

A Women's Journey on the Southern Pacific: From New Hire to Respected Manager

By Pat Doll

In 1973, the West Colton yard opened with circus tents, hot dogs, and over 300 clerks in cute little vests handing out railroad caps to children and conducting tours for visitors. I drove a tram taking people to the roundhouse area explaining the wash rack operations, the sanding and fuel capabilities, and touting the opening of this new classification yard that, at the time, was supposed to be one of the biggest and best in the railroad industry.

The basement, for which I later had special instructions on how to clean when I drew the janitor slot, was full of dozens of towers running RAM drives to store and sort all the information for the cars and locomotives passing through the yard. Notwithstanding this marvelous technology, the automation was still dependent on yard clerks to go to the receiving yard and individually verify and inventory the incoming trains. Once the train lists were verified, along with tare weights and other information on bands affixed to doors of the cars and observation of the springs of cars to detect possible loads that showed as empties, the clerks keypunched the information onto cards, which were then passed through a keypunch machine which then entered that train or trains into the yard's inventory.

I recall so many stories: dropped piles of punch cards for use by crews of hump engines waiting to push the cars to hump for classification; watching trains go by the popped out window on the first floor as they traveled west to get a jump on the list; and trying to pass car-knockers (car men) and maintenance vehicles in the narrow roadways between tracks, while juggling a clipboard and trying to inventory two trains, one on each side.

One day, while at the top of the receiving yard, between tracks 101 and 102, which was empty at the time, I was driving what we referred to as a putt-putt. It was a glorified stripped-down golf cart on which the brake was engaged by merely taking your foot off the push-down accelerator. Concentrating on checking cars on the train on track 101, I did not hear an incoming train approaching behind me to place cars on track 102.

The vehicle I was driving had been in an accident the night before, and as a result, the rear bumper guard was sticking out about four inches instead of being wrapped around. When the incoming train struck that four inches of bumper, it propelled me and the putt-putt a great distance down the roadway and into the air, leaving me and the vehicle jammed in between two gondola cars of the train I on track 101.

By that time, I was screaming so loudly I could not hear much of anything after that, but was told the engineer immediately radioed the tower that someone had been hit in the receiving yard who was thought to be a woman. The connection was immediately made that it was the yard clerk. Carmen came in short order and tore the mangled door off the passenger side and before they could help me down to the ground, which was about five-foot drop, I jumped and ran. I ran for my life away from the yard and the trains and toward Sierra Avenue where the tower personnel and the managers found me in hysterics. In short, the putt-putt was mangled and damaged beyond repair, but I had escaped without any broken bones. I had experienced so many muscle tears and bruises, that I looked like the train had hit me directly.

Since I still in my employment probationary period of 90 days, I was encouraged not to file an accident report, or I would be let go. As I was helped back to work the next day, (I could not walk), it was not a reportable accident to the Federal Railroad Administration, and everyone was happy, and I was allowed to stay home for a week and Southern Pacific paid me for that period.

I was the sole support of three children, one who was a quadriplegic, age four years, and so this job was extremely important to me. I was partially college educated but had no skills. So that I enhance my resumé, I took a three-month crash course sponsored San Bernardino County to learn typing, business math, Dictaphone transcription, and other office-based courses. That landed me a job at Redlands Community Hospital with horrible hours and exposure to things I did not want to bring home to my children.

I moved from the hospital to working for San Bernardino County's Department of Airports and Roads as a diazo blueprint processor, the only such operation on the west coast at the time. I was there when a friend at the County's human resources department called and asked if I was interested in doubling my wages. Needless to say, with my yes response, she moved me into an inactive file for a possible interview for an upcoming opening of the West Colton Yard. I say inactive because, at the time, Southern Pacific was hiring from the unemployment rolls to receive a lucrative credit from the state for those they hired. During the interview I was candid and told the Southern Pacific interviewer that I was working but desperately wanted this job. He hired me and my wages jumped from \$400 a month to \$800.

I was immediately put into training classes, which covered all the aspects of the computers that I would be involved with, the operation of the West Colton Yard, and instruction about train operations, and for several weeks, the information I was required to learn was endless. I kept my job at the County and worked nights to get its backlog of mylar maps and mimeo requests and such up to date until another person could be trained on the Diazo processor. So, for two weeks I maintained that 16-hour schedule. It would come in handy for my break-in as a clerk when I sometimes worked 16-hour shifts, and occasionally one lasting 24 hours. Many people left the first couple of years because they could not work or maintain that kind of schedule and who did not truly understand that working for Southern Pacific was 24-7-365 commitment and that working on holidays was expected.

