

FRANK ARBUCKLE'S RAILROAD CAREER (1906-1959)

My father Frank, born in 1877, moved to Nickerson, Kansas, at age seven, as the family sought a drier climate, in response to his father's TB. It is not known how or why Nickerson was selected. Nickerson was a railroad town, founded in 1872 by the ATSF railroad as its mainline moved west. The sweep of mainline trains past the nearby farm predisposed Frank to a railroad career. He left the family for railroading in 1906, his timing defined by his family's health situation. And he was 22 years into his railroad career in 1928 when I was born. Thus, much of this history is derived from railroaders' "remember when" conversations, from a few photos, and by pilgrimages to railroad sites, but very little from conversation with Frank. With reluctant retirement in 1959, he completed 53 years of railroad train service.

Burlington (1906-1910). Frank was fired from his first railroad position. As a brakeman, his insufficiently protected caboose was rear-ended and burned. He escaped, barely, by busting out a window and plunging through. I, at an uninquisitive young age, when told this, was too young to ask questions. Frank first hired with the Burlington, based at Sterling, Colorado. Given his total commitment to self responsibility and to his profession, I choose to believe his firing only could be the result of an operating or administrative system deficiency.

San Luis Southern (1910-1913). How does a newly fired employee, in Eastern Colorado, learn of job prospects in a small Southern Colorado town as brakeman on a short-line? No internet in play here. Blanca, Colorado, located on the DRGW La Veta Pass route, was highlighted by a well-maintained historical depot when my wife, Judy, and I visited there, 1980. A local bartender guided us to historical rails, rusted rail spikes (a few of which we harvested), interesting old equipment, and a visit to the very friendly Colorado Aggregate Company (CAC), operating on residual SLO yard tracks. Our photos include old SLS equipment and CAC's homemade diesel.

The SLS, 31 straight miles, standard gauge, began in 1909 from Blanca, Colorado, south to Jaroso, at the New Mexico line. Frank was conductor on this line from 1910 to August 1913.

On Judy's and my 1995 visit to Blanca, we took the dirt road (on the old roadbed) Blanca to Jaroso, taking a photo of the abandoned but classic Rattlesnake Trestle. Jaroso provided a perplexing lunch stop. The auto entry to Jaroso was less a road than a random merging of multiple two-tire auto paths. For lunch, we parked in an apparent street under tree shade. A person appeared, asking if we were lost and advising that he had been watching our joyride in his fields. Showing him our guiding SLS article, he noted that some photos were of formerly track-side agricultural services directly across the road from where we now talked. His name (same as the name on the grain elevator) was that of a third generation at Jaroso. Upon his noting that we planned to eat lunch where parked, he confirmed that our vehicle was appropriately parked with respect to his property line. Following lunch, we invited his surprisingly friendly dogs away from under our car and headed for Antonito on the dirt road. We crossed the Rio Grande River observing the 1882 Iron Bridge, as suggested by our Jaroso host.

Our only SLS mementos are two early 20th century classic photos, ie, two views of SLS steam engine #100 stopped, south of Blanca, while the crew ponders a circa 1910 auto, mired in mud along the right-of-way.

Denver and Salt Lake Railroad (DSL). Out of the bankruptcy of the Moffat Road, April 1913, arose the DSL. Frank, always known by railroaders as “Buck,” joined the DSL four months later as brakeman. How did Buck become aware of and interview for a position on the “new” road? It’s easy to believe that DRGW representatives at Blanca’s San Luis Southern and Rio Grande Railroad (DRGW) interchange knew Buck well. (Years later, as a kid, it seemed to me that everyone knew Buck.) By 1913, the DSL was complete to Steamboat Springs and, later that year, complete to its terminus at Craig, Colorado. Corona (Rollins) Pass, at 11,660 feet, with its 4% grade and months of arctic-like blizzards dominated operations, railroad economics and the lives of employees.

