



PROJECT MUSE®

My Life On Mountain Railroads

William Gould

Published by Utah State University Press

Gould, William.

My Life On Mountain Railroads.

Logan: Utah State University Press, 1995.

Project MUSE., <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/12452>

We started down the canyon back toward Provo. Every so often we would pick up more passengers; we stopped every time a few people grouped together alongside the tracks. We ran very slowly in order to give the conductor time to collect as many fares as he could. At that I don't believe he got anywhere near all of them. Long before we got to Provo we had passengers crowding into the cab and tender. They were even standing on the running boards.

After unloading our passengers we received orders to take our train and go out on the Springville Branch as far as Goshen and return. We were standing on the lead that ran behind the depot waiting for no. 409, the Tintic passenger train, to come in.

Our conductor, a man named Sealy, was standing on the ground under our cab, flipping silver dollars first to Toddy and then to me.

Number 409 came in, stuck her nose over University Avenue, and stopped. I have often regretted that I had no way of getting a picture of some event in my life, but no more so than of that passenger train.

When that little ten-wheeler came to a stop, passengers climbed down from every conceivable place that they had found room to sit or stand. There were women and children standing out on the running board holding onto the handrail. That would sure have been a picture to show now in this age of automobile and air travel.

In those days, a circus was something to travel far to see. And the main mode of travel was the railroad. There were very few automobiles then or roads on which to run them. When one went by everyone ran out to get a good look.

It was a Fourth of July about 1910 and the Saltair Railroad was faced with handling the holiday traffic. They only had two engines, both little 4-4-0s, eight-wheelers. And they were the neatest little machines you would want to look at, elaborate in color and in tip-top shape.

I don't think those engine crews ever worked anywhere but on that thirteen-mile stretch between Salt Lake and Saltair. What they did in the winter months when the resort was shut down, I have no idea. They did haul a little salt into town from the salt works near the lake, but that wouldn't keep them all in work.

When business on this railroad became heavy on a big holiday, such as the Fourth of July, it would have to borrow power and crews from the Oregon Short Line or the Rio Grande. This day in 1910 it was the Rio Grande. They borrowed a little Rome passenger engine, and I went with it as a fireman.

The engineer was a man named O. S. Dean. He afterward was fired by the Rio Grande for getting out on the mainline in front of no. 61 with

a little shay engine. This incident caused a wreck between Murray and Salt Lake that pinned down and killed Vern Wilson under a little hog engine.

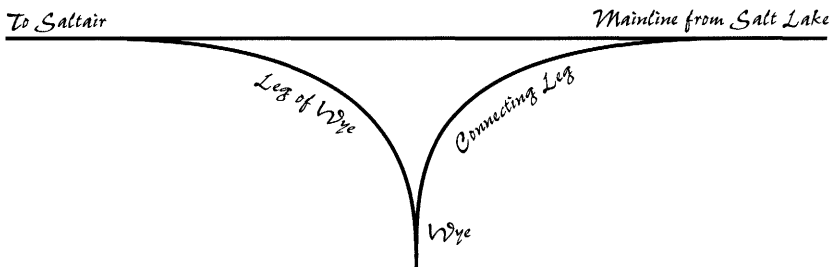
This Fourth of July, when we reported for work on that little Rome, a Saltair road employee was there to conduct us to his properties and instruct us in procedures. There was one thing he neglected to tell us that was to give us a very bad scare. I will tell of it later.

When it came our turn to perform we coupled onto the sharp end of ten of those open air cars used during the summer months on the Saltair and Lagoon trains. Those coaches were loaded! Young bucks and even gals were idly walking along the running boards that ran the length of each coach. We left Salt Lake with quite a gang of holiday passengers.

That little Rome was a much bigger and heavier engine than either of the little eight-wheelers. We had orders not to exceed twenty miles an hour.

Halfway between Salt Lake and Saltair was a passing track. On a busy day such as this the westbound and the eastbound trains would meet at that point. We always had to wait for the other train. Our little Rome handled those coaches without effort on that level track.

