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My Life On Mountain Railroads

William Gould

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The Utah Railway 200. Photo by John Lawson from the W. J. G. Gould collection.

*My Life
on Mountain Railroads*

William John Gilbert Gould

edited by
William R. Gould

Utah State University Press
Logan, Utah
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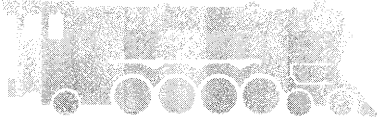
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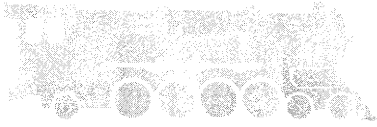
Contents

<i>Illustrations-</i>	vi
<i>Foreword-</i>	vii
<i>Publisher's Note</i>	xiv
<i>Youth</i>	1
1. Trackside Childhood	7
2. From Newsboy to Roundhouse: Starting to Work	29
<i>Fireman I</i>	45
3. Learning to Fire	49
4. Life along the Rails	67
5. My Mentor on the Road	89
<i>Fireman II</i>	101
6. At the Rat Hole Flashing the Door	107
7. Old Heads, Rails, and Boomers	125
8. Railroad Hazards and Wrecks	145
<i>Engineer</i>	171
9. Engineer on the Rio Grande	173
10. Running the Utah Trains	193
11. Life on the Utah Railway	223
<i>Epilogue</i>	241
<i>Index-</i>	245



Illustrations

The Utah Railway 200	ii
The Rio Grande Western in Central Utah (map)	6
William J. G. Gould at a young age	8
The Tintic loop on the Rio Grande Western	16
Gilbert, Pauline, and Richard John Gould	39
The author as a fireman	48
A “hog” 2-8-0 consolidation engine	63
An eight-wheeler “mogul”	63
The author at age twenty-one	69
A Rome ten-wheeler, the Denver & Rio Grande 506	110
The Denver & Rio Grande 1151	116
The Denver & Rio Grande 1193	117
Two engines “blowing the dome”	144
Two engines double heading up a mountain grade	172
The Denver & Rio Grande Western 779, a 4-6-0 ten-wheeler	180
The Utah Railway 100	196
The Utah Railway 101	196
The Utah Railway 102	197
The Utah Railway 108	197
The Union Pacific 3619 compound mallet	209
General map of the Utah Railway Company	222
The author as a diesel engineer for the Utah Railway	240
Gilbert Gould and his grandson Wayne	242



Foreword

My father followed the railroad as a boyhood preoccupation and an adult profession. It was an era when railroading was at once a hazardous and a romantic occupation. In fact, it was more than an occupation; it was a complete and distinct way of life—a culture separate from that of those whom the railroader considered lesser men.

The true adherent did not merely get a job on the railroad. He (at the time, it was an exclusively male profession) “went railroadin’.” Usually it was a lifetime commitment. But his attitude toward the rail was often a contradiction. He would complain incessantly about what a hard life it was, lamenting the long hours and difficult working conditions in wind, rain, sleet, and snow. He would sternly counsel his sons to avoid the rigors of such a life and to better themselves by pursuing other occupations. Yet if he was himself for a time out of a job, he would instinctively and determinedly drift back to the rail and would sigh in contentment when he was again within that strange and exclusive world of the roaring road.

Railroading and railroads long dominated the industrial, financial, and commercial sectors of society. Rails led everywhere and anywhere. Brave young railroad engineers became heroic figures. This was the milieu of my father’s adult life. He spent fifty years and eight months in the cabs of locomotives—mostly steam locomotives. At the age of seventy the law of the land told him it was time to retire. He did so somewhat reluctantly

and immediately mired down in a morass of idleness that threatened his health.

To keep his mind active, I wrote to him asking pointed questions about some of the more lurid tales he had told me when I was a child. This was a natural thing for me to do: my own romance with the steam locomotive had never abated, although I had come along in time to share in only its afterglow. He responded directly to my questions with a series of vignettes that are separate from the longer narrative here, although I have integrated a few of them into it. Eventually the writing itch took possession of him, and on his own initiative he began to write his life story. This was precisely what I had wanted to occur, and I encouraged him at every turn.

This memoir was first written in soft pencil on pulp paper tablets, which were sent to me one by one as they came from under his hand. Later I had a typist prepare an exact transcription of his text. I then undertook a first effort to edit it, making only essential corrections of his grammar, punctuation, and spelling and adding a word here and there solely to clarify some passages for readers from a later generation. I earnestly sought to preserve his distinctive literary style and his great skill as a storyteller, hoping to lose nothing of the natural narrative flow of the Welsh bard.

My father was a Welshman—a Welshman with the name of an early English ancestor. He was born into a family of coal miners and ironmongers who were rather poor, never affluent. They came from the lush green valleys of South Wales. Anciently this region was known as Dyfed. The family came at last to live in the village of Merthyr-Tidfyl in Glamorgan. In Welsh this meant the place of the martyr, for there a woman, later known as St. Tidfyl, was martyred as an early Christian. The town lay alongside a small stream, the Taff River, from which the valley took its name.

The place was home to the ancient industry of ironmongery, which probably located there because of the abundance of good Welsh coal at minable depths beneath the green hills. During the industrial revolution the mining of coal became more important than ironmongery. In ever larger quantities, coal flowed down the valleys, first on horse-powered trams and later on rickety early railroads, to the little Welsh seaports on the Bay of Bristol. From there it was shipped by sea to fuel the burgeoning industries of Britain.

It was coal that brought the Gould family into Wales from nearby Somerset several generations prior to the birth of my father. A few Goulds recorded the occupation of ironmonger on their marriage and death certificates, but most dug coal from dirty dank coalpits. Marrying Welsh natives and adopting the language, they and their progeny became Welsh,