

LOST CARS

WHAT BECOMES OF THEM AND HOW FOUND.

Wonderful System Which Economizes Labor and Insures Safety.

Interesting Description of the Work of the Diligent Car Tracer.

Unique System of Railroads Employed in the Transportation of freight

Columbus Dispatch (June 10, 1893) – Did you ever stand beside a railroad track and watch a freight train pass by, and did you notice on the cars the peculiar and diverse markings? If you have not, take pains to do so sometime, and you will note a wonderful scheme of telling the ownership and route of the car.

No matter by what railroad track you stand you will notice that there are often times more cars belonging to other roads in the train than to the road over which they are passing, and frequently in the heart of the continent will be noticed cars belonging to small railroad corporations in Maine, Florida, Texas, or California.

They seem out of place in their surroundings, says the St. Louis Globe-Democrat, and when the eye catches the lettering of a car belonging to a road running out of Boston or some other distant point, the beholder cannot help wondering how far it is from home. He little supposes that the car which excites his curiosity by its presence in another part of the country from that where it belongs, may have been wandering for months, and at that moment a man from the company owning it may be chasing it about the country in an effort to overtake and bring it home. Such, however, is possibly the case, for cars are valuable, and railroad corporations do not, as a rule, allow their property to pass into other hands without a vigorous, systematic and often long continued effort to retain or regain possession of it.

A LITTLE HISTORY

In the early days of railroading every road kept its cars on its own tracks, and when freight was forwarded to points beyond its limits, the car was emptied; the freight reloaded into other cars and sent on. Thus in a trip of 300 or 400 miles freight was often loaded and reloaded three or four times, and the cost of handling often exceeded the cost of transportation. The necessities of shippers and value of time made it imperative that some system of forwarding goods more rapidly be devised, and thus arose the scheme of roads loading freight for transportation to any part of the country, to be sent through in the same car, the car once loaded not to be opened until it had reached its destination, but to be passed from one road to another, forwarded in turn by each, the roads agreeing among themselves as to what proportion of the through rate each should

receive for doing the work. It thus came to pass that each road handled along with its own cars many of other lines and these cars, not being given preference in any way, stood about the yards, lay on sidings at the station, and became almost a common property. The station freight agents, when in a hurry for cars or urged by the necessities of shippers would often load foreign cars with local freight, rather than make a requisition on the general office for cars, though the company's own cars might be waiting empty at a station only a few miles away. A car once off its own line is, therefore, almost at the mercy of the company on whose line it happens to be, and may possibly be loaded up and sent elsewhere at a moment's notice.

Theoretically, when a loaded car has been turned over by one road to another, it is supposed to be unloaded at the earliest possible moment, then return to the road which owns it; but practically this course is almost exceptional, since railroad companies dislike to haul empty cars, and usually prefer to have them wait until they can be sent back with a load and while waiting the demands of transportation may necessitate the loading of a car with freight for a different direction than that of the home road and then the car may be started on a course of wandering that may take it to any point in the United States or even beyond for American cars pass freely along the Canadian lines.

EXPENSES AND COMPENSATION

It is not to be supposed that roads use "foreign" cars for their own service without compensation. On the contrary every mile that the foreign car travels must be paid for. The rate paid by every road for the use of cars not belonging to its own system is $\frac{3}{4}$ cent a mile for every mile traveled, that is for eight-wheeled cars, half as much being allowed for four-wheel cars. Compared with the cost of a freight car, this sum seems trivial and entirely inadequate, but to a road doing a large business the matter of car mileage becomes one of considerable importance. It is said that one road running out of this city paid last year over a quarter of a million dollars to other roads for the use of their cars, and two other lines have found their mileage bills almost equally heavy. It becomes a matter of the utmost consequence, therefore, to a railroad company to reduce as far as possible its use of foreign cars and press its own into service, making them do all the work they can.

If foreign cars pass over its line they must be made to pay their own way, while if its own cars get into foreign territory they must be brought back as soon as possible.

To watch the cars, whether of home or of foreign lines is the special work of the car accountant's office. His office is the recording station for all cars, whether of the home line or of foreign corporations. A daily record is kept of all cars in charge of the company, whether in motion, on the line, on sidings, in the yards, in the shops or elsewhere, and of the condition of each. Apparently intricate beyond belief, the system is really simple, though involving an immense amount of labor, for so carefully has the plan of watching the movements of cars been devised from beginning to end that even the mistakes made by conductors and yard masters in the haste of making up and recording trains may often be detected and corrected.

THE ACCOUNTANT'S SYSTEM

It is not easy for one who has never had his attention especially called to the subject, to conceive how perfect is the recording system of the railroads, and particularly of the car service. The record of the cars kept is such that at any hour of any day the number of cars, local and foreign on the road may be instantly ascertained, together with their condition, whether in motion or at rest, and where. The reports made by train conductors serve as the original records in keeping the books. These reports give the initials and number of every car in their train, where they took the car, where they left it and in what condition; if loaded, with what, and to who consigned. From these records the annals of the department are compiled.

