A Dispatcher’s Night on the Claiborne and Polk Military Railroad
by Melinda West

This work is based on a Dispatcher’s log book located in the Archives. The Claiborne and Polk Military Railroad located below Alexandria, Louisiana and operated from July, 1941-August, 1946. The logbook entries just give the researcher a dry account of moves made by the engines assigned to duty on the line. I have added the human element and what the soldier might have been thinking when he went about his business.

A cup of coffee at hand, a pen nearby for filling out the logbooks; the radio and telephone are close by also. In Khakis fresh from the post laundry a soldier sits. The Stars and Stripes rests half read on the desk. Outside the light filters through the window out to the hard packed ground below. No grass is growing from the constant movement of foot traffic by the troops. Cigarette butts can be seen as little pin lights throughout the yard as others move about their business. The low sound of Glenn Miller and his orchestra playing Chattanooga Choo Choo wafts on a breeze that holds just a hint of chill. The music is interrupted by the gentle chugging of boilers being tended until ready for the next run. It looks to be a quiet night on the Claiborne and Polk Military Railroad.

At 0650, a flimsie (paperwork for movement) comes into the dispatcher’s office. His breakfast, half-eaten of green eggs and bacon, rests next to the Stars and Stripes that he finished about 0300. He hears Engine 2. This boiler has a unique swirl as she comes into life. Engine 2 and Engine 6 have close to the same sound, but Engine 2 makes a little hiss at the superheater because they cannot find the leak when the boiler is cold. He sure can tell when she is ready to depart. The trainmaster hands him the orders, he records them and keeps a copy. The engineer and the conductor each get a copy. As the crew makes the train up, he hurriedly shovels down the rest of his cold breakfast. He steps outside to take a quick puff of a cigarette when he notices the trainmaster with another set of orders. It was Engine 1600’s turn to be readied. The sound of a diesel engine was now added to the sounds of a military base and railway yard. Troops were marching in formations to their daily tasks of being soldiers. The sounds of a deuce-and-a-half grinding its gears as it goes about its business also adds to the sounds of Camp Claiborne getting ready for another day. Troops are moving to board their trains to the training areas the line serves. You hear the clicks of equipment and the shuffle of boots as they board the troop cars.

He settles down, once again, for a busy day of dispatching. Extra trains were departing for the training areas. Camp Polk was getting more troops in. He had read the switch reports and seen the arrival of two troop trains off the MoPac (Missouri Pacific Railroad) at Bringhurst. Fresh meat for the Engineers stationed at West Camp Claiborne had arrived. He looked at the newly arrived sunshine and blessed the Army for bringing the 714th back from Alaska. Home had been cold in Chicago where the winds whipped off the Great Lakes, but Alaska was too cold. He moved back to his desk and checked the radio and telephone lines that ran along the line. The trainmaster was changing an order for that awful sounding Engine 1. Something was wrong with her tubes and she made an awful sound that sounded like an ancient aunt who wheezed and puffed on her corn cob pipe at the same time. There is nothing graceful about that old lady. She only looked good with that coat of paint she had gotten at Marshall when the Army bought her and her six sisters off the Texas and Pacific Railroad, cheap.

Another order from the trainmaster, it is for that newcomer to the stable, Engine 3410. She is another diesel. Sleek and new, no familiar sounds of huffing and puffing to identify her. They were
sending her on an extra run to Camp Polk. He did not know what she would be pulling, but she would make a nice sight. This mixture of old and new made him feel excited for a future after the war ended. Victory in Europe was new, but satisfying. The struggle with Japanese Empire was still active in the Pacific. Looking from his work out to the yard, he spotted another order heading his way. It was for another new piece of equipment, the Evans Railer 21. They were just introduced in 1936, but had never expected the Army to use one. She was not as majestic as one of the grand old ladies who sputtered, spewed, knocked, wheezed, and whined as they steamed up for business. She was cute, lightweight, and fast on the beat up rails of this line. Dispatching her was a pleasure. Her gasoline engine puttered and sputtered as she charged through the wavy rails and sinking ballast that gave the line the title of the “World’s Worst Railroad”. This young lady with her sleek new appearance turned many a head as she made her way to wherever he sent her. He saw the Company C, the gandydancers, getting ready for their daily run. The Claiborne and Polk was the perfect place to train gandydancers. They kept repairing this line and she obliged them by breaking down somewhere else. The line had not changed much since they had first trained here in 1942.

Once again focused on his duty, out of the corner of his eye something glints. He snaps to attention. A Captain and a civilian accompany the trainmaster. The officer was taking motorcar 7 to Camp Gray. Just to that training area. Outside he could also see some foreign uniforms. This Captain was not top brass, so he was just escorting them to see something. They were always blowing up, or building something at the Engineer facility, go figure. The camp was always getting visitors; his favorite had been Cary Grant who had not been privileged enough to receive a ride on the “Crime and Punishment”. He fleetingly wondered what this trip was about; some inspection, most probably, it was only 1035 hours.