The DRGW employee newsletter (“Green Light,” 15 May 1959), upon Buck’s retirement, reports that Buck’s first job as conductor came in 1916 on “mixed” #11 & 12. It also noted his vivid memories of steam operations on Rollins Pass.

DSL 1916-1927. I can only speculate the details. I assume that “mixed 11 & 12,” facing the momentous Rollins Pass obstacle west from Denver and terminating at Phippsburg, required recrewng at Tabernash. Therefore, Buck could have been “based” at any of these locations. The little known, of his first marriage, indicates that Denver was base, at least much of the time, and from conversations overheard, I know he made many trips over Rollins Pass which points also to a Denver base. Summertime tourist operations were important to the DSL. An undated photo, taken by my mother, Anna, from the 8th car of a tourist train, shows that she made this trip. It’s likely that she timed her trip to when her “Frank” was a crew member.

Rollins Pass. Blizzards; white outs; snarled and derailed trains; tenders stuck and out of water; crewmen standing on snow precipices, shoveling to clear a plow’s blades unless shoveling snow into the tender. I know from photos that Buck did work the snowplows. And, with great fortune, I have two photos of him in snowplow service. As always, smart hat (cap in this situation), cigar, and ever dapper.

The single experience Buck mentioned to me was being stranded 30 days on the Pass due to repetitive blizzards. How the crew survived I have no idea. (I was a stolid pre teen when he mentioned this event.) I do know that there were crew facilities, under snow sheds at Corona, the apex of Rollins Pass. In later years, in the 1930s, when friends visited, talk often touched on the operating conditions that engine crews had experienced, and particularly the dreaded but unseen gassing that had occurred in tunnels, snow sheds, and I guess even in snow cuts. (After acquiring the book, “The Moffat Road” (1), I discovered the seriousness and extent of the “gassing” danger.)

Visiting Historic Rollins Pass. In August 1971, my family drove the Pass. The high altitude bothered the 1968 Ford, an irritability it displayed by refusing high-altitude restarts. We gingerly drove, fearful that any wrong body language would cause a stall. In July 1980, Judy and Edward drove the former rail roadbed from West Portal to the blocked Needle Eye tunnel, which we

walked through. Photos: loop trestle, snow shed ruins, Corona Hotel foundation with its in-your-face view of James Peak, Arrow site, and the square water tower, and with honorable mention to Devil's Slide Bridge, with its narrow wooden tire track runners and deep drop off. One's mind honors the men who drove trains up, but even more so, that drove them down these step grades.

Tabernash: Helpers, Frigid Weather, Frozen Trains. Frank and Anna married, in Denver, Oct 1927, and moved to Tabernash, 70 miles from Denver on the Western slope. (Fraser, a suburb of Tabernash, is famed as a member of the coldest communities in the US, and is on the grade where Rollins Pass begins.) Helpers and snowplows positioned at Tabernash pushed eastbound trains over the Pass, four helpers per train. I assume Buck often was conductor on snowplows, as well as freights, working out of Tabernash.

By personal knowledge, I do know that my parents were friends of the George Schryers. Mr Schryer, tall, exuberant, and kid-friendly, personified (in my mind) the lordly locomotive engineer. Mr. Schryer was a noted engineer and worked the Tabernash Helper for many years. George, elegant Mrs. Schryer, and their two Boston Bulls visited us when in Denver, for me a big event. (2). Clearly, George and Buck had worked together in Tabernash.

My mother never forgave Tabernash for its cold weather.

Phippsburg: Division Point. By October 1928, when I was born, Frank and Anna had moved to Phippsburg, a division point then and now, 163 miles from Denver but only 64 miles from the Craig terminus. Why the move? My guess: with the opening of the Moffat Tunnel, Buck's seniority gained him a position working the Phippsburg switch engine and the less fearsome freights, which originated out of Phippsburg rather than Denver.

