

MEMORIES OF BEING FORCED UP-THE-ROAD FIFTY YEARS AGO

by Abram Burnett © (March 23, 2013)

I grew up in a railroad family in Roanoke. When I finished high school at age 18, the N&W would not hire a man for Train & Engine service until age 21 in Virginia, but would hire at age 18 in Ohio. So I got a pass to ride No. 3 to Portsmouth and hired out on June 3, 1964, as a Fireman on “The Valley” of the Scioto Division, the district between Portsmouth and Columbus. I did not relish the life there and several months later when I heard that the N&W would now hire at age 18 in Virginia, I resigned from the Scioto Division and returned to Virginia and hired as a Brakeman on the Radford Division, where my Grandfather and namesake had been employed six decades earlier.

I was the fourth generation of my family to work on the N&W, and when I hired my father said to me, “Son, the railroad is like a great womb – do your job and it will take care of you from the cradle to the grave.” (My, how things have changed over the last half century!)

My “training” for the Brakeman’s job consisted of riding (without pay) one round trip to Bluefield on an empty train west and a coal train east, riding one round trip on a Time Freight to Bristol, and spending one day on the Salem Shifter. My first call for a “paid trip” was for Extra 367 West at 6:30PM on August 11, 1964, a hopper train with 225 empties, Engines 367-317-915-912-854-309. Ralph H. Thompson was the Engineman and I was the Head End Brakeman. Conductor C.J. “Musty” Hayes and Flagman Bob Guill were on caboose 518203 at the rear of the train. Our train was on #1 Empty Side Yard at West Roanoke and we departed at 7:28PM.

We passed Salem at 7:53PM and were delayed at the west end of Balls Hole from 8:14 to 8:23PM for a sticking brake on the second car and for a low oil alarm on Eng 309. We passed Christiansburg at 9:20, met No. 16 at Belspring, passed Glen Lyn at 11:05PM, and hit the Yard Board at East Bluefield at 12:01AM. I dropped off at the Bluefield East Yard Office and was relieved 25 minutes later, along with the Conductor and the Flagman, while the Engineman took the train to West Yard alone (standard practice.) All Radford Division crews arriving at Bluefield cut their cabooses off on the fly and dropped them into either the Slow Freight Cab Track or the Time Freight Cab Track at the East Yard Office.

“Forced Up-the-Road”

I was having a great time riding the through freights and did not know of the little “scam” that went on amongst the Train Service employees regarding job assignments. The deal was that there were certain undesirable “up-the-road” (away from home) assignments and the youngest men were usually force-assigned to them because none of the older men would bid on advertised vacancies. One of those up-the-road runs was the Second Saltville Shifter, a night local that ran between Glade Spring and Saltville. There were very few Trainmen living at the west end of the Bristol Line, and the two newest Brakemen on the Roanoke Extra List were invariably forced onto the jobs. The “up-the-road” locals were undesirable in that they caused one to live away

from home, and also because they were only five day a week assignments. If a Trainman could hold the extra board out of Roanoke, he generally worked six days per week (three round trips,) frequently worked seven days per week, and if business were really good he could occasionally make an eighth day's pay in one week by "doubling the road" (getting two calls within the same twenty-four hour period,) getting minimal rest and little time at home, I should add. The Hours of Service Law allowed us to work sixteen hours per day at that time.

Early on the morning of August 17, the Crew Caller called with the unexpected news that I had been force-assigned as Middle Brakeman on the Second Saltville job and should deadhead to Glade Spring on Train No. 41, The Pelican, which left Roanoke around daylight. This I did, and thus began my introduction to life in quiet little Glade Spring.

There were two locals that ran between Glade and Saltville. The First Saltville Shifter reported at 7:00AM and made a trip to Saltville and return, switching Plasterco en route. The Second Saltville Shifter reported at 3:00PM, used the same engine and caboose, and made an identical trip to Saltville and return. Other than U.S. Gypsum at Plasterco and Olin Matheson at Saltville, there were no patrons on the Saltville Branch. In steam days, these jobs always used Y-class 2-8-8-2s.

