

The Alberta Switcher and Wall Street

by Richard L. Beadles

Volume V. No. 16. August 27, 2013

In case you hadn't noticed, railroad stocks have performed well on Wall Street in recent years. One of the reasons was the elimination of the Alberta Switcher, and hundreds like it elsewhere across the U.S. Prior to the former Virginian Railroad ("VGN") being acquired and absorbed by N&W in 1959, the VGN and the former Seaboard Air Line Railroad ("SAL", now CSX) maintained an active interchange at a place called Alberta, about sixty-five miles south of Richmond, VA. (Off I-85, exit 28).

Each evening, seven-days-a-week, the same five-man "road switcher" crew went on duty about five o'clock at the former SAL Hermitage Yard in Richmond. Then they departed for Alberta with cars for the VGN interchange, mostly empty coal hoppers, stopping to pick up other VGN interchange cars at Brown Street (Richmond), Bellwood (Hopewell) and Petersburg. After dodging conflicting main-line train traffic on the then-busy SAL, the crew spent most of the overnight hours banging cars together at the VGN interchange. Loaded coal received from VGN, then only moving in single-car increments (today's unit coal trains only came later), were arranged according to destination blocks and lined up to go south or north. As there were never enough yard tracks to make all the blocks or classifications, many of these cars were handled multiple times. Southbound loads were left for later pickup by the "short-haul", a Raleigh-bound way freight. Northward destinations were handled by the Alberta Switcher itself, on its return trip, with "set-offs" at Petersburg, Bellwood, South Yard, or Brown Street in Richmond. The crew often struggled back up the hill to Hermitage and marked itself off, frequently after 15 hours and 59 minutes "on-duty" time. The federal "Hours-of-Service" law required a mandatory ten-hour rest period if the then-applicable 16-hour limit were reached. Consequently, these men, who well recalled the Great Depression, almost always made it off one minute before the deadline. Otherwise they would have to miss the next trip.

In those days most heavy industrial power plants used coal delivered by rail. It was not just a matter of supplying electric utilities by unit trains as is done today. Also, there were still retail-type coal yards in every town. Coal went everywhere, by way of every possible rail interchange point. VGN coal could have also come to Richmond, for example, via the ACL-VGN interchange at near-by Jarrett, or by way of the Southern Railway from its VGN interchange, and probably numerous other combinations of routes.

Dramatic changes in both the coal and rail industries have resulted in a lot less switching of freight cars at places like Alberta. And many fewer jobs! Even the VGN and the SAL are long gone from Alberta. Nevertheless, the "banging" of freight cars goes on. One has only to listen to the whine of diesels and the rough couplings associated with operation of remote-controlled switch engines at CSX's Acca Yard here in Richmond. I

miss the Alberta Switcher and the men who worked those jobs. I wonder if any of those long-gone coal miners and railroaders smile down upon us—wherever they are—when they hear the banging made possible by “remote-controlled” switchers. Wall Street loves it, so rail stocks rise. I like that part, and the dividends too! # # # #