Phippsburg: The Edward Memories. The few things I remember I suppose start with age 4. With a population of maybe 200, Phippsburg offered few children, no playmates, distant medical services, an inhospitable climate. Our kitchen harbored a wondrous huge iron kitchen stove, which provides faint memories of Frank and Anna in early morning progressing from matches to coal nuggets, as the morning fire once again brought salvation. At the rear door, the heavy iron water pump. Further to the back, served by a plank walkway, the forlorn outhouse stood at attention. And, at the back door, dog Dinty's yellow drink pan and a source of one memory: the overnight freezing in August of a 4" deep layer of Dinty's water.

With good fortune for me, my mother enjoyed her box Kodak, leaving a minimal photo legacy of the Phippsburg home and neighborhood, a visit from Denver of my cousins Harriett and June, and, yes, a photo of the outhouse. In the back of my mind is Miss Tidball, one-room school teacher, moonlighting as my babysitter—I suppose only on one or two occasions. She was nice; the small rubber egg-shaped ball she gave me was exciting and durable. And she read from my nursery rhyme book. No TV hypnosis available. Where were my folks? Could there have been a "happening" in Oak Creek? Maybe Eastern Star? There were occasional walks with my mother to the Phippsburg station, taking lunch to my father when he worked switch engine.

The above describes for me, in hindsight, a life viewed by my parents as normal and meeting the middle class economic expectations of that time period. The deviations for me: big upside: occasional visits to Denver, riding the passenger train and overnights at a small friendly hotel near the Denver Union Terminal. More frequent downside: typical children illnesses. Other than aspirin and Absorbine, Jr., OTC drugs were locally unavailable (or unfamiliar). The physician from Oak Creek did make house calls.

With the summer of 1933, I remember carpenters arriving, crating furniture, and teaming crates to a boxcar. We were moving to Denver.

The Railroader: 1927-1933. The railroad industry and the economic outlook for its employees were hammered during the family's Phippsburg period of 1928-1933. The market crash, withering rail markets, rising public funded transportation alternatives, distorted free-market public policies, less relevant union contracts, all contributed. Fortunately, Buck's seniority was the lifeline. A senior conductor had retired, and Buck had bid for the mixed, Denver-to-Craig, #11 & 12. As a 20-year employee and 17-year conductor, his bid succeeded.

Denver: Mixed Train, 1933-Circa 1940; Denver to Craig, Colorado. The "turn" on the Mixed was overnight from Denver to Craig. Consist was one special coach (a combine) and priority freight cars, eg, perishables and livestock—thus the Mixed connotation. My memory says that a turn, from a crewman's perspective, was eg:

- Monday day: Sleep
- Monday night: Denver to Craig
- Tuesday day: Sleep in Craig
- Tuesday night: Craig to Denver
- Wednesday morning: Exhausted arrival back in Denver, followed by a fitful day's sleep
- Wednesday night: At home, sleep
- Thursday day & night: Normal with a fringe of jet lag
- Friday day: Sleep and the cycle again is underway

Life was dominated by this schedule. A family visit? Friends over for dutch lunch, ie, cards, beer, cold cuts and gab? Holiday celebration? Doctor's appointment? All a big challenge. All taken by Buck and Anna with an equanimity not easily accepted by today's standards. For me, I greatly admired my father (age 56 at the time of the move from Phippsburg to Denver, an "older" age at that time than now) and his man-about-town vibe. Even though young, I was aware of his responsibilities and his sense of responsibility. When conversation arose among railroaders, there was no doubt that I was among intelligent, insightful and well informed men and women. But daily life for the grade schooler was constrained. Successful adherence to Buck's sleep schedule was absolute. This meant few opportunities for kid visitors, demand for quiet exit and egress, and whispered conversation, with ever fear of a slipup.

Starting at age 9, I occasionally made trips with Buck. A trip was a streetcar ride to the Castle Building stop, on the 16th Street viaduct. Then one-half way down the scarry wooden steps and into the Castle Building, that mysterious home of railroaders' crew lockers; then to sign-in at the old Moffat depot; then, with lantern, to the consist to compare documents and check car seals.

