

# “Ridin’ on a Varnish Stick!”

**“In eighteen hunder’d an’ forty-one,  
The American railway was begun,  
The American railway was begun,  
The great American railway!”**

SO begins that old folk song and it goes on to tell of the life—and death—of one of its many builders, a tough old roustabout.

It grew up through the years; the almost endless looking, sleek, silver monsters that drone on for days, across thousands of miles of tracks, are a far call from the old, wood burning ‘locos’ of a hundred years ago.

With bandits, train robbers and Indian

attacks, plus the natural hazards of storm and snow, or dry, torturous desert plains, crews had to be tough.

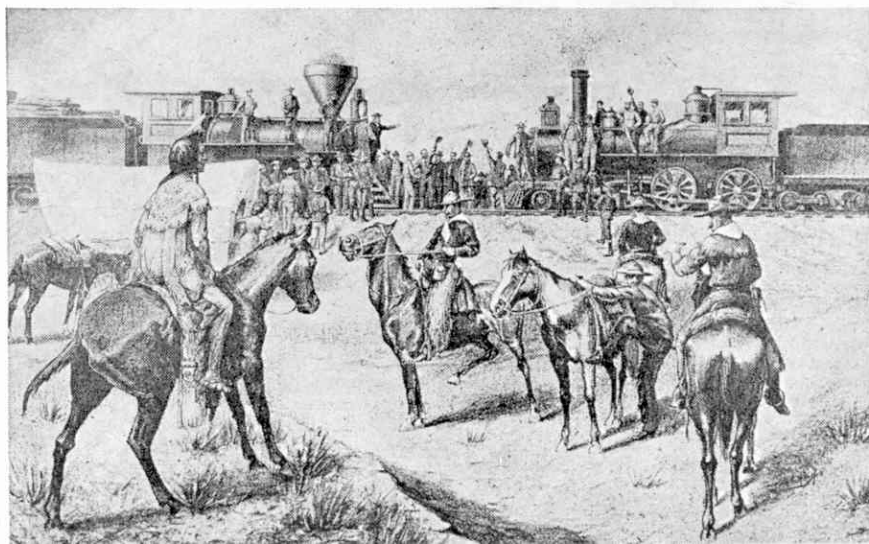
Today, the trains are luxurious. First time for a foreigner in New York’s Grand Central Station is like visiting another world; whirling escalators, columns of people appearing and disappearing through countless openings like ants in a colony, the rattle and hiss of the giant engines, the babble of tongues only partially silenced by the train announcements, but above all, its vastness—when you are a stranger, particularly a foreign visitor, it is the largest, loneliest place in the world.

And how about their freight yards? They seem to stretch for mile upon mile. Your eyes begin to blurr at the crossing and recrossing lines, at the mass of lights and levers and the endless rows of freight cars, guarded and patrolled by ‘bulls’, with vicious looking guard dogs and carrying their menacing, night sticks—heaven protect the poor ‘bum’ who gets caught ‘hitching a stick!’

Just in case you managed to get lost somewhere in that last sentence, let me explain that railroad workers in the U.S.A. have a language all of their own. A ‘bull’ is a railroad guard, or policeman; a ‘bum’ is a tramp who ‘rides the rods’ or

*Above: the De Witt Clinton, third locomotive built in the United States hauled a train of passenger cars from Albany (New York) to Schenectady (New York), a distance of about 14 miles on August 9th, 1831, in 46 minutes. Horse drawn cars travelled the same distance in about 75 minutes*

*Right: the day when East and West were united. The scene is Promontory Point, Utah. The occasion—May 10th, 1869, when the last spike was driven to connect the Union and Central Pacific Railroads*



'hitches a stick'—in other words he steals a ride on a freight car—if he is lucky, it is in the comparative comfort of a closed wagon, if not, then he has to make do with a shake down in an open freighter—bone chilling in winter.

Railroad men are a race apart; their names can range from Casey to Kowalski, but they all talk the same language—railroadese!

Like the modern version of Casey Jones that took me to see the Superintendent of the large American railway depot.

We were walking alongside the tracks when he spat contemptuously:

'Hey! Jes look at dat short tail—high ballin' dat yard goat up de garden!'

I asked him to say it again. He did! I was just as wise.

When I repeated his words, carefully, to the 'Super', he grinned broadly.

'You got it right!' he said, 'a "short tail" is a non-union worker—they aren't very popular with the union men. To highball a yard goat up the garden means he was driving a small shunting engine, very fast, through the goods yard.'

I nodded—but a chap that could talk to me in English(?) and yet I still couldn't understand him—well!

'Come an' have a look round the garden!' said my new guide.

As we came past the offices, an engineer emerged, studying a piece of paper very intently.

'Thass a hog mauler glimming his flimsy!'

I looked at him curiously.

'It means the train driver, or engineer as we call them, is studying his train orders.'

I nodded.

'Then what?'

'Oh! He'll highball his consist up the high iron to Chi.' He grinned at my helplessness. 'In other words, he will drive his train, consisting of mail and passengers, at full speed along the main line to Chicago.'

We passed into the repair sheds.

'That's a drag come in with a hot box!' the Super shouted above the hammering and hissing.