My children loved coming to work with me for years when most jobs were vacant as I was usually working one of the jobs that was required to be filled - crew dispatcher for yard, engine. and trainmen, one of the operator jobs, or the interlocking operator. When those days came, my two older children were taken by the roundhouse foreman for rides on the engines at the wash rack or allowed to come up into the tower. A couple of times, they were with me at the cabooses a Dike that served as a station building when I am handing up train orders to passing trains.

I still have one of the original train order hoops with orders strung in them hanging on one of my house walls for display. It's hard to imagine that short stick of wood is the only thing between me and the oncoming train for which I had to stand in exactly the right position to face it, but not look at the headlight (which wasn't dimmed), and get that hoop of string in just the correct place so it could be hooped through the engineer's arm and then manage to get another hoop strung and up for the conductor to grab as train went by.

One story among others stays in my memory -- a conductor grabbing my train order pole instead of the string and me instinctively hanging onto it (why, I cannot tell you) and stumbling through the ballast alongside the train until he let go of it. It was not funny at the time.

Working in the cabooses at Dike and Hiland, usually during graveyard shifts, seemed attractive to others, as one was in either remote location by themselves, or could do whatever they wanted, but it truly was not that restful. Visitors were few and far between, but one-year, Southern Pacific's employees had issues with people taking potshots from their off-road vehicles as they drove by the cabooses. That same year, one shot a conductor as he was giving his train a roll-by inspection as it went around a curve. I saw many rattlesnakes during the hot months at Hiland, never encountered one at Dike. Rosie, who lived on the premises at Hiland, did not like us killing them, and, instead, asked us to just sweep them away. You kept a broom and a large stick near the steps of the caboose and before you went down them, you would sweep beneath the steps and then alongside the switch machine as you went to line trains for the siding.

Those were years were adventure, wonder, apprehension and so many other things. Southern Pacific hired several women to work in the yard when it opened and there were many hardships encountered by the women because of the egos of the men who also worked at the yard. One assistant general yardmaster said that I was taking good money out of the hands of a man who had a family to support. I got really quiet and put my hand out upside down and said he could divvy up right now and pay me to stay home, as my children were entitled to live as nicely as his were. I think I also told him that it was because of an ass just like him that I found it necessary to support my children.

There were difficulties sometimes sorting out how much the Southern Pacific supervisors wanted the women to do in actual field operations, such as opening up grain car hopper doors on Mondays for the grain inspectors, walking trains in the dark on the south side of the yard to verify tare weights for the ISC clerks to input tariffs, being in a roundhouse tower all by yourself with no ability to lock the door, and finding transients climbing up the three story staircase looking for a warm hangout.

I worked all in areas of field operations and had encounters of one kind or another while performing my duties. The most "fun" I had was at Pepper Street at the east end of the West Colton yard, where the operator sat and typed up orders from three dispatchers to give to those assigned to departing trains. A little metal shanty was situated between the tracks with an adjoining toilet stool and sink.

Bums (transients would be a nicer word, but we all called them bums) would love to curl up in there for the warmth and to clean up. They would approach the window in front of the chair where the operator sat and typed and when they had that person's attention, they would ask questions like "When is the next train to Bakersfield?" "Which train is going to LA?" "Do you have any food I can have?" I would keep the door locked until a crew arrived and would also turn the lights out so that I could more easily see them approaching. I could type and work using the illumination of the light on the pole immediately outside the shanty.

One trainmaster, John Schnoebelen, called me on the radio one night and thought he had caught me sleeping. He whispered into the radio: "Hey operator at Pepper, I'm up here on the overpass and it seems you are sleeping down there, because there are no lights on." I immediately hit the foot pedal and responded, "No, I am wide awake; I just don't like having the bums sneak up on me." He laughed but told me I had to keep the lights on. A few nights later, several bums came to the shanty and wanted in, as they were drinking and carousing. I called for the Southern Pacific officer on duty to come and help, but he was busy elsewhere, so one of the supervisors came and chased them away with gun in hand. I was never allowed to tell that story, but since I am retired and John Schnoebelen is deceased, I do not think there will a reprisal.

