

Arbor Days on Main Line Railroads?

By Richard L. Beadles

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In some locations hereabout it looks like Arbor Day on the railroad. That's not a good thing. We refer to rail rights-of-way ("ROW"), where encroachment of trees and brush jeopardize train operations. Hurricane season is about to get under way, and winter won't be far behind. It is good that the State of Virginia, and the feds, are investing in rail infrastructure, to afford shippers of cargo as well as people access to a viable non-highway transportation alternative. But a single wind-blown, or ice-downed, tree can stop train operations. Rarely does nature drop a single tree. Her storms tend to produce cascading mayhem, with domino-like consequences. Frustrated Amtrak passengers recall the week-long shut-down of service to Richmond this past winter. Freight gets backed up as well, but cargo generally gets preference over people. Even NY garbage trains ran through Richmond last winter before the gate was opened for Amtrak. That's a fact.

In this context, and on this Memorial Day, we recall a notable mid-twentieth-century rail CEO (they were just "presidents" then), who was personally associated with development of the southeast's first regularly-scheduled 100-mile-an-hour railroad. Champion McDowell Davis, president of the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad from 1942 to 1957, was by all accounts not an easy-going boss on a railroad that had a reputation for being tough. The wags said that Coast Line was so tight-fisted with money that an employee had to carry his own drinking water to work! But Davis, a bachelor, was devoted to his railroad, and lavished his company's treasure and attention on the property, especially the show-case 680-mile main line from Richmond to Jacksonville.

This writer recalls that sometime in the early 1950's, Davis decreed that the ACL main line ROW be cleared, across its full width, starting at the James River in Richmond and proceeding southward. Ironically, one of the most dramatic examples of the current arbor-effect is visible from the Forest Hill Avenue overpass, looking north toward the River, right where the Davis ROW clearing program began. For several years thereafter, ACL maintenance forces, equipped with modern mowing equipment, annually cut the weeds and brush along the main line, in exactly the same manner as we now observe on our interstate highways. ROW maintenance was not uncommon years ago.

Alas, Champ Davis was well over seventy years of age, his company's operating ratio was spiraling upward toward the mid-eighties (quite unacceptable by industry standards), and the Baltimore bankers who controlled his board were becoming alarmed. When he raised the speed to 100 m.p.h. for his passenger streamliners, they must have thought Davis was nuts! When reminded that ACL maintenance costs exceeded industry norms, he refused to budge. With that, Champ Davis was "retired" by his board.

The moral of the story is that if you upset “Wall Street” you might get fired. But if we expect our public investment in rail transportation to yield dependable, reliable, service, we’ve got to do a better job of ROW maintenance. Surely, the public and the private sectors, working together, can come up with a solution. # # #