

Recollections of an Engineman – Part 3

By Charlie Bere-Streeter

Memories are an amazing thing!!! I've just been writing some letters and suddenly I remembered Christmas Day 1948. I was rostered as a cleaner from 7am at Eveleigh so arranged for my wife and kids to travel by bus to Mortdale from our home in Herne Bay housing settlement and then by train to Jannali to spend the day at her mother's.

After starting work, I was called to the roster room and told I was to go on a fireman's job as I was the senior acting-fireman. It was a double to Kiama on a P class at about 8.15am. The driver was Eric Wyms, an excellent driver and a gentleman to boot. In fact, he was a nephew of one of our best Prime Ministers, Ben Chifley. One of my best friends on the railway, Bill Miller, was Eric's regular mate.

We whistled out of loco via the Redfern dive and attached to our train at Central and eventually got going. About then I realised that the bus my family was catching arrived at Mortdale soon so after leaving Hurstville, I put on a fire and then leaned out my side waiting for Mortdale. Sure enough, there on the platform was my missus and kids and were they surprised to see me hanging off the handrail yelling and waving like mad. A thrill for all of us on Christmas Day.

The thrill didn't end there as after arrival at Kiama, we had to clean and bank the fire for we didn't return for 3 hours or so. The stationmaster told us he was going to the Grand Hotel for Christmas dinner which didn't go down too well as we had a cut lunch to look forward to.

After about 20 minutes, the manager of the Grand Hotel came over and said he was taking us over to Christmas dinner. As it was quite hot, we were only dressed in overalls over our undies and although embarrassed, we joined the other guests in the dining room and had a fabulous Christmas dinner with all the trimmings. It was a great experience for a very young and inexperienced acting-fireman.

Reading Greg Glanz's article on Joe Reici brings back memories of some of the other characters of the time like Brother Cody, so called as he always greeted you with "lend us a few bob brother." I once offered him five bob and he said "Don't insult me! I meant folding money!" To me, five bob was a lot as middies were only 10 pence and schooners one shilling & tuppence. You could get a flagon of wine for less than 5/-. Then there was Coke McFadden, with a head of flaming red hair. One night, a red flash was seen running from a 58 class that had just gone head first into the turntable pit in One Shed.

The fuelman was charged with not applying the handbrake properly on the engine after de-ashing on the bank at the coal stage. Coke said he was stabling an engine in Three Shed!

Jack Rothwell, the guard known as "Jesus Saves" for he wrote this on the side of the brakevan on whatever train he was working. Needless to say all the old HG vans carried his words for years. He was a great bloke with strong beliefs and would never

work on a Sunday. The old hands told us that during the depression, he used to make up good parcels and place them outside the door of needy people in his district. He did it in the middle of the night so no-one knew his identity.

There was one name consistently written on the back of brakevans and I used to check my sheet daily to see if I could identify him but his name never appeared so unfortunately I never met the man. His name was R. Send.

In my days as a fireman, the mechanical condition of most engines was appalling due to the war years as everything was massively overworked. Overhauls and tune-ups had been put off continually to keep the very heavy programs moving troops and equipment 24 hours a day. There was also a big shortage of spare parts so it became the case of rob Peter to pay Paul. Parts were taken from all engines under repair to keep the goers going.

Each depot had their allocated engines and a plate was attached with the depot name. I recall the old drivers used to check where each engine came from as each depot carried out repairs to their own engines. It became a habit with me also as these old drivers used to say if you get a Bathurst engine, it was like winning the lottery for the mechanical staff there always put their engines out in first class condition, at least 10% better than anywhere else. Their valve setting was spot on.

As this became common knowledge, it amazed me that the powers-that-be didn't recruit these men and put their methods to work universally. Engine condition slowly improved over several years and then Mr. Garside was made Commissioner for Railways and set about reducing the railway deficit which had become massive.

Unfortunately his methods became a disaster. They worked in the short term for he completely halted the production of replacement stock and parts and cut maintenance to the bone. We sank back into the hopeless conditions of the post war period. This legacy was left to his successor.

