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## Folklore in Motion

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## TALES OF THE RAILS

by Charlie Oden



[These tales of the rails come from the T&NO (SP) Railroad. Friends told some of them to me. The rest are from personal knowledge.—*Oden*]

### WE'RE ON FIRE!

252 miles in 252 minutes. That was the schedule of the Sunbeams, No. 13 and No. 14, when the Southern Pacific Railroad began running streamlined passenger trains between Dallas and Houston in 1936. The streamlined cars were swank, uptown. The coaches had comfortable seats instead of the old padded benches. There was a dining car with real white linen tablecloths and napkins. Passengers enjoyed dining from quality crystal, china, and a real silver service that had silver coffeepots. Chefs in tall white caps prepared the food and waiters in white jackets served it.

Passengers rode in comfort in a big windowed observation car and watched the cars on the highways and cattle in pastures. Romances bloomed there during the 252-minute travel time in World War II. The door was located right over the wheels, and when the door opened, passengers heard the busy clickety clack of wheels on rail joints.

No one delayed these trains. Superintendent Tom Spence was inflexible on that point, and several persons learned their lessons the hard way—in their pocketbooks. Mr. Spence fired them for periods of thirty or sixty days. No. 13's schedule was 4:45 P.M. from Grand Central Station in Houston, so around 3:00 P.M. dispatchers began placing freight trains so they couldn't get in the way of those varnished cars. For some crews, this might mean two hours at a blind siding waiting until No. 13 was gone. Others might get a break. To the crews it was like drawing the black beans or the white beans.



**Houston-bound Sunbeam No. 14 at Ennis passenger station. Photo by J. F. Curry, from the Dane Williams Collection**

And so it came to pass that on a day in 1944, Jack Morgan, a heads-up conductor, and Leon Kruse, one of the best hogheads on the Division, were on Extra 777 East, a freight train of about fifty empty tank cars going from Humble Oil and Refining Co. in Bayonne, New Jersey, to Humble Oil in Baytown, Texas. Right behind the engine was a lone box car loaded with wooden window sashes.

When I came to work second shift at Hearne that day, Extra 777 East was stopping at Hempstead at the water tank, which was close by the train order office. As soon as the train stopped, Jack Morgan, the “brains” (as conductors are called) trotted from the caboose to the train order office to see if the new orders would be a white bean. Sure enough, the new order gave the Extra East an additional thirty minutes to go all the way to Eureka Tower. This

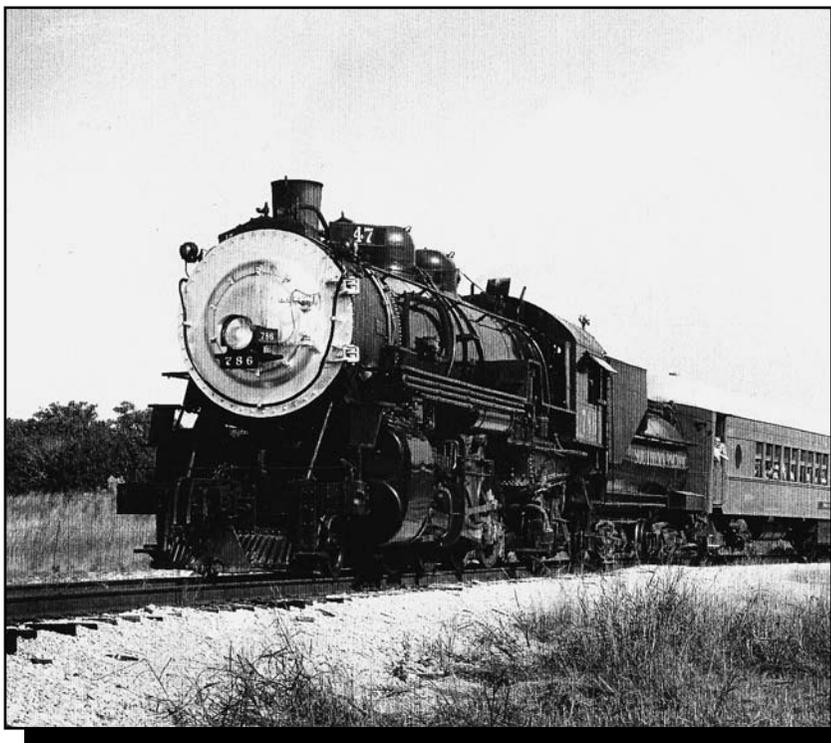
meant that if the crew would hustle, they could go all the way home, and, be it ever so humble, there's no place like home.

When the train left the water tank, Jack Morgan had the order and was on the engine, standing on the steel apron of the water tank and right behind Leon Kruse, the engineer. Both men must have been grinning over this favorable turn of events. By golly, they were going to have their feet under their tables at home come dinnertime that evening!