Just before reaching Saltair there was a wye on which to turn the engines. This wye had a new-fangled switch at the west end. I have never seen anything like it either before or since. I think it was an experiment, although why they should experiment with trainloads of passengers is something I could never figure out. The diagram below illustrates this situation.



When coming into Saltair this switch looked like the old-fashioned stub switch. It seemed to be lined incorrectly for the oncoming train—as if to lead the train off the end of the track.

O. S. Dean closed the throttle. He was about to big hole a train solidly loaded with passengers. He called to me. I jumped across the cab. I saw a guy standing beside the switch. When he heard O. S. shut off he began to wave us ahead frantically. This was very puzzling, to say the least. That switch was clearly lined to drop us off the right of way, and this guy standing there was signaling us on.

My engineer made a heavy reduction of the pressure in the train line anyway. This, of course, produced a heavy application of the brakes. I was down on the step ready to unload. The guy at the switch with his hat in his hand was still vigorously waving us on. It was a strange situation.

All of a sudden the switch took on a different aspect: It shifted to line up in our favor! We rolled safely over it and continued on to Saltair.

It was supposed to act that way. At a distance of a few feet the oncoming train actuated a device to operate the switch and cause it to line up automatically in favor of the oncoming traffic. What benefits were supposed to derive from all of this I never knew. I do know that it gave us an awful scare for a few moments.

The new grade down the western slope off Soldier Summit had only been in operation a few months. When we began handling trains down this new grade we had quite a problem for a while. On the old grade thirteen or fourteen cars of coal were a train. On the new grade we were handling sixty-five loads in a train.

If you held the brakes too long on those long trains you were in danger of stalling. If you didn't keep your brake valve in full release long enough between applications you could break the train in two or three pieces. In the case where the break was so far back that you couldn't back the head end portion up to a re-coupling (in the event it was only a broken knuckle), you would usually wait for a light engine to come down the hill and shove you together.

Of course, if the trouble was a pulled-out or broken drawbar you would have to take the head portion down onto the flat somewhere and set out the car with the broken drawbar. Then you would have to return, get the rest of your train, take it down onto the flat, and couple both portions together. This sometimes took the better part of a day to accomplish, depending on where the break was.

On the day in question I was firing for Needham. Although it was getting quite close to Christmas time the weather was still quite warm. We were in the habit of cutting ourselves a Christmas tree from the hillsides of the canyon. There was an abundance of trees on the hills in those days. At this time I had not yet had the chance to get a tree.

Needham came down into Gilluly with sixty loads. On the big curve above town it happened. Needham broke his train in three pieces. The breaks were too far back to shove them together, but luckily those breaks were both knuckles. After putting in new knuckles there was only one thing to do—wait for a helper engine to come down the hill and shove us together.

I thought this would be a good time to get that Christmas tree while we were waiting. There was nothing on the engine with which I could cut down a tree except a hammer and a cold chisel. I had seen several nice trees on the other side of the canyon.

I took the hammer and chisel and told Needham what I intended doing. He gave his permission. I went to the slope on the other side of the canyon where I had seen what I wanted. It was really a nice tree, although on close inspection it was really bigger than I wanted. I thought it would do.

I started pecking away with the hammer and chisel. As I said, it was quite warm, and I had been walking rather fast in order to get that tree back to the engine before that helper came down the hill to push us together. The sweat was pouring out of me and I was not making much headway with the hammer and chisel. I was getting desperate. I got up off my knees and wiped away the sweat.

I looked upward and said, "Oh, God, give me an axe!"

Now I would not blame you too much if you doubt me, but there, not ten feet away from where I stood, what looked like an axe handle was sticking out from under the brush. I took hold of it and pulled out a lumberman's double-bladed axe! Believe it or not!

With that axe in my hands I soon had my tree. I also had an axe. It was in perfect shape except for a little rust. I think I can explain the presence of that axe. At the time that they were building the new grade down Soldier Summit there were construction camps all over that mountain. When we went up the old grade at night while this was going on the whole mountain would be lighted with flares. If you didn't know where you were and what was going on you might think you had taken the wrong course and entered Satan's territory.

After the grade was completed all these contractors folded their tents and fled into the night. Lots of tools were undoubtedly lost and left behind in the moving. That is probably how that axe came to be there.