The method of relieving train crews in the 1940s and early 1950s depended on public transport but during the night, when none was available, it was necessary for relief crews to walk. As streets were few then, you had to walk the sleepers. There was a list on the wall in the sign-on room giving the times allowed to walk to and from different locations. For instance, 15' to North Box, 30' to Chullora box, 40' to the Home signal off the south at Rookwood cemetery. There were also times to Flemington, Homebush to North Strathfield, Central to Rozelle, Town Hall to Darling Harbour, almost everywhere in the metropolitan area. I'd love someone to find a copy of the list.

Call boys who had to advise crews of the train they were to work or when making "wake-up" calls were given push bikes. All crews living in close proximity to depots got a "wake-up" call 1 hour before sign-on during the night. All regular call boys (or men) knew which window to knock on so as not to disturb other family members. This operation was used as there were always a lot of alterations to jobs during the night and if you weren't called, you didn't get up. Further advice would be forthcoming or a later call made.

The responsibility of the driver in the days of steam was paramount. He was like the captain of a ship (as we were often called). An example of this occurred when Pat Davis was the lead driver of a double headed train from Broadmeadow to Enfield with two TFs and a full load of four wheeled S and U trucks. After being assisted in the rear from Hawkesbury River to Cowan, they proceeded on past Mt. Colah when there was a clanging from Pat's engine and then a great crash. Both engines were derailed and went down into a crevice between two rock walls beside the line and the engines were surrounded by upturned S and U trucks.

Luckily the crews managed to stay aboard and no-one was badly injured. On investigation, it was found that the slide-bar bolts had shaken loose and the crosshead had dropped to the ground causing the derailment. The result was that Pat was found responsible and charged with faulty preparation as the slide-bar bolts had previously been booked by a driver for the fitters "to tighten". He hadn't found them loose during the preparation of his engine prior to departure even though the mechanical staff were supposed to rectify all bookings.

Pat was reduced in grade to a fireman for 3 months. He didn't stay at Enfield long after this and I think he transferred to the horizontal lifts, as the suburban electrics were referred to at the time.

From serious to a bit of humour. Shunting Homebush mill one night, Perce the Punter was the guard and a couple of trucks derailed. Perce rang Control and was told to cut the engine off and send it to loco as the breakdown crews were busy elsewhere. He did this and remained there protecting his train all night. It wasn't until morning that he realised his train was not on the main line but had spent the night in the siding and there had been no need for him to remain in attendance.

Just for the education of those who never had the experience, I will outline what it was like to be an engineman in my younger days.

Firstly as a cleaner at Eveleigh. Shifts worked were 6am, 7am, 8am, 2pm, 3pm 10pm and 11pm. The first thing to be done was to report to the "booker-on" who would hand you a brass token. We all had one hanging on a board in the sign-on room. Mine was No. 338. After changing into overalls in the locker room, you proceeded to the head cleaner's office where on producing your token, he would check if you were an acting fireman and then check the seniority list.

As acting fireman were on call to cover fireman failures (i.e. who did not report for duty), the two senior acting firemen were given cab cleaning duties as they remained at the front of the shed and so were readily available if needed. Their job was to clean cabs of engines in order of their whistling out time by painting everything with phenyl and then steam spraying by attaching a hose to one of the gauge glasses in the cab and cleaning up coal from the floor and kerosene-ing the hand rails.

Everyone else was issued with a cleaning kit which consisted of a rectangular tray with a handle and compartments to hold black oil or kerosene at one end and cotton waste or rags at the other. We were then paired up and given engines to clean. For instance you were given half an hour to black oil and wipe off each side of a P class boiler, the same for the tender. "Pigs" were double this. The 38s were all waxed with

one hour being allowed for each side and two hours for the belly. Four cleaners on each shift did these engines and they were called the "wax gang".

