

The Last Train Holdup.....

By Dick Culver

This one probably doesn't exist in any of the record books, but it's true none the less. It all started with a western movie made in 1948 starring Alan Ladd, Robert Preston, Donald Crisp, and William Demarest. The plot ran roughly as follows. Alan Ladd played a soft spoken railroad detective named Luke 'Whispering' Smith, noted for his ability to bring in anyone causing grief to the railroad. He was eminently successful, and found himself ultimately after an old friend, Murray Sinclair (played by Robert Preston), who has been working for the railroad as a trouble shooter. Murray is living (apparently) above the means of his railroad salary. His prosperous ranch is such that his railroad stipend would not justify.



C&O Locomotive used to pull the "Chessie" and the "Sportsman" prior to their conversion to steam

...You can see this one coming of course. Murray's wife played by Brenda Marshall who was once a "flame" of Whispering Smith and still carries a "torch" for him. (little play on words here, heh, heh...). William Demarest (playing Bill Dansing), is an old friend of Smith and who knows Murray Sinclair from Murray's current position on the railroad as a troubleshooter. Demarest voices the unspoken consensus that "Whisperin' Smith's" old friend is responsible for looting train wrecks, working for an early day Western Godfather-type, Barney Rebstock, played by Donald Crisp. All in all a great western, even in today's conglomerate of shoot-em ups.

Setting the Stage:

I was initially living in Ashland, Kentucky, where my Dad was the Warden of the Federal Penitentiary, some 5-miles out of town in a small wide spot in the road called "Summit, Kentucky". The rug-rats of the Prison personnel went to school in Ashland, transported by an old panel truck that took us to the "institutions of higher learning", and returned us following the daily attempts to educate us for whatever our future pursuits might be. Having relatively few youngsters in our local (prison) community, we tended to make new friends among our more "couth" schoolmates in town. One of my best newly acquired compatriots was a youngster named Billy Joe Lockwood. Billy Joe's dad was the Road Foreman of Engines for the Eastern Division of the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad.

Ashland, Kentucky was an interesting city, being located essentially at the junction of Kentucky, Ohio, and West Virginia (a true tri-state area). It was a bit more cosmopolitan than the average Kentucky settlement, and was a/the Railroad hub of the Eastern Division of the C&O Railroad. Ashland was also the location of Armco Rolling Mills (heavily into the production of steel products). The local Radio Station was called **WCMI**, standing for **Where Coal Meets Iron**. Many of the citizens of the Ashland were not natives of the Kentucky Hill Country, but had congregated in the area due to their expertise in one or another of the

various industrial pursuits. Ashland was not one of your average “hick” towns that exist in the imagination of those who picture Kentucky as a backwoods conglomeration of hillbillies.

Both Billy Joe and I shared an avid interest in railroading. I had been interested in *The Great Iron Horse* since I was a wee nubbin’. We just naturally gravitated towards one another. Bill had always figured on following in his daddy’s footsteps and becoming a Railroad Engineer. Bill’s daddy had acquired his position as the Road Foreman of Engines after many years as an Engineer on the C&O. You must understand that this was still in the age of steam, and the Diesel had not become the “fate accompli” of the steel rails that had united the country following the Late War of Northern Aggression (Civil War to you Damn Yankees). We were living in an era that sorta’ straddled a transitional era in our history.

Since we were close buddies, Bill’s daddy got us a summer job as “*assistant firemen*” on the little steam Yard Engines that shuffled the cars around the yards. We were paid a pittance from funds set aside for “casual labor” and not carried on the social security rolls, ...and of course, the minimum wage was some years in the future. I’m sure that the Bill’s dad knew we would have worked for nothing just for the privilege of working around the railroad (not to mention “firing engines”), and soaking up railroad lore and just rubbing shoulders with “real” railroad men! It was a summer of pure fun, and although stuffing coal into the fireboxes of those little yard engines might sound simple, it was enough to put calluses on young hands, and bring forth salty froth from our sweat glands (not to mention a little “salty language”) that can only be imagined in this modern day and time. Current (PC) guidelines require the hiring of relatively frail individuals of both sexes to fill available billets for engineers on the Con-Rail and Amtrak lines. It sorta’ came under the heading of who would have “*thunk-it*”, even in the waning days of steam?

