

Ed Richardson's Gang Gets Ready For Winter

By William B. Westhoff

When I started for Penn Central in '75, I worked out of Columbus Union Depot but I eventually ended up at Buckeye Yard and assigned to work with Ed Richardson's gang. Our territory was the Bradford and C&X mains within the boundaries of Buckeye, Alton, West and East Alton interlockings. But working in the yard was a weekly occurrence.

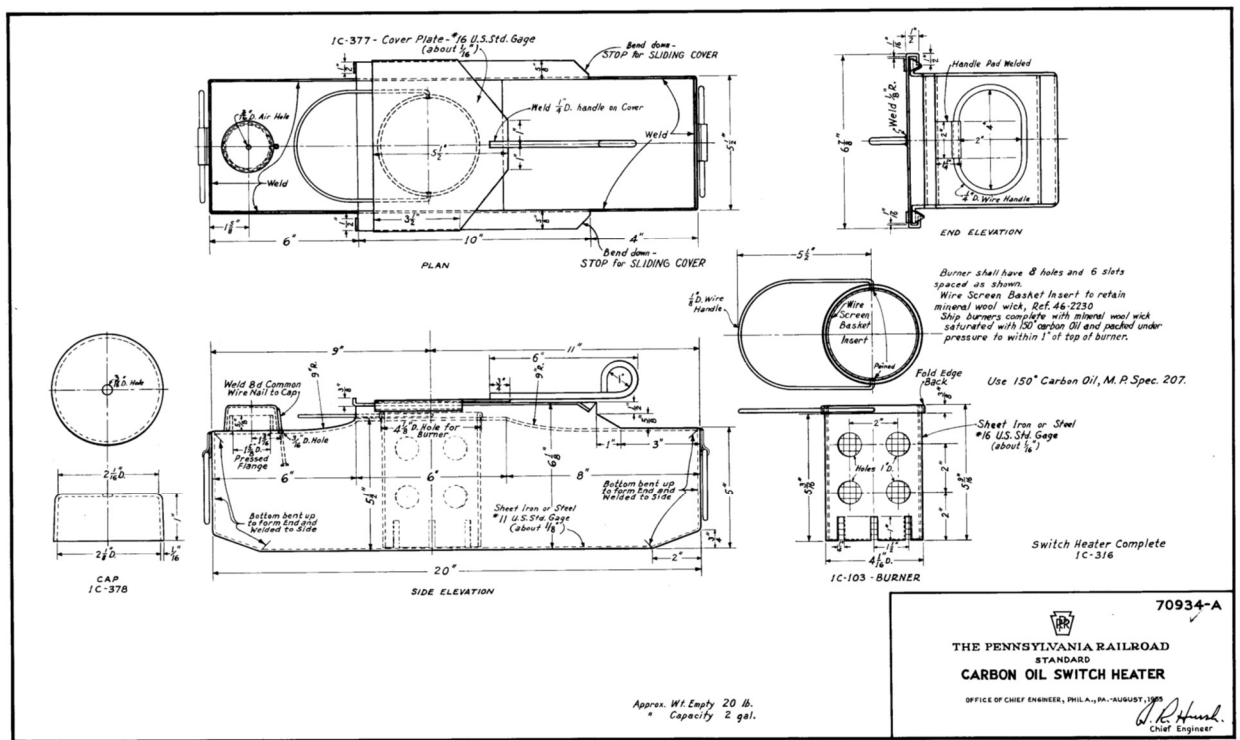
Ed referred to himself as "the oldest rat in the barn." He had started with the PRR in the 40's and so a lot of the old ways were taught us young bloods. An accident had blinded one crooked eye. He had a bent right forefinger from being a catcher in the Black Baseball minor league. And he almost nurtured an inability to remember people's names. These ingredients made it nearly impossible to know who he was yelling at when needing someone's attention. And yell he did. He had a short fuse. We were working with other gangs when Ed wanted my attention. Not remembering my name, he just started yelling "You! ... hey You!" When several of us sheepishly asked "...me?" Ed yelled "...not YOU! . . . YOU!!!" waiving his bent finger. He got angrier and louder. When it was my turn to point at my chest and look puzzled, hey yelled "YES!!! YOU !!!" Out of frustration and embarrassment I responded "Ed! I can't tell where you're looking, ...I can't tell where you're pointing and my name is Bill!!!" I thought the stare and silent moments after that were going to erupt in my dressing down. But he restrained a smile and commanded "come here!" These were the components that lead to our friendship.

