Memoirs of a Santa Fe Railroad Man
By Herman Collins (1874-1953)

edited by Roger W. Collins

From the vantage point of the late twentieth century, railroading in earlier times was a romantic occupation. To the men who were there, however, railroading was hard work, often dangerous, and not overly remunerative. The division between labor and management was sharply drawn, and loyalty among the workers was regarded as an essential virtue. Yet many railroaders loved their work, were aware of its adventure, seriously accepted their responsibilities, and took pride in their performances; and some of them later wrote about their experiences. Among these was Herman Collins, a native of Labette County, Kansas.1

Herman's association with the Santa Fe Railroad began in 1871, three years before his birth. His parents, William Aaron Collins and Martha Sparks, had moved from Missouri to Labette County late in 1869 and had settled close to the home of Martha's brother, Morris E. Sparks, in Osage Township.2 Sometimes Aaron worked as a teamster, hauling freight to Santa Fe; and sometimes he and Morris went to Texas together where they purchased cattle and returned with them for sale and shipment east. In 1871, the Leavenworth, Lawrence and Galveston Railroad built south through Labette County;3 and Aaron must have begun to see the possibilities of a connection between railroads and the cattle business. His vision probably sharpened considerably in 1876 when the Santa Fe reached Pueblo, Colorado;4 at about the same time that the Denver and Rio Grande reached El Moro, Colorado.5 Clearly, one of those railroads was going to build through Raton Pass, with which he was familiar; and that one would need timber for ties, poles, and other construction necessities. That one turned out to be the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe.

Herman Collins' memoirs tell his story of this time.

1. Herman's memoirs, now in the Manuscripts Department of the Kansas State Historical Society, chronicle his birth in Kansas, his youth, his years as a cowboy, and his career with the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway, most of which occurred in Colorado and New Mexico. He subsequently returned to his native state, where he lived and worked in Kansas City until his retirement. He moved to Topeka, where he later died and is buried. The bulk of this article is edited from those memoirs, but a few events are from conversations between Roger W. Collins and his grandfather from 1936 to 1953.


4. Ibid., 396.

5. Ibid., 132.
Memoirs

I was born at Morehead, Kansas, on October 16, 1874. Shortly after my birth, father left his family in the care of a brother-in-law and again entered the service of the federal government, hauling freight between Santa Fe, New Mexico, and West Port, Missouri, and in 1877 when I was three years old he sent for his family to join him.

The Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad was building to the west coast and at that time had reached El Moro, a small town in southern Colorado. My mother started with us children from Morehead, Kansas. On the way I was taken very ill, and when she reached Lawrence, Kansas, she found it necessary to leave the train and secure medical aid, after which she resumed her journey west.

My father met us at the end of the railroad with a prairie schooner and took us to a saw mill in northern New Mexico where he was engaged hauling saw logs for the mill. He had left the services of the government because of his family. The following spring he signed a contract with the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad to furnish railroad ties, bridge timber, telegraph poles, etc. for their railroad and moved us into an adobe house at the mouth of a canyon known as Clear Creek, in southern Colorado.

I was five years old when the Santa Fe Railroad built their road up the mountains with great iron bridges across the deep canyons and reaching the main divide. They built their road across this divide by a series of switchbacks and they brought an engine there, reported at that time to be the largest engine in the world, and called it the "Uncle Dick," which was used to haul their cars over this switchback. It could pull some three or four cars at a time. After I had left the saddle and entered the railroad work, and was promoted from locomotive fireman to that of locomotive engineer, the "Uncle Dick" was the first engine I ran.

In the year of 1882 the Santa Fe Railroad constructed a pipe line from a reservoir they built about two miles up the Clear Creek canyon from our house and piped the water to Starkville, a mining camp two and a half miles down the canyon, and to Morley, the same dis-

6. Collins' recollection is incorrect. The Denver and Rio Grande was built to El Moro, Colorado about the same time the Santa Fe reached Pueblo, Colorado.

