

Now

That

Was Railroading

There must have been close to a hundred people awaiting the arrival of this shy man who had taught me how to keep a balky steam generator operating using string and clothes pins and how to get a stubborn, worn out, old E8 to continue loading when it had made up its mind up to quit.

BY DOUG RIDDELL

Approaching the Rocky Mount, North Carolina, station on a warm, sunny, spring day in 1981, Rob Yancy and I noticed a large crowd standing track side—African Americans for the most part, dressed as if they were headed to Sunday church services, but with an unmistakably festive atmosphere, a celebration of some kind. Signing the register book in the dark, dingy crew room, we checked our orders and rounded the corner of the building where an iron stairway led to the second floor offices of the three train dispatchers that then controlled the Seaboard Coast Line tracks covering the eastern third of the Tarheel state.

Passing through the small, machine-filled room where south end dispatcher Spencer Cockrell held sway over everything that moved on the old double tracked Atlantic Coast Line mainline between Rocky Mount and Florence, we watched as Amtrak No. 90 knocked down the home signal at Contentnea (the junction where the original Wilmington and Weldon Railroad splits with the cutoff through Fayetteville for Florence), lighting up a red occupancy indicator.

“He ought to be in here in twenty minutes, Rob,” Cockrell reported.

“I wish he were a few minutes earlier,” came the loud voice with a southern drawl from the next room that could only belong to north end dispatcher Lloyd Boone. “They’ve told us to expect a few minutes delay here because of the crowd that’s downstairs to see Tom Edwards. He’s making his last run.”

So *that* was it. No, there would be no gold watch—not from the railroad at least. For the most part, that was myth steeped deep in railroad lore. *But such a large gathering.* There must have been close to a hundred people awaiting the arrival of this shy man who had taught me how to keep a balky steam generator operating using string and clothes pins and how to get a stubborn, worn out, old E8 to continue loading when it had made up its mind to quit.

“Have you ever seen anything like it?” asked Nancy, the Amtrak ticket agent, when Rob and I walked into the downstairs lobby. “The whole town’s here.”

The Nathan five-chime horn warned everyone within earshot that the *Palmetto* was about to enter the crossing at Bassett Street, and within seconds it would grind to a halt on the northbound track at Rocky Mount. As engine 270 eased to a stop, its sanders ceased their hissing, the bell ended its one note samba, and the crowd drew closer. When the door on the fireman’s side of the F40 opened, and the face of the quiet, unpretentious black man appeared, a cheer rang out that must have startled the shoppers a block away at the Belk-Tyler Department store.

Reaching the bottom of the ladder, as he had done for more than 40 years, Tom Edwards waited for the grips to be handed down from his engineer—today it was Billy Weatherford. Even on this final day, it was business before pleasure. As Rob and Billy conferred about the speedometer and the brakes, I reached out and shook Tom’s hand as he told me, “I left it in good shape for you.” He *always* did.



Tom Edwards Jr. first fired locomotive 1676 in 1942. In the family album, a hand written notation above the cab photo reads simply, “Jr.”

Turning, he patted the handrails and said, "270. I'll remember that number. My daddy retired right down there on this track in 1964 (pointing to South Rocky Mount, where engine crews changed on the old ACL so that their power could be serviced at the same time). "His last engine was No. 521 (a purple and silver E6)."

"Tom, I hope I live to enjoy my retirement," I smiled, "and I hope that when my day comes I'll have at least half as many friends to share it with you do today."

"When you coming over to see my trains?" he asked. "You know where I live."

"I'll get over there soon, Tom. I look

Tuesday in April 1996 to keep the promise I made fifteen years ago, I remembered how I came to know him. Tom had a story I not only wanted to write about, but to ask about and to understand.

"What's a *colored* fireman?" I asked the engine house foreman, on one of my first nights as a hostler in 1979, as I entered the office of the stucco building with its drooping green awnings, which once stood opposite the towering erecting bays of SCL's Emerson Shops.

"Who'd you hear that from?" he responded cautiously.

"This old assignment board I found laying up against the back of the

would be hiring when everyone else was laying people off, he was told that the railroads didn't want to promote their *colored* firemen.