There is one little thing that has puzzled me all down through the years. Why didn't I see that handle sticking out before I uttered that make-shift prayer? Do you doubt that someone up there must like me, too? I all but tripped on that axe handle before my supplication. Yet I didn't see it until I made my request.

One cold winter night we were dragging up the Price River canyon. There were lots of trees along the right of way at that time. It was dead of night, and we were slowly dragging up the hill. We had reached the last hard pull just before the let-up where we entered the Kyune tunnel. We were going so slow that I thought I would be able to get a tree, throw it on the train, and catch the helper engine into Kyune.

I told the engineer what I wanted to do. He told me to go ahead and that he would slow down some more. As usual, all I had to cut down a tree was the old reliable hammer and chisel. With these in my hand I dropped off and crossed the frozen Price River to the edge of the mountain on the other side.

There were lots of nice trees there. I had little trouble getting one. I looked at the caboose coming slowly along quite a ways back. I decided I had time to get another one for the engineer, so I went to work.

By the time I got the two trees cut that caboose had moved up toward me. I stuffed the hammer and chisel in my back pocket, grabbed a tree in each hand, and started back across the river. Everything was going along fine. I began to think I would make it with time to spare.

I had reached the middle of the river when the ice broke under me, and I went down in that ice-cold water clear up to the trees. I believe the fact that I was carrying a tree in each hand was all that kept me from going under. After those first few breath-taking chills I managed to climb up on the ice again.

I had lost time and the caboose was moving closer. I decided I would not be able to make it up the bank with both trees, so I left the smallest one on the ice and started to scramble up with the other. I was not having much success. That bank was steep and slippery. My clothes were starting to freeze, and that caboose was coming right along. I saw I wasn't going to make it even with that one tree, so regretfully I let it roll down the bank.

My clothes were ice-encrusted, and it was hard to move. I was beginning to wonder if I would be able to climb on those steps of the engine. The mallet helper was just coming by, and I decided to try for it first. If I missed the engine I would have another chance at the caboose. I don't know how I was able to do it, clothed as I was in those icy clothes, but I did.

I climbed into the cab of the mallet. I reached out for the chain and swung the firedoor open. I stood in that hot glare of the firebox in my icy clothes.

Dave Gibson was the engineer on the mallet. When I opened that door both he and the fireman turned to see what was carrying on. What they saw was the ice-encased, dejected figure of a young male human. The hot glare was turning the ice into steam, and the vapor streamed into the firebox, drawn in by the suction of the exhaust. It was several seconds before they were able to identify what that object was.

Believe me, when I got back to my engine I let the blaze from the firebox play long on my wet clothing. I think, taking everything into consideration, that guy up there was favoring me, even though I didn't get the tree.



My Mentor on the Road

An engineer whom I respected was Toby Sheldahl. I came in off the Bingham Branch, where I had been working for a while, when I got married. Business was booming, and I landed in the mainline pool. This “pool board” consisted of mainline freight crews, working first in, first out. All the engines—mostly eleven hundreds—were pooled as well. No one in the pool had a regular engine.

Lots of new men were hired—students as well as experienced men. It seemed that Toby had been plagued with students. On my first trip with him he learned that I was studying air brakes. He told me that if I would stay on the job as his regular fireman he would teach me to handle trains on the Soldier Summit grade. That was great for me.

After the train had been made ready at Soldier Summit on our second trip westbound, Toby whistled off and then called to me. He had a high, shrill, squeaky voice, and when he was angry, it got higher and squeakier. On account of the pitch of his voice, some of the men called him by the nickname of Squeakie. He said, “All right, Gilbert, come on over and take ’em.”

I was not really prepared to take on that responsibility yet. I had already been on a runaway off that summit, and I was still a little bit fearful. I said, “Well, Toby, don’t you want to see how they’re holding? Don’t you want to make the first application?”

“What’s the difference whether I make it or you make it?” He squeaked.

He tugged on the throttle and the train started to move into the tunnel. He then stepped down onto the deck and said, "Go on, Gilbert, take 'em."