At first trip, I learned that the passenger car was a combine (chair car and Pullman) and that the Pullman section was served by an honest-to-goodness African American porter. Priority freight traveling on the Mixed included livestock, and ranchers traveling with that livestock were primary beneficiaries of the Pullman. Buck and the porter seemed to be old buddies, with ongoing repartee. A few miles into departure, and after eating the precious box of animal crackers, I was asleep, sprawled in a chair car seat.

As Buck aged from 56 into the 60s, the household was routine and pleasant. Denver's public transportation service was convenient. We had no car. Piggly Wiggly, two blocks away; other local services, 3 blocks away; Elitches Park, two short blocks. Our seldom meal out was at a now long-gone cafeteria near the downtown Tabor Block. The three dime stores huddled together, also in lower downtown, a geographic that perfectly suited Anna, except for the few times at Woolworths where I demanded a 15 cent toy, and she was going to spend only a dime. She always won. (Now I admire those 10 cent toys; these 1935-1936 well crafted lead soldiers have become collector items.)

Digression. Conversation was dominated by the depression, Franklin Roosevelt's "socialistic" policies, the WPA, and the activism of Eleanor Roosevelt. Layoffs, even of long-service railroad employees, were common in this period. Friends, a conductor's family, after layoff, operated a corner grocery in Southeast Denver. Another, an engineer, lived near us in North Denver. With layoff, he even entered a program to "learn a new trade." (Sounds very modern.) He gave me the beautiful small electric motor he built in this retraining program, a keepsake lost. Both employees returned to work as WWII approached.

Denver: The Yampa Valley Mail, Trains #1 and #2, Circa 1940-1946. With retirement of a senior conductor, Buck became conductor on the Mail, Trains #1 and 2, the daily passenger train, Denver to Craig. This train was staffed by three crews with a schedule that offered a big jump in lifestyle. For example:

Monday day	Leave Denver 0800
Monday night	Arrive Craig, with overnight in Craig
Tuesday day	Return to Denver
Tuesday night, Wednesday, Wednesday night:	At home in Denver.
Thursday:	Restart the cycle

No more day sleeping. (Note: Crewmen paid their own home-away expenses. No per diem.) The Mail's consist: a combination secured mail and baggage car and one coach. The coach was unique, being equipped with a small kitchen and café seating. The power generally was #303, a 2-6-0. Comfortable routine was a welcome addition to our lives. Exceptions that I recall are: tunnel #10 (near Pinecliff) collapsing, resulting in an extended blocking of the railroad. In response, the Mail operated a truncated schedule from Rollinsville to Craig. Crew and Denver passengers were bused to Rollins during closure. The second exception was the Ski Train, operating winter weekends to Winter Park and return. The Mail's Craig departure times, for ski trains days, were delayed three hours, giving skiers a full day at Winter Park. The consist, departing Denver, was augmented by six or so passenger cars, which were emptied of skiers at Winter Park, then these cars were sidetracked further west to be picked up by the returning three-hour late eastbound Mail. Travel on this train typically moved from alarming to belligerent as

ski poles, skis, backpacks and 300 skiers settled in. (To my knowledge, no security guards, no first responders; the conductor and head brakeman were the den mothers.)

The Mysterious Caboose. A caboose was Buck's home much of his freight-train life. He occasionally spoke of caboose living, and typically he was the cook—for himself and for others in the crew—and bragged his biscuits. In 1942, a date confirmed by photos, he and I were driven to Utah Junction (Denver's DSL rail yard) where Buck had an assigned caboose; upon arriving there he shuffled some belongings, extracted others, and evidently released the caboose. His freight Service was nine years in the past? Was this caboose Buck's idea of a souvenir? Never: he took no souvenirs. The Mixed had required a caboose to house the rear brakeman. Maybe that's it: leftover Mixed.

Digression. In early teenage years, I rode the Mail occasionally, to Craig usually, but several times leaving the train at Phippsburg under the amazing illusion that friends would warmly receive me and tuck me away for the night. Fortunately, this worked out. Having no money nor ID card, nor a backup plan, the surviving of a frigid high-country night would have required a new paradigm of self reliance.

