

Flebbe Family – Over 150 Years with Uncle Pete!

With three generations of railroaders, our family's service to the UP began in 1898 with my Grandfather, Walter H. Flebbe, who began his career as a call-boy. He worked hard and rose through the ranks eventually being promoted to engineer in 1907. His first run was on UP 31, a Baldwin 4-4-2. Based in North Platte, he retired in 1947 after a last run on the City of San Francisco and over 49 years of service.

Two of his sons would follow in his footsteps: Elmer, the youngest, who also started as a call-boy in 1934, rose to the position of telegrapher, and later became the West-bound Dispatcher at Bailey Yard where he retired in 1976 after 42 years of service. Elmer raised two sons that would become railroaders as well- Ronald, who worked in the Lab at North Platte for several years, and Carl, who apparently drew the short straw. He worked with a track crew for one summer and decided Railroadng was not for him!

Another son of Walter's, Paul E. Flebbe (my father), started as an engine cleaner in 1929 at age 18. He began a Machinist's Apprenticeship in July 1929, which he eventually completed in November of 1937. During this period, and with the cooperation of UP management, he attended Purdue University (which at the time had a Locomotive Testing Plant) where he earned a B.S. in Railway Mechanical Engineering, graduating in 1937. After graduation, he returned to UP at North Platte; rose to the position of Assistant Engineer of Road Tests in 1939; and by 1943 became Assistant Engineer of Design and Material. In April of 1943 he was called to active duty in the Transportation Corps, U.S. Army, 726th Railway Operating Battalion, and assigned as Enginehouse Foreman and Superintendent of Shops in Gauhati, Assam, India from 1943-1945 with the 758th Railway Shop Battalion.

He returned to UP as Engineer of Road Tests, until recalled to Military service once again in September 1950. He served as Superintendent of Equipment and Executive Officer of the 702nd Railway Grand Division at Ft. Eustis, Virginia before being assigned to the Far East Command as Superintendent of shops at Inchon, South Korea in the 3rd Transportation Military Railway Service. He again returned to UP in July 1952 as Engineer of Road Tests. By November of 1953, due to "continuing retirement of steam power", he was reassigned as Engineer of Stress and Materials. In 1968 he was appointed to the position of Research and Standards Engineer, overseeing the entire research department at the MP&M Lab in Omaha. He held that position until his passing in 1974, with over 45 years service.

When I graduated High School, it was just a few short months before I hired on as a Machinist Apprentice at the Omaha Shops in 1973. I completed my apprenticeship and worked as a journeyman in the Shops until they were closed in 1989. I was fortunate during that period to have the opportunity to work on the 844 several times when it was shopped, as well as the Big Boy 4023, preparing it for static display. The Big Boy went on display at the Omaha shop complex for a period of time, before being moved to its current location at Lauritzen Gardens/Kenefick Park alongside the Centennial 6909. I also routinely worked on many of the 6900's, as they were still fairly new when my career started, getting phased out in the mid 80's.

One of the "perks" my father enjoyed for many years, was a free rail pass for the family. When I was a young boy growing up in the 1960's, our family always took summer vacations on the Streamliners, traveling from Omaha to all points west. The quality of service, the panoramic beauty of the scenery from a Domeliner, and going to sleep in a berth with the steady sound of the wheels against rail on those vacations is permanently etched in my memory. Those were truly wonderful times, and I feel very fortunate to have experienced railroading first hand. Thanks, Uncle Pete.

(Paul) Richard Flebbe