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My Railroad Watch

A remembrance by Jack Elwood

I think I was about six or seven years old when I knew I wanted to be a railroad man, specifically a locomotive engineer. This was in the years of 1925-26, when steam locomotives were supreme on the railroads and my young heart would almost stop when I stood along the Southern Pacific main line in our town of Alhambra, California and watched those marvelous monsters working to the maximum bringing their train up the grade from San Gabriel. The earth would tremble under my feet, there were all kinds of wondrous sights and smells that would send chills through my body. I was really hooked and could think of nothing else.

The men in the cab of the steam locomotive were my heroes and I would not wait to be old enough to join them. Needless to say however, school and some growing up intervened. You had to be 21 years old to hire out in engine service those days but my thoughts and hopes never deviated. Meanwhile I knew that a railroad man had to have a standard railroad watch. In those days the Hamilton Railway Standard 992, Elgin and Howard were the popular watches.

I had saved money from cutting lawns and after school work and now had \$20.00. My dad worked in Los Angeles and had access to many pawn shops. I asked him if he could find a Hamilton Railway Special 992 watch for me. Luckily he was able to find one for \$20.00, and now I was the proud owner of a real railroad watch and had taken another step toward being a railroad man. The intervening years seemed to drag by, I was seventeen when I graduated from high school but still a long way from 21. In the meantime I worked in other departments of the railroad such as the telegraph and signal departments where the age of 21 was not required.

Finally my 21st year, that is almost, the Santa Fe started hiring locomotive firemen in October of 1940, I actually hired out on the 10th, hoping that the paper work would not be processed until the 27th. Fortunately this is what happened and I was legally 21.

Now I had a job as a locomotive fireman and on my way to becoming a locomotive engineer. My twenty-dollar Hamilton watch passed the Santa Fe railway watch requirements. New watches at this time cost \$125.00. Monthly payments were available through payroll deduction and many new employees took advantage of this method of securing the required standard watch.

In the early days of railroading, in my case about 25 years of my 44 years service, your railroad watch would have to be checked every 15 days by a standard Santa Fe watch inspector. Most larger towns that the railroad operated through had a jewelry store with a certified watch inspector. Your watch card was signed and dated every 15 days. For

all these years this formal ritual was carried out without fail. Spot checks were made by supervisors at any time and if your card was not signed you were subject to discipline.

The importance of a reliable watch in the operation of trains was a matter of deadly concern. Trains operating on single track in both directions depend on time accuracy, to the second, to facilitate the safe meeting and passing of trains.

Before starting a trip the operating crews had to check their watches with the standard clocks located at roundhouses, dispatching offices or where crews went on duty indicating how many seconds slow or fast they were on the watch register book. Conductor and engineer compared watches as did the engineer and fireman, all to insure that all crew members watches were accurate. This strongly points out how important the matter of time was in railroad operations. I carried my \$20.00 standard watch for over 40 years and I can still tell you its serial number, 1295106. I registered that number so many times that I will never forget it.

The watch was with me when I was the engineer on the San Diegan, train number 76, in December 1965 when I hit a loaded sand and gravel truck on a road crossing in Anaheim, California. The locomotives were derailed and both turned over on their sides. My fireman and I were viciously thrown around inside the engine cab on impact and a subsequent wild ride down the track ensued. The cab was filled with sand and debris and during this time my watch had been detached from my pocket and was gone.

At the Santa Fe hospital the next day, my niece visited, and as she lived in the vicinity of the accident she went to the wreck site and told the wrecking crew of my loss. They searched the cab and found my watch buried in the sand at the bottom of the cab. The watch has a dent on the backside, a vivid reminder of the wild ride that we experienced in the cab of 61L and 51L on train number 76.

The watch, my very old friend that has been with me through all kinds of experiences in my long railroad career, still ticks along to this day. It is close to 80 years old. Sorry to say that to more modern railroaders, time is not the essence anymore so far as train operations are concerned. A Timex or any watch is now sufficient. Trains are met and passed by the dispatcher pushing a button, sometimes thousands of miles away, that lines a switch to allow trains to meet and pass.

My old friend Hamilton Standard Railway Special 992 model will be passed on to my youngest son Dan who is also a working locomotive engineer. Dave, my oldest son also a locomotive engineer has his grandfather's railroad watch, another veteran of the glory days of railroading. It may seem strange for me to write about a watch, but mine was such an integral part of my life as a railroad man, something so personal and a vital part of my job. Maybe this dissertation will be justified in providing an insight into the importance of the golden years of railroading and the part played by the standard railroad watch; my \$20 railroad watch.

Jack Elwood

