

A YOUNG MAN'S DREAM

**F. N. Lewis' forty year career with the
Pennsylvania Railroad 1936-1976**

By John Lewis

INTRODUCTION

From my early childhood I have always had a fascination with trains. Both the Pennsylvania Railroad (PRR) and the New York Central Railroad had tracks that ran north/south near Cooke Road and Indianola Avenue in north Columbus very close to where I grew up. I would stand by the road crossing for hours and watch trains pass by.

Several members of my family worked for the railroads so I came by my fascination and hobby naturally. My father, brother, uncle, grandfathers, a paternal great-grandfather and several great-uncles all worked for the railroads in some capacity. I often explain to people that I am the first generation of my family since the 1800's to *not* work for the railroad.

I was fortunate to have been exposed to both steam locomotives and early generation diesels in my youth in the 1950's. I was intrigued at the workings of the steam locomotives, their whistles, the reciprocating valve gear, the side rods and those enormous drive wheels. Something that large poses the question of how it could possibly move at all, let alone attain the 100mph + speeds of the limited passenger trains. The steam locomotive was an awesome piece of machinery to me and knowing that my dad ran them only added to my fascination. This was the catalyst that turned me into a rail fan.

FRANCIS LEWIS

My father, Francis N Lewis, was likewise a rail fan when he was young. He and I did not share the typical father/son activities such as baseball, fishing, hunting, etc. However, he spent as much time with me in these and other activities as his varied work schedule would allow. My time with him riding on steam and diesel locomotives was more than sufficient to offset any other activities we might have shared. They represent memories I will never forget.

Due to his fascination with railroading my father made it his chosen career. More specifically he made it his goal to eventually go into train service and become a locomotive engineer. From the time he began work in PRR's Columbus shops in 1936 he looked at each job assignment as a stepping stone to his ultimate goal. I have endeavored to record my father's experiences during his career in engine service on the Pennsylvania Railroad, Penn Central, Conrail and Amtrak from 1936 to 1976. This was compiled from a combination of time book records, employment and military documents, photos, the many stories he told me over the years, and my own personal experiences with him. I'm doing this not just to honor him for the long hours he worked providing a living for our family, but also for the time he spent with local rail fans that he met throughout his working years. If someone expressed an interest in railroads, he would arrange to take them through the shops and explain the mechanics of locomotive operation and, if circumstances permitted, take them up in the cab of an engine. To this day I occasionally run into rail fans that knew my father and they relate stories of their experiences with him.

In the mid to late 1950's, my father recognized that the steam era was drawing to a close on the Pennsylvania Railroad. Since railroad engine service meant so much to him, he thought that it might mean something to me as well and he was right. My first ride with him was on a K4 Pacific class 4-6-2. However, I was very young at the time and recall little about the experience. The K4 was by far my father's favorite locomotive and he talked about them often. I'm sure it had much to do with his numerous experiences as an engineer on trains pulled by K4's. When it came to passenger runs, he preferred the K4 over a diesel.

Most of my cab rides on steam locomotives were on M1 4-8-2 Mountain class, and J1 2-10-4 Texas class engines. Those rides were usually short in duration. Most originated in Columbus, and my mother would drive to Urbana or Bradford, Ohio, to pick me up. Later in the 1960's I rode with him on several passenger runs from Columbus to Indianapolis. By that time all PRR locomotives were diesels. I will long remember those experiences.

PRE-WORLD WAR II

Francis Lewis was born in 1911 in Richmond, Virginia. He was the first of three sons of Samuel and Katherine Lewis. Sam worked for the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway in Richmond. Soon after Francis was born, the small family moved to Columbus, Ohio where Sam eventually found better work opportunities with the Pennsylvania Railroad. After the move two additional sons, Clarence and John were born but John died in infancy. Clarence later worked in the PRR repair and maintenance shops in Columbus with his father. Sam became a hostler on January 19, 1921, and was assigned to the St. Clair engine house. He worked in that capacity until his retirement in the late 1940's. There were a few years of overlap in the 1940's when Sam, Clarence and Francis all worked simultaneously for the Pennsy. Occasionally Francis would board an engine for an outgoing train and find his father preparing it for the run.

As young boys, Francis and Clarence would go to the shops to visit their dad. In those days it was common to see young boys tagging along with their fathers. As long as the boys stayed out of trouble, management wouldn't say much. After all, most railroads employed several generations of families and exposure to the work environment could potentially bring in new employees.

