

Biography of Levy Laird By Alan Laird

Levy Laird was born in LeCompte, Louisiana, with an unofficial birth date of January 22, 1897 (reported birthdate was January 22, 1901). He was the child of Mary Williams, an African-American emancipated slave, who was a daughter of common law enslaved parents who lived on the Williams plantation¹. My father was fathered by a white man by the name of John Laird, who was also my grandmother Mary's employer as a nanny to his family, after his (John Laird's) wife had passed away.



Levy Laird is on the right with his younger brother Shelby Ernest Laird.

My father was the third of four brothers and two older sisters. His two older brothers were fathered by a Mr. Toussaint. My father and his two older sisters (Aunt Tea and Aunt Pearl) and a younger brother Shelby Ernest Laird were fathered by John Laird. (My father's intermediate family tree is shown on the last page of his biography.) As a child of 9 to 12, Levy's mother leased him to the Bear Brothers Lumber Company as a cook and tender of mules, which is where he learned his cooking skills. During my father's childhood, he raised a pair of oxen and had an Airedale dog. As he grew older, he worked in timber and gas pipeline industries. After that, my father worked as a gandy dancer in Louisiana laying tracks for railroad companies.

During the 1918 influenza pandemic, my father was a volunteer who removed the bodies of those who had died because of influenza for preparation for burial. He also worked as a bell boy in Alexandria, Louisiana.



Levy Laird as a young man.

In the mid-1920s, he left Louisiana to work for the McCloud Lumber Company, based in McCloud, California, using a free rail pass provided by the company and he was joined there by his common law wife and her son, Buster. While in McCloud, my father worked for the company driving mules hauling cut-down trees up and down muddy timber trails, but his primary responsibility was working at the planing mill driving mules and operating sawing equipment. He recalled the days when he and other workers and their families would have picnics near a soda springs and make lemonade soda. McCloud was a company town, and the company would give each employee a turkey for Thanksgiving Day.

Prior to the onset of the Great Depression, my father relocated to the West Oakland district of Oakland, California, to be close to the 16th Street Southern Pacific Railroad Station. It was a

¹ "In the 1930s and early 1940s, the Works Project Administration (WPA) employed about eight and one-half million unemployed men and women. The Federal Writers' Project (FWP) was established under the auspices of the WPA and part of its charge was to interview over 2,300 formerly enslaved African Americans. In 1937, Charley Williams, then age 94, who had been a slave on the 300-acre Williams Plantation located in northeastern Louisiana, was interviewed by a member of the FWP. The following is an excerpt from the interview: "I was borned on the 'leventh of January, in 1843, and was old enough to vote when I got my freedom, but I didn't take no stock in all dat politics and goings on at dat time, and I didn't vote till a long time after old Master passed away, but I was big enough before de [Civil] War to remember everything pretty plain." This quote is from the archives of the Library of Congress.

requirement of his new employer, Southern Pacific, to live within 15 minutes walking distance from the railroad passenger station in West Oakland. Our address was 1229 Willow Street.

He had gained knowledge of the culinary arts as a child preparing meals for lumberjacks employed by the Bear Brothers Lumber Company, and he told me his specialty was the biscuits he made. Because of his experience in cooking, my father was hired by the Southern Pacific. He told me about his youthful early days training at the Southern Pacific Commissary in West Oakland, where teaching was done on a stationary teaching dining car.

He would tell me stories of starting as a dish washer and then progressing to a helper who was assigned early in the morning to fill and light the coal/wood burning cast iron ranges and ovens. During this period, he learned the ballet of a moving train. His training instructor and mentor was " Old Man Swanigan," a senior veteran of Southern Pacific, who moved with precision, accepting nothing but perfection, and my father would tell me that Mr. Swanigan would say, "THERE IS A WRONG WAY...AND THEN IT IS MY WAY...WE GONNA DO IT MY WAY." My father built a strong relationship with Old Man Swanigan, although he was always a hard task master.

Some of the Southern Pacific passenger trains my father worked on included the Sunset Limited, Lark, Argonaut, Owl, Starlight, and Coast Daylight. Sometimes his trips would require him to change from working a hamburger car to a full dining car. I recall when Southern Pacific introduced the sandwich vending machines on its trains.



Levy Laird standing next to a Southern Pacific passenger car.

I remember the time my father was coming in from a trip and immediately heading out with a train deadheading to, I believe, Chicago. We came to the station to pick him up but found out that he had to leave very soon. I remember my eyes welling up with tears, watching my father dressed in his whites cook clothes and kerchief. His eyes seemed to penetrate my soul as he gave me a wan smile and wave. Suddenly the train lurched, and he was off again on the rails of steel. I tried and waited until there were no more signs of the steaming train, just a faint whistle at a distant crossing.