The local record books are enormous in size and each page is ruled in such a way as to admit of one space for every day of the month, and of thirty or forty cars being recorded on each page. Several record clerks are employed on each set of train reports, each clerk recording the movements of the cars bearing a particular initial, and the papers are passed from hand to hand until all the information they contain has been extracted, reduced to system, thoroughly condensed and placed in the big volumes in such a way that the head of the office can in a moment, ascertain the state of the road so far as the car service is concerned. From these books the amount of mileage due to other roads is ascertained. For convenience in making up this account all the stations of the road are numbered, each being represented by a figure bearing the number of miles that indicates its distance from the beginning of the road. The only exception to this rule is the division or terminal station, where letters are employed.

MISTAKES ARE MADE

It would naturally seem that with such a complete system it would be impossible to lose a car, and it would be if the human race was infallible. But mistakes are bound to be made and so there are many ways by which a car may be lost and its owners have no trace of it for months, and there are instances where cars have disappeared and have never been heard of again. Cars may be lost through the inadvertence of conductors. A conductor must take account of his train as soon as possible before starting, and as freight trains start at all hours of the day and night, getting the initials and numbers of the cars on a rainy night, by the dim light of a lantern, is sometimes no easy matter.

Suppose, for instance, that the conductor, in the hurry of the moment gets the number of the car right, but the initials wrong. If the car has just come on the line from a foreign road there is no immediate means of correcting the mistake, and indeed no mistake will be suspected in the accountant's office until the monthly report is made out, the foreign road communicated with and the mistake discovered. Suppose, again that the initials are right, but the number wrong, the same thing will happen, but before it can be known the car may have traveled hundreds of miles and gone far beyond the jurisdiction of the road where the mistake occurred.

In the junction report there is a possible means of correcting the mistake, for the car accountant receives daily from all junction points detailed reports showing the number and designation of all the cars received from or delivered to connecting roads, and their condition and destination. But it has happened that the junction report overlooked the car in question, or the car may not have gone on to the junction point, and in such cases the mistake may go for some time undetected.

Then again, a car, after leaving an important road, may be turned over to some small road where things are at loose ends, and may be used as a local freight, or finally the car may be involved in a wreck, may be injured, sent to the shop for repairs, be repaired and accidentally or by design, be stamped with new initials or a new number. In any of these ways a car may temporarily disappear and its owners know nothing of its whereabouts for months. In such cases a tracer is sent out to look up the car, ascertain if possible its history during its absence, and bring it home.

ENTER THE CAR TRACER

Most people regard a car tracer as a man who wanders up and down tracks, around through the freight yards, looking for cars that have been stolen from the road that owns them. He is conceived to be very anxious on the subject, and to scan with intense gaze the letters and numbers of every car he sees in the hope that someday he may discover the missing freight vehicle. When he does he is supposed to jump up and down, clapping his hands with great joy, like a man who found the one hundredth sheep in the wilderness and nobody would be greatly surprised if he went on a glorious drunk for a few days. He is supposed to ride on freight trains and make inquiries of conductors and switchmen and yard masters; he is supposed to lie awake at night, and to make life a burden for station agents with inquiries as to whether they have seen it go by.

In reality he does none of these things. He is a well-dressed gentleman, rather clerkly in appearance, whose business is mostly in the offices of the railroads rather than on the tracks. When a car has been lost the first thing to be done is to find out where it disappeared and begin the search at that point. The car he is sent to find may have been lost six months before, but railroad records are preserved indefinitely, and his business is to examine the records until he finds some trace of that car, for looking on the tracks and sidings would be more hopeless than the traditional experience of searching for a needle in a haystack.

Armed with credentials stating who he is and what is his business, and with a bundle of passes entitling him to ride free wherever he goes, he provides himself with the history of the lost car as far as it appears on the records, and then starts to the office of the road on whose tracks it vanished.

After introducing himself he is taken at once to the car accountant's office, where the books are opened for his inspection; for while he is looking for a car on this line their car-tracer may be at his own headquarters searching for a car of that road extending the courtesy to him, and courtesies of this nature must be mutual.

If successful in finding a record of the missing car he takes up the track at that point and follows the record from the office of one car accountant to another, tracing its history day by day until he has brought it down to the day of the search. It sometimes happens, however, that all record of the car has apparently disappeared, for it is surprising how many slips will be made even by the most accurate of men. In such a case his real trouble begins.

If he finds the car accountants' records furnish him no clue to the car, he proceeds to examine the original records of the conductors and agents. Among these he goes, finding in the offices of the car accountants and of station agents huge piles of papers, white, yellow, red, blue and half a dozen other colors, discolored with age, greasy from frequent handling, foul with dust and sometimes half obliterated by damp. Never well written, they are often almost

indecipherable. The pencils used in making the records in the first place were of the hardest, for soft pencils are of no use to the heavy hands of a strong man accustomed too much rough work, and the lines are therefor of the faintest. Erasures and corrections tend to make still further confusion.

It is a wonder that he can do anything at all with these papers, but experience has made them experts in their line, and they go through them with great rapidity. They are usually successful, too, after a tedious search, and as the wonder is that any success at all is met, the work of the car tracer is certainly remarkable.