Things would calm down. He filed his orders and was able to smoke a whole cigarette and police call the office. Looking at the yard, he saw the rest of his platoon doing some close order drill with their rifles. They had not used them at all in Alaska. Would the girls consider him a hero for serving in Alaska? He kept his ear open for the radio or the telephone lines as he leaned on the doorframe. He noticed his platoon heading for the chow line. They would bring him a plate; what was today’s meat? Today was Wednesday. Hey, it was almost the weekend. He needed to check the duty roster to see if he was on the schedule. Tomorrow he would sleep, and then Friday was inspection. Chow arrived as the telephone rang from Springcreek station. They were just bored and checking in. At 1235, it started kicking off again. Both the Evans Railer 21 and motorcar 7 had returned with no problems. He could hear the old wheezier Engine 1, and his favorite lady, Engine 2 was being sent to Felton until 1800 hours. Engine 3410 was scheduled to be returning from Camp Polk and would be in that area at 1700 hours. It was time for another cigarette. Also, time to go to the PX to get another carton. He noticed another order heading his way. In the distance, he heard the yardmaster yelling at some troops. Glad he was here today; sounds like the Sergeant was not in a good mood.

Once again, light power would be on the move. The Evans Railer would move to Big Oakes. Engine 1600 would depart for Camp Polk. He looked at the clock on the wall to double-check the time. It was 1612 when he finally completed this movement, which had started at 1315, but was amended at 1610. Faithfully he kept track of the ladies as they moved along the line. He saw his buddies winding down for the day and heading toward the PX before chow. A cold coke sure would be great right now. Even though it was May, it was still hotter than he was used to being from up Chicago way. The phone rang. Engine 3410 was finally heading east from Camp Polk. Engine 1600
was still making its way east as well. The trainmaster just slapped down another order for motorcar 7. She would be leaving, going west at 1650 hours. Chow arrived once again. Chicken again. Not his mom’s fried chicken that she fried crisp. His thoughts drifted to her. The two magazine articles about the Claiborne and Polk Military Railroad sure amused her. She frequently brags to her friends that he was back from freezing in Alaska to sweating in the South. Her ladies club sends him cookies once a month. They quit sending fudge because it was hard to get the rations and it melted on the way down here anyway.

He could hear Engine 11 as she steamed up. Yes, he could see her stack spewing ash and steam as she readied for her mission. Her conductor and engineer were giving her the once over. She was newer than the other girls and a favorite with the men. She was also too heavy to run except when there had been no rain for a bit. The gandydancers had to bring up the tracks if she ran when the ground was too wet. She was an army engine and was new when they got her. Her paperwork, flimsie, arrived and she would be going west to Camp Polk at 1805. The air was still and he could hear the clanging and banging from the engine shed. The evening shows were on the radio and telling the home front how the war was going. He could see clouds of dust as barracks were being swept. It just settled on the doorstep for the next set of boots to carry it back in. Deuce-and-a-half’s ground their gears once again going back to their barracks. Most were just hutments. This was a curious mixture of tarpaper and canvas on a wooden frame. Still beats Alaska. His phone rings. Engine 1 is moving from Big Oaks to Camp Polk. Yes, it was time for those troops to head back to their barracks.

The Evans Railer 21 is scheduled to be moving back this area. Engine 2 is also headed to Camp Polk at 1845 hours. So, the Evans Railer 21 takes the siding as Engine 2 follows Engine 1 to Camp Polk. Things are getting complicated and the trainmaster changes orders to get it all straightened out. Engine 1 and Engine 2 will go to Camp Polk; the Evans Railer will come to Camp Claiborne. The Railer will take the siding and let the old girls pass. Engine 1 is ahead of Engine 2. Engine 3410 takes a siding until they both pass. As he is recording this, the sun drops and the moon rises. So do those pesky mosquitoes and no-see-ums. He has a screen on his door but can hear them buzzing around it, attracted by his light. A cigarette does not interest him when he sees the swarm of mosquitos outside. His replacement arrives. Bone tired he reminds himself to check the duty roster for this weekend after he wakes up today. It is now 0001 hours. It was a busy day, but so are all the others. Running a railroad for Uncle Sam was just as busy as running one for any of the lines supporting them. All of the officers and senior enlisted were from the railroad. His unit was from the Chicago, St.Paul, Minneapolis, and Omaha Railway. He had not been employed by a railroad, but worked at a trucking company. He had worked his way into this position in Alaska. Rumor had it that they would be moved to Wyoming soon. That was familiar territory, but after Alaska, this area sure looked good. The girls sure were cute and their accents made a man’s knees give way. The dance he went to in Bunkie had all those brown-eyed Cajun girls. He needed to think on this more when he was not so tired. The guys who were training on the Texas and Pacific from Alexandria to Monroe said they already had jobs lined up with them. Yes, he needs to consider this idea more.

**Primary Sources**


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