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My Life On Mountain Railroads

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One day a newly promoted engineer came to the supply house where I was supposed to keep all the surplus (that did not exist). He had been promoted off the Bingham Branch and was going back to run an engine out of Welby. He had a brand new tool box with his name painted on it. He came in the door and laid that newly painted tool box on the floor. It was completely empty. He wiped his hand on a piece of waste and extended it toward me.

“Mr. Gould?” he inquired. I acknowledged the identity with some apprehension. He told me his name, and we politely and solemnly shook hands. Then he told me what he wanted. He was going back to the Bingham Branch to work, but while he was here in Salt Lake he thought he would get a full set of tools.

He had made out a complete list of what he needed. Mr. Roberts, that fearless, white-bearded roundhouse foreman, had signed it in approval and sent him to me. He laid that authoritative document on the counter and started to read what the list specified.

One ball-peen hammer and cold chisel.

One twelve-inch stilson wrench.

One twelve-inch monkey wrench.

I was inclined to interrupt and break the bad news, but I didn't have the heart. He seemed so confidently sure of getting what he wanted. The list went on:

One fifteen-inch monkey wrench.

One eighteen-inch monkey wrench.

I wondered what old man Roberts had been thinking when he signed that list in approval and sent him to me. Still the list went on:

One dope cup wrench.

One engineman's torch.

And so on and on he went until he had named a dozen tools that I hadn't seen since I had been on the job. When he got through he looked at me, expecting that I would start handing out those items.

I just looked at him helplessly. “Did Mr. Roberts tell you that you could get those tools here?” I asked.

He didn't know how to answer for a moment. “Why, yes. He told me that you would fix me up. Here, he signed this request.”

“Do you see any of those items hanging around here?” I asked.

“Well, where are they?” he inquired in a puzzled manner. “Isn't this the supply house?”

I assured him that it was the supply house all right, but there were no supplies. For a while he couldn't believe that I was serious. After a short

time he picked up his newly-painted tool box and reluctantly left the supply house.

I felt bad about this incident, but there was nothing I could do. I would have liked to have had all those tools that he so confidently expected. With that inventory I could have supplied several outgoing engines.

That was what I was up against on my first job as a supply man. But there was one time when I got partial revenge.

I happened to be up at the general storehouse one afternoon, looking for something. I can't remember just what it was at this moment. There were two men employed there, and it seemed to me that each one tried to outdo the other in downright orneriness. One was called "Coal Oil Johnny." He accompanied the pay car on its rounds with the supply car and doled out oil and tools to the section gangs every month. That's how the name Coal Oil Johnny came to be applied. They both acted as though they personally owned everything in the storehouse.

While I was at the storehouse that day Coal Oil Johnny left the sliding door to one of the cabinets open. I looked inside. I couldn't believe my eyes. There were brand new stacks of tools of every description: hammers, torches, monkey wrenches, and many other items of short supply that I had been crying for. I started to reach inside when Johnny approached and kicked the door shut.

I asked him about all those tools, and why had he kept saying there weren't any in stock?

He said, "You didn't see any tools in there. You just think you did."

I beat it back to the roundhouse and told Old Man Roberts what I had seen. He got on the phone and called up Mr. Brown, the general storekeeper, and told him what I had related to him. The general storekeeper had an office upstairs over the storehouse. He told the foreman to send that smart alec kid up to his office. When I arrived he was all worked up into a frenzy.

He yelled at me, "Did you say there were new tools locked away downstairs?"

I told him that I did. He glared at me for a moment.

He said, "We are going down there and see. If you are lying, you and I will tangle." By that time we were out of his office and on the stairs. In a sassy voice I told him that it would be alright with me.

On entering the storeroom he ignored Coal Oil Johnny and said to me, "Alright, now where are they?"

I pointed to the cabinet, a padlock on the door. He said to Coal Oil Johnny, "Open that door."

Johnny's face was a sickly white as he fumbled for the keys. He finally opened the door. There in neat stacks just as I had described were the tools.