The Lewis home was within walking distance of the Grogan rail yard located south of 17th Avenue. Francis and Clarence often spent their off-school time and summers climbing on retired locomotives that were destined for scrap near Grogan. They would also ride their bicycles down to the Columbus depot to watch the arrival of passenger trains. The depot used to be a gathering place for retired railroaders and military veterans and they would play games of cards and checkers to pass the time. Francis was fascinated by the many stories told by the former railroad men and army veterans. He said some of the older men he talked with had actually fought in the Civil War.

As young teenagers Francis and Clarence made summer trips to visit their grandparents near Allegheny Virginia. Here they were exposed to high volume railroad traffic at an early age. Their grandparent's home was located directly beside the main line of the Chesapeake & Ohio railroad. The C&O bored a tunnel on the family's mountain property within site of the original homestead in the mid 1800's. It was named the Lewis tunnel and was at that time the second longest tunnel on the C&O. Several of the brother's ancestors worked for the C&O or its predecessors at both Allegheny and Covington, Virginia.

Francis graduated from Central High school in 1929. Due to a lack of openings on the railroad at that time, he briefly worked for Fenton Dry Cleaners. He was eventually hired by the PRR on February 6, 1936, to work in the PRR maintenance and repair shops. Francis gained as much experience as possible working on locomotives believing this would help him when openings came up in train service. He attended Franklin University and took classes through the International Correspondence School. Francis also trained and became a certified Westinghouse air brake instructor. This experience and education would later become an asset for his future career plans. Unexpectedly, when the U.S. entered WW-II, his work experience and education also proved to be an asset for the needs of the U.S. military.

After five years working in the shops Francis moved into engine service. He became a locomotive fireman on February 12, 1941. His first job assignment was a yard job in Jeffersonville, Indiana on a C1 class (0-8-0) heavy switch engine #6615. So that he could be added to the PRR's engineman's roster as soon as possible, he took temporary yard jobs in Jeffersonville, Indiana, and Louisville, Kentucky. He lived in that area for a month until returning to Columbus, Ohio, to start work on the Columbus Division. He remained there for the rest of his railroad career. His first job in Columbus was on 3/12/41 firing H10 class engine #9436 at PRR's yard B.

Francis married Mary Jane Eitle in June, 1942. Mary Jane's father, Earl Eitle, was also a railroader. He was a brakeman and conductor on the former CA&C Akron branch of the PRR. Earl retired from the Akron branch in September, 1948, as a result of a career ending railroad accident. The near fatal accident occurred close to Orrville, Ohio when a defective brake lever struck him in his forehead resulting in a severe concussion. He was 53 years old.

WORLD WAR II

Francis continued his work as a fireman on the Columbus extra board until March 19, 1943, at which time he was drafted into the U.S. Army. The PRR had previously written a letter to the Columbus draft board outlining their need for trained enginemen such as my father to support the war effort. The draft board responded that the military had a more pressing need for trained railroad personnel. Francis was not overly excited about leaving behind a wife and his first son, Ted. Once he resigned himself to his military obligation and that his immediate future was now in the hands of the U.S. Army, he decided to make the most of it. Francis continually worked for advancement in the Army and used the experience to make himself a more valuable asset to the PRR after he returned home from the war.

His last day of work before entering basic training at Camp Atterbury in Indiana was on March 23, 1943. His last run was from Indianapolis to Columbus on train #66 the "American". He fired K4 #5420.

Following basic training and testing at Camp Atterbury, Francis was promoted from PFC to Staff Sergeant in a single promotion. The Army needed experienced railroad personnel to recruit and train soldiers for locomotive and railroad operations overseas. He later found that this was the primary reason he was drafted. Francis was assigned to several training cadres and initially taught airborne and front line troops how to de-rail, re-rail and commandeer locomotives and rail cars. He was assigned to operational schools at Camp Harahan (New Orleans, LA), Camp Jesse Turner (Van Buren, AR), Camp Clayborn (Alexandria, LA), and Fort Snelling (St. Paul, MN). At these camps he selected and trained recruits to become Engineers, Firemen, Conductors and Brakemen for supply trains throughout the various theaters of U.S. military operations during WW-II.