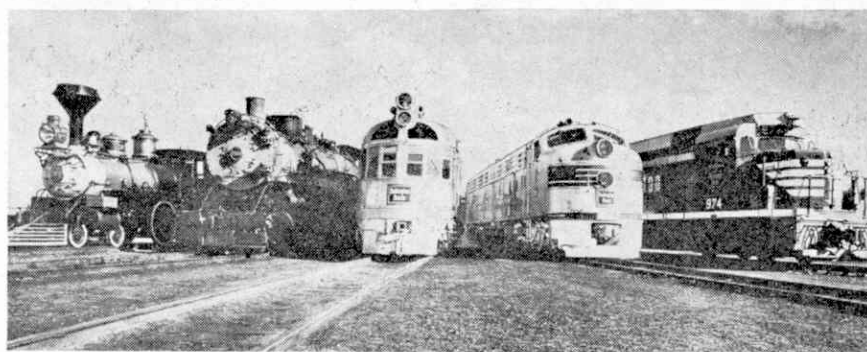
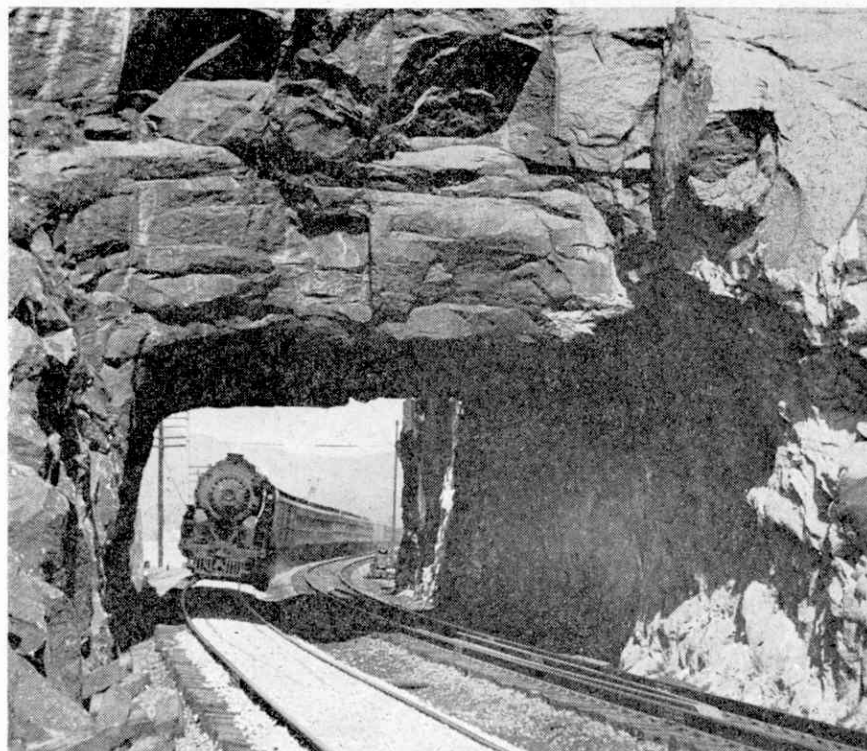
'I know what a hot box is,' I yelled back, 'but what on earth is a "drag"?''

He shrugged despairingly, then patiently explained that it was a slow freight train.

Patience, he interpreted more terms for me; the 'hoghead' or 'hog-mauler' was the driver. Then comes the 'tallow-pot', or fireman as we know them. The rest of the train crew were the 'head-shack', 'swing-shack', and the 'rear-shack'—the conductor and front and rear brakemen. They ride in the 'bouncers', 'brain cars', 'crummies', or just 'caboosees'—brake vans!

All the time we had been walking round I had noticed a lengthy passenger train standing empty. I asked him about it.

'Yeah! Well, thass a "varnish stick"'



held up by the "hog law".

He went on to explain.

'All passenger trains are "strings of varnish", or "varnish sticks", it's a relic of the old days when passenger coaches were elaborately painted and varnished.'

I looked again at the gleaming aluminium and glass of the coaches and shrugged.

'And the "hog law", I questioned.

'It's a Federal regulation that prevents a train crew from working more than 16 hours at one stretch!'

They have their labour problems, too!

As I was leaving the depot, two hefty railway policemen were dragging a weedy looking tramp through the gates.

'A "bum" that's been "riding the rods"?' I ventured.

The Super grinned, then nodded agreement.

'You're picking up "railroadese"! and with a casual, two-finger salute, he left me—still with my mouth half open in amazement.

— H. J. Summers

Top: hammering round the banked curve to enter a cut in the Hudson River Highlands made of solid steely-hard granite. Such was the hardness of this material that when the road was built in 1848, it took a full day to cut an average of 18 inches into the rock. Mansell Collection Photograph

Above: more of a century of U.S. locomotive progress is evident in this recent line-up of Burlington Railroad motive power. From left: the Diamond Stack No. 35, typical of wood and coal burning locomotives in use from 1850 to well in the 20th century; the coal-burning 4960 Mikado type, built in 1923 for freight train service; the Burlington Zephyr diesel locomotive powered the first stainless steel streamlined train, introduced in 1934; the General Motors E-19 passenger unit, used today on high speed Zephyr passenger trains; and the General Motors turbocharged GP-5 locomotive for fast freight service, built in 1963