



# Railway & Locomotive Historical Society, Inc.

## Southeast Chapter

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**Southeast Limited**

## STRIKE DUTY - The Good Times!?!?

Photos and text by Jim Smith

My Strike Duty “adventures” began while I was working in Detroit as Manager, Customer Service. Chessie System’s Transportation Department created a Strike Team, headquartered in Jacksonville, to assist local trainmasters in responding to railroad customers whose union workers had gone on strike.

Sometimes the company involved would keep the plant working using their own management personnel until a contract with the strikers was resolved. Since railroad trainmen are also union workers, whenever they came upon a strike situation the crew would notify the local trainmaster that they would not cross the picket line. This usually resulted in the local trainmaster and assistant trainmaster relieving the crew and then switching the plant themselves.

However, should the private company strike last for more than a few days, it became a problem for the local managers to handle their regular work and switch the striking company. So the primary focus of Chessie’s Strike Team was to relieve the local trainmaster/assistant trainmaster from having to do all the switching work. The new team was made up from management personnel who were licensed train engineers along with conductors/trainmen from various departments. I requested to become a Strike Team member and was okayed since the team was not expected to be used very often - boy was he correct...

So in 1985 I joined other Detroit area Strike Team volunteers at a special training session at Wixom on the Coe Railroad. Chessie System did not want to upset it’s own union workers, so all Strike Team

GP-40 # 6940 and a 2000 series “slug” were typical of the motive power used in coal country. The trains they pulled were heavy and routes had slow speed limits - the perfect combination for mother-slug combos.



training was done on non-union railroads (the Coe RR was a short line running from Wixom to West Bloomfield). We studied Safety Rules and then went outside for “hands on training.” It was a cold day with some snow on the ground. At the time, getting on and off moving equipment was part of the job. In spite of the slippery conditions we found we could safely get on and off moving cars by using a “trailing foot first” method when mounting or dismounting from moving equipment. We also changed out a coupler knuckle and quickly discovered that it is heavier than we thought! We did some switching of cars to get experience throwing switches, using hand signals and radios to communicate while switching cars.

So, now I was all set to help out, but as noted above, nothing happened - except Chessie System was merged into CSX. Four years later, Hurricane Hugo hit Charleston, SC, on September 21, 1989. I travelled with other team members by car from Jacksonville to Charleston. We were all amazed at the number of large of trees blown down or up-rooted. The plan was to use the Strike Team to fill in for trainmen who were taking care of their families/homes. However we soon found out that there were a number of crewmen who had not been significantly impacted by Hugo and were willing to work. This, along with a large number of tracks blocked by downed trees, meant there wasn’t going to be much work for us to do. That evening just one Strike Team Crew was called and the next day they let the rest of us go home. But, I’ll never forget seeing Hugo’s aftermath of destruction.

In 1991 a limited number of Strike Team members (no engineers) were sent to Russell, KY, for a week. Upon arrival, we discovered that we wouldn’t be working as trainmen. Instead we were going to replace striking taxi drivers who took train crews to/from the yard office and their train. So they gave me a 10 passenger van and I began driving crews both within the large Russell complex and outlying terminals. Unfortunately, I drew “the short straw” and ended up with mostly night work. The crews gave me directions to get to the train, but after dropping them off, I hoped I could remember how to get back to the Russell yard office in the dark! Being a taxi driver allowed me to see lots of trains, but once again, I didn’t get to ride one! The event I most remember was almost hitting a deer while making a 3 AM crew delivery! The engineer on board noticed that I swerved to miss the deer and he said that on KY roads you’re usually better off to hit the deer than to veer off into a TREE. Lesson learned but, thankfully, never put into practice.

After a two year lull in Strike Team activity, the West Virginia United Mine Workers went on a statewide strike in the fall of 1993. There were lots of pickets and unrest in the area. Most of the mine owners vowed to continue to dig coal using non-union people. Needless to say, the Strike Team got called. I worked in West Virginia for a week, returned to my regular job as Assistant Director, Service Design and was then asked to go for a second week.

The “team” flew into Charleston, WV, where we split up to work various coal mines. My first job was handling the movement of empties to and loads from the Prenter Mine in Prenter, WV - actually boarding the train in Seth, WV. Since there was no large turn around location at the mine, we pushed 60 empties that had been set off on the branch down 10 miles to Prenter. The local trainmaster was with us this first day to familiarize our group. As we approached the mine, we were met by a CSX policeman (or railroad “bull”) who had been telling the strikers that we had a job to do and we weren’t looking for any trouble. Even so, we were asked to stay inside the caboose and not stand on the end platforms. There was a large crowd of strikers holding up signs and yelling all kinds of “nice” things about us and what they would like to do to “scab” workers. However, the group respected our CSX bull and they didn’t cause us any trouble, but it was obvious they were not happy with us switching the mine.