7. The "Uncle Dick" was scrapped in 1921, but No. 132, the "Cyrus K. Holliday," which was built about two years after the "Uncle Dick" and was of almost identical dimensions, weight and appearance, has been restored and placed in the Kansas Museum of History in Topeka.
tance up the canyon, for their locomotives. In so doing they stopped the flow of water past our house and we were thus deprived of it. The children had to carry water for a distance of half a mile from a spring and we all dreaded old blue Monday, for that was wash day and we had to get up early to get all this water before starting to school. I, being the youngest, was given two small buckets, but even they got very heavy before we got back home. My father contacted the division superintendent of the railroad and requested the privilege of piping water from their main line into our house. This the superintendent refused to do, and this action on his part forced my father to go to Trinidad, Colorado, the county seat of Las Animas County, Colorado, and have an injunction served on the railroad to stop all water into the pipes until arrangements with the court were complete. The superintendent came at once and made arrangements whereby the railroad would not only grant the privilege requested but would pay all expenses attached thereto and water was not only put into the house but into the barn lot and to the slaughter house as well and our water carrying days were thus ended.

As a young man, Herman worked as a cowboy first for his father, then for a neighbor, and finally for a large cattle company in central New Mexico. While there, he was involved in a shoot-out with some sheep herders. No one was killed, but his foreman thought it wise for Herman to take a herd of horses to Trinidad, Colorado, for sale. There, the owner of the ranch wanted Herman to return to New Mexico. He declined, citing the sheep herders; so the owner fired him.

His story continues in the year 1894.

After leaving my saddle and gun in Mr. Brown's livery stable with the horse I had left there, as my boss had told me to do, I started out to look for a job. I had often thought I would like to try railroading and with that

8. In conversation, Herman stated that, his father being a rancher, the water was piped first to the barn. It went into the house only after his mother protested this arrangement.
idea in mind I walked to the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad roundhouse and asked the foreman if he was hiring any men. He looked at my high heel boots, big white hat, laughed and asked me if I had ever worked for a railroad. Of course, I told him I had not, but I had often wanted to and could see no reason why not if I could get a job. He said, "All right, you come to work tonight at seven o'clock and we will give you a try out, but remember this, the work is hard and if you stick we will take care of you." That night at seven I reported for work, wearing my high heel boots, big hat, no gloves or overclothes; I did not know that I would need them. The foreman put me in the ash pit hoeing the ashes out of the long ash pans and after I had hoed out some five or six of those locomotives I thought I was through, but the foreman told me that while I was resting I might shovel those ashes up into a flat car placed on a nearby track to receive them. After this was done there came more locomotives to be cleaned as before. Somehow I managed to stick the night out. I cleaned the ash pans of eighteen locomotives and shoveled the ashes up that night. Next morning I told the foreman that I guessed I had enough of railroading and that I would not be back next night to work. He only laughed and told me they were only trying me out, that one of the men would go with me after working hours and after I had a good breakfast, pick me out the kind of clothes I should wear, get me a good place to room and board, and that he thought I would like it better. Anyway, not to quit until I gave the job a good try out. I thought this might be a good idea, so next morning a boy by the name of Thomas Burney let me use his soap and towel to clean up with, then took me to his boarding house where I found comfortable quarters and good meals. Then after a good breakfast he took me to a dry goods store where I secured two suits of overclothes, two suits of underwear, cap, good heavy work gloves and above all a good heavy pair of work shoes to replace my high heel boots. After a good hot bath which I needed most of all, as I had not been in water since swimming the Pecos River with my bunch of wild mares, in a good bed I slept the sleep of the weary. That night the foreman at the roundhouse gave me a Mexican to help me and after learning I could handle that language like a native, he used me as an interpreter regarding other work for Mexican men, common labor and such. He then put me to wiping engines, a dirty job, but not so hard, then I was put to calling the engine crews out for their runs, and I got along fine.

I was promoted to locomotive fireman in September 1897 and put out on the road as such. I rather liked this but it was very hard work then, for coal was used and shoveled into the firebox by hand; I have shoveled 15 tons into a firebox in one trip of 12 to 15 hours. Today, [1900s] most locomotives burn oil for fuel and all the fireboy does is sit in his seat box and work a lever to supply the oil needed.