My feet dragged me very reluctantly over to the right side. When we emerged out the west end of the tunnel I don't believe I ever saw such a dark night. That old oil headlight cast its feeble glow a few feet ahead of the engine. I looked across at Toby. He was sitting on my seat box perfectly contented. How I wished then that I was over there and he was where I was.

Of course I wanted to be able to handle trains on that grade. I would have to if I were going to progress in engine service. And there was no better way for me to learn than under the watchful eye of an artist like Toby. Still, I couldn't help but be a little fearful. I could still feel that little old 951 bouncing along under me, as it had the night I ran away with old Bill Boucher.

When the train edged over onto the grade, I tried to remember all the ways of the different engineers I had watched. I shut off and opened the cylinder cocks. I gradually eased the Johnson bar over into the back motion. As she started to move freely I opened the valve in the water brake line. Saturated steam began swishing from the cylinder cocks. Then the swinging movement of the engine indicated she was pushing back against the train.

I made an application of the brakes. In a short time they responded. When the train was slowed down to a walk I released the brakes. I didn't stop at running position; I pushed the brake valve clear back to release position and left it there. After a short time the train started to pick up speed. I set the brakes again. Then, at a walk, I released. That faintly uncomfortable feeling in my stomach seemed to be easing a little. I was beginning to feel somewhat better. All the way down the canyon I didn't let the speed vary more than a few miles per hour. I was beginning to wonder how I would do when we reached Media. I knew I would have to bring that train to a full stop there or follow the 951 up the side of the mountain.

I looked across at Toby. He seemed to be relaxed—much more than I was. I thought, he sure has got a lot of confidence in a punk like me.

In years afterward I handled lots of trains down that grade for different engineers. But I don't believe I ever did a better job than I did that first time—notwithstanding that my heart was in my throat, so to speak.

At Media, the stop was made with no trouble. Four blasts of the whistle brought one of the lady switch tenders out to line the switch. While we were stopped there, two Tucker engineers with their wives climbed on the engine to ride down to Tucker with us. They had been visiting at Media. Those engineers looked at me rather fearfully, I thought, when

they saw who it was that was handling the train. However, I gave them no cause to worry.

I did a very good job going the rest of the way down the hill and into Tucker. I even stopped behind a hill crew caboose at upper Tucker. Our passengers left us there, after those engineers had told me I had done a good job. I knew I had, but if I had had to walk around that engine at that moment I couldn't have done it. I was too weak! My legs had turned to water. I had no feeling there.

When I was firing for Toby I not only handled trains on that grade, I handled trains for him all over the road. I truly believe that I spent almost as much time on the right hand side of the cab when I was working for him as I did on the left. Toby must have been in his late thirties at that time, and he could still do a good job of firing. He had fired regularly for the Casey Jones of the Rio Grande, Tom Loftis. And he did his job as he had learned it from his hero.

He told me that no matter how others ran their engines, when I was running his engine I would have to run it as he did or not at all. I will tell of a little incident in this connection.

At Media the stop board was up out of sight of the derail switch. If you stopped at the board you could not see the switch from the engineer's side of the cab. You would have to depend on the fireman to see the signal. But if you went by the board about ten or twelve car lengths you would be on straight track where the switch could be seen from both sides of the engine. Toby always went by the board before stopping so he could see the switch, and he expected me to do the same.

I always tried to do this, although I would get a little fearful when I got close to the board. One day I was handling our train down that grade. The train was not holding quite as good as it should. When I got down pretty close to the board I set the brakes a little harder. Before I could let go of them again the train came to a stop. I could reach out the cab window and touch the stop board.

Toby didn't say anything just then. He got down and slowly slammed a few scoops of coal into the firebox. Then he looked over at me.

"Gilbert," he said, "how many times have you seen me stop way up here? How many times have you seen me go down onto the straight track?" I believe that was the first time I had displeased him.

I started to say something about stopping at the stop board. He didn't hear me through.

"If you're going to run my engine, you're going to have to run it the way I do. You run it the way I do, and I'll be responsible."

Well, we both became angry, and I gave him his train back right there. I've done a lot of ungrateful stunts in my life, but that was about as silly as any one of them. Toby took a great interest in me, and it was not unreasonable for him to expect me to pattern after him. I could surely do no better. I guess I was always just a punk! I can tell of another incident to illustrate that.