Speaking of terminal officers, there was one, who shall remain nameless, who is living to the best of my knowledge, and he came to investigate a tragic accident that occurred at the Pepper area where a man had been cut in two while under a passing train, or perhaps had fallen off a train, or because of another reason. He lay a few feet from the door of the shanty, and we presumed dead because his internal organs were all hanging out. Sorry. But, if you worked for the Southern Pacific or another railroad company in the operations area, in particular, you know what that when a train and the human body interact in a compact area, the result is not forgiving. Anyway, this officer was standing next to the deceased who was not covered, no emergency personnel were on the scene, and all were just standing around talking about getting reports filed, when this "dead" body who is still alive, reaches up and grabs hold of the pant leg of the officer. The officer screamed, ran, and had to go home to change his clothes. The person died a few minutes later, and everyone was taught a lesson that one could not assume anyone was dead until the emergency response personnel had made that determination.

The hardest thing I ever did while working for Southern Pacific as a woman, or as a human being, occurred at Pepper Avenue. A yard checker got on the radio and said he saw a body beside the track near my shanty right off the main line. As he was passing the information for someone to come investigate, the body moved. I grabbed rags and towels and went running over to him to help to stop the bleeding until an ambulance could arrive. There was no blood, just missing body parts and the body was a very young boy of 16, who had been bumming on the train to get home. When he went to jump off the train, his backpack caught on the rungs of a tri-level car above him, and he was flipped under the train. It severed both his legs and one finger. I sat down beside him in the ballast and put his head in my lap and shielded his eyes from his lower body so he could not see that his legs were missing because he was not yet feeling any pain from the accident. I kept telling him not to close his eyes, that he had to stay awake -- some thought that if he closed his eyes, he would die. When he asked me if it was serious, I said yes and then he asked me to pray with him. When he put his hands together to pray and saw that one of his fingers was gone and he was not feeling pain, he then realized the enormity of what had happened.

We waited 40 minutes for the ambulance. This was one of the many instances where Southern Pacific did not have things quite thought through when it came to the importance of human life. The yard encompassed six territories for city and county divisions for proper assignment and dispatch of emergency vehicles and there was only a response when there was a match. Moreover, and this sounds harsh, the Southern Pacific officers who responded were angry with me for talking with the young man and finding out his name. I surmised that by knowing this, Southern Pacific would have the responsibility for notifying the family of the teenager, doing an investigation, and would be subject to a claim of liability; however, if this 16-year-old had died nameless, these issues would not have been of concern. I never got over the lack of blood and how the steel wheels and the weight of the train seared the flesh shut over the iron of the rail and cauterized the areas of amputation completely closed.

I had clerked throughout the Los Angeles Division, filled numerous administrative positions, and operator jobs when in 1984, I applied for promotion to train dispatcher in Los Angeles. I was turned down because a couple of the dispatchers voted against me because of run-ins we had had over getting their trains into the Colton yard when I was the interlocking operator at that location.

George Link, bless his heart, and I laughed about it just before he passed a few years ago about the day he had two trains close to expiring under the hours-of-service rule coming and he was determined that I was going to take them into yard, so he did not have to patch them out on the

line. He aggressively dispatched one train toward me on the hill outside of Colton, on the No. 2 main track and another train on the No. 1 main track. What he and most crews did not understand was that I did not make the decisions about who got in the yard and who did not. It all hinged on availability of track, the availability of a relief crew, stopping yard operations to yank a yard crew off their train to tie down an hours-of-service train, or there just was not trackage on which to park the train. With a lot of maneuvering, an interlocker operator could get two trains up the main westbound, or two trains up track No. 901, one or two up tracks No. 904 or No. 905 and still direct a local train around the balloon track to go west and bring another train in from the west, while holding another out at Slover from Bakersfield. It was all a big juggling game, hours of service, versus crews to take over or park, and tracks to get empty, and which train had priority.

The joke was everyone had a different idea of priority. One superintendent ordered that Amtrak must get through the West Colton yard one night without holding it out, despite the fact that he had just had us bring in three trains that were in holding patterns, without crews. There was not a single running track open in the yard... NOT ONE. So after, much yelling and threatening (sometimes the modus operandi), the Amtrak train came in and I told its engineer that I had made arrangements with the roundhouse personnel for a route for their train, but he was to ascertain that no one was on any platform or adjacent to any of the trackage traversed by the train. We ran the train through the wash rack, over the sanding pit, out the lower end of track No. 904 after which it exited the yard. Those who were involved in the planning and its execution had lots of explaining to do the next day.

