

A Tale of Two Teens Working at the Alaska Railroad

Alaska Railroad employee #1357 is Connor Keogh. He's a Road Foreman of Engines within the Advanced Train Control Systems (ATCS) division of the Alaska Railroad. ATCS was born of the decades-long effort to develop and implement Positive Train Control (PTC) by a federally mandated Dec. 31, 2020, deadline. PTC is a safety system that uses computer programming, GPS system, track-side devices, signals and communications components to avoid train accidents due to human error.

Connor's position is multi-faceted. He instructs train crew members on operating trains with PTC now fully integrated. He also observes train operations / operators and conducts other research to determine areas where train operations can improve. His background as a Conductor / Engineer make him particularly well-suited to the task.

Generations Connect on the Railroad

In remarkable ways, my railroad career follows in the footsteps of my maternal grandfather Jerome Roys, Alaska Railroad employee #18066.

We both joined the Alaska Railroad as a teenagers

When I joined the railroad in April 1998, I was just 18.

When my grandfather joined the railroad in 1936, he was ... well, let's just say younger than 18.

The promise of swapping stories

Having started his career 62 years before mine, Grandpa had a wealth of stories from an era when things were done...differently.

Soon after joining the railroad in 1998, I moved from my small hometown of Chickaloon to the "big city" of Anchorage. Until I could find my own place, I stayed four months with my grandparents at their home in Spenard. Having that temporary home base took some pressure off while I learned the ropes as a brand new Brakeman.

At the time, I recall Grandpa predicting I would soon have some good stories to tell, especially since my job took me from one end of the rail belt to the other. I guess he just knew that to be the case, based on his own experience. He wasn't wrong.

Grandpa said, "When you have a good story, you share it with me, and in return, I'll share one of my mine." I was intrigued, and therefore quite happy that I did indeed have a shareable story within a few months on the job. True to his word, Grandpa had a story ready for me.

In honor of the Alaska Railroad's centennial, I'd like to share both stories.

Jerome's Teen Tale on the Rails:

Gandy Dance Optical Illusion [1936]

Jerome Roys was stationed near Healy while working track maintenance in Healy Canyon, an area that closely follows the Nenana River. It was (and is), an erosion-prone section in perpetual need of repair.

Jerome described track work in this area as very labor intensive and required very long hours. He explained that the tools they used would be considered very primitive by today's standards.

As months passed, new recruit Jerome became more familiar with his track maintenance duties. He made a few friends. And, he soon realized his good fortune to have a crew boss that treated the workers pretty well. That wasn't the norm among other crew bosses who tended to be a bit harsh.

Jerome recalled one thing about his boss that seemed a bit strange. He would almost always tell Jerome and a couple of other younger track laborers to "take a break" and remain out of sight whenever a track car with senior management would traverse their work area. Meanwhile, the rest of the laborers would continue working. As time went on, and this continued to happen, Jerome finally asked this crew boss why he hid the same few guys whenever management was nearby.

His crew boss explained the maneuver was for "political optics." He wanted the track gang to "appear understaffed." This not only helped to protect crew members from potential layoffs but, more importantly, made the crew boss appear more productive. The boss told Jerome that management liked him (the crew boss) because it appeared he was doing more with less.

Jerome shared that this crew boss took care of Jerome's gang because they cooperated with efforts to make the boss look good in front of management. It was an interesting arrangement that continued for many months which kept management, the crew boss, and the laborers all happy due to what my Grandpa Jerome referred to as a simple, "Gandy Dance Optical Illusion".

Connor's Teen Tale from the Rails:

Don't Get Fired Today [July 15, 1998]

With just a few months under my belt, I was working as a Brakeman on the extra board (a rotating on-call list of employees who work a variety of jobs). Out of the blue, I was instructed to work as crew member aboard the Alaska Railroad's *75th Anniversary Train*, which was scheduled to run from Fairbanks to Nenana on July 15, 1998.

I had not previously met my crew mates, Engineer Austin Hill and Conductor Darren Rupe. Nevertheless, we quickly got to know each other while loading excited passengers ready to join a large celebratory gathering in Nenana that day. The festivities included a salmon bake picnic, a performance by the Air Force Band of the Pacific, and dignitaries ready to re-enact the driving of the golden spike, an event that had happened near the Mears Memorial Bridge 75 years earlier.

After we departed Fairbanks, Dispatcher Don Jubb instructed us to pick up two passengers prior to traversing the Mears Bridge and arriving at the Nenana Depot. About half of a mile from the bridge, we spotted our two passengers waiting to hop aboard the locomotive: former Governor Bill Sheffield and the then-ARRC Chairman of the Board John Binkley. After climbing aboard, they said they wanted to ride outside on the front of the train while waving flags as we traversed Mears Bridge. And, they wanted to

stay there until we arrived at the Nenana Depot, where a large crowd was gathered and awaiting our arrival.

As Governor Sheffield and Chairman Binkley got into position with their flags, Conductor Rupe looked at me and expressed concern that the men would not have 3-point contact with the locomotive. Rupe told me to get out there with them and make sure they didn't fall off the locomotive (especially while we traveled high above the Tanana River on the Bridge).

As I stepped out of the locomotive door to join the former governor and chairman, Darren and Austin jokingly asked me, "You're still a probationary trainman, right?" I responded affirmatively. And with big grins, they jokingly said it'd look really bad on my performance evaluation if they had to write up that the Governor and/or the Chairman fell off the train into the Tanana River on my watch; and I'd likely be fired.

I returned a nervous laugh. Then, sharply dressed in my brakeman uniform, I stepped outside the lead locomotive, positioning myself in between the two passengers. I recall putting on a brave (and what I hoped was a professional) face.

In this prime position, I witnessed hundreds of folks who had gathered to see the arrival of the *ARRC 75th Anniversary Train*. I'm happy to report that the former governor and board chair remained perfectly dry that day. So... no firing, after all.



Above: After successfully traversing the Mears Memorial Bridge the ARRC 75th Anniversary Train continues to the Nenana Depot. Pictured left to right John Binkley, Connor Keogh and Bill Sheffield. Inside the cab of the locomotive: Austin Hill and Darren Rupe.

Now, 25 years later, I still work for the Alaska Railroad.

I can't help but think back frequently to those two intrepid teenagers who decided to launch into railroading -- one from the late 1930s and one from the late 1990s.

Although our teenage years were separated by six decades, we were still the best of friends. And yes, we enjoyed many years of railroad storytelling.

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