As they left town, Leon Kruse was busy getting the engine up to speed. Here the "Tallow pot," fireman J. R. Lewis, was playing a key role because he was the one who was creating the steam the hoghead had to have to get the speed needed to make Eureka Tower for the varnished cars. They were like the baseball player on second who gets an unlooked-for-break and runs for home plate as fast as his legs can carry him.

Lewis was using all of his skills to heat the boiler to its maximum steam pressure of 210 pounds as quickly as possible. He sat on the cushioned top of a tool box facing an array of gauges and handles. He was watching the water gauge and the steam pressure gauge. He was spraying fuel against the boiler crown sheets with a firing valve that combines the thick oil with steam and makes it burn like gasoline, all the while injecting water into the boiler as needed so that the roaring flames could turn it into the steam that the Mike engine needed to respond to the engineer's demands.

Leon Kruse also faced an array of gauges, including the water, steam, and air gauges. The throttle and whistle cord were overhead. He was operating an air-actuated device whose function is roughly that of the stick shift transmission in a truck. His skill in getting up speed was in knowing when to shift gears up or down to the best advantage. The engineer and fireman were giving that Mike engine their best, and the Mike engine was giving them back its best. Both the head shack (brakeman riding the engine) and the rear brakeman were intently watching the empty tank cars in the train to detect any hot boxes or dragging brake beams that might endanger the train. It was teamwork at its best.



**786 "Mike" engine (MK-5) pulling the "Hill Country Flyer." Photo by J. Parker Lamb, Courtesy of ASTA and Dr. Robert W. Schoen**

From Prairie View, six miles east of Hempstead, to Hockley was the fastest track between Dallas and Houston, and you can bet your boots Leon Kruse took full advantage of that. Going by Hockley he "had 'em in the wind"—that is, they were really sailing. I heard the Cypress annunciator buzz shortly thereafter. The men were going home for dinner.

At Hot Wells, which is just past the side track at Cypress, a loaded gasoline truck drove into the 777 and exploded, sending a ball of orange flame over the engine and severely burning Jack, Leon, the fireman, and the head brakeman. Someone at Cypress drove the suffering Jack Morgan back to the side track where the dispatcher's telephone was located. I heard a popping sound in the phone and answered. Jack was stammering and crying as he said to

me, “We’re afire! We need help!” and told me about the accident. The operator at Eureka Tower broke in and said that an ambulance was on its way.

I was stunned, but recalled that Jack held a live running order. I said, “Jack, I’ve got to annul your running order.” He replied, “Hell, man! Don’t you understand? I can’t copy an order. The flesh of my hands is sticking to the phone now!”

It was a long time before the men got back to work, and the Houston terminal forces took charge of the railroad.

Back to Hot Wells: There was no crew on the train. Right behind the engine the lone box car loaded with wooden window sashes was burning. The empty tank cars were next to the box car. Someone told me later that a man in the uniform of one of the armed forces was among the spectators. He uncoupled the burning car and the engine and moved them a safe distance away. No one knew him, and he never identified himself. To this day, he remains the unknown and unsung hero of the tragedy of the Extra 777 East.

I have talked at some length to two retired locomotive engineers who assure me that this part about the unknown hero is utterly impossible because the engine would have been too hot, the air brake hoses would have been melted, and, because of the way in which air brakes operate, it is simply not possible for the hero part to happen. So what does this mean? It means that a genuine folk tale has been attached to an otherwise true story. It happens all the time. I have read that journalists watch to prevent this from happening in their writings, but despite their care, some folk tales are published as being true anyway.

### HE DROPPED HER IN THE CORNER

If someone suddenly accelerated the engine in his car, he might tell you that he “put the pedal to the metal,” and you would understand what he meant. If the engineer of a steam engine wanted to express to you that he had suddenly accelerated his engine, he would say that he had “dropped her in the corner.”



**Vernon Willis, head brakeman, and Albert Williams, rear brakeman, No. 257. Photo by J. F. Curry, from the Dane Williams Collection**

About three or four o'clock one morning, No. 257 was operating from Ennis to Denison and at the time had only about a half-dozen cars. Vernon Willis was head brakeman and rode the engine.

Everything was wet. It had been raining for about a week. Water stood in the fields, streamed down the ditches, ran in the branches and creeks, and flooded the rivers, filling them over their banks. Inside the cab of No. 257 the flames in the firebox were flashing, making shadows that jiggled about. The headlight's full candlepower was thrusting its super beam through the darkness, revealing what was ahead. The rest of the world was black, very black.

The train was crossing the bridge over the East Fork of the Trinity River near McKinney when Harry Tolar, the engineer, called Vernon over to his side and said, "Take a look at that." The

front of the engine was plowing through the water as if it were the prow of a ship. Water was running over the bridge!