While stationed at Fort Snelling, Francis designed and constructed a locomotive and train simulator with parts obtained from supporting railroads in the St. Paul area. The simulator was used to train new engine crewmen on the operation of steam locomotives. This training device included simulated rail cars to demonstrate the function of air brakes. Articles about his simulator were featured in the local city and camp newspapers and photos were made for Transportation and Signal Corps publications.

After the war Francis sent parts of his simulator to the Pennsylvania Railroad employment offices in Columbus, Ohio, to be used as an aid when interviewing potential employees for railroad service. Other Columbus area railroads used it for the same purpose.

His wife, Jane, traveled with him to the various camps to which he was assigned. Both expected that he would serve his entire time in the Army stateside, but it wasn't to be. After several months at Fort Snelling Francis was in the process of locating a house to rent so Jane could again join him there. Before this happened, however, he received orders that he was to be deployed to Europe. He returned to Columbus on temporary leave before going overseas. Although they corresponded frequently, Jane did not see him again for nearly two years.

EUROPE

In September, 1944, he traveled by train with the 735th Railway Operating Battalion (ROB) from Fort Snelling to the New York port of embarkation. He boarded a troop transport and crossed the north Atlantic to Southampton, England. Later that month he and other members of the 735th crossed the English Channel and entered France at Omaha Beach on the same landing crafts used on D-Day. This was three months following the initial Allied invasion on June 6, 1944. After a short stay at a hotel in Beauvais, France those members of the 735th ROB were transported to Le-Havre, France.

Most supply train movements were handled by recruited soldiers that had been trained in the U.S. Soldiers with previous railroad experience were selected for higher priority assignments. Although Francis' railway battalion job title was "road foreman" he was the assigned engineer on the first Allied supply train from the port of Le-Havre, France to Paris, in November, 1944. He painted "Mike Meyer Limited 66" on the side of the tender to fulfill a promise he had made to a friend in Columbus. The locomotive was S-160 class 2-8-0 #5705 built by the Lima Locomotive Works. German artillery was still hitting Le-Havre at the time of the train's departure per verbal account by Francis. He also ran several supply trains to the front during the Battle of the Bulge from December, 1944, to January, 1945. Baldwin, Alco, and Lima locomotive works built a total of 2120 of the S-160 locomotives for the U.S Army Transportation Corps for initial use in Europe during WW-II. A few of these locomotives remain in limited operation today in railway museums in England and the U.S.

Francis was promoted to Army 1st Lieutenant on Feb 5, 1945. He was assigned a personal rail car so he could efficiently move throughout his region of responsibility in France, Belgium and Germany. As a special assignment engineer he was involved in a derailment just east of the Mosel River near Koblenz, Germany, April, 1945. Germans had bombed a railroad bridge across the Mosel River. Fortunately the bombing also damaged the approach to the bridge and the rails were damaged causing the derailment only 150 feet short of the river.

Due to his prior experience, Francis also transported Allied Commander Dwight D. Eisenhower, Generals George Patton and Mark W. Clark. He also had one of Adolph Hitler's trains that had been captured by advancing Allied forces. That train was later assigned to General Clark.

At wars end he was assigned a special train loaded with tail sections from the German V2 rocket program. These tail sections were transported to the closest deep water port and sent back to the U.S. for use in America's early rocket development program. The U.S. captured enough V2 rocket hardware to build approximately 80 V2 missiles.

Francis was promoted to Captain in early 1946. He received the Victory Medal and European Service Medal for his service throughout Europe. He left Europe from the port of Bremerhaven March, 1946.

POST WORLD WAR II

He returned to Columbus and the Pennsylvania Railroad the following month. While he was in the service, the PRR had promoted him to his long awaited job as an engineer on August 10, 1943, five months *after* he had been drafted into the Army. From the date of his return in April, 1946, Francis worked to be qualified on all classes of locomotives and on all areas of the Columbus division.

During the war, the PRR had acquired new locomotives. Most of the T1 class 4-4-4-4 duplex and the J1 2-10-4's had been built during the war. His first run with a T1 was from Richmond, Indiana to Columbus on 12/21/46 with engine number 5518. Three months later from March to June, 1947 Francis held a regular but temporary job on the "Jeffersonian", trains #65 and #64. It was pulled almost exclusively by the new T1's. He wasn't impressed with the rigid frame duplex. He said they were fast and could pull more cars than a single K4 Pacific, but they were also slippery and the drive wheels would lose traction at high speeds. It could happen on either the front or the rear set of drive wheels and would do so with little warning. He said it was often difficult for a T1 to start a heavy train, and it was a common practice in Columbus to have a switch engine ready to assist a long train pulled by a T1 if it was needed.

