



Going Hungry on the Cotton Belt

DOUG BRITTIN/photos as noted

IN JULY 1978, the Brotherhood of Railway and Airline Clerks on Norfolk & Western voted to strike over issues of union jurisdiction and automation protections. Having grown up in a union family, I was sympathetic to labor issues. I enjoyed the benefits of United Transportation Union membership during several summers as a brakeman on Southern Pacific's Los Angeles Division while I was in college, and later teaching. But now I was a traffic representative on SP in Long Beach, Calif., which is to say, I was MANAGEMENT. SP's practice for strike coverage at the time was to send its management and sales personnel to the opposite end of the system so they could run trains and work their way back home.

Thus in late September, when a national rail strike occurred, I found myself, along with a small team of other LA Division folks, on a flight to St. Louis for what appeared to be a long-haul trip west across the system. We arrived at our hotel at 1:30AM and were told to be in the lobby later that morning at 9:30, ready to go to work.

After a short night and quick breakfast, a carryall picked us up for the ride to Valley Junction, where our three-person crew was met by the local trainmaster. Due to my experience, I was assigned as conductor. Our engineer, Mike, was an assistant road foreman of engines on the LA Division. Bob, an assistant district sales manager, had never been in train service and was assigned as head-end brakeman. That lack of experience was not expected to be an issue as the line was either double track or CTC-controlled, and we wouldn't be making any pickups or setouts.

We would be taking Train APLA (Auto Parts Los Angeles), one of the Cotton Belt (SSW)/SP's hottest trains, as far as Pine Bluff, Ark., 388 miles and three normal crew districts away. Our route would be down the Missouri Pacific/SSW "joint line" as far as Dexter, Mo., and then via SSW rails from there to Pine Bluff. The joint line operated on MoPac rails from Valley Junction for 120 miles to Simbco, Ill., just short of the Thebes bridge over the Mississippi River. Dispatching was handled by the MoPac to Simbco, and from there to Dexter, Mo. (and beyond on the SSW), by the Cotton Belt.

We were advised that the strike was



ABOVE: In 1978, Doug Brittin was working in Southern Pacific management when he was sent east to work during a national labor strike, giving him a chance to work on SP subsidiary Cotton Belt. A year later, one of Cotton Belt's new EMD GP40-2 locomotives was sitting in Pine Bluff, Ark., one of the terminals Brittin worked through. HARLEN WILSON PHOTO, KEVIN EUDALY COLLECTION

fairly bitter on the MoPac segment, with a few rock-throwing situations reported, and a few minor derailments, so we should keep our eyes open. There had yet been no such incidents reported on the Cotton Belt.

I asked for operating timetables for the MoPac Division, as well as for SSW's Illmo and Jonesboro subdivisions. All that was available was a two-year-old Cotton Belt copy, and a Xerox copy comprising one page of the MoPac's Chester Subdivision (Illinois Division), but it sufficed to at least let me know where we were along the way and helped ensure that we complied with our train orders en route. I also requested an SSW switch key and a caboos key. Neither was available, but as noted earlier, we weren't expected to be turning any switches, so the former was not really an issue. We were told that meals would be provided along the way, which was good news as my hastily packed grip contained exactly one small thermos full of vending machine coffee and a 3 Musketeers candy bar.

No train orders were issued, as we would get those a few miles away at South Dupo for the MoPac segment. A carryall dropped me at the bay window caboos at 10:59AM, and then drove Mike and Bob to the head end. Climbing aboard, I fiddled with the battery switches until I was able to turn on the radio and marker lights and then called the dispatcher. After confirming our instructions and clearance to proceed to South Dupo, I walked ahead to release any hand brakes. Finding none were set on the first eight cars, I returned to the

caboos, checked to see that the water cooler was full and well-iced, and waited to hear from Mike.

Our power that day was SP 8441 and three SD40s. The train consisted of 76 loads and 27 empties totaling 6,425 tons and 7,195 feet. After Mike had settled in, I called for a brake line test. The brakes were set at 11:25 and released at 11:30. After Mike notified the dispatcher, we were moving at 11:35.

We were about to leave town when we were informed of a set of derailed MoPac units up ahead. We'd have to navigate a number of yard tracks to get around the units and a MoPac yardmaster boarded to help us get through. That delayed us more than an hour. Finally, at 1:18PM, after stopping again at the South Dupo to be handed up a set of three train orders consisting of slow orders and spiked spur switches, I called Mike to let him know we were cleared, and we headed out of the yard and onto the southbound main. We had gone a whopping 7.1 miles! About then I began to sense that it was going to be a long day.