My first trip on the Second Saltville Shifter was on August 17, 1964, and we reported at the Telegraph Office in the Glade Spring station at 3:00PM. The Engineman was R.O. "Frog" Lester, the Conductor was Saylor F. Beard (who filling in, off the Roanoke Conductor's Extra List, for regular Conductor Howard L. "Nip" Eller,) the Flagman was C.E. Meredith (also force assigned from Roanoke.) The Head End Brakeman, Vernon "Peco" Norris. The caboose on this run was 518172.

On this run we had Engines 870 and 334. We switched out the required number empty box cars from the Clean Out Hole at Glade, coupled to the inbound cars that had been set off for us by the through freight runs on the "Hill Tracks" west of Glade, and departed Glade at 4:13PM. We switched at Plasterco from 4:31PM to 7:55pm, then switched at Saltville from 8:02PM to 11:50PM. We arrived back at Glade Spring at 12:15AM, set out our "east cars" and "west cars" for pick up on the Hill Tracks, and were relieved a half hour later. My brakeman's pay was \$17.76 for 8 hours, or about \$2.22 per hour. In Through Freight service, the rate of pay for eight hours or a hundred miles was \$17.56, but the Saltville Shifters paid two and one-half cents more per hour since they were heavy switching jobs and were classified as "Local Freight" for pay purposes.

Unfortunately I did not record the number of cars handled on my first trip down the Saltville Branch. But on August 30, with the same crew and Engines 755 and 530, we handled 32 loads and 20 empties, 3296 tons (written as "32x20-3296") on the trip to Saltville, and on the trip back to Glade we handled "2x17-562." What made these particular eastbound trains so heavy was the loads of coal going to Olin Matheson at Saltville, a lot of which coal came off the Southern at Bristol, with the balance coming off the N&W Pocahontas Division. If there were no coal being handled on a particular day, the eastbound trains into Saltville would be almost all empties, and the westbounds back to Glade would be almost all loads.

Frequently we had to “double out” of Saltville account too much tonnage for one trip. This was the case on December 31, 1964, with Engs 654 and 778. On the first trip we brought out 20 cars, 1176 tons, and on the second trip we brought out 26 cars, 1927 tons, with a total of 9 hours 55 minutes on duty.

The men on the First and Second Glade Spring Shifters all lived locally, except for two of the three brakeman's jobs on the Second Saltville Shifter, and these two vacancies were always filled by force-assigning the youngest trainmen out of Roanoke. That meant that the Second job always had two force-assigned green-horn brakemen on it. The regularly assigned Conductor on the Second job was Howard L. "Nip" Eller. The Head End Brakeman was Vernon "Peco" Norris, and the Engineman was Robert O. "Frog" Lester, who was Norris's cousin.

The first time I was force-assigned to the Second Saltville run, it was as the Middle Brakeman, and then later I was force-assigned again, this time as the Flagman. I also caught one-week vacation relief assignments on Saltville jobs several times later while working the Roanoke Extra List, and usually deadheaded down on No. 41 to cover them. If I was sent down for a week on the First Saltville Shifter, the 7AM job, I would ride No. 17 out of Roanoke at 9:16PM the night before. We always deadheaded by passenger train back then, and sometimes by freight train, riding on the caboose. Any Conductor would haul you as long as you told him you were deadheading.

Naturally, Conductor Nip and Head End Brakeman Peco on the Second Saltville job were not enthusiastic about always having to work with the two most recently hired men, but that was the luck of the draw for them. And of course, any force-assigned green-horn immediately filed a telegram to the Trainmaster asking him to please, please, please advertise his job as soon as some new man was marked up, so he could go back home!

