secretary of transportation said, “Let the Milwaukee go” when they were talking about going bankrupt. He didn't want the government to bail us out. We reorganized and cut off the west end. The trains ran as far as Miles City and Aberdeen. That was the end of talk of me moving west.”

“I retired in 1985, it was shortly before that there had been rumors of a merger with the Northwest, and others, but they ended up merging with the Soo Line. I worked about four months after the merger was complete. After they merged, they had a duplication of supervision and they offered early retirement to the older supervisors. I found out about it after we came back from our trip to Mackinac Island. I was supposed to pick up a new company car in Milwaukee and they asked me if I got a letter. I called home and asked Ma if we had gotten any mail, and she opened the letter, it was about taking early retirement.”



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“So I didn’t go anywhere that week. I was going to Chicago but I went home, I had a lot of thinking to do. I only had two weeks to make up my mind. I called Bill Cassidy; he met me in St. Paul and we had quite a visit. He thought it would be the best for me to take the early retirement, unless I wanted to exercise seniority and start climbing poles, and I didn't want to do that. I was only 58 and a half and that was a big decision to make. They offered me a 2-year payoff, 50% of my wages and I started drawing supervisor pension at the same time. So I was almost taking home as much pay as when I was working. Then we started on railroad retirement when I was 60. We had some real big months for about 6 months (50% pay plus railroad retirement and supervisor pension).”

“Once I made up my mind, I had to break in a guy to take over my job. Ken Mahoney from Prairie Du Chien and I covered the territory for the next two weeks. The last week we met up with Frank Kramer, the head of the Sioux Line communication. Frank used to work for the Milwaukee, he stayed with us at Bensenville, Illinois (17 miles west of Chicago) when he was a special lineman. He worked there 2 1/2 years putting in cable “talkbacks”, that was before automatic throw switches and they used talk backs to communicate.”

“Then I went to Austin; Bill Cassidy was there. I left the company car and came home with him. They had coffee and party at the depot for all of the people that were leaving, but I didn’t care to go. The date was June 30, 1985.”

“I only had the new company car for two weeks- it was the only one that had air conditioning. I started driving the school bus for Timothy that fall when school started, in 1985 and stopped in 1991.”



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Signal and Communication Staff Meeting December 4th 1974 in Chicago



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Milwaukee Road Depot

Picture 749 of 1148. Picture date: 1999-01-25.

