

Tom Schoonover – Fireman and Engineer on the B&O Road for 40 Years.  
Interviewed at Schoonover home on Cherry Fork Rd.  
Interview by Michael and Carrie Kline, Talking Across the Lines, LLC  
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Thomas Schoonover was born 8/14/1925.

Raised in Montrose. Dad was first real mail carrier out of Montrose post office in 1906. They were married – I have no idea the year now – Probably about 1916.

Leslie C. and Lula May.

*Tell us about the place you grew up and your brothers and sisters.*

I had one sister. She passed away two years ago.

Played baseball from grade school until WWII

Work on railroad Dec. 12, 1945. Retired September the 18<sup>th</sup>, 1986.

*Did all you guys put in 40 years?*

Well, I don't know. I did. I had 40 years of actual service.

*Were there other members of family who had worked on the railroad?*

My wife's father worked on the B&O and he was instrumental in getting me a job. When I came home from service, I was trying to get something to go to work... I had intentions of working until the fall semester of college and going back to college. When the fall semester was ready to start, we had a little girl. I never went back to college, just kept right on working in the railroad.

[4:38] *Well, you worked during a period of great change, I would guess.*

Oh yes. We started out--We still had a few shovel-fired engines when I started. Most of them were stoker-fired engines—steam engines. And then there came the diesel. Of course the diesels were getting more complicated and better powered and so forth. By the time I had quit there had been some changes in the diesel, but it was a way of making a living. The only thing I can figure out of it. [5:21]

*Stoker-fired, you said?*

Yes. There were—I don't know whether you been on a steam engine or not, but there were barrels, or a metal container that went up to the firebox door. And it had a screw in it, and it went right back through into the tinder. And the coal went down into a trough and the screw brought it up in and it was blowing into the firebox with

Commented [SD1]: Steam v. diesel

steam jets that placed it around different places in the steam box. You adjusted the amount of steam you wanted in this corner and this corner, and it would put the coal approximately where you wanted it. It was very fine coal, and burned—if you did it right, you had a good fire and kept steam. If you did it wrong you had steam problems. But you learned through experience.

Commented [SD2]: Mechanics/engineering

*Tell me about your first day on the job*

Well, my wife and I had gone to Gassaway on the train. After they'd given me a job, they assigned to the extra board at Gassaway. Well, we went to Gassaway, and her parents had been in Gassaway at one time. A lady let us had a room in her house, because that was a place to stay for a short time. When they called me to go to work that evening, I went down to the engine. Of course I had made student trips before, so I knew a little about what I was supposed to do. Went down and got the water and ice that was supposed to be for drinking purposes. Set the jets on the stoker the way I thought they should be, looked at the firebox, was scared to death that I'd never be able to keep steam on the engine. And this engineer came out—he was a tall, thin man named Corbin Methany. I told him who I was, who my father-in-law was. Helper. Going from Gassaway to Grafton. We started up out of Gassaway and there's a grade right out of Gassaway—start right out of Gassaway there's a grade. I had the engine hot, going up the hill, and he looked over at me, and he said "shut everything off, boy." And I thought "what had I done now." He shut it off and he looked at the firebox and he said, "if you just keep doing what you're doing, we'll make it." So we went back to work and we made a trip over to Adrian and got water and went back up to Frenchton where we went over on the Y, and made our way with light engines.

8:45 – discussion of Ys on railroads

You know what a Y is?

*I know what the letter Y is.*

Y on the railroad – turned your engine – backed the engines in on the Y, turned it around, and started back to Gassaway.

Light engines just meant we had two engines, no cars.

Just getting them back to the terminal so they could be used for another term.

*Put them on the pit, you said?*

That there was a place where they could dump the ash pan on the pit – get it re-coaled – ready for the next crew to take it out. You got a clean, ready engine to go – set it over on the ready track – and the next crew that got that engine would have an engine ready to go.

10:05

10:12 – *So you started out as an engineer in training?*

Well, I guess you could say you were an engineer-in-training, but you were a fireman. And after the first year you worked they gave you an examination that was starting on the promotion to an engineer. And after two years you'd have a series of tests that you took.

At the end of the third year you had a three-year examination. Aircar. Operation of air brakes of the cars and what you had to do. Functions of the engine.