I was promoted to locomotive engineman in September 1900 and in July 1902, I was married to your mother, and you, Joe, were born on July 1, 1904. Allen La Roy, your brother, was born on June 17, 1906, and you, Elmo, were born on May 20, 1909. Allen La Roy died on December 4, 1912. I do not wish to go into the details of this part of my life because it brings back memories that I have tried hard to forget, and I could tell you of experiences that I have had that would be hard for you to believe.
I would like to tell you of an engine out of control and running away down the steep mountain grade. I would like to tell you of an engine that had got loose on this same mountain and was running wild when I caught it, riding with a Mexican on a push car. I would like to tell you of a car of dynamite powder which had gotten away from the brakeman and was headed down the main track on which was soon to come the morning passenger train. While I was chasing it with my engine I thought of what would happen if I failed to catch it before it met the passenger train and what might happen if I did. Anyway, I caught it and just as soon as I knew the automatic coupler had connected I stopped the car and, reversing my engine, returned it to my train. If the railroad officers had known of either of those experiences someone would have lost their jobs, so why report it. We only reported what we could not cover up, and thus saved jobs.

As I have told you this much of my past, I might as well tell youconstantly, even though anyone knows little or nothing regarding railroad work. As I told you before, I was promoted to Locomotive Engineer in 1900, and at that time the railroad men had a very poor contract with the road on which they worked. I was running one of their Tandem Compounded Engines. We had at that time what we called regular engines, that is an engineer and a fireman were assigned to a regular engine, and when that engine made a trip its regular engineer and its regular fireman took it out on all of its runs. At that time we had no eight hour day, we worked ten hours for a day’s pay. We did, however, have a law that required us to have eight hours rest if we requested it on our arrival at any terminal. If not, we were required to go out when called. Failure on our part to accept the call resulted in discharge from the service.

I had made a round trip on my own division and that was the first district of the New Mexico division. Without even removing my work clothing on my arrival at my home terminal, I was called at once to take a train over the second district. On arriving at the terminal of that district, I was called to double head another train to the top of the Glorieta Pass [New Mexico], then to turn my engine on a track provided for that purpose and to return to my last terminal with the light engine. On arriving back, I was called to pull the local freight back to my home terminal. I had not called for rest at any of those terminals because I knew if I did I would be held away from my home terminal, and the men in charge found it convenient to send me home, because my engine was assigned to the first district and might be a long time before it ever got back so far away from its home terminal. The fireman and I accepted the call, and soon left with a long train of empty box cars including two or car loads of local freight which was to be delivered along the route. When we reached a small town some thirty miles from our home terminal, I realized I was not safe any more because I could not keep myself awake. I drew a bucket of cold water, with which I washed my face, trying to keep awake, but I found out even with that I simply could not stay awake, so when we ran the train into a side track where some local freight was to be unloaded, I sent a message to the train dispatcher that I would have to have eight hours rest to be safe before continuing the trip. For this I was given thirty demerit marks. That was just half of my job, because sixty demerit marks was considered sufficient for discharge, but I accepted them without complaint because I knew I should have asked for rest at one of the other terminals I had entered. But that was the life of a railroad man.

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The Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Ry. Co.

CLEARANCE CARD.

No. 189.

C. and E. No. 189.

Conductor and Engineer No. 189.

Signal is out for Operator.

I have no order for your train. Signal is out for , Operator.

This does not interfere with or countermand any orders you may have received. Conductor MUST SEE that the number of HIS TRAIN is entered in the above form correctly.

Conductor and Engineer must each have a copy.

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of a railroad man at those times. Since then, the railroad unions have had laws enacted to avoid that kind of treatment to their men.