Why did the Saltville jobs (and some of the other locals) have a "Middle Brakeman"? Well, this was in the days before radios, and it was the Middle man's job to ride on top of the train and, when switching, to pass signals (relay hand signals) from the Conductor and Brakeman in the field to the Engineman. This was especially necessary when switching on the curves at Plasterco. At Plasterco, we usually carried the caboose next to the engine, so the Middle Man would have a decent place to ride while passing signals. (Yes, we rode on top of the caboose and held onto the grab irons atop the cupola.) The caboose or a load of coal next to the engine afforded a good place to ride, but a box car was too high and the overhead obstructions across the track at Plasterco would not clear a man on the top.

A Typical Day's Work

A typical day's work on one of the Saltville Shifters went as follows. All members of the train crew (Conductor and Brakemen) reported at the Telegraph Office where the Conductor registered his train on the branch and received his switching instructions from the Operator or one of the Agent's clerks. The Engineman, however, reported at the Engineman's Register Room, which was in a tiny brick building, the only remnant of the old Glade Spring main line coal wharf. The train crew then walked to the Engine Track, met the Engineman and brought the engines off the engine track. The first work was to switch out of the Clean Out Track as many

empty box cars and bulkhead flats as had been ordered by Plasterco. Then the crew went up to the Hill Tracks west of Maple Street and coupled to the Saltville cars which had been set off by eastbound and westbound through freights, numbers 95, 51, 88, First 52 and Second 52. With all these cars, the train headed down the Branch to Saltville, nine miles away.

US Gypsum at Plasterco was the first “work” on the local, pulling loads and placing empties. It was a nasty place to work due to all the white mineral on the ground – in wet weather one’s feet sank down in white mud. Plasterco shipped its product both in box cars and on bulkhead flats. Both the First and the Second Saltville jobs completely “tore down” the place, pulling everything out of the plant and setting it up again from scratch, and placed loads of coal at the powerhouse.. The “re-sets” (cars which were only partially loaded and had to be set back in place) caused the switching headaches. Switching was also difficult because all the tracks were on curves and, due to both curvature and buildings; the brakemen had to string out to relay hand signals to the Engineman. Both locals spent several hours a day in Plasterco.

The worst of the work was over by the time we left Plasterco. At Saltville we simply cut away from the inbound cars destined to Olin Matheson, ran around the loads we had picked up at Plasterco, and found the outbound cars which the Olin crew had brought up for us. At this point, we usually “Took Twenty” (stopped for a bite to eat.) If the weather were nice, we walked two blocks to a little diner on the main street and ordered a hot dog and a Grapette soda, which together cost thirty-five cents.

The N&W had no Agent at Saltville (his job having been abolished several years earlier and the station closed,) so there was no one to coordinate our interchanges with the Olin crew. We just “looked out for” the Olin crew, so that no conflicts arose. Olin did have a Yardmaster in their plant, but he never came up to our yard. Occasionally he would send the one of the Olin engines up with a message that there were “hot” cars, not yet loaded, for which we would have to wait.

After our “Twenty,” we classified (“blocked,” to use the modern term) all the cars which would go back to Glade Spring. We made up three blocks: Bristol, Roanoke and Radford. Most of the Radford cars were empty hoppers, which would be moved to Bluefield by a job called “The Short Run.” When all the cars were classified and the train made up, we returned to Glade Spring and set them on one of the Hill Tracks west of the Glade Spring Wye, the Bristol’s tied down at the west end, and the Radford’s (head out) and Roanoke’s (behind the Radford’s) tied down at the east end. Then we put the engines away and registered off duty at the depot.

Both ends of the Hill Tracks west of Glade Spring were protected by derails, and early in my time on the Saltville Shifter I had a learning-laden experience with one of those derails. After we had spotted our outbounds at the proper ends of whichever of the Hill Tracks we were using, one of the Brakemen was assigned the duty of tying the cars down with hand brakes, re-applying the derails, and closing up the switch from the passing siding to the Hill Tracks, after which his work was done and he made the long walk down to the engine storage track. I was the Brakeman designated for this closing-up job. During the few minutes it took to accomplish this work, the rest of the crew made a quick dash to put the engine away and report off duty. It was not an efficient way to work as the tie-down took only several minutes and the engine could have easily

waited, but the Conductor and the Engineman were always in a hurry to be relieved as quickly as possible. This practice made a lot of extra walking for one of the new men... me!