11:30 – My first trip as an engineer was in November – I won't give you the exact date, because I'm not sure, but it was after the big snow in 1950. They call me to go out and brake road for my first day. I guess I was really concerned about trying to get a day's work in such weather.

*To brake road?*

And it was full of snow as far as that's concerned.

It was on Saturday that they called me but they couldn't get anyone to work. 12:50 – I did brake road on Monday after the big snow of 1950.

*What does that mean to brake road?*

13:00 - To plough – to go through the snow. Just like a snow plow.

[16:41] *So after that snowy day, how did your steam engine experience progress?*

Well, that was my first day as an engineer. I went back to my regular job as a fireman. It was my regular turn as a fireman and I had another fellow firing for me. Firing for – Rudy Roar I guess was my engineer. He was a musician. On the weekend a lot of times he was playing in a dance band. Rudy played trumpet for him. They had gone to Richwood, as far as I remember, to play a dance on Saturday night, and they were snowbound, and he couldn't get back for his turn as an engineer. He was snowbound, and that was the reason for my being used in an emergency. He was a little short guy, he loved to play trumpet, and he was pretty good.

[18:31] *Now, these runs that you made with Rudy Roar, were they mostly gathering up?*

Gathering coal, coal, yes. Well, It was a night turn that worked out of Belington, and we brought coal or whatever mostly brought coal that brought cars that you needed

- box cars, whatever needed in Elkins that were transferable to the Western Maryland. We took them into Elkins and set them off in Elkins for the Western Maryland. We would turn our engine in Elkins, get water, then come back and go to the mines. There was Norton Mine at the time, and we worked Norton Mine, which was at that time doing a lot of business. They were putting out probably a hundred loads of coal a day. They day-turn at Belington and went out there and got those, and we got part of them, and we would go over to Midvale which was on the Buckhannon river, Middle Fork Railroad, little railroad that went up to Cassidy. Loads of coal that we would bring out of Midvale. You would haul, maybe going into Belington, a lot of times in that night turn you went into Belington with a hundred loads of coal on one engine. It was starting downgrade, so one engine could bring em into Belington. It was - it became a little bit - experience helped a lot in getting them down the hill from the river.

20:55 - Your air brakes. The engineer of course handled the brakes on the train. You charged up your brake system with air, and to put the brakes on, you took air out of the system. Also moved the brake shoes against the wheels, and that was what I meant by handling the air. It was a balance system. Not like on a truck where they actually put air into brakes to stop it. You just took air out.... It disturbed the balance.

*22 - Those brakes worked pretty well?*

Oh yes, they worked. There was no question about it. If there was an emergency portion of it, if you dumped all the air out of it, it put the air on real quick and made an emergency stop. You had brakes on the engine and on the cars.

*22:40 And the engineer could control it all?*

Oh yes. That was part of your learning. When I told you about going to the air-car for your promotion, that was to learn the handler. They...

*23:13 - Now, I'm a little unclear how the evolution of feeding the locomotive coal. For awhile it was hand-shoveled?*

Yes. In Belington it was always hand-shoveled. Gondolas. Raised-track. 23:54 The tinder probably held 16,000 ton, that was getting the engine ready to go. In most of the terminals, they had a way of putting it on mechanically.

*Once it was in the tinder, it was hand-shoveled into the fire box?*

Well, some of them were shoveled and some of them had the stoker. Trough in the bottom of your tinder, almost the length of your tinder, but there was a screw in there that took it up. I'd say you blew it into the firebox with steam jets.

*What was the fireman's job in that case?*

To operate the stoker. Keep the water up on the steam engine. The steam pressure on the CA's was 216 pounds steam pressure. CA's were about as high as I ever worked on. 215 pound of steam.

28:33 – That's the main way of handling a train today even. To handle that train efficiently, you have to know the grade. That's the best way in the world to learn to run an engine is to know the grade. Once you know the grade, then you can handle a train much more efficiently.

*29 - So, from 1950 you get your first crack at it, but we're still in the steam era, as far as you're concerned?*

Well, we changed in 1957 was the first we had diesels that weren't on the turns I was worked. They had got some diesels in 1950... but they weren't up here where I was working in Belington.

I went to Buckhannon, Clarksburg, Gassaway.