I was called one morning to take a lone engine to a coal mine some distance away, and the hurry was very great indeed. It seemed the regular locomotive on that job had left the track and the coal mine was about to shut down for the want of empty coal cars which an engine was required to bring them. The Master of Mechanics and the Train Master were in great hurry to get me started with this extra engine, and I did not test its brakes as required by time card rules and left the terminal as quickly as possible. This part of the great Santa Fe Railroad runs over the Raton Pass, the mountain being tunnelled through. This tunnel is the top of the Pass, and the grade is around three percent and sometimes heavier. All trains have to be held in check by the use of their brakes. I had tested these brakes before I left with the engine, but being in such a big hurry, I had failed to notice they were not in first class condition. When we topped the mountain and started down the steep grade, we soon found out those brakes were not going to hold that engine. I tried reversing the engine to slow up or stop by those means, but I found out I could not hold the engine in reverse because it was so worn out the reverse lever would not hold. Into the forward motion it would go, gaining speed at every turn of its wheels. The fireman and I thought of abandoning the engine, but as we were in single track and the morning passenger train was due before long, we decided to stay with the engine and keep trying to stop it. We did not have much luck until the steepest part of the grade was passed, when we brought the engine to a stop, and returned to a station we had passed and took a siding there, and let the morning train of passengers go its way. If people traveling in those times knew of the narrow escapes they had been unaware of, they would...
wonder how those railroad men ever got by with the things they did. I got another thirty demerit marks for letting this engine get away from me; but when I found out the engine was sent from the San Marcial Division to their general repair shops for general overhauling, and it had been condemned by the United States Locomotive Inspector as unfit for further service until repaired, and especially its brakes, they were very kind indeed and so removed those demerit marks.

At another time when I was running a passenger engine pulling their east bound trains during a very heavy snow storm, I could not see but a short distance ahead. I was on time and felt pretty good about it, but I was very uneasy because I could not see far enough ahead to insure safety. A notion came into my head to reduce speed and get under control. (Under control means able to stop your train within the distance you can see.) I was still on time and I hated to reduce speed because that would mean I would loose [sic] time, but the urge to slow my train was so great I could not resist, so I did slow up to a very slow speed, that is under control. My fireman asked me what was the matter, why had I slowed up so much? I told him I did not know, but something was wrong. We had gone but a short distance when the rear end of a freight train with its red lights showed up directly in front of us. This freight train had stopped on the main line for a hot box on one of its freight cars which had got so hot it had started to blaze. The conductor and rear brakeman had left their caboose to take care of the hot box. They had forgotten entirely about passenger Train No. 2 which I was pulling until I had brought my train to a full stop just back of their caboose. When they saw us standing there, they both came back on the dead run. When any train finds it necessary to stop on the main line, a flagman, usually the rear brakeman, is required by train and time card rules to go back the required distance from the rear of his train in order to flag any train following and thus avoid accidents. This the freight crew had neglected to do, and both were subject to discharge from duty for this neglect. The train rules are very strict about this rule. Of course, what the company officials don't know about any neglect of duty of their workmen don't seem to hurt them very much, and all of the train and engine try to cover up any neglect of any nature and thus save some Bosses job. So this conductor asked me not to report this neglect of their failing to have their flagman out to protect their own train as well as any other train that might be approaching, because that would mean that both he and his brakeman would be dismissed from the service. Of course I at once agreed to this arrangement, and so told my own Conductor that I had been properly flagged by the brakeman from the freight train, but I can never forget that experience. I have thought of it many times and long since I have thought that God surely put his hand on my shoulder and told me to reduce speed to under control.

The officials never did find out about that experience. I can mention many other experiences that were never mentioned because it was our feeling to our fellow employees to save their jobs if possible. I must,
OUR MOTIVE POWER

The history of the motive power of the Santa Fe System is of peculiar interest because, since the advent of the very heavy locomotive, this road has played a leading part in its development. The various locomotive manufacturers throughout the United States are represented in the Santa Fe's present equipment, although the greater part of it has been built at the Baldwin Locomotive Works, which concern has furnished us 1,150 out of a total of approximately 1,850 engines now in service. About four hundred have been built at the various plants of the American Locomotive Company and the balance by locomotive manufacturing concerns which have since gone out of existence, while a very few have been built in the Santa Fe shops. These engines have been of various types, and a brief review of the classes represented will prove interesting.

