

MAX M. HARNETT, C&O CONDUCTOR

Edited by Charles H. Bogart

In going through the Blue Grass Railroad Museum archives recently I found a short autobiography by Max. M Harnett, who worked for the C&O for 48 years. I have added a short introduction and some concluding remarks to Mr. Harnett's account and have clarified some of his comments.

Max Malloy Harnett was born in 1899 to Michael P. Harnett and Letitia Fightmaster Harnett in Lexington, Kentucky. Max went to school in Lexington and at an early age developed a fascination with railroading. One could not say that he was a "railfan," as the term had not yet been invented. That he was, in fact, a railfan is not in doubt, for he was a founding member of the Bluegrass Railroad Club and the Bluegrass Railroad Museum.

The following is Mr. Harnett's account of his railroad career.—Charles Bogart

I started my railroad career early in life, in 1917 when I was 17 years old. I went to work for the C&O at Lexington, Kentucky, in a transfer gang. The transfer gang worked in the Netherland Yard in Lexington. They would transfer freight from boxcars too large to pass through the tunnels east of Lexington, reloading it into smaller boxcars.¹ These large-size boxcars were delivered to the Netherland Yard via interchange with the Louisville & Nashville Railroad or the Southern Railway. Sometimes it would take two small boxcars to handle the shipment from one large interchange boxcar. This was very hard work, so after a few months I decided to find another job and went to work as a private chauffeur.

After a short period of being employed as a chauffeur I decided I needed a trade, thus I went into electrical work. However, railroading again entered into my mind so I went to work for the Southern Railway. I was employed as a brakeman on the First Division, Ludlow, Ky., (across the Ohio River from Cincinnati) to Danville, Kentucky. A strike by the Southern Railway's Mechanical Department and the Clerk's Union, however, made business slow. As I had no seniority I was not getting much work off of the extra board. I thus quit the Southern and went to work for the Cleveland, Cincinnati, Chicago & St. Louis Railroad, the "Big Four." [The Big Four was part of the New York Central System.]

I was assigned to the Big Four's Sharonville Yard, located just north of Cincinnati, as a yard switchman. The weather was bad that winter in Ohio so that I soon decided to again give up railroading. I therefore returned to Lexington and went to work for the Kentucky Utility Company installing light meters. I soon found that railroading would not leave my blood. I thus surrendered to my fate and again hired out to the C&O as a brakeman. This time I would stay for 48 years.

I started to work for the C&O at Lexington in 1923. There were 340 men on the seniority list ahead of me and I started at the bottom of this list. I soon moved up the list, however, and more and



On January 26, 1971, Max Harnett was greeted by his wife, Ethel, at Lexington station as he stepped down from the *George Washington* at the end of his last run as a conductor for the C&O. (Bluegrass Railroad Museum Collection)

more assignments came my way. I worked at first on the Louisville Division, Lexington to Louisville, and then the Lexington Division, Lexington to Ashland, and later Lexington to Russell, Kentucky.

During this period at Lexington I qualified for baggage master and brakeman on passenger trains. The only positions open for me, at this time, in passenger service was at Ashland, Kentucky. I thus moved to Ashland and there I was assigned to extra passenger work only. I made my home at the Ashland Railroad YMCA, but Lexington was my real home. I worked on passenger trains running toward Maysville, Ky., Charleston, W. Va., Elkhorn City, Ky., and Lexington.

The "Railroad Y" was the "away from home" residence of nearly all the railroad men. It was the best place to hear all the news of what was going on in railroading in general. The men would talk about jobs, the trips they had been on, telling you the good and bad about the equipment, the changes taking place, how other crews were doing their jobs, and what to expect and what to do at a certain point on a trip. All of this helped when you went out on your job, making your trip better.

Among the trains I worked during this period were through passenger trains to Louisville Nos. 21-22 and Nos. 23-24; Big Sandy passenger trains Nos. 36-37 and Nos. 38-39; and Lexington local Nos. 38-39. I also worked many specials like Derby trains, troop trains, hospital trains, coal mine owners' trains, C&O president's private car trains, inspection trains, baseball specials, and many other types. This work was very interesting because you met all kinds of people and usually something out of the ordinary happened.

I have had on my train miners with broken backs lying on stretchers going to the hospital, and often had very sick patients on cots or stretchers traveling for medical treatment. These sick people all had to have a doctor's certificate stating that they did not have a contagious disease and that they were OK to travel by train. If they did not have such a certificate you could not load them into the baggage car. You never knew what you were going to see when you opened the baggage car door and looked at the depot platform. I have had corpses, dogs, cats, monkeys, baby chickens, bicycles, wheel chairs, and Sears Roebuck catalogs by the thousands in the baggage car.