It was a time of HOPE ...and challenges. When I was five years old, my father took our family down South on the train in 1954, and it was an adventure I will never forget. I remember we left on Halloween night in October 1954, traveling with our suitcases and our green wicker picnic basket. I recall waiting for our train at 16th Street Southern Pacific passenger station on Wood Street in Oakland, which was a place quite familiar to me, for we had been there many times to drop off or pick up my father.

I recall the hustle and bustle at the station and the many different people, ranging from vanilla to dark chocolate. I remember we spoke to the Red Caps as they manned an outside baggage station, maneuvering with their baggage dollies and large push carts, as if in some strange ballet. The Red Caps always seemed part of the family, and my friends had fathers who worked at the 16th Street Passenger Station and the Oakland Mole. The Mole was a huge and cavernous structure with endless metal beams, and ribbons of steel railroad tracks. Moreover, the Mole had its own personality, and provided berths for the Southern Pacific ferries running between Oakland and San Francisco. As an aside, San Francisco was also where the Southern Pacific Hospital was located, directly across from San Francisco's Golden Gate Park.

As a child, I thought of Southern Pacific as being like a famous uncle, who provided for families of their many variously skilled workers. I remember taking the ferry with my mother and one of my brothers to visit my father when he was a patient at the Southern Pacific Hospital.

Going back to our departure for Texas and Louisiana, with a stop in Tucson, the train station was filling up with travelers. While waiting for the train at the station on 16th Street, I felt as though I was in a palace, as I looked at the grand gold gilding on the ceiling and a very large clock.

The pounding of staplers, and paper shuffling could be heard from the highly polished wood and glass ticket counters. The intermittent broadcasts by the Station Master's announcements blended with the cacophony of ringing pinball machines from the men's lounge. I vividly remember the slapping of shoeshine rags whipping up the familiar scent of shoe polish and, of course, the smell of fresh hot dogs emanating from the cafe, and the gifts, chewing gum, and newspaper vendor.

Suddenly our train was announced, and we made our way outside, when I could see our train roll down the trestle to our station platform. We were directed to a chair car coach, where we flipped our seats to face one another for our journey. It was so many years ago, but it is as if those times have been deeply written within me.

Before our train began its lurch into motion, a few cooks and waiters came by and spoke to my father, which caused me to beam, and my brother and I received a pint carton of milk as a treat from the crew. We were also given crayons and a coloring book, which I believe awakened the artist in me.

Our trip was a magnificent gift, which will always be filled with memories to warm the spirit. While traveling, my father took us on a tour of the railroad galley, which was super-hot, but I was intrigued to see some cooks pouring steaming water on the galley floor, which was comprised of wooden slats with exposed gaps revealing the tracks below.

I wondered if the regular train passengers knew of the hard work these cooks were performing, up before dawn and to bed after midnight, and sometimes sleeping in dormitory coaches or in the dining cars' possum belly (an area under the dining-car floor where items including extra coal for the stove or bedding for the crew was stored).

When we arrived in El Paso, Texas we had a layover so that coaches could be added, and my parents just told us we were stopping to get tamales, which we did near the station. When we returned to our coach, there were no white people, and I never thought of the reasons why we had to change until much later. Many years later, when my eldest brother told me that when my mother and he had traveled to Texas on another trip, there had been a commotion in El Paso. He said that some soldiers returning from Korea had been sitting in the rear of the coach, when the conductor came and instructed three white soldiers to leave their Negro travel mate, but they refused to leave their Black soldier friend. The conductor stormed away and returned with police who beat the Negro, and dragged him off the coach wearing his uniform, while the white soldiers were also removed.

My father worked many hours, days, and sometimes weeks traveling on special trains during the 1920s and 1930s. The white Shriners² would rent out an entire train and go to Canada, or

² Until the 1960s and later, Black and white Shriners, Elks, Legionnaires, and others belonged to similar organizations, but were separated by race.

sometimes Mexico. I recall my father telling me about the times he was on board the Presidential trains of Truman and Eisenhower; he believed that he had watched history being made.

My father would give me snippets of his trips while I would rise before sunrise to spend a little time with him before he departed for a trip. I remember a time when he said that everyone in the galley was very busy preparing for the next meal. One of the cooks was on the floor peeling potatoes and as the staff was quite involved providing a flowing river of food to the passengers eating on the train, no one paid particular attention to the cook. Finally, someone noticed that the cook looked as though he was asleep, but it was soon discovered that he had passed away.

I recall a story he told me about how, while he was working on a train, that his legs began cramping and bringing on great pain. My father left the train at Tucson, Arizona where he hospitalized. I guess the long hours of constantly moving, along with the high heat, had taken its toll.