With clear signals ahead, we shortly gained track speed down the long tangent south of Dupo. The top speed on the Chester Sub was 60 mph, but in most cases we did not exceed 50. As the caboos speedometer was inoperative, I timed mileposts to gauge our speed. The line down the east side of the river was mostly double track, but even in the single-track segments there were numerous lengthy sidings.

The afternoon was pleasant, warm, and sunny as we cruised along, and I

enjoyed the early autumn scenery. Reaching Val, I began to catch whiffs of brake shoe smoke, although we were maintaining speed and the train line gauge had not moved. Curving through Val, I scanned our train and now noticed a faint hue of blue smoke from a car about 20 lengths ahead. Confirming with Mike that he had not made a brake application, I suggested we make a stop so I could walk up and check to see if a hand brake was set.

We came to a stop at milepost 28, north of Fults. I checked the hand brakes on the cars ahead of the ones I'd done at Valley Junction, and all were clear. When I came to Lehigh Valley boxcar 34471, 24 cars from the caboose, it was evident I'd found the culprit. The hand brake wasn't engaged, however, so there was a problem with the brake cylinder itself.

I knew it could be bypassed, but as I had only done that once during my brakeman training school days seven years prior, I decided to go back to the caboose and call Mike to walk me through the steps and ensure I didn't dump the entire train line. After successfully completing the process, we were moving again at 2:30PM.

We met only two northbound MoPac trains and noted another derailed unit in the small yard at Gorham. Passing Simbo, we slowed for the slight climb and sharp curve to the west onto the Thebes bridge. I had anticipated a scenic river vista on this route, but our only view of the river was along a short stretch through Chester. Now we were crossing over the river on a historic structure and entered SSW rails.

The bridge opened in 1905, and at almost a half-mile in length and situated high above the water, was quite an architectural marvel when completed, and it certainly impressed me that day. We crossed it at 5:20PM, and I afforded myself the luxury of what was surely a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. A few minutes later we rolled to a stop adjacent to the small yard in Illmo, Mo., to await our SSW train orders.

As we held the main, our thoughts began to turn to that food we were promised about seven hours earlier. My candy bar and coffee were long gone. Unfortunately, the Cotton Belt's dispatcher advised that we might have to wait until we got to Dexter, 50 miles ahead, as he needed us to clear the main ASAP.

By this time we had been stopped for around 10 minutes, with the caboose about 20 cars short of a grade crossing. Our train was also blocking another crossing at the west end of the yard. Drivers were beginning to honk, and I noticed a few people getting out of their vehicles and climbing over the couplers ahead. Suddenly, we lost our air. Mike immediately called to ask if I had dumped the

air. I advised him of the pedestrians, and we concluded that someone might have cut the train line. The only solution was for me and Bob to grab spare air hoses and a wrench and start walking the length of the train from each end. As I had to pass by that first crossing, I decided to walk up the north side of our consist and stay out of sight from the now fairly irate drivers on the south side.

Halfway between the two crossings, I spotted the reason for our emergency brake set — someone with knowledge and skill had climbed onto a coupler and stomped down on the glad hand connection, deftly avoiding the dangerously whipping hose ends as we lost our air. This was certainly easier to correct than replacing a broken hose. By the time Bob arrived I had remade the connection, and I told him what to tell Mike, letting him know he could begin pumping the air back up.

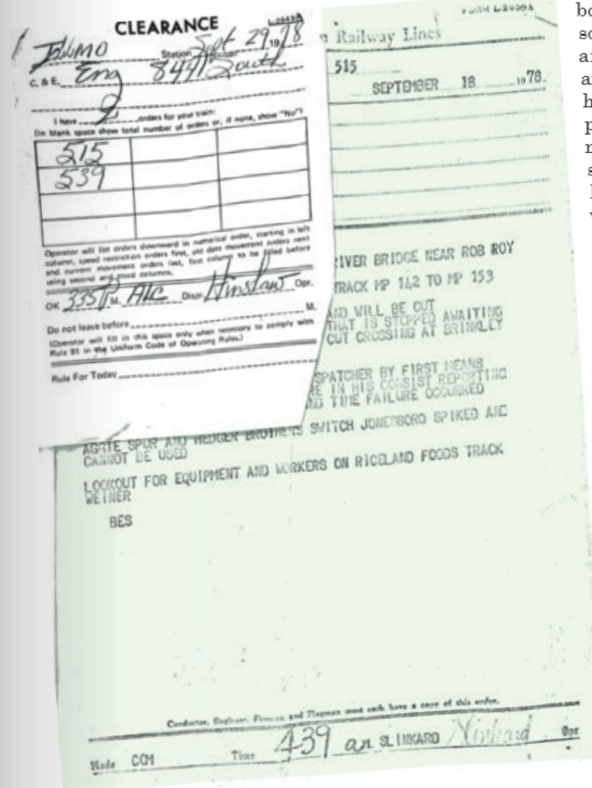
My trudge back to the caboose was not a pleasant one. I was intercepted by an angry sheriff's deputy, who demanded to know why the crossings had been blocked. There was a high school football game that evening and we were preventing fans from getting to the field in time for the start. He yelled in no uncertain terms that if I didn't get on my "gosh darn" caboose immediately and get that train out of town, he would arrest me then and there. Respectfully, I told him that if I was arrested, the train wouldn't be leaving any faster. That seemed to work.