Several weeks into my "Glade Spring Experience," I was left up on the hill to do this closing-up work while the rest of the crew "ran for the quit." After doing my thing, I walked down to the engine track and the Conductor met me there and said, "You left one of the derails off." The night was pitch black and I asked him how he knew I had left a derail off. "Walk over to the main line with me," he said. He then pointed westward into the darkness and said, "See those crossing flasher lights blinking at the road crossing? The derails are wired into them. If you leave one of the derails off, the flashers keep flashing. Now go back and fix your mistake!" The crew had already been registered off duty and I asked if I could get a few minutes extra paid time for walking up the hill and back down again. The answer was a string of curse words. That long walk in the darkness taught me a lesson, and the mistake was one never to be repeated. (This particular road crossing today shows as Maple Street, but back then there was a street sign which showed it as "Hillman Rd.")

Sometimes we had to wait for "hot" cars coming out of Olin. One of my time book entries shows a three hour wait one night. If the Conductor needed to communicate with the Operator at Glade Spring, there was a crank telephone in a Company T-Box near the road crossing at the upper end of Saltville Yard. There was still a rickety pole line between Glade and Saltville which carried two wires on the cross arm – wires for the railroad's telephone. (Some railroad stations did not have a "city phone." Payne, Va, on the Winston-Salem District, never had a city phone up until the day it closed in the mid-1970s.)

Under what operating rules was the Saltville Branch operated? By 1964, the system of "Time Table and Train Orders" had been abandoned on the Branch and it was operated by "Register Rights." There were no scheduled trains on the Branch, no one gave authority for a train to operate on it, and all trains could proceed without either schedule or Train Orders. In the Telegraph Office at Glade Spring was a large book called the "Saltville Branch Train Register." The Conductor of any train wishing to use the Branch had to check to see if any train which had previously registered "on the branch" had also registered "off the branch." A train that had thusly "registered on the branch" could move in either direction without fear of meeting an opposing or following train. In registering his train on the Train Register, a Conductor listed his train symbol (which was the word "Extra" followed by the engine number and the direction, "West",) and signed his last name. All this was covered by Timetable Special Instruction. To fail to register one's train "off the branch" at the end of a trip was unforgivable, for it prevented the next train from using the Branch.

Undesirables from Dog Town

The regular men on the Saltville jobs always referred to Roanoke (and specifically to Shaffers Crossing) as "Dog Town." You can understand why when you realize that they themselves were sometimes forced to Roanoke (e.g. when being marked up on the Conductor's Extra List,) and then had to live in "the VASCO" at Shaffers Crossing. "The VASCO" was the railroad's decrepit, dimly lit and greasy-spoon "beanery" (restaurant) with rooms upstairs,

operated by an outfit called Virginia Supply Co., which supposedly was owned by some big officials. Glade Spring'ers and other unfortunate "up-the-road people" forced to Roanoke rented a bed there until they had enough seniority to bid back home. Therefore, we frequently heard the regular men on the Saltville Shifters say things like, "I have two new green-horn brakemen from Dog Town." Such appellations made one feel really welcome on the Saltville job.. The sense of exclusion for a Dog Town'er was exacerbated by the fact that Peco Norris, the Head End Brakeman on the Second Shifter, "ran" the job (i.e. called the moves) and generally made it uncomfortable for any green-horn brakeman. Ergo, "getting forced to Glade" was not an experience one relished, and it certainly was not conducive to the learning that newer employees needed to acquire. The older generation of railroaders was not replete with good teachers.