All side rods and wheels were done with kero and had to be wiped off clean and dry as some of the Special Class drivers would wipe a sweat rag behind the rods and if dirty, would request the engine be re-cleaned. In those days, they were treated like gods. One instance I recall occurred when a Special Class driver signed on at Sydney Terminal to work a double headed express. The shed fireman had coupled the engine to the train. On walking past the engine, this driver saw some sand on the footplate and demanded the engine be returned to Eveleigh for re-cleaning. It caused a delay of nearly 2 hours to the express.

Anyway back to cleaning! As you finished each job, be it half an hour, one hour or two hours, you returned to the head cleaner for the next job. At meal time, we had to go to the "booker-on" and deposit our token and draw it again on completion, so you see every minute of our time had to be documented.

Cleaners were used to fill in on almost every position where vacancies occurred such as fitters assistant, washout man, tube cleaner, fuelman, points cleaner, barracks attendant, even as a call boy. In those days, there were no telephones and call boys had to notify crews of all alterations that occurred.

One Sunday I arrived at work and as I was the cleanest looking, I was given a rail pass and a heap of departmental tram tickets and given four call notes to deliver, one to Coogee, one to Botany, one to Sans Souci and the other was easy, Willy Tye at Tempe. What a day! No street directories in those days, just find the address the best way possible. I'll never forget the one at Coogee. I had to walk a mile and half beyond the tram terminus. The one at Sans Souci was my first ride on a trolley bus from Kogarah. Willy Tye (the Chinese driver) was a treat. He insisted I stay for lunch. This was in 1948. Not a bad memory eh?

If you put a foot wrong such as not doing the job well enough for the head cleaner or the chargeman, you had to front up to Mr. Crossley, the Running Shed Foreman. He was the biggest, most overbearing bastard it has been my pleasure to meet but at least he was consistent. Everyone hated and feared him. He gave me a ten minute dressing down for failing to return my holiday pass within 48 hours. I said "It's only a bit of paper" and he marched me into the D.L.E. for disciplinary action for talking back to him. He then stormed out of the room and boss laughed and said "Forget it Charlie, the bastard's mad".

Back again to cleaning. All the waste and rags used for cleaning engines had to be returned to the store where they were bagged and sent to Clyde depot to be washed, firstly with kero then laundered to be re-issued for further use. Once a week we attended safe-working classes for two hours to team all about signals and safe-working. When the instructor thought you knew enough, he rostered you for examination and if you passed, you were "travelled with" on a local job to gain experience and learn how to fire an engine by a fireman's instructor.

After being passed as an acting fireman, you continued as a cleaner on rotating shifts until you gained sufficient seniority to be used as a fireman which occurred when a

vacancy arose and you were promoted. In large depots, it was reasonably quick but in depots such as Hornsby, Gosford and the like, it could take many years.

When I transferred to Enfield in late 1949, I recall what being a fireman meant! In Eveleigh with good engines, good coal and light trains, it was a piece of cake but at Enfield with worn out freighters, coal that resembled shale and every train loaded down to the last ton. Boy, what a difference! It was nearly all rouse-about working where you got tomorrow's sign-on time when you finished today.

We knew when we were to start but never when we'd finish. Anything from 8 hours to 14 hours. If you finished under seven hours, you were compelled to report to the chargeman for further work. They had that many long hour cases, they were always looking for someone to relieve with.

I had recently moved into a new Housing Commission house at Bass Hill and rode a pushbike to and from work as most of us did in those days. It was about seven miles in each direction and coming home from barracks after about 11 hours on duty, it was worse than running a marathon with that big box on your back. On one occasion, I left loco about 1 am, I left loco with Bill Phillips who lived at Yagoona. We climbed the stairs to the bridge over the main line near Enfield old barracks and we heard a sobbing sound in the dark.

Upon investigation, we found a young man sitting on his tucker box in the gutter beside his bike; he was in a sorry state. I won't mention his name. He said that he was too tired to get on his bike. Bill and I sat with him for a bit then we all walked homewards, wheeling our bikes across the paddocks and up Rawson Road to the Hume Highway where we sat again for a spell. Then we all mounted our bikes and rode slowly along the highway, firstly to Bill's place and then my place. By this time, young Dave was feeling much better and continued down Hector Street to Chester Hill. I still raise a tear today writing this story.