The first locomotives constructed at

CONSOLIDATION LOCOMOTIVE, "UNCLE DICK," 1878

In 1807, seven years after Collins became a locomotive engineer, the Santa Fe Magazine featured this photograph of "Uncle Dick," once the largest engine in the world, and the first locomotive Collins engineered.

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however, tell of another time when I lied. I lied so beautifully and got away with it, that I laugh even yet when I recall the incident.

When the officials see fit to hire a new inexperienced fireman, they give him an order to ride any freight engine in order that he might learn the job from the regular fireman. When the engineer on the engine which he had made one of these trial trips thought he would ripen into a good locomotive fireman, that engineer would sign his letter which ran thus:

To all Firemen. This will be your authority to carry Mr. John Doe on your engine as a student fireman, and if you think he will make us a good fireman, kindly sign his letter.

After this student fireman had made ten trips as a student and his letter had been signed by ten engineers, he was marked up on the extra board; and his railroad career had started. I at that time was holding a regular assigned passenger engine pulling passenger trains only, and I had one good fireman. I required all of my fireman that when the curve in the track curved to his side, he must not regard his steam but keep a sharp lookout on his side for any danger that might arise. When the curve was on my side or the track was straight, he could attend to his steam; and we went along very nicely by that system. My fireman had secured a job as a student fireman for a brother of his, a young strong man just off the farm. He was anxious that his brother get the right start in his new life as a railroad man, so he asked me if I could carry his brother on our engine for just this one trip so he could instruct him in the work first and get him started out right. I knew, and so did my fireman, that for his brother to ride with us as a student fireman was against the rules, but I wanted to accommodate my fireman and I allowed this arrangement. We had a very nice trip, going down, I knew the road as well as I did my own division, and we took our train on time. We were scheduled to return on Train No. 4. That was their East Bound Golden State Limited,* one of the highest class trains the Santa Fe Railroad ran between Chicago and the West Coast at that time. It was scheduled to leave in the early morning. We left Las Vegas right on time. The first ten miles, that is from Las Vegas to a small station called Onava, was all up grade, and no train was expected to even make running time up that grade; so I told my fireman to fire the engine himself since I expected to use the engine to its fullest capacity in climbing that first grade. This my fireman did while his brother the student just sat on his fireman’s seat and watched his brother fire that engine. After passing Onava, the next ten miles to another small station, Watrous, was all down grade, and by allowing your train to roll down this ten miles, you could make up the time you lost in the first upgrade of ten miles. We passed this small town Watrous right on time and I was well pleased.

From Watrous to Shoemaker, the next station, was also a distance of ten miles through what was known as Shoemaker Canyon. The track was good and of heavy rails, but due to a flood sometime before, this part of the track had been washed away. The company had erected a stone quarry in this Shoemaker Valley for the purpose of obtaining stone to be crushed into ballast for this part of their track. In their time card and on all train orders, and erected on a big sign board near their rock crusher, was a sign reading like this:

ALL EXCEPT FIRST CLASS TRAINS
APPROACH STONE QUARRY UNDER FULL
CONTROL EXPECTING TO FIND MAIN
LINE OCCUPIED BY ENGINES OR CARS

This particular morning was rather foggy and I could not see any too well at best. Besides I was very nervous, for the time between Watrous and Shoemaker was one mile a minute for a distance of ten miles. I was standing up watching and wondering what would happen if someone had forgotten our train, “The California Limited”—what would happen if we should strike a car on this part of the track. My regular fireman was firing the engine, as I had asked him to do on leaving Las Vegas. His brother, the student, was sitting on the fireman’s seat, keeping close watch. The fireman had told his brother to keep a sharp lookout and to tell the engineer if he saw anything on the track ahead. We had just passed the stone quarry and the curve was to the left side when this student jumped up from his seat yelling to me to “Stop her, for God’s sake, stop her!” I, being already nervous, was very much frightened, of course. I put my brake valve into emergency position, reversed my engine, pulled the throttle wide open, and started to leap from my side window. My fireman had dropped his shovel and had got onto the lower step on his side ready to drop off if necessary. We were making a mile a minute when this happened and we both knew that to get off running at that speed would mean almost suicide. Nothing happened, so I turned and looked at my fireman still on the lower step of the cab. He gave me the all clear signal. I returned into the cab, released my brakes, and threw the reverse lever into the forward motion; but the train had not yet stopped, when the student fireman said, “Oh you killed him, the poor devil, you killed him.” I asked him, “What did we strike? Was it a man?” “No,” he replied. “It was a poor