One night I was brakeman on Big Sandy Train No. 38, and as the train

pulled into Pikeville at 10:30 I saw a large crowd going to the front of the engine. I had to go back to the rear of the train, to flag with my red flag and red and white lanterns, so I could not see what the excitement was about. We stayed at the depot for some time and when we left the station I asked the conductor why we had stayed so long. He told me that they had found a man sitting on a saddle on the front end of the locomotive. They had removed him and sent him to the hospital. The man was only slightly bruised, but he was in shock. He was also highly inebriated. We later learned that the train had hit and killed the horse he was riding four miles from Pikeville. The man and his saddle had landed on the front of the locomotive and he had completed his ride into town on an iron horse.

Every day was a new experience in my life as a railroad man. Once when I was flagman on Big Sandy No. 38 we were leaving Prestonsburg, Ky., in a bad rainstorm. A few miles east of the town we were stopped by a landslide, and I had to flag the rear. I was out there in the rain for over eight hours without relief, in soaking rain, without even a tree to stand under. At the end of the day I didn't have a dry thread on me. Well, that was railroading in those days. That was what made railroading different; each day was a new experience and no matter what time or weather a railroader was always ready to go out and do his job.

Your day on a railroad is 24 hours long and you can be called any hour of the day or night. A crew consisted of five men: engineer, fireman, head brakeman, rear brakeman, and conductor. This meant five different families whose husband or son is on call at any hour. The conductor is in full charge of the train and must see that

all his orders are in proper form. The engineer and all the other crewmembers are responsible for their own job and must be ready when it is time for the train to roll.

The engineer had a regular fireman and each man knew his job and how to do it. The caboose was assigned to a conductor, so that he had the same "hack" every trip. The head brakeman and the rear brakemen ride in the caboose with the conductor. The caboose was often called the "cabin car." Each man of the crew, with the exception of the locomotive crew, had a bunk bed in the caboose. The caboose was your home away from home and you could cook, sleep, and rest there.

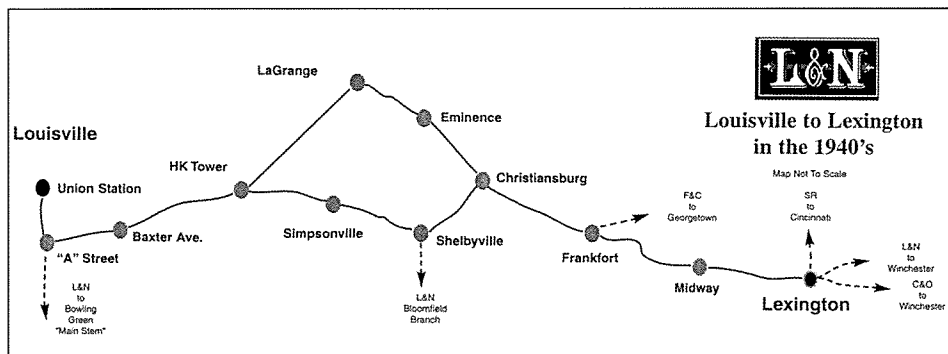
Soon after I retired in 1971 all this changed so that crews no longer had a regular caboose assigned to them. The cabooses are run anywhere at anytime, so it is not as good these days as it use to be.

On the Louisville Division the C&O used the L&N from Lexington to Louisville. We were working for the C&O but under L&N rules and L&N supervision. It was like working for two railroads at the same time. The C&O and the L&N men had a good working relationship. As a railroad man you knew all the stations, agents, operators, section men, signal men, and all other employees wherever you would meet them.

The men of this division and every division had special names for various curves, road crossings, and bridges along the right of way. When these names were used every man knew the location in question.

I must tell a story here. "Streaking" is supposed to be a big fad today [1974]. But let me tell you about some streaking that happened back in 1924, and the streaker was me! The streaking incident happened in 1924. I was riding in the caboose of a Louisville-bound C&O freight on the afternoon of September 24, 1924. We were nearing the West Frankfort Hill, at Frankfort, Kentucky, when suddenly our train collided with a helper engine running toward us in reverse. Three crewmen died instantly, and I was thrown from my seat in the caboose. I skidded across the floor of the caboose on my back. The floor was covered in coal, which had spilled out from the caboose's stove coal bucket. By the time I stopped skidding my back was pretty well lacerated by the coal.

I wound up in the emergency room at King's Daughter Hospital in Frankfort. Here a nurse told me to take off my shirt



The *George Washington* ran between Lexington and Louisville via Shelbyville. Until 1950, the *George* called at Louisville's Central Station, but in its last decade or so the train terminated at Louisville Union Station. (Map by John Landrum, courtesy Louisville & Nashville Historical Society)

and lower my bib overalls to the waist so she could treat my back. I was standing there, holding my bibs up when she suddenly dipped a big sponge in alcohol and slapped in on my bare back! I took off running down the corridor but was slowed down by the fact that my bib had fallen down around my ankles!! Well it was all pretty embarrassing. The nurse caught up with me and managed to calm me down enough to slap iodine all over my back.