1940-1946 resumed. While the Mail remained routine, the neighborhood changed. The Mail became a Denver and Rio Grande train, its terminus to move to the Denver Union Station (DUT) rather than the Moffat Station. The streetcar stop still would be atop the 16th Street viaduct, but Buck's locker would no longer be deep in the distant Castle Building but now would be deep in the DUT. And watch check would be at the huge clock above the main DUT aisle. As auto ownership increased, auto traffic increasingly fouled transit lines, deteriorating service. While Buck didn't press for an auto (he didn't drive but Anna did), deteriorating transit service dictated reality; the used 1940 Dodge 4-door sedan was purchased. Increasingly, he was met at the station upon return from a trip; I think he liked that, and (now nearing the age of 65) relieved from the steep semi safe climb to street level from and to the 16th Street viaduct.

On 6 December 1941, I made the trip to Craig with Buck. Returning the next day, I witnessed the total destruction of the old routine; at the Kremmling Station, the agent announced the Pearl Harbor attack. Family plans had called for Buck to retire at age 65 (1942) and a retirement move back to where his rail career began: Nickerson, Kansas. This plan was reversed after Pearl Harbor, with Buck's recognition of the huge need for railroad workers to serve the war effort. Retirement was out!

The advent of the P-38 and B-17 pushed my interest onto airplanes, but I assumed that rail would always be there, in the basic form I'd grown up with. However, Buck perfectly foresaw the railroad decline. Only the rapidity with which diesel power replaced steam brought surprise. My folks purchased income property on the East side of Denver and then moved to another property, also on the East side. Always they had lived prudently and frugally and upon retirement, with a railroad pension, were financially OK through the retired years, even with the edging wave of nursing home costs. Regardless, with all their frugality, I wonder if all might not have been lost, given Anna's needs, if Medicare had not been legislated, and as pre 1950s's savings succumbed in value to post-war inflation.

Undertaking college in 1946, and relocation to San Francisco late 1948, severed my close link to the railway and Buck's career. That is, until 1958 when Steve (age 3) and I made a day trip, returning with Buck (now known as Steve's granddad), on the afternoon Mail. Buck retired in 1959, at age 82, still in excellent health and still able to safely step from the ground to that first step of a railway coach. I can't do that. (Steve, himself, was a born-again railroader by age 5, and at age 20 started a 30-year career as clerk and train dispatcher with SPT, DRGW, and UP.)

One More Thought. Buck was a union man, a requirement upon operating railway employees in the closed shop railroad industry. He respected the union and fully appreciated the "balance of power" it provided. But in equal measure, he was a "Company" man. He recognized the need for capital and for competent managers, and with great satisfaction acknowledged those that qualified. His friendly disdain seeped out whenever a colleague or acquaintance tagged the Company as a money pit or source of undue entitlements. He openly admired Gus Aydelott, who became Company President, not only for his competence but, apparently, Mr. Aydelott's commitment to knowing operating employees and to awareness of the employee view of operations.

Buck spent his final years in Santa Barbara, California. With family support, he did his own "batchin" and maintained a comfortable lifestyle in a modest mobile home. A minor fall at age 94 led to general deterioration, which led to nursing home round-robbins. Nursing home rules, of course, meant no chewing his beloved cigars—the final fate. Frank Arbuckle passed away in 1973 at age 96. The railroaders, Frank, Anna and Grandson Steve are at rest at the Goleta, California Cemetery, just yards from the Union Pacific Coastline main.

- (1) Edward T. Bollinger and Frederick Bower, The Moffat Road (Denver: Sage Books, 1967), 72-76.
- (2) P.R. "Bob" Griswold, Denver and Salt Lake Railroad 1913-1926 (Rocky Mountain Railroad Club, 1996), 71, 72, 74, 98-99. This book relates several George Schryer adventures, operating trains over Rollins Pass.