We had been coming up the hill out of Helper on the head end of a drag. As usual, when stopped at the water tank at Colton the water would show at its lowest point in the water glass. I got up on the tender to take water. I thought Toby would keep his injector on until the water level in the boiler rose a little. We had a hard steaming engine and had to take advantage of this stop to gain a little water. Instead, Toby had discovered that he had a hot box on the right side of the tender. He had shut off his injector as soon as we stopped and was down on the ground doctoring this hot box.

When I came down into the cab after taking water I found that we hadn't gained on the water level in the boiler. I started to put on my injector when Toby hollered at me to bring him some waste. I started to grumble, and he heard me. He wanted to know what I was mad about. I told him how low the water in the boiler was, and all the while we had been standing there with no injector on.

He told me that he knew where the water was, but that this hot box was more important right now. We argued back and forth until we were both angry. After leaving Colton neither of us spoke again.

When ready to leave Soldier Summit, Toby said, "Do you want to take 'em down the hill, Gilbert?"

I told him no, and to take 'em down himself—which he did. When we stopped at Tucker, it developed that the trainmaster had been riding in the caboose. He walked up to the engine and congratulated Toby on the fine handling of the train down the mountain. He said, "You could have stopped anywhere on a dime."

Toby answered and said, "Yes, and my fireman can do just as good a job as I did."

If that wasn't heaping coals of fire on my head I don't know what would be.

Toby once pulled a little stunt that I thought was pretty good. About five miles west of Provo the Union Pacific and the Rio Grande mainlines cross each other on a conventional diamond crossover. At that time all trains on each road had to stop before going into this crossover. The UP trains were very light compared to those of the Rio Grande. If UP and Rio Grande trains approached this crossing at nearly the same time it was always the UP train that was able to stop and start the quickest.

One morning we were going west with a heavy coal train. A light UP train was dogging along on the paralleling track. We could tell that he was in no hurry. With that light train he knew he could get stopped and started again before we could with that heavy coal drag (a slow, heavy coal train). But Toby fooled him!

Instead of driving right up to the usual stopping place, Toby stopped almost a half a mile back. He hurriedly whistled the required two blasts and started up again, moving slowly and laboriously. By the time the UP man, who had gone on to his usual stopping place, was stopped we were underway again. and with increasing speed we were approaching that crossover.

Having made the stop and whistled off, under the rules we had the right of way. That UP man didn't dare try to beat us to the crossing! I can still visualize the foolish look of chagrin on his face as we passed him by.

In the early days of railroading, before the introduction of automatic lubricators, it was quite a problem to keep the valves in the steam chest oiled. All engines had a suction cup, or relief valve, on top of the steam chest. If a person poured oil in this suction cup while the engine was drifting with the throttle shut off, the oil would be sucked into the steam chest. That was the only way to oil those valves before the advent of the lubricator.

For this purpose all engines were originally supplied with a tallow pot full of mutton tallow to be poured into those relief valves. That's where those cans got the name of tallow pots. The fireman was also called a "tallow pot," because it was he who had to grab that can whenever the engineer shut off and started to drift. He would run out on the running board, jump down on the steam chest, and pour mutton tallow into those relief valves.

Those valves were still maintained on all engines long after I quit firing. If Toby and I were called for an engine that had been standing around for any length of time, Toby would run the engine down the track and shut off. I would be out on the steam chest with the tallow pot containing valve oil. The moment he shut off I would start dribbling valve oil into the relief valves. In this way our valves were always well oiled before the lubricator started working.

One day I was out on the right steam chest waiting for Toby to shut off and drift. I had a tallow pot in my hand. As soon as he shut off I started pouring oil into the relief valve. I noticed that the valves seemed to give out a little more smoke than usual. All at once I heard the high piping voice of Toby:

"Gilbert! Gilbert! What the h—— are you doing!"

Then after a few oaths he yelled, "Come in here!"

Still I didn't know what I had done wrong. When I got back in the cab Toby had his cap off and was mopping his forehead with a chunk of

waste. He looked at me with a very disgusted look on that Swedish countenance of his.