Mr Brown turned on Johnny. I don't believe I ever heard a man take such a bawl out as Johnny did without fighting back. Brown wanted to know how long that had been going on. Here the mechanical department had been hollering for tools, and all the time you said we were out of them.

He turned to me. "You make out the necessary requests, and take everything out of the cabinet." I got a wheelbarrow and did just that, and for a while there were new tools in circulation. I thought that Brown was going to fire Johnny, but he didn't. And that guy just got more ornery than ever.

When I wasn't too busy on my job I would be trying to help the fire lighters. They were at that time Johnny McKenna and a little guy named Reese Phillips. Reese was well under five feet tall, but he was quite a man for a little fellow. Sometimes when he was really busy he would step out to the supply house and ask, "Would you like to exercise your muscles?"

I would usually answer yes. He would then tell me what engine to fire up.

The method that prevailed then in building fires in a cold engine was thus: About a ton of coal would be spread over the grates. Then a lot of wood cut up from the tie pile would be laid on top of the coal. A lot of greasy waste would be thrown in on top of the wood. The waste was then lighted. Pretty soon the whole mess would be on fire. If there was any steam in the boiler, the "blower" would be in operation. If not, a live steam line in the round house would be tapped to operate the blower.

The "blower" is a pipe leading from the fountain (a manifolded steam source) on top of the boiler and inside the cab to the smoke box. It ends in a upright nozzle directed at the stack. When steam is turned into this pipe it creates a draft up through the stack. This draft works on the fire to build it up and raise steam pressure. I was always willing to help the fire lighters if I wasn't busy on my own job.

One day I learned that Reese was spreading unfavorable reports about me. A guy told me that Reese had made this remark to a gang in the roundhouse: "You know that kid out in the supply house? Well, he's a real sissy. He says 'gosh dang' instead of 'G—— d——.'"

When I heard this I just laughed. I took it as a compliment, but I noted from subsequent incidents that some of the guys really thought I was a sissy. Then something happened that permanently changed that opinion in a hurry.

It was a morning in the middle of November, and there had been a heavy fall of snow during the night. Early in the day, while I was coming

out of the main oil house after filling my supply cans, a machinist came out of the roundhouse. He picked up a handful of snow and playfully threw a snowball at me. I set down my oil cans, and we engaged in a friendly little snowball fight.

We were having a lot of fun, when a switch engine came down the “back lead” with a string of coaches. A switchman was leaning on the handrails of one of the coaches laughing at us. He was a big, burly young fellow. I was making a snowball in my hands when he came on the scene. Instead of throwing it at the machinist with whom I had been snowballing, I playfully threw it at the switchman.

If I had really been trying to hit him I am sure I could never have done it. I just wasn't that good in pitching a ball. But the snowball that I threw in fun went straight to the mark. It hit him right square in the forehead!

He quit laughing and jumped off the steps and started running at me. At first I didn't know what to do. This switchman was a big fellow and here he came straight at me like a charging bull. I thought first of running away into the roundhouse, but on second thought something seemed to say to me: “You're getting too big now to run.” So I stayed. I got set and waited. Here he came in a blind rage. As soon as I judged he was close enough I let go with a straight right with everything I had in my 135-pound frame!

The result took me as much by surprise as it did everyone else. I landed right on his left eye. The force of him running at me like that when I was in a set position, and with the timing perfect, all combined to do an effective job of stopping him in his tracks. The big 200-pounder's feet went up in the air, and the back of his head hit the ground. He looked at me from that prone position on the ground for a second or two. There seemed to be a hurt and a surprised look in his eyes.

Meanwhile, I had resumed a fighting stance and was dancing around waiting for him to get up. When he did get to his feet, all the fight was gone from him. He hurried back and climbed on the still slowly moving coaches. I must confess that I was somewhat relieved at the outcome. That guy could have broken me in half if he had gotten hold of me.

I looked around to find that I was not alone. The machinist with whom I had been having the friendly snowball fight was standing still like he was glued to the spot. He hadn't moved. All the windows in the roundhouse were full of heads of the surprised roundhouse staff.

From then on no one thought that I was a sissy.

During my days on that supply job I made several enemies among the enginemen. I was to encounter that enmity later in my career. These