29:40 – Wherever there was a job that my seniority allowed me to work, I went to work... There was no staying home, because I had a family. The first thing was to make a living for your family, regardless of where it was. If you were gone for a week, you were gone for a week. You went home, got clean clothes, some things to take care of for the week, and went back to work again. IT wasn't something that you worked every day at home and went back to the house everyday.

30:25 – When I worked at Grafton—either way, it was an overnight job. That was those jobs. Of course that entailed driving from Grafton to Belington. Another hour you spent before you went home to eat and rest and go back to work again. It wasn't bad. You were gone overnight and you went back. Some of the turns worked 17 days a week, some worked 6 days a week.

31:21 – This is boasting, maybe, but I had three kids. Two girls, one boy. One boy works in Elkins at the bank – you may even know Jim. And at that time—I had three kids in college at one time. My thoughts at that debt was that the national debt wasn't any bigger than mine, and I worked whatever I worked to get the most money. In order to try to keep my family going. I'm not trying to be boastful about that, but I'm just telling you how it was. We needed the money and I worked wherever I could to make the most money.

32:23 – I could handle my job, whether engineer and fireman. I felt reasonably sure of being able to handle the job, whatever it was.

*32:25 – But also knowing the ropes as to where, or did they just dispatch you wherever they wanted?*

At that time we had turns that were called regular turns. You had a regular time to go to work. The railroad never had a regular time to quit. Then they would relieve you of wherever you were and deadhead you back to the terminal.

33:20 – Dead end – riding taxis – weren't working, just riding. Last part that I worked you were riding taxis all the time, when you went on the law, which is the hour service law.

33:50 – well, there was a law that restricted your working more than 16 hours, then it went down to 14 hours, then when I quit it went down to 12 hours. It was actually a law of the land that you were only allowed to work 12 hours and then you had to be relieved. They called it "going on the law."

*So you worked in steam as late as?*

34:30 – 1957.

*As anybody, right?*

Yes, I think the diesels were coming but they went on turns that were more— handling more cars... the diesels were put on jobs that were handling more coal than the little district turns that were gathering more coal. At Belington we were probably one of the last turns on our division to get a diesel, which was in 1957. Of course that was the change where everybody was yelling about the fireman was featherbedding, he was no longer needed, but you still had a job, you had a job to do. Supposed to go back over the engines to see if they were loading properly. Which – they had an they had an indicator on a governor to tell you how they were loading.

36 – Then If you were going downgrade, they had a dynamic brake. It cooled the grids. Reversing the generator – the motors were reversed to a generator – had fans run with electric to keep the grids cool – the dynamic break was just what the generator took to turn. Helped to slow you down, to hold the weight of the train back. Check to see if those trains were working, if there was oil in your governor.

37:30 – Firemans became a little more lazy because you had gone back over the engines, they were working all right, and as long as the engineer didn't say, 'hey, there's something going on over here, you better go check on it,' you may skip a little bit of the work that you should've done. But there was a job for the fireman instead of featherbedding.

37:53 – *What is featherbedding?*

Doing nothing.

*Is that a railroad term?*

Well, that's what became when they got the diesels—It was pretty much from the public that they called us featherbedders. It wasn't a railroad term, it was a public term that they thought those firemen weren't needed and it was just excess baggage for the railroad. And of course today they have two-men crew: an engineer and a conductor. Conductor rides the engine with the engineer and that's the crew that's going over the road. You may have a switcher that you'll have to help them wherever they're switching, but he doesn't ride with them, he's sent back to the terminal as opposed to being the third man on the crew.

[38:46] *As opposed to?*

38:50 – We used to have five-men crew. Engineer, conductor, a flagman and a brakeman. And if you were working on the mine you had three men on the ground. And of course today they're doing it all with radios, and one-man crew is all they use on the ground. No cabooses.

39:30 Also has a radio control. Those things. So, I didn't work on the short crews. When I quit they still had five-men crew.

*So, were railroad men represented by a union?*

Yes, yes.

*What was the structure of that?*

40:07 - Well, it became necessary to belong to the union in order to work. It was a closed shop. And you worked – had a union for engineers, had a union – BFLE was the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, the BFLF was the Brotherhood of Firemen and Engineers– and then they came up with a union that went together and made it the union—UTU—United Transportation Union – when I went to work I joined the Fireman's organization, which was the BFLF&E, carried it for years and years – before I quit they needed members for the engineer's organization, and I joined it to give 'em another head to count for the union, but it was just for a short time, just before I quit that I joined the Engineer organization.