“Gilbert, what kind of oil do we use in those valve chambers?”

“Why, valve oil, of course,” I answered.

“All right, get the tallow pot with the valve oil and go back out there, and let’s try it again,” he said disgustedly.

It was then that I tumbled. In my hurry to get out on the steam chest I had grabbed the can containing engine oil. Engine oil is no good on a hot valve. It just burns up and emits a stenchful smoke. Toby recognized my error before I did. As the years go by my memories of Toby grow fonder and fonder. How grand he really was!

One morning we were called to help no. 5 from Helper to Soldier Summit. We were a mainline pooled crew at the time, so we had a caboose between our engine and the road engine. At Colton we spotted the road engine for water. At Soldier Summit we cut off, together with that caboose and deadhead train crew. We received orders to make up a train at Soldier Summit and proceed westbound.

We had quite a job getting that train together. At last, when we were ready to leave, I began to experience trouble getting my injector to pick up the water. Just before leaving town I scrambled back over the coal in the tank to take a look at the water level. I raised the manhole cover and looked down into the tank. There wasn’t enough water in that tank to wet the soles of your shoes! I began to wonder what we would do. There was no water tank at Soldier Summit at that time. Toby had already started the train.

“Toby!” I yelled, “we’re out of water!”

A slightly impatient, worried look crossed his face for an instant. He looked out the cab window for a second. We were just entering the snowshed.

“Don’t put any more coal in her, Gilbert,” he said.

He continued on through the snowshed. On emerging from the west end of that shed the grade dropped sharply to a steady four percent. This was the old grade. As soon as the train started to roll Toby shut off. I was in a sort of a quandary.

He turned to me and in a matter-of-fact tone said, “Kill her, Gilbert.”

I wondered if I had heard right, although I knew it was the only safe thing to do. But what were we going to do then? We were just tipping over onto a four percent grade with a train of coal and would have a dead engine on the point.

“What did you say, Toby?” I queried. I knew what he said the first time, but I couldn’t believe it.

“I said, ‘Kill her, Gilbert, kill her!’” he replied.

I knew there was nothing else to do. I grabbed the long shaker bar and proceeded to shake the fire into the ash pans. Already what water remained in the boiler had rolled down into the slanting front end. I knew the “crown sheet” must be bare. The “crown sheet” is that part of the boiler on top of the firebox which must be kept covered with water or it could cause an explosion. It was up to me to get that fire out from under that crown sheet fast, and that didn’t take long.

I climbed up on my seat box. This was a new one on me. Here we were rolling down that four percent grade with a full train of coal shoving us on down with a dead engine. The nearest water was forty-five minutes away at Tucker.

After thinking our situation over for a few minutes I gradually came to the realization of what Toby was intent on doing. He was going to get that train down to the water tank at Tucker before what steam was left in the boiler was all exhausted. As long as that steam was enough to run the pump we were safe. It was a case of taking the train with us on our run for water. I had never heard of this before, and I was worried.

Once in a while, as we descended that treacherous grade, Toby would slant an encouraging glance in my direction. I thought, well, if he wasn’t afraid, why should I be?

We made the stop at and left Medea okay. We still had quite a bit of steam. I began to think we would make it to Tucker and the water spout before that steam ran out on us. This was one time I was glad that Toby was handling that train and not I.

It was a little better than forty minutes since I had killed the fire in that engine when Toby finally spotted her under the spout at Tucker. As I rode that spout to let water into the tank I could see Toby throwing pieces of wood up into the gangway.

Between the two of us we soon had a wood fire roaring under that dead engine’s crown sheet. We lost a little time at Tucker getting that old eleven hundred back to life before proceeding on our way. It was just one more lesson I learned at the hands of the old Swedish master. But this was not all. On two occasions afterward I saw Toby pull that same stunt.

I had heard a tale about Toby that went the rounds before I became acquainted with him. At the time I heard it I had laughed somewhat in disbelief.

It seems that Toby was working on a hill crew out of Tucker. One warm afternoon they were coming down the old Soldier Summit grade. Toby, it seems, was having a little difficulty keeping his train under control.