"I needed the work," Jack once told me, "but I didn't think what they were doing was right. My conscience wouldn't let me go down there to take a job away from some one who deserved it. Some fellows did. A lot of them stayed. I was lucky. I hired out on the Pennsylvania Reading Seashore Line until the PRR called me back."

The rain became drizzle as I spied the mailbox with the train on it, and turned into the driveway where two cars sat parked. Both had bumper stickers reading "Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers." I reached into the trunk and tucked two volumes on the ACL beneath my arm—Richard Prince's classic ATLANTIC COAST LINE R. R., and Warren Calloway's ATLANTIC COAST LINE DIESEL YEARS.

Just as I headed toward the front door, a lady with a smile that could brighten the dreariest of days called out from the carport entrance "Tom's out back waiting for you, Mr. Riddell."

"You must be Mrs. Edwards," I remarked. "Now I know why Tom was so anxious to get home when he got off. Thank you."

Painted white with a green roof, the bright yellow and black SCL herald on the door made the clapboard building appear for all the world like one of the small stations I came to know during my first days on the SCL. From behind the door poked a head covered by a white and purple baseball cap with the ACL logo.

"Come on in young fellow," Tom Edwards grinned. "You finally took up my invitation to come see my trains." Bursting with pride, Tom opened the door wider, and I beheld not only a miniature wonderland of Lionel and Marx trains that took up all but enough room to maneuver around its perimeter, but the walls were covered with pictures, calendars, and memorabilia covering almost a century of railroading. Hanging on the door he closed behind me were a faded denim jacket, overalls, and pen striped cap with blue headband, along with two ladies' hats.

Seeing from my opened mouth that I was too startled to allow anything to come forth, Tom chuckled and spoke.

"That's my dad's firing clothes, and two

His wife embraced the retiring railroad man.

After all of those years of midnight calls,

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she didn't have to share him with the

Atlantic Coast Line, the Seaboard Coast

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except for the Lionel one set up in a

building behind their home.



forward to it," I promised. With formalities taken care of, Tom posed for photographers, and then waded into the crowd. His wife embraced the retiring railroad man. After all of those years of midnight calls, missed holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries, he was all hers now. He always was, but now she didn't have to share him with the Atlantic Coast Line, the Seaboard Coast Line, Amtrak, or any other railroad—except for the Lionel one set up in a building behind their home. No, Tom Edwards was home for good this time—a well deserved retirement after a lifetime of service.

