

INTERESTING RAILROAD SNOW FIGHTING ARTICLE

The following article was written by FRRS Life Member Dave Anderson. He hired out as a brakeman/switchman on Southern Pacific in February, 1995, and is currently working the extra board out of Roseville. While this story does not apply to our museum or to the WP we thought our members might enjoy reading about his experiences on a flanger. You may contact Dave if you wish more details on his railroad career. Dave Anderson, 7585 Cherry Glen Ave., Citrus Heights, CA 95610

The call I'd been hoping for came on Thursday at 3PM. "Mr. Anderson, you are called for 4:30. You'll be working the rotaries out of Truckee as a brakeman."

The night before, I was supposed to deadhead on the rotaries to Colfax with Engineer Carson to pick up a set of helpers. A heavy winter storm had pretty much shut down the mountain. Amtrak was stuck behind a freight that was stuck behind a derailed flanger and the snow was up to the windows. We wouldn't be helping trains because nobody was moving. Our job would be to shuttle crews. After waiting with the rotaries for hours, we ended up riding in a van to Colfax. The plan was to then follow the rotaries up the hill. Well, as is often the case, the plan fell apart. The rotaries go out so rarely that getting them ready can turn into a major production. They were delayed in Roseville so long that the dispatcher ended up "busting our call" (cancelling our job) and we deadheaded back to Roseville. I'd missed my chance to ride the rotaries and could only hope for another chance.

Here it was! I called up a couple of friends to share the good news and had barely hung up when the phone rang. It was the crew dispatcher again. "Mr. Anderson, I'm giving you a call and release for the rotaries. You'll be working a flanger with Engineer McCrary and Conductor Stewart." Oh no! How disappointing! Oh well, at least it was snow service and I'd probably at least get to see the rotaries working.

I gathered up some warm clothes and got ready to go to work. When I got to the "chicken coop" (the place where the crews report in and pick up their orders), Richard McCrary asked me if I had brought any change of clothing. I hadn't, but pointed out that we were supposed to tie up in Colfax and deadhead back to Roseville at the end of the shift, so I didn't suppose I'd need any. The conductor, Kevin, said he didn't think we needed them either. He just brought what he was wearing.

We took a van up to Colfax and found our units and Kevin gave me a quick course on how the flangers work and what my duties would be. He would be riding the head end and would raise or lower the blades. My job would be to change blades over from one side to the other to keep the snow going to the downhill side of the tracks when we reached a given point. You can't really see ahead from the flanger so he would let me know by radio when to change over. We didn't run into enough snow to flange until we were just west of switch 9, Emigrant Gap. We had a red at switch 9 and settled back to wait. The mountain dispatcher told us we would be waiting for three Westbounds. Unfortunately, one of them had broken in two in the Big Hole and the conductor was going to have to walk back to find the break. Apparently snow or ice had built up to the point that it hit the

cut lever just right and caused the pin that holds the knuckle closed to raise. At eight hours into our shift, we had only flanged about three miles and were still stuck at switch 9. When the traffic finally cleared up we started flanging East again. Flanging is a kick. We flange at 35 mph, 5 mph faster than the speed limit for Amtrak over the hill. The flanger has a ride just short of violent when the blades are up, like in a tunnel, but settles down to bone rattling when the blades are down and you are in some fairly deep snow. The snow shoots out about 50-60 feet if there are no obstructions, but we eventually build up walls of snow that just get higher every time we go past.

By the time we got to Truckee, we'd been on duty for 11 hours so the dispatcher told us to run around the balloon track and tie up. We figured they would deadhead us back to Roseville, but no, They had rooms for us at the Super 8 motel, and that's where we stayed for the night. The next day we got called for more flanger service and would probably spend another night in Truckee. Well Richard was right. Before we went on duty I walked over to Long's and bought some Tee shirts and underwear, deodorant, etc., I also bought some Snow Packs, (I only had leather boots), some wool socks and a couple of those disposable cameras (We recently moved and I couldn't find my 35mm.).

We made three flips that day. There is a balloon track just West of switch 9 where we can turn the flangers. A flip is a round trip from Truckee to switch 9. It snowed all that day and night so it was obvious that we were going to be there for the duration. The only question was what is the duration? Since we never knew, we ended up putting all of our stuff on the train every time we went out. Saturday and (Superbowl) Sunday were more of the same. Twelve hour days, usually 3 flips.

On Monday, day 5 for us, we went out on the spreaders. As I was saying earlier the flangers leave a build up of snow that gets higher and higher. Eventually you are running between two walls and the snow that you are throwing just bounces off the wall and right back at you. When that happens they call for the spreaders, I'm sure you have all seen pictures of them, they have large wings that shove the snow away from the tracks so that the flangers can work again. What an impressive machine! You are going much slower, probably not more than 10 mph, and moving tons of snow. As you plow forward the snow compacts and curls up above the blades to heights that sometimes reach 6 or 8 feet above the locomotives before breaking off and crashing down the side of the mountain. There isn't much for a brakeman to do on the spreaders, just protect the rear end when shoving back to make another pass, so I just basically sat on the rear unit and watched the nearly hypnotic sight of all that snow rolling up and crashing down all day. We had a beautiful clear sky most of the day and I was out of film. I had forgotten to get another camera and I only had 1 exposure left when we left Truckee.

On Tuesday we were given our choice of taking a flanger back to Roseville with one stop on the way at Colfax to pick up another flanger to take back with us, or stay for another day or two for the clean up. Richard and Kevin were both ready to go home so we gathered up some cars that had been stuck in Truckee since before the storm, and put the flanger on the back, and headed down the mountain.

I'm looking forward to going up there again. I learned a lot and met a lot of great guys, I also will pack more clothes, my camera and a lot of film. I did see the rotaries, perhaps next time I'll work them.