Our Accomodations

"Accomodations" for a Dog Town'er who landed in Glade were spartan. The Comp'ny furnished an old wooden box car with a door and several windows cut into it, placed a quarter mile west of the depot and on the north side of the main line. It was painted M-of-W green and white. It sat on a track that was "depressed" in a ditch about three feet below grade, and a large wooden gang-plank had been laid up to the door. The door was locked with a brass switch lock. The engine storage track was adjacent to our Hotel Glade Spring. These tracks were immediately west of the switch where the east leg of the wye entered the passing siding.

There were six army surplus metal-frame bunks, in an over/under configuration, in this "facility," and the "mattresses" were horsehair seat cushions from cabooses. One brought his own blanket. No one brought sheets or pillows.... You folded the blanket in half lengthwise and put one half under your body and the other half on top. One fellow brought a sleeping bag. There were also six wooden lockers built into the bunk area, where one could stow his gear. If you were sent "up-the-road" to Glade, this was your accommodation. Sometimes an extra list Operator was shipped from Roanoke to cover a vacancy at the station, and he would also put in at this seaport and bunk with us.

The car was partitioned, the east end having the bunks and the middle being the "kitchen." We carried in water from a pump to wash our dishes. The west end of the car had been partitioned off, with a locked door, by one of the car inspectors for his own little room. The kitchen was equipped with an oil stove, which both heated the car and provided for cooking. As for utensils, the fellows had brought a few pots and pans, and that was it. You either purchased some groceries and heated them up, or you walked to the town restaurant for your meals. None of us ate well. The only heat for the entire car was the stove in the kitchen area. The toilet was a wooden outhouse. As you can imagine, our "lodging facility" was as hot as blazes in Summer, and as cold as Alaska in Winter!

If one wanted to wash up after work at Glade Spring, there was a very small brick building a few feet east our "wooden hotel," which served as the Enginemen's Register Room. I think it was a building left over from the old Glade Spring Main Line coal wharf. This building was only large enough for a desk for the Enginemen's Register, a toiler and a grungy shower. Save for these marvelous amenities, one was on his own when "forced up the road to Glade."

I should add that living in a converted box car was not standard for the N&W trainman who got bounced around from assignment to assignment. In most places he would spend his time between runs cooking and sleeping on the caboose, as was the case when assigned to the locals working out of Radford, Bristol and Bluefield. But at Glade Spring there was only one caboose and it was used by both the First and the Second Saltville Shifters, and therefore was unavailable for bunking arrangements.

In the town itself, there were only three things that a Dog Towner needed. One was a little barber shop, across the town square from the depot. Haircuts cost a quarter. The second was the town's very small grocery store. The third was The Eagle Diner, located in a tumble-down old brick building situated directly west of the depot and across the grassy plot where the new "tin" station building was later built. The Eagle was run by a very pleasant older lady whom everyone called "Granny Norris." The fare was humble (breakfast items, hamburgers, beans, soda,) and for less than 50 cents one could get a better meal than he could wrestle up in the Comp'ny's Glade Spring Box Car Hotel. Granny's big vice in life was collecting coins, and she carefully studied every coin which was given her in payment for a meal. If one were feeling cosmopolitan, he could purchase a copy of the area's newspaper, the Saltville Progress, a weekly, which sold for a nickel. There was also a bank on the town square, where I opened an account since I had no idea how long it would be before I could get back to Roanoke,

The Station

Several times I have been asked about the old station at Glade Spring as of the time of my hiring. As of 1964, only the west end of the truly massive earlier brick station remained. The "freight warehouse room" had been torn off the east end of the building, probably due to the fact that the roof leaked and the railroad had exited the Less-Than-Carload ("LCL") business a few years earlier and no longer needed a warehouse for freight shipments.

In the remaining western portion of the structure was located one large room which housed the "Telegraph Office" (although the telegraph was no longer used) where the Operator worked, and several desks for the clerks who did the waybilling and kept the accounting records. (The station at Saltville had been closed earlier, and all waybilling for cars out of Saltville and Plasterco was done at Glade Spring.) I think the Station Agent had a small private office off east side of the main Telegraph Office area. There was also a ticket window on the east side of this room, and passengers would come to this window to purchase their tickets. The Operator's desk was on the west side of the building, facing the tracks, and he had levers for the mechanically operated Train Order semaphore signals. The Train Register for train crews going on duty was located on a small shelf in the Telegraph Office.