I made it back to the caboose, where the Illmo operator was waiting with my set of SSW train orders, and I called Mike for another set and release. We were moving again at 6:35PM, and as we passed the crossings, I was greeted "warmly" by those waiting.

But once again our journey was not a long one, as we headed into the long siding at Quarry, six miles away. There we met five northbounds in fairly quick succession. At 8:14PM, we were moving again as our empty stomachs continued to complain.

At Delta, the main line turned to the south and we made good time. Although the maximum allowed speed for an authorized fast freight was 65 on this stretch, we rarely exceeded 45-50. As we passed a stopped TOFC train in the siding at Randles, I was startled to see the number of trailers with doors torn open and items of lading strewn along the right-of-way. The train had obviously been there for some time.

Sustenance was not to be had at Dexter, as the dispatcher advised that there was no one to pick up something for us at a restaurant. He couldn't hold us there as he needed to keep the main clear for a number of MoPac trains coming off its line from Poplar Bluff. But he did say



ABOVE: Some 46 years later, Doug Brittin still has the paperwork from his trip across the Cotton Belt — one where he nearly went hungry along with the rest of his management crew.

that we would surely get some food in Jonesboro (75 miles), or possibly Brinkley (149 miles)! By now it was 9:40PM.

At Jonesboro, our hopes were dashed again, but the dispatcher assured us we'd get fed in Brinkley. After more than 12 hours on duty, the water diet was wearing thin. True to the dispatcher's word, when we were about 40 miles north of Brinkley, the operator there called us, and gave us our options — burgers, onion rings, fries, pies, and coffee. I selected "all of the above." As we approached the station, Mike slowed so Bob could grab their bag on the engineer's sidestep. Mike told me he would pick up speed a bit but then slow back down to about 5 mph as the caboose neared the station. I hung my lantern in the crook of my left arm and descended to the bottom step at the front end of the caboose and waited to catch my goodie bag. But as we got closer, and the station came into view ahead, we didn't seem to slow down. I could make out the operator standing trackside and jiggled my lantern to let him see where I was. By this time, I estimated we were still going at least 15 mph. The operator held up a large brown paper bag top and

bottom, doing his impersonation of an order hoop, and I crooked my right arm and squeezed the bag hard, doing my best impersonation of an RPO mail hook. He shouted something unintelligible, I yelled my thanks, and we were gone.

As I climbed back up the steps, hot liquid ran out the bottom of the bag — I'd grabbed so hard that the lid had popped off the large Styrofoam coffee cup inside. But that coffee-soaked burger, fries, rings, and apple pie tasted exquisite. By now it was 1:30AM and any food was good.

We had multiple meets in the 65 miles from there to Pine Bluff. Just below Humphrey around 3:30AM, we sat on the main for well over an hour in a wooded area, and a dense fog had settled in. I kind of wished I had that caboose key then,

imagining all sorts of swamp creatures lurking. At 5:00AM, we got word that the strike was over as President Carter had called for a cooling-off period. We entered the huge Pine Bluff yard and rolled to a stop at 5:25AM, and the carryall picked me up at 5:59, exactly 19 hours after boarding the caboose. We'd covered those three crew districts and 388 miles in that time, not exactly challenging the SSW/SP's *Blue Streak Manifest* scheduled time of seven and a half hours. Apparently, the Hours of Service Law of 14 hours for train crews was not in effect for us.

After a quick but much-needed shower at another Holiday Inn, and about three hours of sleep, the phone rang, and I was told to be in the lobby in an hour for a ride to the airport for my flight home. I was back in Los Angeles eight and a half hours later, less than half the time the previous day's journey had taken. After catching up on some sleep on Sunday, I was back in the office Monday morning, dealing with my shippers and consignees who were anxious to track down their shipments.

Alas, SP, Cotton Belt, and Missouri Pacific, as well as TWA and the L-1011 on which I flew home, are now long gone. But I'll never forget my adventure as a conductor on the joint line. And I never did find out who won that football game. ■