At this time I have to say that I think that I worked the best years the railroad had, for this was the steam era. The steam era was really something. The engines were hand-fired and small when I hired on, then they became larger and stoker fired. Stoker firing was a big improvement over the hand-firing. When steam engines were at their best, I was with them. We had some engineers on the C&O that truly loved the engines and could really make them work just right. Then there were some who just ran the engine. You were always glad to get a good engineer, for your trip was better in every way.

When I started my railroad career trains were moved on train orders. Then the C&O got electric block signals, which were a big boost to train movements. The first train signal was a semaphore type, and then the color-light type came along. Railroads have come a long way in improving services in all ways.

When I first went to work on the C&O all passenger trains were "Yellow Coaches." These trains were called "The Yellow Kid," but in early 1920 the yellow was changed to standard olive green.

On April 22, 1930, after a very rigorous rules exam, I was promoted to conductor. This was truly a proud day in this railroader's life!

The Great Depression hit many railroads very hard, but life on the C&O did not seem to slow up much. Many new men were laid off, but those with seniority continued to railroad. I was bumped to brakeman but continued to work. We on the C&O were all lucky to be working for a coal-hauling railroad. Toward the end of the Thirties tonnage being handled on the C&O was getting to be too much for the locomotives. Thus began the last stage in C&O steam locomotive development. I saw this last stage produce powerful but beautiful steam locomotives. The late Thirties saw many improvements in the C&O motive power and physical plant.

These would be sorely needed in the war years just around the corner.

On March 13, 1936, I got married to a Lexington girl, Ethel Pauline Scott. We made our home in Lexington and have enjoyed a happy and prosperous marriage.

I stayed in freight service though most of World War II, during which time I was on many special kinds of trains on the Lexington to Louisville line. Trains loaded with bombs were but one type of train over our line. These were very dangerous and had to be handled very carefully. We also ran solid trains of aviation gas and even a train of poison gas. Then there were the many troop trains, P.O.W. trains, and hospital trains carrying wounded soldiers.

I think I have worked every kind of train there is while working for the C&O. These included work trains, wreck trains, baseball specials and even a presidential special. Every railroad man on these special movements did his job the best he could to make the trip the best possible.



Max and Ethel on their wedding day in front of their apartment in Lexington, Kentucky. (Bluegrass Railroad Museum Collection)

Railroad men are a wonderful group to work with at all times.

The pride of the C&O during my years with the company were its polished fleet of passenger trains: the *George Washington*, the *Sportsman*, and the *FFV*. Passenger consists through Lexington gradually increased in length through the Thirties; reaching a peak shortly after World War II. These trains were excellent in every way; in fact, the *George Washington* was the first totally air-conditioned train in the United States.

All through World War II and for years after most C&O passenger runs were double-headed all the way from Ashland to Louisville. It was not uncommon for the eastbound afternoon *George Washington* to tie up all of downtown Lexington during its station stop. This was due to the train consisting of 12 or 13 heavyweight Pullman and coach cars that necessitated spotting twice at the depot for unloading passengers. Loco-motives used during these years included the rather brutish looking K-2 class 2-8-2, the J-class 4-8-4, and Atlantic and Pacific engines. Like most railroads, the C&O cleaned out its enginehouses during World War II trying to get all the traffic over the road.

All Pullmans required on the Louisville-Ashland-Washington, D.C., run were coupled onto the train at Louisville. As you know, the Louisville section of C&O passenger trains tied on to the section from Cincinnati at Ashland, Kentucky. At Ashland all the Pullmans on the section from Cincinnati were normally already filled with through passengers that had boarded at Cincinnati Union Terminal or other depots along the way. The now longer passenger train would continue on to Washington, D.C. A typical consist of an eastbound *George Washington* during the late Forties was as follows: one Railway Post Office car, one baggage car, one combine, two coaches, one full diner, and three heavyweight Pullman sleepers. Of course when needed, extra coaches and Pullmans were added to the train.

The passing of the years since I hired on with the C&O has brought a lot of changes to the railroad. During the 1950s steam gave way to diesel, the old olive colored Pullman cars gave way to stainless steel cars, and F-units gave way to GP7s. But other things were also changing at this time; the passenger trains were getting

shorter and the riders fewer. April 1952 saw the last steam movement out of Lexington, when K-2 Mike No. 1166 led six other steam engines in a light move to Russell. More than one C&O railroad man will tell you that it was all “downhill” for the railroads when they scrapped their steam locomotives. At the same time the automobile was slowly killing off the famous fleet of C&O passenger trains. As for myself I had advanced to the top ten in the C&O Lexington Division seniority list, leaving 300 men younger than myself behind me on the list.