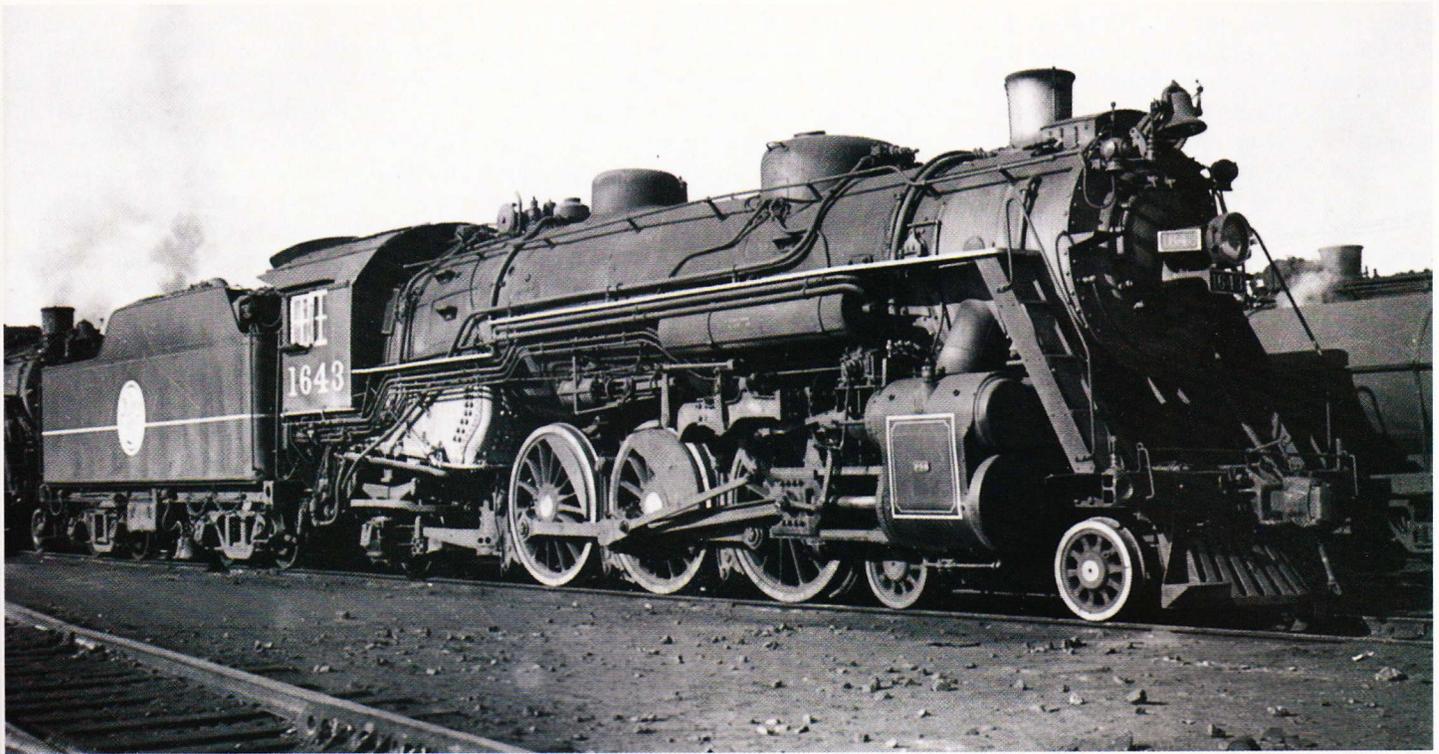
As the locomotive bell announced that the northbound *Palmetto* was departing town, Tom glanced back over his shoulder, turned, and waved. His smile said it all.

Tom Edwards Jr. Just the name brings back memories. As I drove down I-95 from Richmond in a pouring rain on a

building—I could barely make out the lettering," I answered. I was always rummaging through old buildings, looking for treasures among the trash that otherwise might have been thrown away and lost forever. "It says 'white firemen and colored firemen.'"

The foreman explained: "Back during segregation, they used to hire black men to fire steam engines—colored firemen. They weren't allowed to run an engine—couldn't be promoted to engineer like the white firemen. They even had separate rosters. All that ended years ago, of course. The only one left is Tom Edwards."

That brought to mind a conversation with my cousin Jack Stecklein, a retired Pennsylvania Railroad engineer living in Philadelphia, who told me that shortly after World War II, he was furloughed, and was informed that some of the railroads "down south" were looking for engineers. When he questioned why they



ARTHUR B. JOHNSON, COLLECTION OF C. L. GOOLSBY

Because of wet coal, a trip with Pacific No. 1643 lasted from 7:30 p.m. until 6:30 the next morning, "a long, miserable night" for Tom Edwards Jr. The Atlantic Coast Line locomotive is Acca, Virginia, on January 21, 1945.

of my mother's hats," he beamed. Pointing toward the rafter near a window, he added, "That's his shovel, and mine beside it. And our tin water cups." Pointing to two framed, water stained documents below, he said, "These are the firemen's rosters—the white firemen and the colored."

"Here's my dad's name. Yes sir, he hired out the first time and worked from 1916 to 1918, but quit and moved the family to Philadelphia—that's where I was born. He returned to the ACL in Rocky Mount in 1919 and fired trains until he retired, September 30, 1964," Tom noted with authority. "That's his picture with the division superintendent, taken at South Rocky Mount, with engine 521 (an ACL E6, still in purple and silver, before an access door was added to its nose).

This building represented the life of Thomas Edwards Jr., and the legacy of his father, Thomas Edwards Sr. Looking around me, it was like Christmas, New Years, and the Fourth of July, all rolled into one—a celebration of life with a railroad museum thrown in to boot. As his story began to unfold, it finally dawned upon me why the years of being treated differently had apparently not left Tom embittered, as it easily could have done with a lesser man. Tom Jr. truly loved trains, he idolized his father, and he was proud of the role he had played in the rich history preserved on those four walls.