The end of the above story is when George pushed the two westbound trains past the Santa Fe tower on each main and while they were waiting to get into the West Colton yard, the yardmasters got annoyed and said two trains had to be taken out of the yard before the two trains George was dispatching could be taken into the yard. I was coerced into moving two eastbound trains down each of the main tracks to depart the yard. There we sat, two trains looking at two trains and there was no alternative as to how the trains could move forward. When push came to shove, George, the hill dispatcher, had to back up one of his trains because once the yard trains were pulled out to go east, the yard crews started humping and pulling cars down into the tracks they had just vacated. It is not an easy task backing a train up a hill in mainline territory and George and I would not have a good working relationship for years to come.

After getting the promotion finally to train dispatcher in 1984 I worked with Russell Tomren, the east end dispatcher, eventually big in the Rules department, and with several of the esteemed assistant chief dispatchers, who supervised us and delegated priority of trains and pickup and setout instructions and handing off of locomotives to passing trains. The juggling game just got bigger and bigger. I tended to try to inform the crews of the WHY I was putting them in at Iris for three or at Clyde for two. The more information I gave them about the yard not being able to take them, or the yard needing a following train in first account setouts, or lack of crews, the more I felt they could handle the wait. WRONG!!! I was told over and over by my chiefs to stop giving the trains information. It only added to the endless chatter about their wants and needs and did not satisfy them. At one time, I was sent a note via company mail in which someone had scribbled on it my name along with a dripping dagger about me being the Night Stalker. I killed trains. At the time, Richard Ramirez, the actual murderer, rapist, sniper, was running loose in LA. It was scary. I was in tears more times than I can count and did stop talking on radio as my tear-filled voice would truly not gain me any sympathy. One chief, Gary Furbee, jumped on the radio one night on my behalf when a crew asked why they were being held out and said, "Because I told her to, that is all you need to know" They did not like it much, but they stopped bullying me over it and I stopped giving them information.

When the offices merged and moved to Roseville, it was a very difficult move for me preparing to find a place and people to help me take care of my youngest daughter, Deanna, who was a quadriplegic from an accident one year after birth. In the first few years on the railroad, I deliberately sought out and bid on midnight jobs so that I only had to hire someone to be in the house at night and who would not have to render any medical or aid. I would get off work at 7 am and go home and get the two older ones off to school, feed her and place her on the floor of the living room on padding and then lay down beside her and nap off and on. My oldest daughter, Shelley, and my son, Andrew, would come home from school, take over her care and let me sleep a few hours uninterrupted. This became very hard on them, giving up school activities and I was not holding up much better. When I had to work 16-hour shifts, I struggled to find sitters who could manage to feed her correctly and to move her muscles periodically to keep her from becoming twisted. Before I could solve the problem of moving her to Roseville, she became ill with pneumonia for the umpteenth time and passed away just prior to the move just two weeks short of her 18th birthday. My two older children were of age and elected to stay behind and continue their lives in Southern California. It was a very lonely time for me on that move.

The Roseville office was a showplace after they moved us to the old Hewlett Packard building from the old Roseville yard office (where we sat working all those years sitting on top of the unexploded ordinance from the bomb train explosion of 1973. (1997 discovered unexploded bomb(s).) At the new office, each dispatcher sat in glass enclosed cubicles designed to give each control over air quality and soundproofing. Visitors would come and stand outside the glass peering in at you working. It was always joked that we were in the fishbowl. From this location I was selected by William Neal to train as a rule's instructor. I had "bad" rep with the crews of being a stickler for the rules but could not give it up just to be popular. The accidents I had seen had left a huge impact on me and I just couldn't face being part of the problem for anything happening. At the time I was working the Mountain, once the domain of Jeri Blair, who ruled that territory with her expertise. She was a very hard act to follow. But times had changed from train orders to centralized traffic control and yards and divisions needs and wants were much more prevalent and harder to satisfy.

The chief train dispatcher at the time was a crusty individual who would call you into his office and swear at you about mistakes or misjudgments you had made. On one occasion, I was 'fired' by one of his minions for not clearing an unobstructed path for a pet train (an important one to him) and he made me get out of the chair and said I was fired. I calmly picked up my purse and vacated the cubicle. I made a point of walking by the Chiefs office on my way out and he demanded to know where I was going. I told him that "Tom" had fired me and I was going home. The expletives that came out of him would shame a sailor. He would laugh about it today as he is very much aligned with the religious community and does extensive charity work. Needless to say, I was not fired, and "Tom" was not either, but there was another relationship that did not grow any better over time.

