

Baby on the Extra Board

By Linda Niemann



Seated in the front row from left are Linda Niemann, Susan Fox, Ron Batory, Bill Fowler, and Roy Gelder. Standing in the back row from left are Mike McGinley, Rob Krebs (he was a member of the audience), Andrew Fox, Rollin Bredenberg, Mike Mohan, Pete Rickershauser, Brian Holtz, and John Gray.

Two years ago, at the Lexington Group Conference, I was on a panel with former executives of Southern Pacific (please see the picture on the left). The subject was the last 10 years of Southern Pacific. There were 2 women on the 12-person panel, me representing labor and one other representing marketing. I listened to the narratives, thinking how different each view of the railroad was. Some were trying to run a railroad, repair a railroad, or market a railroad, while we were operating a railroad. One after another exec spoke.... the meltdown in Houston in 1980. I remembered that. I was loaned out to Houston as a switchman in February 1980. Brand-new tracks fell over in the sand. Crews

from everywhere else were sent out over territories they had never been on. Hazardous materials sat leaking on sidings. The Great Salt Lake flood in 1983. I remembered that. A lot of the railroad women went there to operate the work trains dumping ballast into the lake to shore up the tracks that traversed it. 12 hours a day 7 days a week. A futile effort until they breached the causeway so the opposite sides of the lake could equalize. The 6-year attempted merger with Santa Fe, ending in failure in 1986. Yes, I remembered that. Repainted engines. Rumors, layoffs, more booming for operating crews, sleeping in their campers in yard offices all over the system. I hid out on AMTRAK for 2 years until the dust settled. They talked about the D&RGW's (then owned by Phil Anschutz) purchase of Southern Pacific in 1988. I remembered more seasonal layoffs, formation of a reserve board, which I signed up for as a baby brakeman in Watsonville Junction, not being able to work all year anyway. I took half pay and went to live in Mexico and learned Spanish. I was called back off the reserve board only to be laid off two weeks later, after I had rushed back from Guatemala to mark up.

Then Mike Mohan, who was sitting next to me during the presentation, started talking about some big cheese, I forget whom, who liked to pull up unused track.

“Yes,” he said, “All of a sudden we were pulling up miles of track everywhere.”

Ask a switchman what “unused” track is. There is no such thing. Unused track is what we use to run around our cars, so a switchman doesn't have to ride a 2-mile shove hanging off the side of a junkyard hopper full of rusty metal. In the San Jose yard, where I ended up working in 1996 at the last years of my career, I remember the company pulling out track we really needed to switch out the few remaining businesses we actually serviced. The Peninsula Line between San Francisco and San Jose had been sold to the Peninsula Joint Powers Board, but Southern Pacific had the right to run on it to switch industries and pull and spot cars. I remembered the old heads talking about the fabled Southern Pacific tracks in southern Arizona.

“They sold that rail to a company that made razor blades. Top quality German steel.” I wonder who is shaving with our branch line now?

To say that the 20 years I spent as an extra board brakeman/conductor/switchman changed my perspective on the world is an understatement. This is what I wrote about working on the all-girl crew in Watsonville Junction in 1979, three months after I hired on.

“We all lived in Santa Cruz and would meet at a local espresso house to fortify ourselves for the night. It was an odd feeling to be getting ready to go to work when everybody else was ending their evenings, relaxed, dressed up, and, I began to see, privileged. They were going to put up their umbrellas, go home, and sleep. We were going to put rubber clothes on and play soccer with boxcars.” *Boomer: Railroad Memoirs*, p. 8.

I had earned a Ph.D. in English Literature from UC Berkeley at age 27 and found myself in a bad job market. I had no idea what people did to earn a living in the real world. The railroad was going to show me. The fact that women were able to work in the operating crafts was very recent in 1979. Our inclusion had to do with Jimmy Carter and the Public Works Employment Act of 1977, as well as the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The labor unions, which I came to appreciate, did not have historically the best record on civil rights. Minority men preceded us into the operating crafts. As one old head (who happened to be our union griever) put it one night:

“Goddamit, now I’ve got a (N word) hoghead, a Mexican (American) conductor, and a girl brakeman.”

He seemed to regard this as an end-of-the-world scenario.

Even though the labor unions had historically kept us out, I came to appreciate the seniority system as being essentially fair. If you had the date, you got the job. This, for women and other minorities, was a radical improvement. The difficulties of the craft itself took care of the merit angle. Anyone who survived work for ten years was pretty decent at their job. They also were pretty conscientious and responsible people. I don’t see how deskilling a job would produce people who were willing to pick up the phone at 2:00 AM and go to work for 12 hours in the rain and who would not duck the call because it would hurt their reputation with their fellow workers. That was the railroad work ethic in practice.