With the love and support of his beautiful wife and their family, along with the respect of their friends and neighbors, Tom had achieved a level of personal satisfaction in this life that very few people attain.

"You know, dad died in 1969, and we never discussed whether or not he had signed for me to work for the railroad," Tom confessed.

"Sign for you?" I asked, puzzled.

"January 3, 1937, dad was due back in town from a passenger run to Florence," Tom told me, "and I cut across the shop yard on my bicycle on the way to school. I stopped in that field and looked at those locomotives standing there steaming and huffing. I could smell the coal smoke and the grease, and I thought 'This is where I want to be.' So I went to the roundhouse foreman, Mr. Gurley, who asked how old I was. When I told him that I was 18, he said that my dad would have to sign for me, or wait until I reached 21. I told him 'Sure, my dad will sign for me,' so he sent me to the labor foreman, Mr. Biggs, who ordered my physical at the old Atlantic Coast Line Hospital on Church Street. Upon my return, I went right to work as a laborer in the shops. When my dad's train pulled in to South Rocky Mount, the word had already spread that Tom Edwards Jr. had gone to work for the railroad. Everyone knew my dad. He was a

well respected man. When he came home, he walked into the house and didn't have a word to say. I can only assume that he signed for me."

Looking off into the distance and nodding his head, Tom said, "I wanted to follow in my dad's footsteps. I wanted to be just like him."

"Did he give you any fatherly words of advice when he accepted the fact that you were indeed going to be a railroad man?" I asked next.

"Be dependable," Tom answered. "Dad said 'Always be dependable.'"

"When did you start firing?" I inquired.

"December 6, 1942," he laughed, as if there was something especially memorable about that day. "Memorable?" he answered in response to my query, "I went qualifying on an old 'Copper Head,' No. 1045 (4-6-0, Baldwin, 1922), to Plymouth, North Carolina. For some reason, I never thought about bringing along any food. All I had was a piece of hard Christmas candy in my pocket to suck on. After 13 hours of hand firing that engine, I learned that you *never* come to work on the railroad without a lunch."

"He wouldn't have had that chance if I hadn't put my foot down," interrupted Mrs. Edwards. "Tom had a disagreement with some one in the shop while he was still working as a material helper. Tom came home and announced that he was

going to quit his job and move us to Philadelphia. I told him that he should have decided to do that before he married me, because he wasn't going to do it now. I wasn't about to up and move, so he went to see Road Foreman McSweeney about a job firing."

"I made my first day firing on the yard on No. 1229 (0-8-0, Baldwin, 1924)," Tom added.

Did he ever work with his dad?

"Oh yes," Tom Jr. smiled. "Qualifying for road service, we caught a Florence extra train with the 2019, a Santa Fe type 2-10-2 (Baldwin, 1925). I returned to Rocky Mount on a "yellow train," a perishable train, with fireman Willie Fudge and engineer David Powell. We had the 1675, a Pacific type (4-6-2) with 69-inch drivers. When I got back, Road Foreman McSweeney asked me if I was ready to mark up. I told him 'yes.'"

It wasn't long before the call came for Tom Jr. to make his first road trip as a fireman, a Florence extra, this time with another high stepping Pacific, No. 1564.

"I remember getting up on the deck of that engine, building the fire—it had just been out shopped and a brand new stoker installed—and listening to those pop valves. I remember saying to her 'Please stay hot,' and she did. The trip from Rocky Mount to Florence was an uneventful one. It was over in just five hours."

Rested, Tom Jr. and the engineer, R. M. Crocker, drew Pacific No. 1643 for their return trip on a "Pot Yard" train—a solid freight train destined for Potomac Yard in Alexandria, Virginia, outside of the nation's capital. What they discovered to their dismay was that a leak had developed in the tender's water tank, filling the stoker with water, which caused wet coal to be poured out into the fire box. As a result, it would not burn properly and Tom could not keep the engine hot.

"Dad pulled up beside me at the coal chute at Milan Yard (Fayetteville, North Carolina) on his train and I told him about the trouble I was having. There wasn't much he could say to help me because there wasn't much you could do with bad coal," Tom remembered vividly.