About 1951 my Dad was transferred from Ashland, Kentucky to the Federal Lockup in Petersburg, Virginia (roughly 400-miles to the East). In the way of background, my Dad had been transferred from Petersburg in 1934 to Alcatraz as one of the first five lieutenants assigned to Alcatraz when it became a Federal Prison, then being transferred from Military control, and he was now being transferred back as the Warden. While this was something of a success story, it was not viewed exactly as a plus when you were 15-years old.

Now put yourself in a position of entering your first year of High School and having to leave all of your friends from grade school and Junior High School behind. Even for a guy used to pulling up stakes on a regular basis (when moving around in both the Marine Corps and the Federal Prison System), moving after your 9th grade year was a bit traumatic. Being an understanding individual however, my dad agreed that it would be a good transition for me to go spend a few weeks with Billy Joe Lockwood over in Ashland in the Summer of 1951. Not only that, but I got to travel by train (my favorite mode of transportation before the ghastly transition from steam to Diesel power on the railroads).

Nobody checked your baggage in those days, and shaking down a 15-year old kid wasn’t high on their list. I came with appropriate ordnance including an 1878 Colt Double-Action Army in .45 Colt caliber, with a much worn and flaking nickel plated finish. All in all, not exactly a collector’s piece, and one that I would not have shed many tears over losing. ...Still it was a shooter, and in those days (as in these) I never went anywhere unarmed. As with many youngsters in those days, I always had a large western neckerchief, blue jeans and a couple of much faded western style shirts.

A Fateful Day at the Paramount Theater, “No Mam’, we don’t rob ladies”!

Bill and I got our jobs back that summer, back to firing yard engines, and resuming our old acquaintances in the yards. As usual, they treated us as pets, and patted us affectionately on the heads. We settled into our old routine. ...Until the two of us went to the local Paramount Theater one Saturday morning to watch the weekly Westerns, catching “Whispering Smith”, the railroad yarn as described in the first paragraph above.

Being always into railroading (including model railroading), we got to talking it over and decided that there just hadn’t been a real train holdup since the demise of the old west! Hummm... OK, *now* what? Well, what if, just what if, the two of us took the bull by the horns (in the interest of maintaining railroad tradition of course), and pulled off one last train holdup? A long discussion ensued, and we began to plot! When you’re 15, the consequences are sometimes outweighed by the promise of adventure, and so it was...



**The Chessie
Passenger Logo
from the C&O
Railroad 1937-1972**



The C&O Sportsman circa 1951

While I was into railroading, Bill was what could only be described as fanatical on the subject. He had essentially memorized most of the major train schedules that flowed into and out of Ashland on regularly scheduled runs. One in particular was called “The Chessie” and ran from Cincinnati, Ohio to Washington, D.C. The same train, with only the name changed was called “The Sportsman” and ran the reverse route from D.C. back to Cincinnati. These little jewels were of the old school complete with “observation cars” complete with searchlights.

Only a few years before (1947), the Presidential whistle-stop tours had been held by the major candidates, with their trains stopping at all major cities for political speeches hoping to sway the electorate. The 1947/48 contest had been between Harry Truman and Tom Dewey. My dad had held me on his shoulders to watch Truman’s speech from the back of his train attempting to sway the electorate.

Remembering the railroad role in such recent political evolutions, a thought came to the pair of us... A regularly scheduled train would be coming by within striking distance. A small town, Catlettsburg, Kentucky was located approximately 13-miles from Ashland along a rather desolate strip of terrain with much of the road-bed fill being built-up out of railroad cinders. Having not been over that way for many years, I imagine that the (then) relatively deserted strip is probably now built up with housing and whatever. ...In those days however, it was for all intents and purposes desolate. Bill reached back in the recesses of his memory of train schedules and came up with the timetable of the “Sportsman” returning from D.C. to Cincinnati. Mercifully, the schedule was in the hours of darkness, and would conceal a couple

of young scalawags bent on maintaining the traditions of Wild West train holdups.

Catlettsburg was a small town located at the junction of the Ohio and the Big Sandy Rivers and was just across the Ohio River from West Virginia. Tradition had it that the back of the Catlettsburg Courthouse still held lead from several shoot-outs between the Hatfields and the McCoys of feuding fame!



Devil Anse Hatfield

The leader of the Hatfield Clan was “Devil Anse” (for Anderson) Hatfield, and hailed from the West Virginia side of the River. The McCoys were Kentuckians. To give you some idea of how many years ago this was, my 6th Grade English Teacher had actually met Devil Anse Hatfield when she was a young girl, Devil Anse having succumbed to the effects of a stroke in 1921.

