

BLACK RAILROAD ENGINEER

Forrest Whitman

“Some hard cases among the white engineers, maybe because I’m Black, but that’s only part of the story.” That’s what Bobby Sampson reported recently. His story is a natural. It brings up to date a column about Black railroad workers I wrote here. Black railroad workers began our shared history in mountain towns as soon as rails extended here and has long been a part of our history..

I was honored that Bob let me interview him for this column. In a minority where hiring has often been limited, he still completed 34 years working on the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad. Of course he started out in lines of work more usual for minorities. He worked on repair tracks and as a hostler driving engines in and out of round houses and cleaning them. When he completed those 34 years a decade ago he had worked nearly everywhere on the rails.

Bobby was feeling good about the railroad life both times we talked “on the record.” Black history comes around in our mountain towns. Beginning from a total lack of Black engineers in the 1940s that percentage has increased. Bobby still wears his Rio Grande retirement diamond now and again. He’s a happy guy.

Bob now lives in Pueblo, but gets up Gilpin way. He’s a fly maker and comes with his fly rod in tow. Trout tremble when they hear he’s on the stream. Along with his wife he enjoys a little trip here now and again. They enjoy many things about the “little Kingdom” including the opera and the casinos.

When he worked for the Rio Grande Railroad he was “shared out” along with other engineers and conductors to some far flung areas. One stint was at a little town in Arkansas. Black employees or white workers from “up north” were not welcomed. After about three mornings a little switch engine delivered a flat car next to the crew shack. “That’s your private office,” said the road master. Some of the white employees had refused to work if they had to sign in and do their paper work in an integrated setting. He had to laugh. At crew change three white engineers told him he was welcome and not to worry too much about the others.

His best stories are often about being shared out as an engineer. He tried to “learn the culture” of those places.” He became an anthropologist. Sometimes that even helped him not to violate any taboos. He’s fascinated to see women following the same track he picked. Again the predicts this will be a cultural change.

A worker had a few grades to climb before getting seniority as a train driver (engineer). But each year more and more Black employees made it to engineer. The conductor is the boss of the train (and now and again sits in the angel’s seat in the caboose) he along with the engineer at the throttle make the best pay. That’s true if the run is one flat car, light, or a 300 hopper coal drag. The conductor ends up at the investigation if something goes wrong. But the engineer on the head end, has a lot of responsibility too.

Bobby did have a few unpleasant tales to tell. There were always the old heads who just let you sit there on a student trip. They wouldn’t tell any tricks about how to switch a new mine or warehouse. If you made a mistake there could be cars on the ground. But, that became more unusual with passing years. Things became more computerized and radios better. I know all about that from my railroad days.

There were good stories too. Sometimes a fellow engineer bought a coke. Some knew where a good place was to “tie up and go to beans.” Most of the guys were just “getting along and avoiding trouble.” Trouble did come during periods when management would go on a campaign to weed out workers. Typically this meant an investigation and time off without pay.

The dirtiest trick was the “line across the tracks.” A couple of officials would hide in the weeds on each side of the track just where the yards joined the high rail. You and your crew had just checked the air pressure on your train and sometimes added another cut of cars. You got your clearance and your

orders. The tower ahead gave you the green light. You were on your way until you spotted the dreaded yellow line across the tracks. You had to get stopped before you crossed it or it was investigation time again. Thank goodness those campaigns were not regular parts of railroad life.

Mostly the railroad life was good for Bobby and he lived in the years when it got better. Bobby is a living part of railroad history and the long march for equality. What a pleasure to get to know him.