After the demolition of the warehouse portion of the station building, there had been no attempt to cover or close up the demolition damage, and the bare timbers were exposed on the remaining portion of the building. The only thing which I got out of the old structure was the old brass Adams Express Co. wax sealer, which I found in the drawer of an old desk and which I will make sure goes back to Glade Spring someday. I think its impression says "Southern Express Co."

The Agent's name was William Hill, and I think he was a 1941-hire. He always met No. 41, the early morning passenger train, and sometimes No. 46, and then was often out on business for the rest of the day. His father, Lester Hill, was a Norfolk Division Passenger Conductor who held one of the three "sides" of the Monroe-Bristol crew assignment on No. 41, which meant his westbound train came through Glade Spring every third morning. Lester was a 1917 or 1918-hire, as I recall. Bill Hill was always on hand when his father's train came through.

There was an Operator on duty in the depot around the clock. The only Operator I recall by name was the second trick man, Cotton P. Belcher (pronounced "Belker," following the German origin of that surname.) I have vivid memories of Cotton being out on the platform each evening with his green and white kerosene lanterns, to "flag" No. 18, the eastbound Birmingham Special. Glade was a "flag stop" for No. 18, and the train would only stop "on signal" (which meant being flagged with a green and white flag by day, or a green and a white lantern by night.) This notwithstanding, I do not recall a single night that No. 18 did not make a stop at Glade.

In the following year, 1965, when I had enough seniority to hold the Extra List at Roanoke, the last portion of the old Glade Spring station was torn down and a much smaller new tin building was constructed immediately west of the old building. It housed the Operator, Agent, ticket window, perhaps a clerk, and the Train Register for crews. The semaphore Train order signal was replaced with a color light signal (red/green.) I do not have any memories of the new tin building being built. It just suddenly appeared, and the old station disappeared. It was not unusual for a Roanoke Extra List Brakeman to spend most of his time working "on the river," i.e. the runs to Bluefield, and to get down the Bristol Line only occasionally, and I was simply on the wrong part of the division when the old station was torn down.

In 1964, six passenger trains per day stopped at Glade Spring: Nos. 17-18, the Birmingham Special, Nos. 41-42, the Pelican, and Nos. 45-46, the Tennessean. Every road freight in both directions stopped to pick up and set off at Glade Spring, and these were westbound Time Freights 95 (which occasionally ran in two sections, First 95 and Second 95,) 51 (which usually ran in two sections, First 51 and Second 51,) and eastbound Time Freights 88 (which occasionally ran in two sections, First 88 and Second 88) and 52 (which almost always ran in two sections, First 52 and Second 52.) There was also a daily local freight each way, six days per week, between Radford and Bristol, which I think was numbered 101 and 102. All of the Time Freights invariably "worked" (set off/picked up) at Radford, too, and usually they "worked" at Pulaski as well. If a Time Freight crew had "no work" at Pulaski, they felt lucky.

I will conclude my memories of braking in Glade Spring 50 years ago with three personal experiences.

OILING UP THE CAPTAIN

One Autumn night we were leaving Glade Spring early and it was just beginning to grow dark. I was on the caboose with Conductor Saylor Beard (his real name) who had "hired old" and who, even though he was near 60, could hold only the Conductors' Extra List out of Roanoke. (I think

Saylor hired around 1947 or 1948.) I do not recall whether he had been force assigned to the Second Saltville job, or whether he had been sent down on a “vacation relief” assignment.