Bill and I both had driver’s licenses at the age of 15 (they were pretty lax on ages in those days to accommodate kids driving for farm purposes, and the lack of an Interstate Highway system). We were fairly good sized, and attracted little or no attention while driving. On the appointed night, having checked the schedule carefully, we borrowed his mother’s 1948 Studebaker Champion, stashed the garments we were figuring on using to pull off our imitation of Jesse James, and headed for the lonesome strip that existed in those days about half way between Ashland and Catlettsburg. We pulled off on a wide spot up against a bank and put on our neckerchiefs, and battered cowboy hats, and of course, my 1878 Colt Double Action .45 (not loaded, I simply had it along in its holster for appropriate effect – I sure as hell didn’t figure on shootin’ anyone!). In retrospect, that probably wasn’t my smartest move – if anyone on the train had been armed (not out of the question in those days), they’d have been perfectly justified in shooting my fanny! It just wouldn’t have been authentic if we hadn’t had a “hog leg” along, don’tcha’ see? Demanding their “clinkables¹” without a gen-u-wine “*pistolaver*”² would have gotten us laughed off the train, even if it WAS simply a “prop”!

We had this one all figured out. We were going to stop the train using a readily available item called a “*railroad torpedo*”. These torpedoes were a packet of compression/impact-sensitive explosive in a square package about the size of a packet of military rifle cleaning patches, albeit a bit thicker. The “powdery” explosive mixture inside the packet was almost unbelievably powerful. I once took a pinch of the stuff, placed it on the sidewalk, and struck it with a hammer. The resultant explosion blew the hammer head “plum off” as the saying goes! No wonder you could hear the noise above the sound of a fully functioning steam locomotive! A fairly wide strip of “lead ribbon” was fastened to the packet and anchored from the inside. These little jewels were used as signaling devices by the conductors and brakemen to alert the Engineers/Firemen to obstructions or hazards on the track ahead. They were extremely loud, and could be heard well above the roar of a steam locomotive (you’ve got to have heard one of these jewels to appreciate the noise of the “bang”!). Whew! The railroad torpedoes were usually stored in the caboose, baggage car, and/or locomotive cab. Security on such things in those days was essentially nil, and they were easily come by.

One packet (torpedo) placed on the track and anchored by bending the lead ribbon around the rails, signaled “extreme caution”, possible construction or need to slow down on the track ahead. If you placed two of these torpedoes, ten paces apart, it meant “*lock the wheels, probable wreck on the track ahead*”! It was understood, that you didn’t have time to

check to make sure, the engineer just locked the wheels and stood by for a possible disaster! When you locked the driving wheels of a steam locomotive, it meant that sparks flew, and everybody stood by for the traditional ram!

The (large) *drive(ing) wheels* of a steam locomotive were separate from the so-called “*tires*” encircling the wheels themselves. When the “*tires*” developed a “flat spot” (caused by a “screeching” stop or became excessively worn from “time in service/mileage”, the tires could be heated in the locomotive shops, and removed from the wheels to be replaced by (a new set of) pristine tires. This was no small task, and created a major operation for the locomotive repair facility, it was not something you did on a whim!

Bill and I had figured to stop the *Sportsman* with two torpedoes placed on the rails, the required ten paces apart. Figuring on the approximate distance necessary for the train to pull to a stop after hearing the twin explosions. We were gonna’ position ourselves in/on the steeply slanting cinder road bed that composed the built-up fill, so that the observation car (last car on a streamlined passenger train of the era) would stop about even with us. Once the train was stopped, we figured to swing aboard the observation car of the now immobile train, cowboy style (sans horses of course). Since we really weren’t interested in robbing anyone, we were simply going to take off our cowboy hats and meander down the aisles of the passenger coaches, refusing to take anything from the female passengers with a comment of “oh no Mam, we don’t rob ladies” or some such chivalric gibberish. Instructions to the male passengers would be something to the effect of “just put yore silver ‘clinkables’ in the hat partner!” We of course, planned to leave our “ill gotten gains” in an obvious spot for their retrieval. The entire thing was simply an adventure, with the possibility of being the last two “yahoos” in history to pull off a train holdup during the age of steam! Everything seemed to be going well, at least at first. We drew straws to see who was going to put the torpedoes on the track, and of course, “I” drew the short straw (drat!).

