

Photographic memories - Food for Thought

by Charlie Bere-Streeter

Editor's Note:- Charlie is well known for his irreverent opinions of all those in authority during his career as an engineman and his articles in Roundhouse caused much discussion. He challenged your editor (the Editor of Roundhouse Magazine) to publish this piece on rail enthusiasts. Here it is!

I guess the majority of readers are ardent enthusiasts of all forms of trains, especially the days of steam locomotives which they look at as a glamorous era but to the old hands, it was far from it.

Imagine me, back in the early 1950s, signing on at 10:49pm to work No.329 south and book off. It's pouring rain, a howling westerly blowing, cold enough to freeze the proverbial monkey. I've had about 4 hours sleep after working 22A & 228 Trips the night before (two loads of coal to Botany for the powerhouse), a shift of 10-1/2 hours. I got home about 9am, had breakfast, did the washing (copper, scrubbing board and wringer on the concrete tubs), did the shopping and cooked a huge pot of stew to feed my five kids and wife who is seven months pregnant in order to give her a break as I'm away in barracks a couple of times a week.

I pick up my sheet and find I've got the fireman from hell who has a record of sticking up on most tough trips and who is sitting in the corner half asleep and probably like me, wondering if it would be better to commit suicide.

Off to the engine board and Abel Jupp, the chargeman, says "sorry mate" and you see your engine is 5537 which has record of steaming dull for the past six months!

Whistle out of loco O.K., run to the yard and attach to the train which is a length load of U and K trucks to Medway, 55 long but under maximum tonnage! Fair enough! Up comes the guard and it is the "white rat" Sh t! All lost time will go in the loco column and be charged against the driver. No chance of hedging which would happen with a good guard who would book time to signals, crossings and the like.

It is still raining 'cats and dogs" - a black slurry running out of the coal in the tender and over the shovelling plate and onto the floor, helping to make it more miserable. There won't be any photographers out tonight.

The guard pulls the tail and we reverse out of the Down yard and head up past Enfield North Box, run around Chullora junction and steam up past the cemetery. Over Potts Hill to Regents Park junction and I notice the old girl is not giving off

plenty of black smoke, even though the fireman seems to be shovelling in plenty of coal. So, heading up to Chester Hill, I decide to get the short pricker down, careful not to foul the overhead wires, and comb the old girl's hair. I find there is a lump in the middle of the firebox which I spread and bingo - thick black smoke.

I realise the fireman is going O.K. with a bit of encouragement from me but he is not exactly hitting the spot so instead of upsetting him, I decide to leave the pricker down and occasionally rake her over and help keep the fire flat.

Even though it is past midnight, I 'cock-a-doodie-do" on the whistle going through Sefton in case my missus is still awake. Who cares if I wake up Jack Matson and others living in the area! The effort on the fire seems to be working for the old girl has reached the magic 160 psi and actually blew off at the dome a couple of times on the undulating track between Villawood and Liverpool. My mate is starting to stick out his chest a bit!

Through Campbelltown and going up to the pipeline, she dropped back a bit in steam but picked it up again running to Menangle. I give the rocker bars a bit of a shake steaming up to Douglas Park as we will clean the fire and rake out at Picton. Battling a bit but no lost time - YET!

We leave Picton on time but it is still raining and getting colder outside but bloody hot in the cab, at least on one side. I put the fireman in my seat and have a go at her myself to give him a break. I have to fire her light as the shovels of mud I throw in nearly put the fire out. I rake her over with the pricker but she's still not steaming well so I knock off the injector. The length load is grabbing us a bit around the bend up to the tunnel so I tell my mate to let her out a couple of notches. Try as I might, I can't get the steam up above 150psi.

There is nothing else to do but wind her back again and bludge on the water, putting the injector on and off frequently and rake the guts out of her! Hell, we're losing time and me firing! If that bastard turns around and grins at me again, I'll drop him! We struggle up to Tahmoor, water in the bottom nut so I tell him to throw out the kellick so I can get more steam and raise the water level. Why didn't I take a sickie? The "white rat" will be having a ball booking all this time in the lost by loco column on my sheet!