As soon as we were inside the mine compound the bull shut the gate to keep any strikers from wandering in as we started our work. First, I was assigned as “head brakeman” and after setting our caboose on a siding, I rode the head end of the train (hanging onto the ladder) to spot the empties by advising the engineer when he needed to stop the train at the end of track (there were three sidings that would hold 60 empties). Once the train was stopped, I knew they were getting ready to shove up another 20 cars uphill to me. While that was happening, I had the fun job of “tying down” the hand brakes on the end six cars. All the brake wheels were at the top of the car, not low to the ground like most cars today. I

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**Prenter Mine - on the right are coal cars that have just been loaded. Under the tippel are two cars being loaded. Soon the management coal rider will roll them down to the other coal cars. When the loaded track is full they'll start using the empty track. When we first arrived and pushed empties up to the three track yard, we shoved them through the tippel on the track in front of our engine.**



**Why the Strike Team was working the Mines. The first day we worked Prenter Mine, there were at least 50 strikers, now, later in the week, only a few. The close striker with a red hat could have been the one who “wanted to fight with a scab...”!**

stopped the second cut, tied down 6 more brakes, and then did the same for the third cut. Having climbed up and down multiple ladders and tied down 18 handbrakes, I was already pooped! That’s what I get for having a “desk” job! Three days later, after setting the hand brakes on our first set of empties, the engineer didn’t reply to my count down as the next group of cars came up the hill. Something must have distracted him and all too soon I was yelling into the radio “STOP”, which he finally acknowledged. The last car came to a stop just three feet from the end of the track - with no crossed ties or pile of slag - just a two foot drop off!

As I walked back down the hill I watched a coal manager uncouple two cars and ride them down to the loading tippel. Once loaded, he released the cars and coupled them to other coal loads. He didn’t connect the air hoses, which

became my next job. The assistant trainmaster and I walked from the lower end of two loaded tracks connecting air hoses and noting the car number if the coupling didn't connect. As we got closer to the tipple we had to be extra careful since there was a little slack action every time the rolling cars coupled to the string of loads.

We brought lunch with us so as to not give the strikers any opportunity to approach us. But we did note that when the crowd of strikers thinned out in the late afternoon, we'd sometimes see a transfer of mine managers as they swapped out 5 people from a car that came via a back road.

After lunch, we'd make up our outbound loaded coal train with the caboose next to the engine. Since I was the head brakeman, when we approached the gate I hopped off, opened the gate and threw a derail to let us out. While doing this a heavysset striker came through the opening and said to me: "I feel like fighting with a scab!" My only answer was "I'm too pooped to fight, so I might as well lie down right now, you win!" Thank goodness he started laughing! So I quickly climbed up on the engine and we headed back to Seth. We left it to the mine managers to shut the gate....

Prenter Mine didn't need a switch every day, so we went with another crew that was going to the Amherst Coal's new (built in the late 80's) Fanco Mine that took stockpiled coal and "flow loaded the train in motion". But the loading process was slow - our lead unit had a special speed control that allowed the train to continually move at 1.3 miles per hour! I told the engineer that I was going to practice getting on and off moving equipment. After about three minutes I returned to the cab stating that 1.3 MPH was too slow as I simply stepped on and off the front engine step.

After a few hours we finished loading our train. Then we "ran around" it to get "FRED" (or "Flashing Rear End Device") off what had been the end of the train. One of the crew members had experience working with FRED and he showed me how to take it off and put it on the other end of the train. Yes, we put FRED on the running board and ran the engine to the other end so we didn't have to carry the rather heavy FRED past 75 coal cars! Then we put the engine at the new "front" of the train and took off for home.

The next day we again worked the Prenter Mine, which fell into an every other day job. However, on our return trip the engineer let me sit in his seat and run the loaded train back to Seth. Even though the speed limit was only 15 MPH I had to use the air brakes more than the throttle because it was mostly downhill and we had a heavy train. It was my "highlight of the week" in coal country.

The following day we took a train of empties to the Wharton 2 Mine. It was a regular practice throughout the strike to call a union crew and have them take the train to a grade crossing that was close to the mine but not near strikers. At the grade crossing the regular crew got off and we got on. This also happened on the return trip, we'd stop the train at the same grade crossing and swap crews.

Shortly after the train left, our crew went in a van to the grade crossing and waited on the train. All of a sudden we heard a woman yelling at us from her nearby home. She was verbally worse than the strikers! Even though her young daughter was on the porch with her, she screamed obscenities at us like a seasoned Navy sailor - every dirty word she knew she used and all we could do was stand there and listen to her for at least 15 minutes (seemed like an hour)! These were obviously "hard times" for the coal miners.