Now, when taking charge of a caboose, the flagman had a number of unwritten duties. First and foremost, he took a piece of cotton waste and wiped the coal dust out the Conductor’s seat in the cupola. If he failed to do this, he heard about it. Then he wiped out the seat on his side of the cupola. Next he made sure all three wall lamps and the red and white flagging lanterns were filled with kerosene, and trimmed the wicks, if necessary. Then he swept out the caboose and supplied it with ice and water. One thing the flagman never forgot to do was fetch a big block of ice from the ice house, and chip it into the five gallon galvanized water bucket, using the ice pick which was stuck in the wall of every caboose, just above the little sink.

On the day in question, I must have had other things on my mind (I had just turned 19 years old) as I completely forgot to fill the lamps with oil. And so it came to pass that, leaving Saltville on our return trip, Saylor Beard sat down on the horsehair bunk cushion to write up his wheel report, using a big clip board. Since it was growing dark, he lit the kerosene lamp on the wall, but in a minute or so the flame sputtered and died. He jacked up the wick and lit the lamp again. Same results... the flame died again. Having figured out my failure to fill the lamps, he began grumbling and calling my abilities and intelligence into question in a very unambiguous way.

“Oh, I’ll fix that, Captain” I said. (We always addressed the Conductor as “Captain” back in those days.) Quickly I grabbed the oil can (which held about a gallon and a half of kerosene,) unscrewed the filler cap on the lamp, and began filling the lamp’s oil tank, leaning over the seated Captain to do the job. Just at that moment the slack ran in for some reason, I lost my balance, the oil can’s spout came out of the filler hole, and kerosene went all over Saylor, his shirt, his bald head, and even worse, all over his sacred wheel report which was, by this time, half finished! The things he said about me, I cannot put into this memoir. Lesson learned.

I once asked Saylor Beard how he had acquired his name. He said, “The week I wuz born, there wuz two preachers in town, Saylor and Flory. My mother named me after them both.” End of issue.

A VERY CLOSE CALL

The second personal experience I shall relate concerns the closest brush with death I ever had in my 46 year railroad career. It happened at the upper (or west) end of Saltville Yard, and I had only been on the railroad three or four months. We were classifying the train we would take back to Saltville, switching out the Radfords, the Roanokes and the Bristols. Conductor Nip Eller was working the switches at the upper end of the yard and Head End Brakeman Peco Norris was kicking the cars and pulling the cut levers. The other brakeman was probably somewhere coupling air hoses. We had a lot of empty hoppers for Bluefield that night and my instructions were to ride the first cut of empty hoppers down Track 3, stop them in the clear, “catch” the other empties as they were kicked down into the track against me, and keep drifting

the entire string of cars downhill as more cars were cut into the track. It was an unnecessary exercise and such a thing would never be done today, but that's the way we worked back then. Given the fact that we had two green-horn men (myself and the other brakeman) working in the darkness, it was also an unwise move and in retrospect I would even say it was a dangerous thing to have done.

I rode the first cut of four empties into the track and, using the hand brake on the west end of the eastern most car, slowed them to a crawl. Then several more small cuts came in against me, and I drifted the string of cars further down the track. In the darkness it was, of course, impossible to anticipate when the next cut of cars would strike the cars I was riding. And then came a tremendous impact when a cut of about eight hoppers, moving much too fast for conditions, hit the cars I was riding. I remember hearing the crash and feeling the surge of motion as the car I was riding accelerated from a near stand-still to about 15MPH, all in a split second. I lost my balance, my feet came off the brake platform and I was dazed. The next thing I remember was dangling from the end of the car, my right hand in a death-grip on a grab iron, and looking down at the shiny rail and the crossties moving just a few feet beneath me in the darkness. That was a close call, indeed. The lesson learned was always to choose a brake so located that, in the event of a bad impact, the body would be thrown against the end of the car, not away from it. No safety rule I have ever seen embodied that piece of wisdom. That night's frightening experience will go with me to the grave.

TRIED AND SENTENCED IN JUST SIX WORDS

The third incident I shall relate is an embarrassing one, and concerns throwing a derail under an engine.