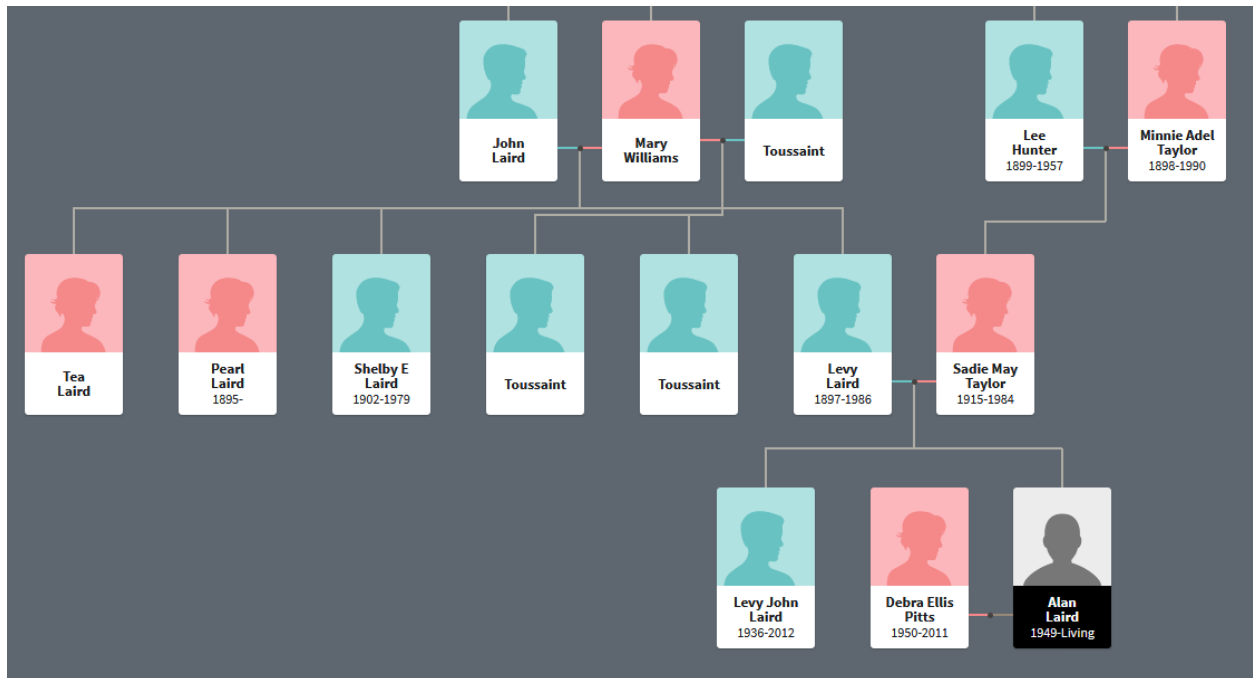
I also remember his stories about working on trains during World War II transporting Japanese men, women, and children to internment camps. My father and his co-workers prepared meals for the detainees with unsmiling faces and because they, as second-class citizens, empathized with their plight, and they were motivated to serve the Japanese with dignity and respect. My father would become very sad when recalling those journeys.

My mother, Sadie Laird, had family members (uncle Henry "Bubba" Taylor, uncle Joe Taylor, and grandmother Minnie) who also worked for Southern Pacific. They were employed at Southern Pacific's facilities in the West Oakland area: the commissary, the laundry, and where upholstery was repaired.

My eldest brother, now deceased, worked temporarily for Southern Pacific as a waiter, before going to work for the Western Pacific in Oakland. He frequently worked on the California Zephyr.

I worked briefly for Southern Pacific Communications at San Bruno, California operating Datran communications switches that were a part of Southern Pacific's system-wide microwave system. I also married Debra Ella Pitts, a member of a family who worked for Southern Pacific. Her grandfather, Walter H. Pitts Sr. was a steward and his son, Walter H. Pitts Jr., worked for more than 36 years as a waiter and a steward.

Although my father and his contemporaries would never be considered for advancement to supervisory positions, their employment as employees of Southern Pacific, as well as the Western Pacific and Santa Fe, provided entry into the middle-class Black community in Oakland and the surrounding area. There, my father and his family became a part of a vibrant social and economic environment that provided comfort and hope for the future. My father thrived from his many relationships, and at one point, he would own two homes in West Oakland, had part-time businesses, and loaded mail onto railway post offices on his days off. He was proud of and thankful for his Southern Pacific service!



Alan Laird is an artist who lives in Miami, Florida. In addition, he is a collector of railroad memorabilia related to passenger service, with a portion of the collection focused on Southern Pacific. He has also spent many hours as a docent at the Gold Coast Railroad Museum in Miami acquainting visitors young and old about railroad passenger service in the United States. The following link provides a short video featuring Mr. Laird explaining the contributions of Black railroad employees during the heydays of passenger service in this country: <https://www.soundhound.com/?ar=200708424728829414>.