In the early years of their career, firemen never had a regular driver and coming to work each day was full of hope and anticipation. When signing on, you would ask who was your mate. If it was a crook one, "Bloody hell!" while it was a good one "Thank God!" Luckily at Enfield, the "Thank God's" far outnumbered the others!

All of us smart acting firemen set about to impress the good drivers, especially those with long standing regular mates who would soon become senior enough to be rostered as drivers. My first regular mate was Dave Kirk Senior. Not a great engineman but a pleasant man who had done it rough all his life and raised a large family in very bad times. He never made it to his retirement, dying of heart attack in the sign-on room at 64. He was complaining of the lack of overtime at the time.

When you signed on as a fireman, you had to read and sign general orders, answer departmental correspondence (bungs) in regard to misdemeanors, go to the engine board to ascertain what engine was on your train, which roundhouse it was in, go to the store and draw the kit consisting of a shovel, a ditty box, engine oil, lubricating oil, and a bucket containing two oil feeders, two flare lamps, a monkey wrench, a hand brush, a coal pick, a small can of pump oil and a kerosene hand lamp.

You then proceeded to your engine and commenced to prepare it for traffic. Firstly you filled the lubricator and turned on the steam in order to heat it up for the driver to set before whistling out. Then oil and turn on the air pump to gain air for the driver to do the brake test. If steam was low in the boiler, firstly you spread the fire and turned on the blower which being steam operated, was not much help at this stage.

You then opened the smoke box and checked the interior for excess cinders or blockages to the tubes or spark arrester. Then taking the oil feeder and flare lamp (it was always dark under the loco) you climbed into the pit, crawled under, checked the ash-pan, oiled the motions and although it was the driver's responsibility, checked and oiled the front bogie axle-boxes. This procedure didn't apply to K class, 36 class, 59 class, 38 class or 57-58 & 60 classes as these locos had external motion and valve gear.

During preparation, checks were made on seals on the spare gauge glasses, also the back-box on the tender which was equipped with emergency gear such as spare air hoses, spanners, chocks etc., and was maintained by the shed staff and fitted with a lead seal.

All defects and shortages are relayed to the driver to write up in the repair book to be attended to before departure. After all this, the engine is taken via the turntable, to the whistle out point where the tender is filled, the boiler blown down and the ash-pan raked out if required. While waiting to be dispatched, you fill the bucket with hot water and set about washing everything down. All this was done in the 60 minute prep allowance.

I intended to do a driver's preparation here but I've had more than enough of oil and grease and dirt so I'll do what I mostly did as a driver - give it a miss hoping the hostlers had given her a good go in the past couple of days. Inspectors didn't worry me then so I'm bloody sure they don't now! As Jack Drady used to say, "Charlie never gets dirty preparing an engine."

During the football season when we worked No.69 to Penrith and book-off on Saturday after banking the fire and stabling the engine, we'd have a couple of beers at the Red Cow then catch a train back to town using the driver's sheet to cover fares. We'd head off to the Cricket Ground or Redfern oval, watch the game, then travel back to Penrith to work No. 64 pick-up home to Enfield. This was over 24 hours without sleep but if Souths won, we were on a high but on a down if they lost which wasn't often as Clive Churchill was playing in those days.

The barracks at Penrith were an education. A low ceiling shed like building, a small kitchen, fuel stove, a bedroom with three beds and a thunder box outside and right in the middle of the shunting yard. In summer, you'd get cooked so plenty of liquid was required. In those days there were barracks at Hornsby, Gosford and Picton but these weren't used on a regular basis.

We young drivers spent the majority of our book-offs in Thirroul and Moss Vale and later, Goulburn and Broadmeadow. On gaining seniority, we'd be sent to learn the road to Lithgow as the Railway Department classed the west as much more difficult. For me, I'd rather work the mountains anytime in preference to the South Coast and

Moss Vale. Anyway, by now diesels were taking over and the west was being electrified so we were being inducted into a new era.

