

THE TRAIN GOING WEST

By John F. Hall

Years ago, I wrote a story about being on a freight train going to the west coast from Milan, Tennessee. I was part of an Army security team that was sent to the Milan Army Ammunition Plant. That plant is one of the largest facilities of its kind, and it is



responsible for the manufacturing and storage of much of the ammunition used by US. forces for training and combat. Its manufacturing capabilities include tactical missile systems. This story provides more detailed information about that train trip.

The security team drove from Fort Campbell and pulled into the gate at the Milan Plant. Once the team was cleared to enter the rail yard, we were given instructions to drive over to a red caboose that was connected to three boxcars. We received instructions to put our duffle bags and weapons in the caboose. Once that was completed, our team leader signed for the boxcars. The extra drivers returned the vehicles to Fort Campbell. Our security team consisted of seven soldiers.

The caboose served as an escort car and it had a cupola that allowed us to watch the boxcars for fires or dragging equipment. It provides a place where a railroad crew could



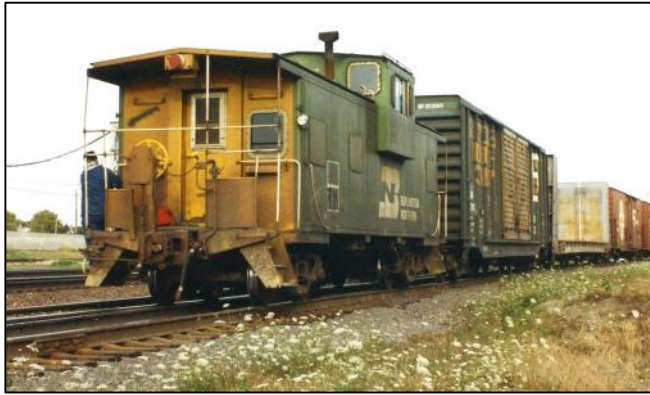
work, cook, eat and sleep. It also served as the conductor's office where he could do his paper work. Inside the caboose was a chemical toilet, a potbelly stove for heat and cooking. It had an ice chest to keep perishable foods fresh. No sooner had we gotten onboard when a small locomotive backed into the rail yard and coupled to the lead boxcar. That coupling was hard. It

pulled the three boxcars and caboose to a spur rail line and uncoupled. Later, the main rail locomotives backed up and coupled us to a long train of over 60 rail cars. ‘

We were not given any instruction concerning safety while being in a caboose. The most dangerous place to be on a freight train is the caboose. Excess slack in the train creates that danger. It feels like the slap of a whip when it happens. Riding in a caboose can lull a person into being careless. The excess slack in the train can forcibly knock a person off their feet without warning. I learned this the hard way. The slack action occurs when the train is coupling, picking up speed or forcibly slowing down. I was cooking on the potbelly stove when the train was forcibly slowing down. It was so severe that it knocked me off my feet and the food that I was cooking was thrown off the stove.

Norman Orfall of Hellendale, California, wrote an article in 2018 about a caboose that he owns. He calls the caboose Tioga Pass. This is part of what he wrote; “I am probably one of a few people who have ridden the rear end of a freight train a long distance in the last

few years. My private railcar is frequently chartered to a European country to serve as the escort car on train loads of military equipment moving from the training base to an Atlantic port for shipment to Europe. The rail journey is about 2,400 miles. The soldiers



and security personnel who ride the whole way with me quickly learn to never be unbraced. That is to always have three points of contact with the car-both feet and a hand on the railing... Making soup in the galley? Now that's tough!"

I was just lucky, during the time when I was sitting in the cupola, that I was not thrown out the window during a hard slack action. I

don't recall seeing any seat belts in the cupola. We learned to expect hard hits when the train was adding additional rail cars. But the slack action was so unpredictable. Today, modern technology made the need for a caboose obsolete. The railroads charter private escort rail cars like the Tioga Pass. It also eliminated two railroad personnel on freight trains.

I found a very old hymn written by M.E. Abbey called “.” Read the words carefully. They are about the life of each person. These are his lyrics: “Life is like a mountain railroad, with an engineer that's brave; we must make that run successful, from the cradle to the grave; watch the curves, the fills, the tunnels; never falter, never quit; keep your hand on the throttle, and your eye on the rail. You will roll up grades of trial; you will cross the bridge of strife; see that Christ is your conductor on this lightning train of life; always mindful of obstruction, do your duty, never fail; keep your hand on the throttle, and your eye on the rail. You will often find obstructions, look for storms and wind and rains; on a fill, or curve, or trestle they will almost ditch your train; put your trust alone in Jesus, never falter, never fail; keep your hand on the throttle and your eye on the rail. As you roll across the trestle, spanning Jordan's swelling tide, you behold the Union Depot into which your train will glide; there you'll meet the superintendent, God the Father, God the Son, with the hearty, Joyous plaudit, 'weary pilgrim, welcome home.' Blessed Savior, Thy will guide us, till we reach the blissful shore, where the angels wait to join us in Thy praise forevermore.”

My favorite train hymn is “Glory Train.” It was written by Baker Knight in 1960 and it



was used in a spiritual album by Ricky Nelson. The gospel quartet, The Cathedrals call the hymn, “Ride That Glory Train.” Baker Knight wrote almost 1,000 songs, mainly rock and roll songs. One thing that I learned from researching Knight's life, is that fame and fortune is meaningless if one is miserable. He suffered from agoraphobia, a chronic fatigue syndrome. He had tremendous pain on a daily basis from his fibromyalgia.

He died in 2005 at the age of 72.

Nearly every time that I am in Hopkinsville, I would hear the warning horn of a CSX freight train as it came through the heart of that city, known as the “Pearl City of the Pennyrile.” The CSX railroad company is based in Jacksonville, Florida. My first passenger train ride was out of that city in 1962. I had enlist in the Army and rode that train to Fort Jackson, South Carolina. It was a four hour train ride. After eight weeks of Basic Training, I was send to Fort Gordon, Georgia for advanced infantry training. The CSX railroad has 20,000 miles of track and access to 70 ports. On many occasions, I would watch the railroad gates come down and stop all vehicle traffic going east and west on Highway 68 in Hopkinsville. I would look to see, if perhaps, there might be a chartered caboose at the end of that train. Someday, when my life on earth is through, I’ll get onboard and ride that glory train to heaven.

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*Read other stories by John F. Hall at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>