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10. Herman meant “The California Limited.” See later in text, and see Marshall, Santa Fe, p. 379, for train numbers. The “Golden State” was a Rock Island train running at the time Herman worked for that company in Kansas City and began to write his memoirs.

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old burro. Oh you killed him all right." I looked at my
fireman and he looked at me, neither speaking a
word. We soon regained normal speed, and reached
Shoemaker Station on time.

Our next stop was Wagon Mound where we had to
stop for water. I spotted the engine at the water crane,
took my oil can, and got to the ground to look my
engine over and apply oil where necessary. The con-
ductor came up and asked me what happened in
Shoemaker Canyon. "Boy," he said, "you put that cook
and his breakfast into the other end of his kitchen and
wrecked the joint up plenty," and he said he would
have to report the matter by wire. I said, "Yes, you
should report it, by all means. After we passed the
stone quarry, I saw a drunken Mexican walking along
the end of the ties. It was on that sharp curve there,
and I couldn't see him until I was almost on him; but
in trying to stop, it had given the drunk time to step
off the track." "Did you hit him?" the conductor asked
me. "No," I replied, "we almost did, but he got off just
in time. The pilot of the engine brushed his coat tail,
but we did not hit him." "Good," said the conductor,
"I'll report it that way."

When we got in and were washing up to go home,
I asked my fireman if he did not think his brother
should finish his student trips on a freight engine.
"Yes, by God," he replied, "I don't want another scare
like that one." In about two weeks, I received a nice
letter from our superintendent complimenting me on
my action in trying to stop my train and thus saving a
human life.

In later life, Herman often alluded to his railroad expe-
riences in conversation. For example, when once explaining
how heat will cause metal to expand, he recalled how, as his
engine topped a ridge one summer day, he saw that the rails
ahead had been bowed outward by the heat of the fierce New
Mexico sun. Fortunately, his train was under control.

The job was not always hard work, of course. Traveling
in a caboose once, he was involved in an all-night poker
game, during which he won a pocket watch. It is a good
watch, for it is a family heirloom. And being a locomotive
engineer did bestow a certain social status, as indicated by
a clipping from a Raton, New Mexico, newspaper printed
after his wedding: "Miss Madge, daughter of Mr. and Mrs.
J. F. Ruffner, and Engineer Herman Collins were united
in matrimony. . . ."

Finally, his job resulted in a minor change to his name.
He had no middle name, so, when he received his pay enve-
lope, he signed for the cash as "H. Collins." One day, a
new paymaster mistakenly gave his envelope to another H.
Collins, who was a track hand whose pay was substantially
less than Herman's and who had managed to drink most
of the difference by the time Herman and the paymaster
found him. Thereafter, Herman always signed himself as
"H. H. Collins."

Those infractions of the rules mentioned by Herman
finally caught up with him. His memoirs tell of the end of his
career with the Santa Fe.

In April of 1913 I was discharged from the railroad
for disregarding one of their rules and after waiting a
year expecting reinstatement I left our home town
and took up work at a small mining camp some eight
miles distant. Being able to handle the Spanish lan-
guage, I was soon promoted, but you, Joe, developed
some sickness and the camp doctor advised a lower cli-
mate and so we removed to Topeka, Kansas, where I
worked at anything I could find until 1914. Then we
came to Kansas City, where I again entered railroad
work, that of a machinist, a trade I learned when a boy
just out of the saddle. I followed this work until the
Railroad Retirement Law went into effect and on July
16, 1937, I retired.