When the SP was bought by DRGW and the move was to be made to Denver, Co. there were many who fought the move and the new regime. Lots stayed behind, which left the dispatching office without enough to fill jobs adequately. Hours of Service for field personnel are allowable to 12 hours but only to 9 for dispatchers and then only in extreme cases. No exceptions, huge fines and problems ensue. Short of staff, the RR ramped up to immediately start hiring and training

personnel and I became one of the two instructors. Quick and hard development of a 29-week training program as we were bringing in people off the streets with no RR experience and so had to create not only an accomplished train manipulator but a safe one who understood the field operations well enough to enhance their decision-making moves.

In the years between 1989 and 1997, over 600 students passed through the classroom. The dropout rate was minimal account the pay even in training was good, but the failure rate to pass the testing and on job apprenticeship was dropping them at a high rate. A good portion of them would not and could not manage the working hours and conditions. Protests abounded about working holidays, and family needs and not being able to go to their kid's football games and on and on.

One group in particular, brought to the DRGW office from a headhunter who they paid \$18,000 a head to recruit young military individuals, proved to be the toughest. They did not think they needed as much training as anyone else. After all, they are officers in the military , or were. I struggled for three days to get them to stop talking amongst themselves and pay attention and then had another few days trying to get them to follow instructions at my pace, not theirs. Each wanted to go off in their own direction and fly on their own, so to speak. (Air Force) With such an extensive training program, detailed down to the last letter about each step followed each step they fought tooth and nail to soar ahead. I let them go. Then came Friday, quiz day, every Friday. When they were told that they had ALL failed the quiz and that one more failed quiz and they were gone, they settled down.

I had a particular teaching style I had developed after so many classes and so many head bumps with so many different individuals. Most women were more attentive to my instruction and the men were rebellious about a woman teaching them about the railroad - after all the railroad is a man's environment. I did not fight this mentality. Just let them hang themselves. No changing the way a person's thinks about any given subject. They have to arrive there all on their own. I studied rules extensively, learned the history of the rules, the why they were in place and tried to find pictures and films and current situations to illustrate the reason for the rule. I made a good friend in Salt Lake City, Utah, Bob Pugmire with the former Union Pacific after the UP acquired the SP/DRGW. He was head of the rules department for UP for all field personnel, engine men, trainmen, yards. We met on many occasions there in SLC to go over the differences in the rules between the UP and the former SP and to sort out just what they were willing to adopt and what they thought was nonsense.

Definitely a good ole boy network there on the UP. Not only in SLC but in Omaha, as well. Such a stark difference between management styles and hierarchy at the time. I had to interview for my own job during that merger. The UP interviewers were very hard core about a woman coming into this position and "allowed" me on a probationary basis I believe only because I was one of the few on-site personnel with expertise on the computer side of the train movement system. UPs intent was to just "roll" the trackage and all into their computer system and do away with the old SP computer system. Their much older and better system would manage it all. It did not happen.

The UP-training program was much less structured and actually much less in length and depth than the former SP program. They did not even have much of a training facility. A room, a book, an instructor that said if you make it thru the book you are qualified. Sounds great to some, but proved deadly to some. After a year of accidents in which the train dispatchers they had turned out were held accountable for deaths in the field, the federal government said enough and decided that they must change their training methods, among other things. At that time, they implemented the former SP training program as their own. Job insurance for me. The biggest hurdle with the implementation, was find a building, find applicants. UP insisted on college degrees to enter the program. Their thought is that dispatchers will always rise up and be promoted to bigger and better. Problem with that is twofold. You have a constant flow of unexperienced train dispatchers, and you get people with college degrees in agriculture who still do not know a damned thing about railroading.

My last years on the railroad with the UP were markedly different than anything I had experienced beforehand. It actually gave me the incentive to retire early and when the opportunity presented itself to retire at 60 with 30 years' experience, I took it. I was tired of fighting with everyone about following the rules. It was always someone wanting to make exceptions for sometimes very flimsy reasons. My teaching style had remained the same, follow the rules or people die. Follow the proven ways, do not think your degree makes you smarter than what has already transpired enough to change it. My philosophy about rules instruction was adopted from Russell Tomren, (since deceased) This Rulebook is written in Blood. Someone died and, yes, they wrote a dozen rules afterwards, trying to prevent the next fatality. It is not up to any of you to think you can do it your way, your way is not proven, these are.

Writing this has been cathartic in a way. Helped me let go of a few issues I still carry with me. I fought hard on the railroad to be respected for my knowledge. If you know anyone interested in buying a lot of old rule books, let me know.. going to start letting go of some of the RR paraphernalia.