*How could the workers have any bargaining power if there were all these different unions representing them?*

Different parts of the crew. UTU should've been a powerful organization 41:30 but the union, I'm sure you're aware that unions have lost a lot of their power now, they're no longer able to create the stoppage that they did at one time. When railroads had stoppage, twice, Truman was gonna put us in the Army if we didn't go back to work, or give us a hard time if we didn't go back to work.

The stoppage at one time, when President Truman was, he threatened to draft us into the Army if we didn't go back to work, and they got an injunction to put us back

to work the other times. They really wouldn't let the railroads strike. The coal miners could strike, could be out for six months if necessary, but the railroads were never allowed to do that – the railroads were too vital to the country I guess – we were out one time for two days I think 43:00 – I just went home and sat down, didn't walk in any picket lines or anything else – I wasn't gonna cross a picket line but I wasn't gonna walk one either – I wasn't gonna go out and carry a sign – I might've been criticized but I just didn't feel like I wanted to do that. You know, some people are bull-headed and stubborn and I probably was one of them

44:00 *Must've been a little awkward?*

Must've – they had a strike fund, and if you didn't walk the picket line you didn't get any money for the picket line – My kids will probably tell you that he's a stubborn old brute

44:40 *Just didn't believe in that, huh?*

Oh, I believe very much in the ability to strike, but I'm just not gonna walk out and carry a placard saying "I'm on strike." I was just that contrary about it. I wasn't gonna pass it. I wouldn't go to work and brake the strike, but I wasn't gonna carry a sign. IF that's what it took to get the strike fund, I'd just forgo the money.

45:20 *In the transition to diesel, what were your feelings about it?*

Well of course, everybody thought the diesel's not gonna be able to haul the coal, you're gonna burn up. You got a motor, you're gonna burn up. It was gonna get rid of a lot of jobs, and it did. When you had four engines and two men on it instead of four engines with eight men on it, there was six men who weren't gonna be working that day. And that was ... that took a lot of ... it reduced the force a lot. When the diesels came and got everything set up, at that time I was the oldest fireman by seniority, ready to be marked up as an engineer. And it wasn't until just a few days when I was the youngest man working, because they got rid of so many jobs. Oh, as a fireman, the oldest fireman, a short time later I was a Hustler – men who moved the engines around ready track –because that was the only thing I could hold seniority-wise. The only way you were gonna gain seniority then was through attrition. That wasn't too rapid. Several fellas retired and died at a short time. But it did eventually go up. When I quit, I was the oldest man on the seniority roster for our seniority district.

47:40 *Did you live at Belington?*

My wife and I decided we'd retire here. In 1978 we built this house.

*What was it like for the wives?*

They deserved enough medals to cover them if they lived with a railroader. My goodness. How many women would put up with a man going to work at 3:00 in the

morning... my wife got up and fixed me breakfast on my work... she worked in the bank at Belington for 16 years, did her job, tried to take care of a man working the hours.. she deserved all the credit in the world for her way of life.

*While struggling with the kids and everything?*

49:37 – She was the one who taught the kids what they needed to know, she was the one that raised the family... oh I suppose I helped a little bit but mostly it was just through finances. My job was to keep meat on the table and she was to cook it and take care of the kids and she did it and she did a wonderful job. I don't know of any other occupation in which the wife is so in charge of doing everything as she was for me.

*Was this true of other wives?*

Sure, sure. If a man worked on the railroad for 30 years his wife had to be a saint. Rigors of the job. Taking care of kids. Being a bookkeeper. Nearly every check I ever drew went through her hands to pay bills, take care of the kid's clothing and whatever was necessary to use it for. She was the one who took care of all the things that was needed. I can't think of anybody's life who was more needed than she was for the family. She took care of the big things.

*We just met one of your sons who grew up to be a railroader?*

William Ronald Schoonover. Wanted to go to Nashville Auto-Diesel college. Got a job as a welder. Went out to Parkersburg.

## ***DISC 2***

0:28 - Got a job on the B&O as a trackman. Said something to my boss – I'd like to get him a job in engine service. Called him, he immediately came to Grafton.

14:40 – Didn't work on the WM. Worked on the B&O. Had joint track rights with WM.