On 1/11/48 Francis was called for his first diesel assignment. It was train #32, the "St. Louisian" from Indianapolis to Columbus. The lead engine was an Alco PA-1 #5756. PRR #5756 and 5756B were later offered in both HO and Z scale models.

The Pennsylvania Railroad was well aware of Francis' military record and within a few years following his return from the war, he was considered for management positions. He talked with regional PRR management several times and after due consideration turned down their offers. Other men that had accepted management jobs were eventually required to re-locate to other cities, and he wanted nothing to do with that. He had the job he had always wanted, enjoyed being an engineer, and looked forward to his work. He had also personally built his and Jane's dream home in north Columbus. After several job offers the PRR just stopped asking him.

My father often said to me, "Find a job you like, and you'll never work a day in your life". This isn't to say that every run was a bed of roses for him as some were long and boring. As an extra board engineer, he worked whatever job he was called for. Sometimes it was in the yards, hump service, work trains, transfers, turns, freight trains, and sometimes passenger, or mail/express trains.

As seniority increases a crewman could bid on more desirable runs. My father referred to these jobs as “goodies”. Some enginemen liked freight runs as they paid by the hour and could sometimes take far more than eight hours to complete. Francis preferred high speed passenger, mail/express trains, and fast freights. He was motivated by income and status - these runs offered both. At the time these fast runs paid crewmen by the job and resulted in shorter hours. Francis’ wife, Jane, used to say that he had “high wheel fever”, a reference to his desire to run passenger trains. Throughout the 1950’s and 1960’s he did not have enough seniority or “whiskers” to hold down a regular passenger or mail/express run, so he would work to position himself on the extra board for jobs like the “Derby Special” and the “Rose Bowl Special”. Sometimes these extras would have so many passengers that a second train or “section” was required and it would follow the first section.

In the days of steam, a train might require two engines or a “double header”. This required separate crews for each locomotive so there was ample opportunity to be called for one of the engineer jobs. On regular freight or passenger runs, if two engines were required, extra board crewmen were called to run the second engine. Sometimes this would spawn friendly competition between the two crews. The younger engineer on second engine would close up the slack between the locomotives by “nudging” or shoving the front engine. The senior man on the lead locomotive could feel this and look back to the hand gestures of the younger engineer suggesting that he wasn’t moving fast enough.

When the specials or extras came through there was a scramble by some enginemen to position themselves for these desirable runs. They referred to themselves as “board players” and Francis was considered one of the best. The antics he would go through are funny now, but back then it was serious business. He would keep close track of where he was positioned on the extra board and begin calling the crew dispatchers a day or so before a special run was scheduled to depart Columbus. If he was advancing up the board too fast, he would call the dispatcher and “mark off”. All crewmen’s names were located on both ends of a small rectangular wood block placed in equivalent sized compartments within a vertical two sided grid structure. There was a separate grid for Engineers, Firemen, Conductors and Brakemen. One side faced the dispatchers, and the other was behind glass and faced the crewmen. These blocks would be moved from bottom to top by the dispatchers as jobs would be called.

When Francis thought the timing was just right he would “mark up” and restart his climb up the board. He kept a running record of “how many times out” he was at for any given time of the day and it was written in a code on a blackboard in our kitchen. This translated to how many qualified men were ahead of him to be called before his name would reach the top of “the board”. The speed at which a crewman’s name would move up would vary depending on the schedule of incoming trains. His coding was always listed on our blackboard even if he wasn’t trying to position himself for a particular run. The idea was to reach the top of the board when it was time to be called for a desirable job. This was long before cell phones. If he was only three or four times out, he would have to notify the crew dispatcher or “caller” on where exactly he could be reached if he was called. It was not good to miss a call from the crew dispatcher.

There were also opportunities to be called for runs when a regular engineer would go on vacation or “mark off” for Christmas, Thanksgiving or other holidays. Francis would keep track of all this through conversations with the senior men so he could position himself for a particular run. For many years Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners at our house was timed around my father’s work schedule. The

holidays provided the best opportunity for a passenger job. It was common for him to be called on Thanksgiving and Christmas Day and he would sit at our dinner table wearing his work clothes. About an hour after he left for the depot, my mother, grandmother and I would drive out to West Jefferson to watch him pass by. The train would really be moving by the time he reached West Jefferson and he would flash the headlight and give a couple extra blasts of the horn when he passed. Those were some of my best memories of my father.