This new era, in my opinion, was the downfall of many enginemen for on being taken from a hard manual environment and put into a sedentary one, most put on a lot of weight. In the first two or three years, about 15 or so Enfield enginemen had heart attacks and died. Most were in their late forties. When I found myself gaining weight, I took steps to get more exercise to combat the problem.

Wandering again, I remember as a fireman working the last train into Richmond and having to remain there to work the first passenger train to town next morning. I had to clean the fire on a P class, rake out the ashpan and shovel coal forward then I had to coal a coffee pot (26 class) from the coal stage by hand and prepare it for a Richmond crew to work the Kurrajong line. The driver did preparation on both engines. I would like to see someone dig up some old pictures or paraphernalia about this line as I never had the experience.

Going back to my experiences on the 57 and 58 classes, we sought of looked forward to getting on them as they had mechanical stokers. Coal was fed via a worm from the tender to the firing table then distributed in the firebox by steam jets individually adjusted so therefore we thought no shovelling of coal. Rubbish! They only put three slides in the tender to the worm so we had to shovel the rest of the coal (about 10-12 tons) up to the worm and the sides of the tender sloped at about 40 degrees into the centre.

Nos. 25 and 27 express goods between Sydney and Goulburn were "big engine" rosters in the, early 1950s and on many occasions, the crews ran out of coal and had to stow trains in sidings, saving enough coal to run light engine to Goulburn where another engine was sent out to bring the train in. Using this amount of coal meant continual use of the rocker bars to remove excess ash and the side ash hoppers would glow red in the night. When you stopped at signals or in sidings, these would be dumped at the side of the track and on more than one occasion, I got a bung for burning the end of sleepers doing this.

The 58 class were narrower than the 57 and it was the intention to work them on the north to Broadmeadow. Many of the stations on the north were on curves and the 57s were too wide to work on this section. As it turned out, the 40 class diesels and the 60 class Garratts were used instead. The 57s and 58s were three cylinder locomotives and they had a unique sound. In the twilight of their days, some had the centre cylinder disconnected and worked on two only with reduced loads.

When the 60 class arrived, it was a rough riding engine due to being two engine units fed off one boiler and the two engine units would get out of step and bounce a lot at speed, especially when the weight was unbalanced. After overcoming early problems due to heat in the cab caused by insufficient lagging and a poor firehole door, they became a fireman's dream. They were easy to fire and above all, had a worm which ran the full length of the tender and it had a flat floor and slides all the way. Boy!

Although rough, dirty, hot and dusty, you could at least sit down and fire them. You virtually had to get in the tender if lumps of coal had to be broken up to fit in the

conveyor.

In most of my stories, I have not included the guard who after all, was the third member of the train crew. A good guard was a decided asset for if you were having a bad trip, the likes of Joe Latter, Sid Kemp and a few others, would come forward and help out when doing loco such as taking water, shovelling forward etc.

In return, on heavy shunting trips such as No.41 South or No.167 South Coast, one of us would go back and help, especially when we had an "out-of" truck on the train and lots of heavy boxes and equipment had to be unloaded onto the platforms as road transport was almost non-existent in those days.

Then there were the other-type like "Perce the Punter", "Plonky", "Seaweed" to name a few who would make life difficult to say the least. Needless to say, no help given, none returned!

Writing this, I have just recalled a trip with Jackie Wonders!!!. Jack was a great bloke, but mostly came to work the worse for wear (hic!) and all drivers would ask the examiner when he was doing the brakes, to see that he was in the van and the doors shut. Some drivers would go back and tie him to his seat.

Anyway I was firing for Jim Barnes and we were working a single engine west. When we were up near Glenbrook tunnel, the air went. We assumed a burst air hose so I grabbed the monkey wrench and the spare hose from the back-box and headed back along the train, applying a few hand-brakes on the way as we were on a steep grade and it didn't take long for the brakes to leak off once the air had gone.

I got all the way to the van and the tap was open inside and Jack was asleep. I shook the proverbial out of him and asked why he pulled the tail. He said 'I felt guilty having a beer back here while you blokes were working so hard and thought you might like a drink.' With that, he handed me a bottle and said "Take this too" and gave me a burst hose with a note on it giving a truck number, time and place.