"We spent the whole night going from one passing siding to the next, shaking the grate and cleaning the fire," Edwards sighed. "The trip lasted from 7:30 p.m. until 6:30 the next morning. A long, mis-

erable night. I fell asleep as soon as I walked in the front door when I got home. A few weeks later, I got that same engine on a troop train to Wilmington, but I got the pressure up to 220 psi, and kept it there. I made up my mind she wasn't going to get the best of me *this time*, and luckily, the shop forces had fixed that leak."

Of course, since they were both firemen, Tom Sr. and Tom Jr. didn't get to work together on the same train except when double heading, but they did spend a lot of time with each other on their layovers in Florence.

"People used to say that we were more like two brothers than a father and son when we hit Florence," Tom Jr. recalled. "Yes sir, I wanted to be just like my dad."



DOUG RIDDELL

In retirement, Tom Edwards Jr. proudly maintains this setup of Lionel and Marx trains which share space with railroad artifacts from the working days of Edwards and his father.

Not all of the trains the Edwards fired were through trains. There were the branch line and main line locals—the work horses.

"Both dad and I had one train that we'd prefer to not catch—the Georgia Connection," the elderly black man chuckled. "We were called out of Florence every trip to follow the *Havana Special*. As soon as his markers went by the north end of the yard at FY, they'd turn us loose, but we didn't go very far. We'd stop and set out at Blue Brick, Latta, Dillon, Elrod, Rowland, Hope Mills, Milan, Dunn, Selma, and Wilson."

Even so, Tom Jr. loved his job.

"Some times late at night when the pressure was up and the fire was right, I'd pull my goggles down over my eyes, lean on the arm rest, stick my head out the window, watch those drivers turning, smell that smoke, and listen to that whis-

tle moan," he smiled broadly. "Now *that* was railroading."

But railroading did change radically in many ways during Tom Edward's watch. In 1949 the Atlantic Coast Line ceased hiring 51 percent white firemen and 49 percent colored firemen, consolidating both rosters into one. For Tom though, the most memorable change came the following year when he arrived at South Rocky Mount on an extra from Florence with Pacific No. 1669.

"We were met by the road foreman and some other officials who told us that this was the last steam-powered train we would ever run," he said, shaking his head. "So we cut off the train, backed her off the main line, into the engine house, and dropped her fire for the last time. It was a sad day—a sad day indeed. As I climbed down, I looked up again at that number on the side of the cab, 1669—I'll remember that number."

The railroads viewed the advent of the diesel locomotive as their opportunity to eliminate firemen, except to the extent necessary to train people for promotion to engineer. Since colored firemen were not promotable (at that time), and were not generally allowed to operate a locomotive, qualifying them on diesel locomotives was not a priority. When I asked how he became acquainted with steam generators, which served to provide diesel-powered trains with heat until Amtrak electrically powered its auxiliary systems in the late 1970s, Tom explained that

while working in the shops at Rocky Mount, he was shown how to operate them soon after diesels equipped with those cantankerous appliances were first dispatched there for inspection or repairs. It brought to mind a less pleasant memory.

"It was on a July 4," Tom Jr. told me, "and the *Champion* came into town with the steam generator malfunctioning. Even in the summer you needed steam for hot water and for cooking in the diner. I knew how to operate steam generators, but since they wouldn't qualify me so I could mark up and work diesels, the foreman rode to Selma with me. He wouldn't let me go by myself. As it turned out, he was needed in the yard, and when he couldn't be found, it got to the superintendent. The foreman got into trouble when it was discovered that I was qualified but he had refused to mark me up. The superinten-

Tom Edwards Jr. displays the retirement photo of his father, the division superintendent, and ACL engine 521, taken on September 30, 1964, at South Rocky Mount, North Carolina.



dent ordered him to do so immediately.”

“I made my first regular trip on a diesel, firing for Eugene Viverette on Nos. 41/42 to Wilmington, North Carolina,” as Tom again demonstrated his uncanny ability to recall specific engine numbers and events. “It was the ACL’s first passenger diesel, E3A No. 500.”