We leave Tahmoor with a full head of steam, 3/4 glass of water and make Bargo with no further loss of time but we are 27 minutes late. Not bad considering the conditions. I knock the fire down and the fireman is underneath raking out the ashpan with water pouring on him from the boiler as it is still raining. I then put the water column in the tank, turn it on and then check axleboxes and side rods etc for overheating but then, how could anything get hot in these bloody conditions! We then boil the billy from the injector overflow as it's too wet to walk to the station and have our 15 minute crib break. No chance of the 'rat' coming up to see if we're O.K. or to give us a hand like the good guards do. They often

help by taking water or shovel a bit of coal forward as we are now starting to stretch for it in the back of the tender.

We have a fair break at Bargo as they hold us here to cross a stock train following us for they are on a faster table - 3/4 runners - and they probably think we are going to lose more time and could block them.

Freshened up, we take off again but it's not long till my mate is in trouble again and the coal is way back in the tender. So now I've got another job and in between using the pricker, I hop up in the tender and shovel some coal forward in between fires being put in by my mate who is now looking more dead than alive. We stagger on past the "oyster lease", getting down again in both steam and water but manage to keep moving up to Yerrinbool where I throw out the anchor again and we have another blow up, raise steam and fill the boiler.

I grab the bat again and sit the fireman down for a bit. Boy! He sure looks R-S. He looks like he is ready to resign and we're not halfway yet! If he does, I think I will too! I'm not going to do this on my own!

Thank God it is not too far to Mittagong where we pull onto the pit and roughly clean the fire and rake a bit out of the pan - not much as there's a fuelman at Moss Vale to do this. We've nearly broken her back while she's been breaking ours and our hearts as well. Just got to make it up through the Bowral tunnel and coast down past Berrima and into Moss Vale as it's just starting to break into daylight and if it wasn't raining, I'll bet there'd be white frost everywhere - it's so cold!

We knock the fire down again and the fuelman rakes out the pan then gets up to shovel the coal forward. Every couple of minutes, he asks if it's enough and I say 'No'. I want the lot forward. No more reaching from here on.

It reminds me when I was firing for the likes of "Popeye" McGuinness, Joe Bryant, Bert Webb, Bert Johns, Sparks Butler, Ted McEwan etc. We didn't have to shovel forward as they dropped them down some of the banks, the coal would vibrate forward - half filling the cab at times, especially if the wedge between engine and tender was loose. It's a wonder the back box didn't come down as well.

We leave Moss Vale about 75 minutes late and don't lose any more time as we are able to bludge on the water now as the banks at Exeter, Penrose etc., aren't too long and eventually we are turned into Medway and shunt the train into a siding. We are well over the regulation 10 hours on duty and having sent a zona at Moss Vale, the signalman informs us relief is waiting at Marulan.

Running engine and van ex Medway, we are relieved by a Goulburn crew at Marulan and travel passenger in the van to Goulburn. We ride the engine into

loco as we're too stuffed to walk. I fill in a casualty form thinking of the bloody bung I'm going to get and sign off 11 hours 20 minutes on duty.

Arriving at the bloody barracks, we find the fire is out. The last crew out never built it up! No hot water to have a shower so we light the fire and cook some bacon and eggs, hang our wet clothes in front of the fire and go to bed. I've got a quid in my pocket but am too tired to head for town for a couple of beers.

All this for 30 quid (Editor's Note - \$60) a fortnight. While you affluent so and so's spend more than this chasing us around to get your beaut photos! There's just no justice!

We do have good trips though but even those aren't a piece of cake. There's still plenty of hard yakka being done. To sum up - when enjoying all your great photos, spare a thought for what we had to put up with to make it possible.

P.S. We still have to get home tonight! Hell! More sweat and tears! And it's still raining!