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My Life On Mountain Railroads

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The brakemen were lolling about out on top of the cars where they belonged on that mountain.

Still having difficulty, Toby finally grabbed the whistle cord and sent a long call out for brakes. The head brakeman was riding about three cars behind the engine. When Toby sent out that call for brakes, instead of going after those brake wheels with his brake club he strolled leisurely over to the engine. He climbed down into the cab and glanced up at the air gauge and remarked, "Oh, you got lots of air."

Toby got angry. His high, piping voice really squeaked as he said, "I didn't call for an argument; I called for brakes! Now get back out on top and tie 'em down."

That brakeman got back out on the car tops of that train and tied 'em down. It suddenly dawned on him that if Toby had reported his actions he would be joining the boomers. What he had done was a dischargeable offence. When an engineer called for brakes on that grade, that call had to be taken seriously.

After I go to know Toby, I brought this legendary incident to his attention one day when we were in a genial mood. I asked Toby if the way I heard it was right. He said it was accurately told.

He added with some indignation, "The idea of a brakeman coming over to the cab to tell an engineer that he has plenty of air after he has called for brakes!"

He was right! After all, who is better qualified to know what was needed than the engineer who was handling the train?

I have known several brakemen and conductors who were fairly well up on air brake operation. But the majority of them knew little more about it than the average layman. The brakeman in this case thought that as long as the air gauge showed a supply of air, that was all that was needed. I have seen many trains where the condition of the brakes and not the air supply made the difference in braking operations.

There were a lot of the old engineers who were not up on the latest practice in air brakes. This was especially true of those older men who had taken the examination in the early days of air brakes.

I was firing for old Art Campbell one day. We were coming west on no. 5 with engine 768. On approaching Midvale the train seemed to drag. In fact, after passing the water tank, Art started to work steam. He called to me. He knew that I had made quite a study of air brakes.

I glanced up at his air gauge. Both hands were together and far lower than they should be. Art looked at me inquiringly. I thought a moment.

At that time the SF4 pump governor had two heads with three pipe connections. The SF4 was a particular speed control applied to the air pumps

or compressors on locomotives. I thought I knew what the trouble was. By now those brakes had almost dragged us down to a stop. I grabbed a monkey wrench and a hammer. The pump and governor were on my side of the engine. As I hurriedly pushed the door open and stepped out on the running board I knew my diagnosis was right. I could hear the air squirting from the top pipe to the excess pressure head of the governor, which was broken.

I held the monkey wrench under the lower, or main, reservoir connection to that head and brought the hammer down sharply on the pipe. The connections were of copper and about the thickness of your little finger. When I brought the hammer down on that pipe it put a kink in it, closing the flow of air to the underside of the governor. This cut the excess head out of service, allowing the pump to start again, which it did merrily. We were still pulling against stuck brakes, but I knew that would be only momentary until the pump built up the train line pressure and backed off the brakes.

I went back into the cab and told Art, "It will be all right in a minute."

Sure enough, when the pressure in the train line built up sufficiently, the brakes released and we began to pick up speed.

"What did you do, Eddie?" Art asked. (Somewhere in the dim past, Art had had a fireman named Eddie something-or-other. He must have thought a lot of this fireman because everyone who fired for him thereafter was Eddie to him.)

I told him that the top pipe to the excess pressure head was broken at the point of connection with the governor, and that I had plugged the bottom pipe by putting a kink in it. I said that when we stopped at Salt Lake I intended to plug the top pipe the same way. Thereafter and until we reached Ogden the high pressure head would stop the pump at 130 pounds, but he could control the train line pressure with the feed valve. At Ogden he could report the governor system as in bad order and in need of repair.

We did this and had no further trouble. That little repair job that I had done saved a delay to no. 5 that day. Not only that, but it was recounted among those old heads all over the road. I was then known as an air-brake crazy fireman.

An International Correspondence School air brake car stopped at Salt Lake for several weeks. I visited it several times and became well acquainted with the instructor. When he found out that I was a pupil of ICS he arranged for me to conduct a class. Of course it was a boost for his school to have a student so well advanced in the subject conducting a class.

I also conducted an air brake class at the railroad YMCA at Helper. This class consisted of firemen who had received instruction to report for the examination as engineers. They were all east-end men.

The way I got into this was as follows. There were some large air brake charts on the wall in the reading room of the YMCA. An engineer running a switch engine in the Helper yard had been injured some time before. He was off duty and moving about on crutches. Several of the firemen who had been notified of the coming examinations had persuaded him to instruct them with these charts. He was sitting in front of those charts with a long pointer in his hand. The would-be engineers were gathered around him as he explained their workings. I wandered over to see what was carrying on. When I found out it was air brakes I became interested right away. Whenever there was an air brake discussion I tried to be in on it, so I joined the gang. I didn't know any of those east-end men, nor did they know me except by sight.

I listened to the guy with the pointer for a while. Soon I detected a mistake in his instructions. I called him on it. We had a short argument; then after I explained, he admitted that I was right. He didn't like it though. To get even he asked me a question about an incident that had recently happened in the Helper yard. I had heard of this before and had already formed my opinion. I gave him my answer. He conceded that I was right.

About that time the fire whistle at the roundhouse let go, and we all ran out to see where the fire was. It proved to be a minor blaze near the coal chute. When things settled down again, those east-end men came to me in a body. They told me they were trying to wise up on air brakes, as they had all been called up for promotion. If I didn't have anything pressing, they wanted me to go back to the YMCA and talk air brakes with them. I was always ready to talk air brakes at that time, so that's what I did.