I dutifully placed the first torpedo and then paced off the required ten paces. So far, so good! We then hunkered down, pulled up our bandanas and waited for the *Sportsman* to make its appearance. Sure enough, much like “El Duce³”, someone had the railroads running on time!

The two explosions rocked the night, and the *Sportsman* showed the immediate effects of a panic stop. The drivers appeared to lock up and the now immobile wheels threw off sparks that would have done justice to a 4th of July fireworks display. We had come pretty close to judging the stopping point of the aft end of the “Mighty *Sportsman*”... As the smoke settled, two young “Jesse James” imitators prepared to swing aboard in true Wild West fashion!

As the two young miscreants prepared to embark on a life of crime, it became immediately obvious that something was badly amiss! Before we could get in a position to stand up and prepare to swing aboard, the large spotlight on the rear of the *Sportsman* came to life! People seemed to be boiling out of the Observation Car, and the light coming from the Spotlight on the end car silhouetted those disembarking as being foul-mouthed, excited and worse yet, armed with pistols! Egad! How in the hell did they know? Had they seen us? What caused such excitement by some extremely agitated and armed hostiles!

Billy Joe and I weren’t exactly stupid, and it became immediately obvious that getting caught with bandanas and a .45 Colt Pistol wasn’t going to result in our being nominated for “teen-agers of the year!” Both Billy Joe and I pulled down our bandanas, and I set about

burying the 1878 Colt in the “cinder-pile”... We *then* set about personally burying *ourselves* in the cinder bank, making as little noise as possible! This had the makings of a major disaster!

This “search” was carried on for what seemed to be the entire night, but in truth probably only lasted about 15-minutes. The armed searching party finally swung back aboard the train, and the Sportsman started to slowly pull away. Anyone who has ever watched a steam locomotive get underway will picture this clearly. The big drivers started to roll with an initial bit of spinning to pick up some “purchase”, punctuated by much “steam huffing and chuffing” as forward momentum was gained. When the large “drivers” reached the “flat spots” on the now flattened steel tires, a very audible “clank” indicated the location of the flat spots. The flattened “smack” of the wheels became more indistinct as the engine picked up speed. Billy Joe and I looked at one another and a large wave of relief slowly caused the draining of color from our faces! Dear Allah! We both breathed a huge sigh of relief. Heading back to Bill’s house, we repaired to our bedroom, and quietly hit the rack, two very relieved young scalawags. Tomorrow was going to be an interesting day...

We headed down to the railroad shops (engine repair facility) with our ears straining for any scuttlebutt about the previous evening’s festivities. There awaiting a “change of tires” was the locomotive that had been heading the Sportsman the night before. Talk around the shop was wondering about the unexpected sudden stop of a mainline passenger train. Again the talk ran to the possibility of some sort of political entity riding the Sportsman, and attended by appropriate bodyguards. Hummm... well, at least it wasn’t Harry Truman with attendant Secret Service protection piling off the train. Obviously it wouldn’t have done to have asked too many leading questions, since (at least at that moment), no loose talk among the old timers had led to the speculation of two young idiots trying to gain a spot in the Guinness Book of World Records.

In retrospect, had the gents carrying “heat” captured a pair of young idiots wearing bandanas, and carrying a .45 1878 Colt, I could just picture the headlines that could have resulted – “Son of the former Warden of the Federal Penitentiary in Ashland in custody following attempted train holdup!” Oh good... My Pappy would have been thrilled.

Thinking back on the entire evolution, I don’t know if it was pure chance, dumb luck, or the ultimate switch from steam to Diesel that saved me from a life of crime? Who in the world would have wanted to be remembered for holding up a dadgummed Diesel? How unglamorous can you get? Now occasionally manipulating the system within the Corps to assure the accomplishment of assigned missions or taking care of the youngsters entrusted to your care may well have caused a bit of stretching of the letter of the law, but never the intent...

Semper Fidelis,

Dick

End Notes:

¹ “Clinkables” was a slang term for the “clinkable silver coins” common in the old West.

² “*Pistolaver*”- A non-word laughingly used to describe a handgun of any description, be it revolver or semi-automatic. Sometimes used as a “hillbilly” description of your belt gun often carried on a Saturday Night to assorted dances or *hoe-downs*; not to be confused with “*nappy headed hoes*.” Heh, heh, heh...

³ “El Duce” (Mussolini, the dictator of Italy in WWII) was said to have bragged he had the trains running on time!