There were several opportunities for passenger or mail and express runs in the 1950's and 1960's, but as passenger service dwindled, these jobs became less frequent. Sometimes Francis would be called for a job he wanted and sometimes he would get beat out by another "board player". Ed Hanning was another engineer that played the board and he was ahead of Francis on the engineer's roster. They were longtime friends, but absolute rivals when it came to lining themselves up for particular runs. Both also had skills outside of the railroad and they frequently helped each other on their personal home projects of which there were many. Ed was a car mechanic and Francis was a carpenter, plumber and all around handyman. The barter system was alive and well between all crewmen on the Columbus division. My dad also thought he was a barber but I can attest that he wasn't particularly good at it. As a young boy he cut my hair as well as other boys in our neighborhood. He only knew one style that he called a "pineapple". One can use their imagination on what that looked like.

In May, 1975, the American Freedom Train came to Columbus. The train was pulled by a Reading 4-8-4 Northern class steam locomotive. It came into Columbus from Cleveland on the New York Central Railroad. A "pilot" engineer was required to take the train across PRR tracks to the Defense Construction Supply Center in Columbus. At that time Francis and Ed Hanning were the only engineers left on the enginemen's roster that were qualified for both steam and passenger service. Although the run was short it was a chance to get one final crack at a steam throttle and Francis and Ed were both scrambling to get the call. Both held regular jobs at the time, but Ed was better positioned for it. Francis would have had to lay off a round trip on his regular job on Amtrak to have a shot at the Freedom train. As a result Ed got the job.

RETIREMENT

The following year in August, 1976, I rode with my father for the last time. It was on Amtrak's National Limited. It was supposed to be his retirement run, but issues concerning his benefits came up and he rescheduled his retirement for the following month.

On September 24, 1976, Francis made his final round trip and Jane rode with him. He returned from Indianapolis on Amtrak's #30. As he was walking towards the engine (SDP40-F #594) he was approached by railroad police carrying paperwork that reflected he was being pulled out of service due to some ridiculous reason concerning his health, but he wasn't buying the crazy story. It was all a ruse to get him to go back to an extra dining car where a surprise retirement party was planned with their friends.

His favorite fireman ran the train eastbound to Dayton. By the time the train arrived at Dayton, Francis had enough of the party activities and told everyone that he was *not* going to retire from a dining car. He climbed up on the engine for the last time at Dayton. Amtrak #30 arrived in Columbus at 3:40 a.m. well ahead of the scheduled arrival of 3:55 am. Not bad considering they left Dayton late and made an unscheduled stop.

During the final leg from Dayton to Columbus he stopped the train near London, Ohio, to say a final goodbye to two loyal rail fans. The young couple frequently came out to a location where westbound #31 and eastbound #30 would pass one another. If both trains were on schedule, they would pass within minutes of each other. Crewmen came to know the couple personally as they would occasionally ride both trains round trip Columbus to Indianapolis. It marked a fitting close to the times Francis accommodated the many rail fans that he had come to know over the years.

In 1979, the last passenger train to arrive and depart from Columbus was Amtrak's National Limited #30. Francis and Jane made the round trip to Indianapolis, but this time both rode in the dining car. Crewmen on this final train knew my mother and father were on board, and Francis rode part of the trip with the engine crew. This was his very last time on a locomotive. As the train arrived in Columbus news teams were on hand to interview crewmen. They interviewed my dad and he gave them an earful of his concerns for what had happened to U.S. rail service during the previous forty years. He was certainly in a position of knowledge as he lived through that era and saw firsthand what had happened to America's railroads. Watching the last passenger train leave Columbus was a sad event for him.

I envied my father as he worked the job of his dreams and thoroughly enjoyed what he did. Long after he retired, when steam excursion trains came to Columbus, he couldn't resist the urge to race over to the Cooke Road crossing when he heard their whistles. Jane said he once commented to her; *"Isn't this crazy? I ran those engines for years yet the sound and smell of a steam locomotive is still exciting to me"*.

After a long life of 86 years, including a fulfilling retirement of 22 years, Francis Lewis passed away in August, 1998. He died at the Kobacker Hospice in Columbus, Ohio. Former railroaders and local rail fans attended his funeral. He is missed by all that knew him.