As I have mentioned earlier, the only thing high-speed about the Saltville Branch jobs was "the Quit." After arrival back at Glade, everyone raced to get the engine put away and to "register off duty." And so on this particular night I was doing my usual duty of working the high-level switch stand on the East Leg of the Glade Spring Wye, to put the engine away on the Engine Track. Now, this switch had a pipe-connected derail associated with it. The derail was there to keep a stored engine from moving off the track unexpectedly. And, of course, it was dark... and it was a Friday night. The Conductor and the Engineman, who lived locally, wanted to go home, and the three Roanokers on the crew wanted to catch No. 18 or No. 42 and shake the dust of Glade Spring off their feet for a weekend.

Frog Lester, the Engineman, came into the Engine Track with his two GP-9s on a tear. He must have gone past me at 20MPH. He already had the headlights and the lamps in the number boards extinguished. After the engines went sailing past me and disappeared in the darkness, I waited for a short period and then horsed the switch lever around to close the switch. Immediately a series of harsh metallic sounds emanated from the darkness... Boom, Crash, Bang-Bang... the

sound of engine wheels being lifted off the iron and then coming back down again. I had thrown the pipe-connected derail right under the moving engine !

Running down to the area, I could see by the light of my lantern that the pipeline leading to the derail had been grubbed completely out of the ground and uprooted from its fastenings on the crossties. The big iron derail itself was broken cleanly in half, but the engines were not derailed. (Fortunately it was a one-way derail, not a both-directions derail.) And where was Engineman Frog? Nowhere to be seen! After making his thumpety-bump ride backwards over the derail, he had completely disappeared in the darkness and gone home, without staying even to comment !!! So I caught the passenger train and went home, too.

Being young and new, I was almost afraid to return to work on Monday afternoon, but return I did. When registering on duty at the depot, not a word was said about Friday night's incident by either the Conductor or Engineman Frog. When we walked over to the Engine Track, we found the section gang just finishing up the work of installing a new pipeline and derail. But again, not a word was said by anyone. The situation was entirely disregarded, as if it had never happened. And likewise on Tuesday, and likewise on Wednesday. So I thought I was off the hook for throwing a derail under a moving engine...

And then came Thursday... It happened as we were going to work. No. 45, the Tennessean, pulled into the Glade Spring station and down off the engine crawled a man in a white shirt and straw hat. It was Mr. J. C. Irvin, the Radford Division Trainmaster. None of us had ever seen Mr. Irvin, but we all intuitively knew who he was

The Conductor ran to the caboose. Engineman Frog Lester quickly went to the far end of the engines on the Engine Track and found a way to look busy. The other brakeman ran to couple some air hoses somewhere. And that left only me, standing beside the high-level switch stand at the Engine Track. I had nowhere to hide.

Mr. Irvin walked slowly up to me. He did not introduce himself, but looked me squarely in the eye and said sternly, "What do you know about this?," pointing to the broken derail in the pile of mangled scrap the section crew had piled up near the switch. Fortunately it had rained over the weekend and the iron on two broken halves of the derail clearly showed rust. "B.. B.. But, Sir... The pieces are rusted. This must have happened some time ago!" I said. Mr. Irvin looked straight into my eyes for about ten terrifying seconds and then, without another word, turned and walked slowly back to the depot. Perhaps, in his mercy, he had remembered some similar incident from his own young days on the railroad. "*What do you know about this?*" Just six words, but with them I had been tried, found guilty, and sentenced. I never hear another word about the incident, and I never laid eyes on Mr. Irvin again. Nor did I ever again throw a derail under moving equipment...

So Glade Spring, although an inconvenient assignment, was a good place for a new brakeman to beak in. In those days the railroad had not one whit of a training program. A new hire was

issued a Rule Book, a Safety Book and a Time Table, but they were put in one's grip and never discussed. A new man learned, solely by osmosis, the bad habits of the older men. And in retrospect I now understand why the older men were so crabby. They were not teachers by nature, they did not enjoy breaking in new men, and far worse, as senior members of the crew they were responsible for what the new men did.

Would I today go back and work the Second Saltville Shifter again? In a heartbeat.