"That'll cover the lost time" he said. I won't give a date and train number as someone might put us on a charge.

Anyway, if they gave me life, I wouldn't have to spend much time in clink now!

When we got to Lithgow, we all adjourned (a legal term!) to the Vale of Clwyd pub as my mate knew the woman publican who he woke up by throwing stones at the window. It was about 3 am and we tied one on and I reckon I was worse than Jackie on the way home.

In my early days at Enfield, I was rostered to work to Goulburn and my driver was Peter Kelly. Most of the average fireman shuddered when he was their mate as he was not the flavour of the month. Don't get me wrong, he was an excellent engineman but he expected the best. He was evidently spoilt by having a top regular mate for years who did all he expected and more.

Well, we had a TF and a full load before leaving Enfield and I realised it wasn't going

to be easy as he had said "Clean the floor, wet the coal, fill the bucket", more than once before we reached North Box while I was trying to sort out the fire and keep a full head of steam. He was sort of treating me like a kid. Well it wasn't going down too well as I didn't join the job as an inexperienced boy. I was a 22 year old married man with three kids and I expected to be treated at least as an adult.

As it was a long way to Goulburn, I kept my cool and ignored his mumblings and grumblings. I was working reasonably hard but he was a good driver and drove so light that I was over-firing causing a build up in the back of the firebox. I had to get the dart down and push the fire forward and spread with the pricker a couple of times. I neglected cleaning the floor and he had to come over and then get the deck hose to keep filling the bucket with clean water. He never stopped washing but needless to say, the shovel never got washed!

We did loco at Picton with the help of the crew stationed there for that purpose and I cleaned everything up and wet the coal etc., before we headed off to Bargo. Well before Tahmoor, we got into a bad patch of dusty poor quality coal and I had to work my guts out, long and short pricker, rocker bars, the lot, to maintain steam pressure between 145 and 155 lbs.

We got to Bargo a few minutes late, the firebox full, ashpan full, water in the bottom nut and I guess you could cut a dozen washers off my ring and we were only at Bargo.

As the ash-pan was full, I got into the pit and started raking out first and then got up to knock the fire down and to my surprise, the guard had come up and he and Peter were up on the back of the tender shovelling madly at some good coal they had found there while filling the tank with water.

Well it didn't completely solve the problem but this good coal mixed with the rubbish certainly improved things for me. We cleaned the fire again at Mittagong and Moss Vale. The fuelman shovelled forward enough of the good coal to get us to Goulburn.

From Bargo on, Peter didn't say much' but all his mumblings and grumblings had stopped.

Later on, another driver told me he was talking to Peter and my name came up and he said I wasn't a bad hand, but a dirty bastard! A lot better than he said about most other firemen! He put a claim sheet in for one fireman's pay as he said he had to do most of his work and as a result, was severely reprimanded!

Recently there was a television show about the Granville rail disaster. This brings back the memory of my worst shift as a driver. On the morning of the crash, a group of us were attending a refresher course at the Railway Institute. I forget who was doing the class but he called it off and we adjourned to the pub and had a wake. Not that night but the next, I was called to relieve the breakdown crane at Granville at 10pm.

All night as the jack-hammers cut off blocks of concrete, the Craven crane lifted them and the rescue squad kept pulling out bodies and they were all crushed in the seats.

It was not easy to get them out onto stretchers and take them to the signal box which had been made a temporary morgue. With people collapsing continually and being replaced on the jack-hammers, the stench, the flies, the heat!!! My God, what a night!

The most outstanding thing I remember was a little fellow in a Salvo's uniform distributing coffee, cans of Aeroguard and air freshener, continually, all night, to all and sundry. He came over and talked to us and I recognised him as I had watched him fight on more than one occasion at the old Sydney Stadium. It was the ex- boxer Trevor King.

[Editor's Note: Unfortunately, this is where Charlie had stopped his writings. Only time will tell if he has time to remember and write down any more of his interesting rambling about his 'Days with Steam'.]