Vernon replied, “There might not be a bridge under us for long.” Tolar dropped her in the corner, and the train rocketed forward to safety.

And the river? It was just like “That Old Man River”—it just kept rolling, it just kept flooding along, and it washed out that bridge. Five days passed before the line was open again.

### HOGHEADS AT THE PEARLY GATES

Two EsPee locomotive engineers died and went to Heaven. Unfortunately, they found themselves standing in a line before the Pearly Gates. The line was long and moved very slowly. It was enough to try the patience of Job.

As they were commenting on how slowly the line was moving, they noticed a little man with a sun visor on his head and sleeve garters on his arms walking by. An ink pen was in his right hand, and a carefully rolled train sheet was tucked under his left arm. He walked past the entire line and right into Heaven.



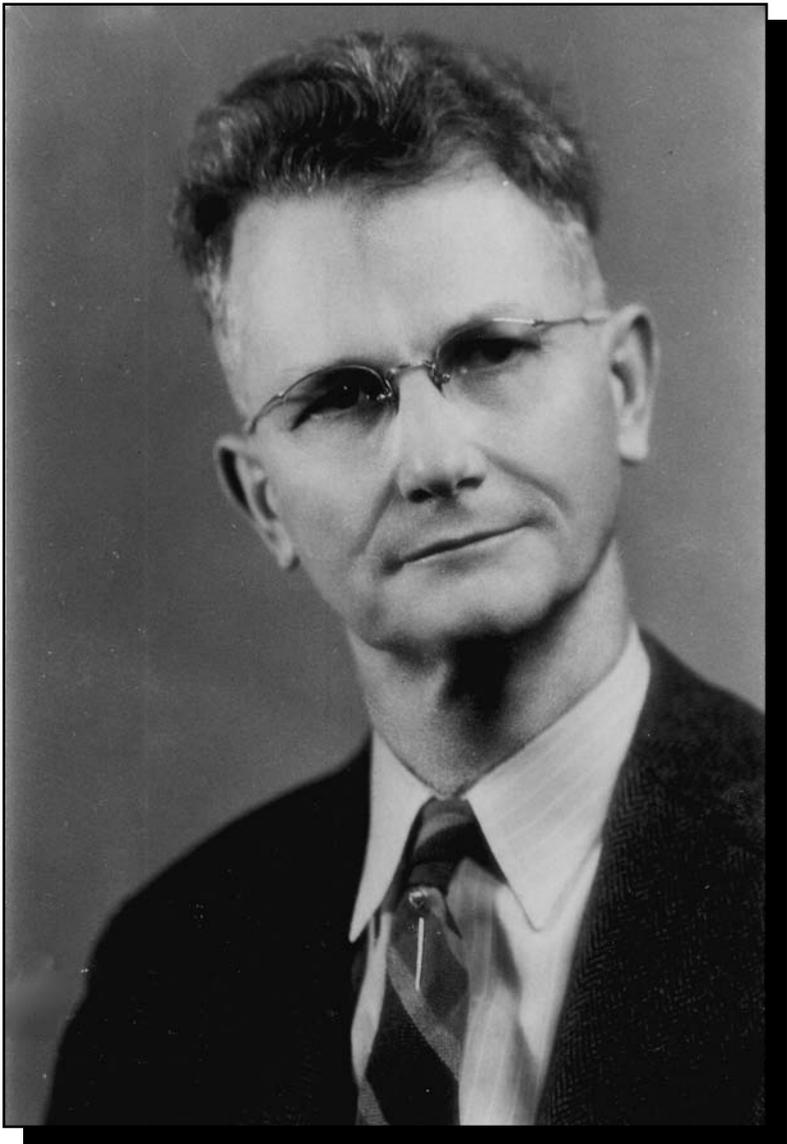
**H. C. Dinkens, train dispatcher, Ennis. Photo by J. F. Curry, from the Dane Williams Collection**

This angered the engineers. How dare a dispatcher run around them? (A “run around” in railroading is a humiliating experience for the crew. It is strongly resented by the crew and causes a loss of earnings.) As the two waited their turn he was all they could talk about. When they finally reached Saint Peter, they wanted to know why he let the dispatcher run around them in line. Saint Peter told them that he had done no such thing. Both of them swore that he did. As the argument went back and forth, one of the engineers saw him, the little man with the sun visor and sleeve garters. A train sheet was still tucked under one arm.

Seeing the man the engineers pointed out, Saint Peter said, “Oh him? That’s no train dispatcher, that’s God. He just thinks he’s a train dispatcher.”



*Photo by J. F. Curry, from the Dane Williams Collection*



*Newton Gaines, 1929. Photo courtesy of TCU Special Collections*