I do believe that his strict and forceful management as foreman taught me faster and better about track work. So, idioms like *do the job right the first time*, defined our ethic as a gang.

Winter: prepare for winter became a mantra. Everything is harder to do when you're cold. So, do what you can when you're warm. That meant cribbing out below the points so that snow would have a place to drop and Ice would not build up and foul the switch. Then crib out to the bottom of the switch ties where the heaters would be so they would slide in and out easily. Then asbestos shingles would be nailed to the ties centered underneath the rails to protect the ties. Once a tie started burning, they could be hard to extinguish especially if the wind was strong.

The switch heater that Ed preferred were the old PRR switch pots. I've attached a standard drawing from *Rob's Pennsy Page* (<http://pr.railfan.net/>). They held about 2.5 gallons of fuel and burned a 4" diameter wick made of rockwool that we tamped in to the cylinder with a track bolt. They would easily burn for a 24-hour period. And they didn't blow out in that nasty westerly wind that ripped through Buckeye every winter. The objective of a switch heater is not to melt snow as much as it is to heat the rails and switch points. I know that sounds redundant but that's what made these old heaters better. The other gangs seemed to like the newer pot with the wick (pic number 2), they

were easier to care for. But if that wick was to burn down too low, they may at times blow out or be snuffed out if snow changed to rain. Before we could use our pots, they were cleaned up from last year's use. This all took place at the material yard next to the local yard at Buckeye where the pots were stored during summer. That meant digging out the old rockwool with a sharp new spike and draining out any rain water that had accumulated over the summer. We made sure the cover for dampening the fire would slide easily in the channel. Also, we had to replace any lost fill caps. This process took a couple of months of any available spare time we had toward the beginning of autumn and became a dedicated daily job the closer winter came.



PRR switch heater: Picture #1



New style heater Picture #2

When everything was ready the pots were positioned in the switches. I have a diagram of the Pennsy standard for where the pots were placed but it is packed up right now. There were 10 to 12 pots per switch.

Then we cleaned out the back of the Penn Central green 6-man pickup and had a 500-gallon tank placed in the bed which was filled at the diesel pad. It had a hand pump! It was not uncommon to rotate that pump handle for the whole 8 hours. It was a job I didn't mind.... kept me moving and warm. Once we had the main line taken care of, we assisted the gangs in the yard. North Tower was everyone's top priority. There was something eerily calming watching a night-time snow fall after all the heaters had been lit. They burned with a warm yellow fire not the cool pale blue of gas heaters.



A shot from the web, not North Tower.

So, what could go wrong? Well ask Russ Thompson! Sometimes the heaters may burn insulation from the track circuit wire. That's a mess! Sorry Russ. And sometime the ties would ignite. Once there was an idea to mix gasoline in with the diesel fuel. The intention was to help those new style pots burn better. In extreme cold the fuel would jell and not climb the wick. The gasoline would dilute the fuel and keep it from thickening. OR, the gasoline would separate from the diesel and eventually find its way up the wick. Ummmm, yea. Gasoline may burn a little more quickly and hotter, or perhaps explode in that void left by the used fuel oil. This was tried ONCE up at North Tower. I witnessed, as I stood under Roberts Road bridge looking south into that maze of switches, what look like pyrotechnics at a cheap rock concert as pot after pot would explode and send a fiery mushroom cloud up into the night sky. Cool!

Well, that's the basics of switch heaters back in the day. I'm sure I missed a couple of things but I'm ready to help any modeler simulate that night at North Tower if you like. I'll bring the gas.