On May 9, 1957, the C&O ceased using the 50-year-old Lexington Union Station located on East Main Street. Union Station was built in 1907 at a cost of \$375,000 and served the L&N and the C&O. It was owned by the Union Station Company, of which the L&N was the major stockholder. The L&N had ceased passenger rail service to Lexington in the early 1950s. The Southern Railway had their own station on South Broadway.

The last C&O train to use Lexington Union Station was the eastbound *George Washington*. At the time of closing the only passenger train using the station was the *George Washington*. At one time the C&O ran eight trains daily out of Union Station, while the L&N dispatched 12 trains from here. When the C&O left the Union Station it was used for a few more years by the L&N freight department. [The L&N maintained offices at Union Station until the early 1960s. The depot was torn down in the 1970s and the site is now occupied by an office building.]

When the C&O left Union Station it moved passenger operations to a new but much smaller building on Delaware Avenue near the Netherland Yard. The westbound *George Washington* of May 10, 1957, was the first passenger train to use this depot. The eastbound *George Washington* on May 1, 1971, was the last passenger train to use the Delaware Avenue Depot. The depot is still used [1974] by freight crews. [It is in 2005 a church.] In December 1968 the track through downtown Lexington, via Vine Street, was taken up. C&O passenger and freight trains then both took a northern loop through Lexington to the Delaware depot.

During the last days I worked for the railroad, a new law was passed by Congress governing working hours. The new law reduced the working day for a



On the morning of his last run, Max posed at Lexington Union Station beside the *George Washington* just before giving the highball to head for Louisville. (Bluegrass Railroad Museum Collection)

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railroad employee from 16 hours to 14 hours. The law was later changed and a working day became 12 hours. With this change in hours I was assigned to the *George Washington* as conductor from Lexington to Louisville and return to Lexington. I liked this job for I was home for all my meals except noon and got to sleep at home every night.

While working as conductor on the Lexington–Louisville–Lexington run our train hauled hundreds of school children. For many of the kids this was their first train ride and also their last. The kids usually rode from Lexington to Frankfort, or Frankfort to Shelbyville, or Shelbyville to Louisville. It was really something to see their mixed feelings and emotions on riding a train for the first time.

My retirement day, January 26, 1971, came with mixed emotions. I did not want to retire! I was mentally and physically able to continue working for a few more years, but they were taking the *George Washington* off on May 1, 1971. After 139 years of passenger service it was being discontinued by the railroads and being replaced with Amtrak service. I would have to step down from passenger service after that date and move to Ashland if I wanted to continue to work for the C&O. I did not want to move, as Lexington was our home. My wife and I were both born and raised here, family and friends were here, we didn't want to leave, and thus I retired.

When I stepped down from the *George Washington* for the last time Lexington Mayor Charles Wylie gave me an official greeting. It is true that I said to Mayor Wylie, who had his normal police

escort with him, “First time the police ever met me and didn't have a warrant.” Also present were many members of my family and friends who came to greet me at the end of my last run. Among them was Wilbur Faulker, who had retired as an engineer in 1962 with 50 years of service. He told me that us young people just did not have what it took to be an old-time railroader as I did not get a 50-year service pin from the C&O. I had, however, worked for the C&O for 48 years, 59 days, 12 hours, and 29 minutes and had traveled over two million miles on their track. The *George Washington* on this day consisted of one diesel engine, one baggage car, two coaches, and one Pullman car; the train was but a shadow of what had been.

I would like to finish my story with a word of praise and thanks to my wife, who has been a true Railroad Wife from the day of our marriage. She was helpful in forming the “Chessie Club” for retired and active C&O employees. She knows most of the officials on the road and contacts them frequently by letter. She has been spotlighted many times in company publications for her interest and concern for the C&O Railway and its employees.

In closing I would like to thank all for allowing me to share these fond memories with you. Would I do it all over again? Yes, I would. I believe I made a successful trip of it. Railroading offers as much of a future as anything I know of, that is if you work at it the way it should be worked.

As a note, Max and Ethel had no children of their own, but they looked out for the families of their fellow railroaders. Max enjoyed a full life in retirement, even returning to work as a passenger conductor during some steam outings sponsored by the Bluegrass Railroad Club. Mr. Harnett died in 1981. His coffin was carried to its grave site at Hillcrest Memorial Cemetery by fellow C&O employees both active and retired. His wife Ethel died in 1989 and is buried alongside Max.

Note 1: One of the reasons given by CSX for abandoning the Ashland–Lexington C&O route was that the tunnels were too small to handle modern freight cars and the expense of reboring or “daylighting” the tunnels was greater than the expected return from projected traffic. 