

Riding the rails to Acton

By BRIAN MacQUARRIE
Of The News Staff

Two hours after an early spring sunrise in a West Cambridge train yard, Maynard's Frank Poitrast and three other members of the B-3 locomotive crew ready freight for a round-trip run to Acton.

The men all are nearing retirement, but move about the glistening tracks with age-defying nimbleness. Amid a cluster of rails, the men couple cars, throw switches and ease the 1,700 horsepower engine to its load of vinyl acetate.

"Here we go, daddyyooooo..." shouts engineer John Roane in an exuberant half-laugh, half-yell.

He throws the metal throttle away from his hefty body, sticks his capped, cigar-chomping head out the window and eyes the train's slow progress with professional intensity.

Another 12 hours of work is underway for the senior crew of the B&M Railroad. But their job of moving goods to Acton businesses this day seems more than mere work. It approaches a vocation.

"I started on the B&M on July 4, 1941," says Roane, the railroad's most experienced engineer. "I was supposed to have the job for six months, but I loved it and here I am."

Roane waits for a signal from conductor Poitrast and bucks an unwanted car from a previous run down a siding.

"We've no bosses out here. We're doing our own stuff, our own jobs. It's a hell of a lot better than working in a factory. That's nothing but slavery."

That sounds odd at first, coming from a man who toils 12 hours a day, five days a week. But according to Roane, life on the railroad is better than ever. Only six or seven years ago, train crews put in 16 hours daily.

The hours are discounted because the railroad seems inbred for Roane, Poitrast, flagman Tom "Trigger" McHugh and head end brakeman Paul Buss. Except

for Poitrast, the Boston area crew comes from railroad stock dating to the 19th century.

Freight and commuter lines still criss-cross the country with a maze effect, but railroads have hit hard times. The result has been a personnel drop on the B&M from about 15,000 to 5,000, and virtually no way in for a young man lured to the rails by the grease and the legends.

The chances for any of the four's children landing a job with a B&M crew are next to nothing.

Poitrast started with the B&M in 1938, after waiting three years for his application to be considered. "It was terrible to get on during the Depression. If you got a job, you hung on to it tooth and nail."

Poitrast was hired after McHugh, but before Buss and Roane. The four men represented a "new breed" resented by the "old-timers," according to Poitrast.

The railroad was divided into three divisions then, each with its own seniority list. One was centered in Boston, another at Portland, Me., for lines north of the city, and the third at Fitchburg for western routes. Poitrast was assigned to the Fitchburg division. Because he was at the bottom of the personnel "roster," he could be assigned to any job on any line west of Boston.

Because of those early, scrambling years, Poitrast says he has "worked every local from here to Mechanicville, N.Y." That includes the main line from Cambridge to New York State, as well as all branches to places like Worcester, Keene, N.H. and Bellow's Falls, Vt.

The B&M only has one division now, with one seniority list. Because the B-3 crew tops the roster, they can choose any job they want. They chose the western "local" because it's work near home.

This particular run is headed towards Airco, Inc. and the Dewey and Almy Chemical Division of the W. R. Grace Co. in Acton, two of the B&M's

regular customers. Buss, sitting across the cab from Roane, says he likes the trip because of the scenery.

Pointing out horses, cows and physical landmarks of all shapes and sizes, Buss says he knows "every inch of the track for hundreds of miles."

"Green!" he says, as an upcoming signal indicates the next crossing is clear. "Green," echoes Roane, who cannot see the signal but must repeat the sighting.

The bend unveils a pond to the right. "Walden Pond," mentions Buss. The rails, arcing around the southerly shores of the pond, lie in the same bed as did the railroad

mentioned by Henry David Thoreau in the famous account of his two-year stay by the pond.

The freight follows a path used since the earliest days of railroad history in the state, according to B&M agent Marty Lacarbonara.

The route may be venerable, but the forces of winter have not been kind to the track. Ice and snow accumulation became so bad, Lacarbonara says an embargo was placed on freight shipments to Hudson and South Sudbury.

"This was the worst winter I've seen. You clean the ice away from the rails and then they freeze up again. This

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ALL ABOARD — Maynard's Frank Poitrast, one of four members of the B&M's senior crew, mounts a diesel engine preparing to deliver freight to South Acton.

(News Photo by Brian MacQuarrie)



SENIOR ENGINEER—Hand at the throttle, John Roane surveys the West Cambridge train yard before heading the B-3 on its western "local" run.
(News Photo by Brian MacQuarrie)

Getting the freight to Acton

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winter had the most derailments I can remember."

Poitrast says the B-3 derailed at least seven times during the past winter.

"A short time ago, we went off by Dewey's. We had 20 minutes to get the train back on the tracks because there was a Budd car coming up. We had a lot of luck, but we made it."

Poitrast, whose job it is to make sure every car makes its destination exactly, says the crew of the B-3 has rerailed every time this year.

"Nobody gets excited when

we go off. If someone gets excited, then you really are in trouble."

But despite the occasional headaches, Poitrast says he's glad he chose the railroad. He calls the work "independent" and "healthy." And he says he's glad most of the work is the result of his own decisions.

He sees little of his family, except on weekends. So he's home, he doesn't talk railroad.

As Buss says: "People think we have Lionel sets running around in our basement, we don't. But when we get together after hours, you'll hear nothing but railroad talk."

The B-3 deposits its goods at Dewey and Almy and heads back towards Boston on the "straight iron." On the next day, the crew will don their blue denim coveralls and railroad caps and move more freight, to Watertown, Waltham, or Acton.

This crew on the Acton "local" represents one of the few remaining links between diesel freights and the storied steam locomotives. They'll discount it, buy when the four retire in a few years with over 150 years of combined experience, a bit of Americana will go with them.



STRAIGHT IRON — The B-3 locomotive setting in Waltham.
(News Photo by Brian MacQuarrie)