Looking at a 1996 CSX system map, Wilmington seems like an afterthought with only the former Seaboard Air trackage to Hamlet remaining. At one time however, ACL tracks radiated northward to New Bern and northwesterly on the former Atlantic and Yadkin to Sanford, North Carolina, in addition to the northbound and southbound main lines. One shouldn’t forget that the old bachelor, Champion McDowell Davis, once ruled his purple and silver empire from the ACL’s massive

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headquarters at the mouth of the Cape Fear River until the torch was passed to W. Thomas Rice at the modern brick and glass skyscraper in Jacksonville, Florida. Today’s excellent Wilmington Railroad museum is the sole remnant of the ACL’s huge presence in this important east coast seaport. When Tom Edwards Jr. was forced there to fire during the crush of World War II traffic, it was still considered to be on the main line, although the Contentnea cutoff (through Fayetteville) was more heavily used.

“I’d go down there in the car to pick him up so he could be at home with the family, and so often he’d tell me that he stood first out to work again, and I’d have to drive home alone,” Mrs. Edwards pointed out.

Tom was at Rocky Mount when the

first diesel to bear the ACL name appeared on the property, an Alco HH-660 yard switcher.

“It didn’t stay long. It couldn’t keep up with the steam engines,” he remembered.

But later, the intruders from Alco, EMD, and Baldwin appeared in droves and eventually were used to shove aging 0-8-0s and their big brothers into fields of weed hidden storage tracks to await their date with the cutting torch. While regarded as state of the art innovations in their prime, the early passenger, freight, and switching diesels were primitive compared to today’s computer regulated, 6,000 hp behemoths.

“Those E6s and FTs had manual radiator shutters and cooling fans. They had ER (engine run) relays and fuses that got stuck or blew out,” Tom Jr. recalled. “They were always running hot or breaking down. There was always something to do back there, and a fireman had to know what was wrong and how to fix it. As the first diesels got a little age on them they needed constant attention.”

And they got it, because Tom knew his craft as well or better than anyone else. When I made my first trip qualifying as a passenger fireman, I was tutored by Tom Edwards. Together we went back into the

business end of an old EMD E8B, and with a flag stick, matchbook covers, baling wire, and a lot of experience, he showed me how to get them running and how to keep them running.

As my visit drew to a close, I asked Tom if I could borrow some of his pictures for my article. He was more than obliging. In the Edwards’ living room hung a pen and ink drawing showing him at the Rocky Mount station at the conclusion of his last run. There was the picture of Tom Jr. in the cab of the 1676, taken when he first fired it in 1942. Obviously from the family album, a hand written notation appeared above the cab which read simply, “Jr.” Occupying its place of honor among all of his treasures was the picture of Thomas Edwards Sr. at his retirement with No. 521.

“Please be sure to bring them back,” Tom requested. “Don’t let anything happen to this one especially. That’s my dad’s picture.”

Heading back to Richmond on I-95, I got off at the Weldon exit and stopped at *Ralph’s*, famous for its classic North Carolina barbecue. While there, I reflected on the events of the day, and I promised myself that I would be back soon to personally return Tom’s pictures to him after completing my manuscript. Next time however, I’d bring my son, Ryan. You see, like Tom did, Ryan wants to be a railroad man just like *his* dad. I want him to meet a man who had that same dream many long years ago, and lived to fulfill it. Now *that’s* railroading.

Doug Riddell, the grandson of a Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad conductor, received a B.S. in Mass Communications in 1973 from Virginia Commonwealth University in his hometown of Richmond. He appeared on radio and television for a number of years before fulfilling a boyhood dream by hiring out as a switchman on the Seaboard Coast Line Railroad in 1977. A SCL locomotive engineer since 1979, with Amtrak since 1986, his writings and photos depicting life on the railroad have appeared in numerous rail publications. His feature, From the Cab, has appeared monthly in PASSENGER TRAIN JOURNAL since 1995. With Sandra, his wife of nearly 20 years, and their son Ryan, the Riddells live in a rambling white country house on six acres in the Richmond suburbs, where Doug is working on a book between turns at the throttle of Amtrak trains between Richmond and Washington, DC. ◇

