

Published on October 26, 2021. Editor's headline: His grandfather's watch

Old-timer Jack Chadwell tells this story about his grandfather, whose long-lived service watch has become the stuff of legend:

“My grandfather, Alexander Schmick, was born in 1883 in Germany. As a young man, together with his younger brother August Schmick, he emigrated to New York via Ellis Island. His parents had arranged for him to marry a German girl whose family resided in New York, and he did so. They had six children. My uncle John was the firstborn and my mother was the second. I never met my grandmother; by the time I was born, she had passed on.

“Uncle John and his wife were unable to have children and so, he took an early interest in me, his sister's son and the first grandchild in the family.

“In the 1930s Grandpa Alexander took his family to Omaha, Nebraska, where he began to work for the Union Pacific railroad. At a time when train engines ran on steam, he worked his way up to train engineer. He was given a “timepiece” of his own, a service watch he kept in the bib of his overalls. The train's conductor had a similar watch. Several times a day the watches had to be synchronized to make sure the timetables were upheld. Since the conductor remained in the caboose, he and my grandpa worked out a system of signals. I am told Union Pacific contracted with a specific jeweler to keep its watches running with precision. Grandpa remained with Union Pacific until his retirement in 1958. The service watch was his to keep.

“When Grandpa first worked as engineer, generating steam was done through huge boilers, with firemen having to tend the coal- or wood-burning fires with great attention, lest the boiler explode from excess steam. Especially in the early days, explosions were not uncommon,

both on locomotives and on steam-powered boats. Mark Twain, who worked on a steam-driven Mississippi riverboat, tells of another such boat where his brother worked. The boiler exploded, sending many workers to their deaths, including Twain's brother. I shudder to think what it must have been like to be inundated by boiling steam, an extremely painful way to die.

“A steam engine works through a fire beneath the boiler that heats water, creating steam. The steam escapes through a valve into the cylinder underneath a piston, which is initially sitting near one end of the cylinder. As the steam continues to enter the cylinder it pushes on the piston, forcing it toward the other end of the cylinder, thereby pushing the rod attached to the top of the piston. The rod may be attached to a very heavy weight, which the force of expanding steam can also move. When the steam beneath the piston is cooled with a squirt of water and no more steam is allowed to enter, the piston is pulled down by the force of the empty space created by the condensation of the steam back into water. Then the process begins again: steam is let into the cylinder and pushes the piston back up to the top. Luckily, Grandpa Alexander never experienced a disaster such as befell Twain's brother. Long before his retirement, diesel engines powered the trains he ran.

“In 1986 Alexander's son, my Uncle John, bequeathed his dad's service watch to me, since he himself had no heirs. I had the watch restored and own it to this day. It still runs perfectly. I am told it is a valuable piece of antique jewelry.

“Late in 1986 Uncle John sent me a letter in response to my thank-you note for the watch. In the letter he mentions, in 1943 he visited Omaha on the way to the Alameda air station in California and went to see his dad at the Union Pacific freight house. There, one of the guys told him that his dad had ‘hit 120 mph on a mail run.’ His dad laughed when he heard this and said,

‘That’s history. One of the guys hit 130 mph’ with the #6 eastbound mail train. Uncle John asked his dad, ‘He wouldn’t be in the freight house, would he?’ His dad pretended to scan the room. John glanced at the station master who nodded his head. I believe this means that my grandpa was the one with the speed record. If so, it would have been the highlight of his career. Maybe the railroad bosses asked him to drive his train with the steam-engine locomotive at the fastest speed possible, which would have been a dangerous feat. I have a photo of Grandpa Alexander with his railroad bosses and his firemen on the platform of a diesel engine, which was probably taken at his retirement.

“Grandpa was unhappy when the railroad forced him to retire at sixty-five. He got to keep the service watch; however, he wanted to continue driving ‘his’ train. They wouldn’t let him. Rules were rules, and the rule said 65 is retirement age.

“Grandpa never learned to drive an automobile. Whenever he wanted to watch the Omaha team play baseball, he took a cab to the ballpark. My family lived not far from his house, and sometimes he took me with him to the ballpark. After the game we would take the cab to a pub where he met with his buddies to hash out the game over a beer. He sat me on a stool and bought me a sarsaparilla soda.

“Grandpa died not long after retirement. I think he died of a broken heart. I cherish his watch as a memento of his long-ago time and place with Union Pacific.”