At one time I had quite a collection of charts on air brakes and Mitchell models to go with them. These models were made of heavy cardboard. They had movable parts, so you could move them to the different service positions and note the different connections and ports.

I remember the last time I saw Toby. Business had fallen off a bit, and Toby had gone to Helper to take a helper turn. He had obligated himself for some acreage out at Orem on the Provo Bench, so he needed a job that paid more than the Salt Lake pool. I was firing fast freight out of Ogden. One morning we were going down the Price River Canyon on no. 62. At Nolon a westbound drag was pounding up the hill with a mallet helper on the rear end.

As we came even with this helper and were about to pass I could see the engineer standing in the left-hand gangway. He waved a friendly greeting to me and then crossed back to the right side. It was Toby Sheldahl!

That night when they woke me up at the YMCA to call me to return on no. 61, the callboy told me the news: Toby Sheldahl had been killed in a rear end collision on the curve just east of Colton! To say I was shocked would be putting it mildly. I was grief stricken.

I don't remember much of our westbound trip. It was usual for a death to have a sad effect on all members of the crew, to cast a pall of melancholy over the entire railroad for that matter. But with me this was something beyond that. I just couldn't get used to the thought that Toby—good old Toby—was gone. I remembered the many times he had favored me, and the many times I had shown little gratitude. Why, I was even called Toby myself by some of the railroaders who knew us and knew that we worked together. It was not uncommon to nickname a fireman after his regular engineer. So it was with us.

Many a time on the road I would have gone hungry if it hadn't been for Toby's interest and generosity. He treated me like a son, not like the ungrateful pup that I was.

I do know that all the way home I had a hard time. It was all there in my throat, and I managed to keep it there. But when I arrived home I couldn't hold back any longer. I went into the bathroom, closed the door, and gave way to my feelings. I sobbed like a baby. Mom pounded on the door and wanted to know what the trouble was. I told her Toby had been killed. Then I really let go.

It isn't the usual thing for an engineer to cross the deck to wave a greeting at a crew going in the opposite direction. I wonder what prompted him to do it on that last trip.

Toby had made his help to Soldier Summit and was returning to Helper. On the east end of the big curve just out of Colton he had been stopped by a work train. This work train had held him there until his time was up. They decided to couple into his engine and back him up into Colton to await the dogcatcher crew. They were outside of yard limits and should have had a flag out.

An eleven hundred-class engine had made a help to the Summit and was coming down the eastbound mainline. The engineer was a man named Joe Newman. He stopped and took a little water at Colton, then started again. Rounding the curve below Colton he saw the work train backing the mallet. It was too late to stop.

He hit the mallet that Toby was riding pretty hard. It seemed that Toby must have had some warning of the impending collision, and must have been trying to get out of his seat, because when the impact came it smashed the tender up against the brake valve stand, pinning Toby between them.

It developed that Newman with that eleven hundred hit Toby's engine just eleven minutes after leaving Summit. When you consider that he stopped to take a little water at Colton, he must have been travelling pretty fast—too fast.

They got Toby out and put him in a caboose and started to make a dash for Salt Lake for medical attention. He was still alive at the time. They notified his wife at Orem, and she got to the depot at Provo just as the engine and caboose with Toby came into town. She went aboard the caboose and took Toby's head in her lap.

"What happened, Daddy?" she asked.

Toby started to say, "Aw, that crazy Joe Newman ..."

She interrupted him, "No, No, Daddy. It was an accident."

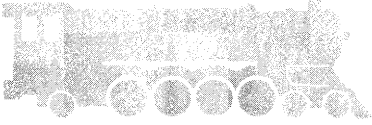
Toby said, "Yes Dear, it was an accident." Then he died with his head in her lap.

The conductor on that work train was a man by the name of Richardson. He left the Rio Grande and went to the Utah Railway when I did. I worked with him quite a bit before he became incapacitated. I never looked at him without thinking:

"If you had used a little horse sense maybe Toby would be alive today."

Of course, this was before the advent of block signals. If block signals had existed they would have prevented this occurrence.

I have been around a lot of accidents. I have lost a number of acquaintances whom I considered good friends. I have seen men stretched out in death to whom I had been talking a few moments earlier. But the death of Toby hit me harder than anything that had happened to me previously. I didn't get over that for a long time. I just couldn't forget how ungrateful I had acted to his favors and his interest in me.



Fireman JJ

The wind blustered against the back curtain, and it sneaked with stinging fury in under it where its length was just short of reaching the deck. The old fellow stood facing the open fire door, his back against the flapping curtain. His hands were sunk deep in the side pockets of a dilapidated old overcoat that he huddled in to keep out the weather. At best it only partially protected him from the cold. He was almost hidden in its many folds. Being much too large it reached almost to the shoddy footwear that encased his feet.

He was quite old. The dull glow from the open fire door flickeringly revealed the lines of many years on his shadowy features. His faded blue eyes swimming in water, his feeble shuffling and his asthmatic cough attested to his misery.

Fall weather had come and gone, and now we were deep in the clutch of a brutal winter. Most of that traveling fraternity that habitually rode the freight trains had long ago journeyed to the warmer climes, but occasionally a late straggler could be seen shivering with the cold on top of a boxcar. Rather than witness their agonies, we the crew members would get them up in the comfortable warmth of the engine cab.

In those long gone days of steam we could usually use an extra hand on the engine. We always had an extra shovel. When the coal in the tender got too far back for the fireman to reach it without taking additional steps, that third man could exercise that extra scoop to keep it up within his reach. In this manner he earned his passage and frequently a hot meal at some beanery along the way.

This old fellow had fulfilled the duties of a coal passer, and now as we waited in the passing track for an eastbound hot shot to roll, he shivered