I suppose everyone thinks their perspective is the true one, and that was certainly the case for workers. We ridiculed top-down orders, new officers, and safety rules that didn’t address fundamental issues. A classic example of the latter was the formation of the Region System Board, which Southern Pacific instituted in 1994. This was an extra board comprised of the extra brakemen the company had reduced from full crews. These extra brakemen were sent off, in a kind of involuntary booming situation, to locations that needed temporary help. You spent 20 days in far-flung locations in company motels and ten days each month at home. I remember complaining to Kevin Klein, our UTU representative, that the system was unfair for women.

“It’s the same for everybody,” he replied.

“Yes, but the world isn’t the same for everybody,” I said. “Women usually don’t have somebody at home to take care of the kids, bills, pets, house, etc.”

But he was right. The seniority system was the same for everybody.



Linda Niemann on an SP locomotive in SP Englewood Yard in Houston in 1980.

The fundamental safety issue with the Region System Board was that, unlike the airline extra board it was modeled on, knowledge of territory is the most important factor in railroading. It was good for our general education as switchmen, but dangerous for the yards we were going to. We didn't know where anything was. As a result of my low seniority status, I worked in nearly every location on the Southern Pacific system. That is why listening to the executives talk

about exciting times in Houston, Ogden, Los Angeles, Colton, and Roseville rang a bell for me. I worked in all those places over an 18-year career as the baby on the extra board --- as well as in El Paso, El Centro, Yuma, Tucson, Douglas, Guadalupe/Surf, San Luis Obispo, Tracy, Oakland, San Francisco, Bayshore, San Jose, Alamogordo, Carrizozo, Lordsburg, Casas Grande, Tucumcari, Bakersfield, Klamath Falls, Reno, Sparks, Carlin, and Watsonville Junction.

During the Region System Board years, brakeman Julie Watson spent the 20 days in an RV parked in the yard office lot in Los Angeles, as did many others. Since I had been booming since I hired on at Watsonville Junction, it was a continuation of a displaced life. But since I was a writer, the life gave me a subject and a perspective. I finally resigned in 2001, after taking a leave of absence for two years to take an assistant professorship at Kennesaw State University in Georgia --- the result of writing about the railroad. Southern Pacific had been swallowed by the Union Pacific five years earlier.

What was my takeaway from interrupting my academic career for 20 years on the railroad? I now have an operating craft perspective when encountering news reporting or official accounts. When analyzing events, I am alerted to look for what FC Gamst calls latent errors in systems that active errors bring to light. For example, if I am sleep deprived because of working an extra board that has inaccurate forecasting, my error doing something on the ground is not only a result of what I did, but it is also a latent result of the situation that made me sleep deprived.

When I heard about the 2013 Lac Megantic, Quebec, Canada, railroad disaster, I could not understand how it could have happened. Under what circumstances is a train left on a grade on a mainline unattended overnight? If the crew died under the hours-of-service law, they might have to sit on it until a relief crew arrived. But this was a regular practice. Main lines cannot utilize derails, the only protection an unattended train has against vandalism. Then I couldn't understand why even seven brakes weren't enough to hold the train. On top of a standard big hole brake application, seven handbrakes are sturdy. Later, it came out that the common practice on that run was not to big hole the train, so that the one-person crew could save time making an air test to get going the next day. The engine independent brakes were the only air brakes applied. Latent factors: one-person crew, a standard safety short-cut, the grade, no possible derail, an unanticipated fire in the engine causing the municipal fire crew to release the engine brakes which were crucial in holding the train in place. And of course, the press, the government and the company blamed the engineer, asleep in a company motel after a 12-hour shift. Who would be the party interested in saving time, since time is money? Not the engineer.

So, I started as an out-of-work academic facing workplace discrimination as a woman on the railroad, and I ended up with an awakened class consciousness. Professors, as I have tried to tell my colleagues, are workers. With the Covid-19 crisis, I hope they are beginning to get the picture. I am sure every group that breaks into an exclusive work environment faces discrimination. Numbers count. Once our presence is normalized, behavior changes. Attitudes are different. They never change. But then, they shouldn't have to. Thoughts are free.

That said, I am often surprised by the messages that come my way. Sometimes it is a phone call out of the blue from a railroader working in a remote place saying, "I read your book and now I feel less alone." These railroaders are not always women. The latent structures we live and work within predate us and are the ocean we swim in. We get to play different parts at different times. I got this letter recently from a rail:

"Thank you. What you wrote about is the dying of 'the light.' There has been so much written on the romance of the job, one can only dream (deeply) to see the truth. You made sure that was recorded for 'us' the next generation, the ones who are asking the question, 'What the hell happened?' Brother, (and I mean that) your stories are the 'Grit' that's what no one sees and that's what is so hard to explain to people. Once that GRIT gets you, that's it... Your words came off the page like an old friend."

What happens to any one of us really does happen to all of us.