This mine had a long "Y" turn around so we went down one leg of the "Y" and stopped to let the trainmaster and me climb up to the brake platform between the 1st and 2nd cars so we could back down the second leg of the "Y" and give the engineer a countdown of car lengths to the end of track in the mine (we rode on the high brake platforms because of the Safety rules that prevent you from hanging on the side of a car for a long distance).

The trainmaster then told me to take FRED off our train and put it on the end of a single box car that was on another track. When I asked him why the box car was even in the mine he said that some coal companies had asked CSX to bring supplies to their mines. This box car had brought a number of beds and other materials that the "management miners" needed. Later, when the strikers found out that the railroad was helping management they were very upset and threatened action against the trains. In an effort to stay "neutral" CSX terminated the box car practice.

However, I still had to get FRED on that car! Fortunately, thanks to the recent Fanco Mine trip I was able to correctly put the unit on the car's coupler and connect FRED's air hose to the one on the box car. It all looked okay to me so I made the long walk up to the engines and off we went.

As our train slowly came to the grade crossing where the regular crew would get on the train we all heard and felt the train brakes go into emergency and stop the train. We got off the engine, changed crews and told them we'd look for the problem. So where would we start? Yep, we headed for FRED! While driving back to the rear of the train we noticed a

automobile really speeding by us on the typical narrow West Virginia road. When we got to the end of the train and started walking toward it we heard air escaping from FRED. I thought “Oh no, I did something wrong when I put it on!” As we gathered around FRED, a man came out of his house and told us that a boy had been “playing” with the end of the last car as we slowed for the stop. He also said that he apparently kicked FRED and disconnected the air hoses. Further, FRED’s air hose swung around and hit him hard in the head and his mother had taken him to a hospital! Now we knew why we had seen a speeding car. As soon as I coupled the air hoses together, the train started to build air pressure. I didn’t need that type of excitement, but it’s a part of railroading.

During my second week in coal country, I spent the entire time working on Montcoal mine shifter, #H891. On our first trip we met with a trainmaster at Elk Run Yard, near Whitesville, WV, to get familiar with the work - taking empties to the mine and returning with coal loads (approximately 50 miles round trip). Unlike the prior week, there was not a lot of switching. For the rest of the week, my engineer and I made the trip on our own since the trainmaster had his regular job to do. The run was easy except that now, as conductor, I had to perform an air brake test before we could return to Elk Run.



**Montcoal coal mine shifter, #H891 returning to Elk Run Yard, near Whitesville, WV**



**Elk Run Yard Office where we originated and terminated our Montcoal shifters.**

I had to walk the train to make sure the brakes were all on and then walk it again to make sure they all released. The engineer and I completed the week doing this job and then I returned to my desk job as Assistant Director, Service Design.

After my two separate weeks of coal mine strike duty I made some conclusions:

1. Coal mines are very, very dirty. There is black coal dust on everything, including the ladders I had to climb and the hand brake wheels I had to turn.
2. There is no “FLAT” ground in West Virginia’s coal country. You ALWAYS had to set brakes.
3. You had to be careful if you were hanging onto the side of a coal car while switching. If you were on the up-hill side, tree branches could knock you off the car. If you were on the side next to another track, you have to lookout for close clearance cars that could knock you off the car.
4. I’m glad CSX decided to not have the Strike Team work at night. There are some really, really HUGE holes and lots of metal junk along the tracks in a coal mine!

Two years later, in September of 1995, I was called for strike duty in my home town. Workers who unloaded auto rack cars went on strike. So I became a brakeman for a week as we placed and pulled auto racks at the Jacksonville auto ramp. I stayed with the engine and threw switches and also got drenched in a typical JAX thunderstorm while we partially blocked a grade crossing spotting a long string of 85 foot auto racks. This assignment was HEAVEN compared to coal mines. But the poor engineer had his “hands full” working the throttle and air brakes at the same time, while making an exact placement of the loaded cars. Oh yes, halleluiah, no hand brakes!

The very next month, October, 1995, I was part of a tiny Strike Team working near Akron, in DeForest, Ohio. Our three man team, consisted of an engineer, another brakeman and me. We spotted cars of taconite iron ore pellets that were used in the process of making steel. We stayed in Akron and would take an engine and caboose from there to De Forest to switch one particular plant. Our main job was to ride the end of a cut of about 15-25 cars and count down the car lengths to the end of track - which was always out of sight of the engineer! It was not a hard job, but we always had to watch our step! The pellets were like large marbles slightly smaller than a quarter and they were everywhere! Fortunately we didn’t twist any ankles or break a leg. The fun part of the job was standing on the rear platform of the caboose as we headed back to Akron. The last day we expected another enjoyable ride “home”. But our engineer was anxious to get back...so, what a ride we had! Who knows how fast we were going, but it was way more than the 30 mph speed limit! It was a nice way end what was to be the last of my “Strike Team” trips.



The yard office at De Forest, OH, home of the taconite marbles. CSX mainline on the far left.