

## PORTRAIT OF A RAILROADER, PART I

By Evamaria Krischell

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As a substitute for our "Local Representatives" series, the next three articles will attempt to describe a person of long ago: one W.W. Brakefield, a conductor for the NC & St L R.R. Line and of Cowan, Tennessee.

Personal letters and newspaper clippings scarcely need an explanation in order to give a clear picture of this man's loyalty, strict adherence to the law and rules, and a genuine belief in the Christian faith.

On his retirement in 1920, after 40 years of service, a newspaper described him as "...one of the oldest passenger conductors on the Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis railway in point of service....Railroad officials speak in the highest terms of his service and loyalty to the company and but for his application for relief he would still be running the road.

"Mr. Brakefield lives at Cowan, Tenn., and for forty-six years has been in the service, most of the time as a conductor. He entered the service as a brakeman in October, 1873, and was shortly thereafter promoted to conductor. He has handled freight runs as well as passenger runs, his last service being on the Old Hickory branch between Nashville and the powder plant."

He was evidently given a generous pension and certificate of performance, for he sends his letter on January 3, 1920. The letter is copied verbatim and the spelling is original:

"Cowan Station

Jan. 3, 1920

W.P. Bruce G.M.

F.W. Kelsey G. Supt. and all conserved

T.A. Cakeson

My Dear sirs

In anser to your most welcom and valuable Faiver of the 30<sup>th</sup> I wil say that I can not find wordes to Explayne to you how I appreciat it, and as I Penn this my Eyes is Dimes with moistur to no that you have agreed to Provide Temporal Blessings that wil Protect me and my companion (Lik Eliza of olde) the Remainder of naturall Day.

"Rockfeller is no Prouder of his Fortune to Day than I am mine which has fell to my fate that has caused me to have & go through maney Hair Raising Exesiences [experiences].

but by being Faithfull to my Trust & Living up to the Golden Rule I am now Reeping what I hav sowne – now all that I can say in your behalf is that I hope and Trust tht your Hastes [hearts] & mindes may be Divinley Guided & Directed Like the Lonsom Finger Board that makes no mistakes allways Pointing in the Right Direction for Ever Ready to assist those that needes assistance for whitch you wil Reape spiritual Blessings Ten Foldes moore than you have sown. Isah 30 – 15. 16

I remain as Ever yours  
WWBrakefield”

(Underlined Brackets, Editor’s interpretation.)

We would like to express our gratitude to Mr. and Mrs. James Cantrell for the loan of several letters, newspaper clippings and pictures, which will make up this trilogy. (E.K.)

## **PORTRAIT OF A RAILROADER, PART II**

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The portrayal of a railroad employee of a century ago becomes clearer as the following two letters reveal W.W. Brakefield’s loyalty and reverence to the company.

On the death of the president of the NC & St L R.R. he writes this letter on Dec. 23, 1913 from the Nashville Station to the former assistant and newly appointed President and General Manager of N C & St L R.R., a Mr. Jno. Howe Peyton: (sic)

“Mr. J. H. Payton President and Generall maniger NC & St L R.R.

“My Dear sir

“Having Recently Red the announcement of your apointment to the Highest office of the NC & St L. R.R. Permit me to say no one is Delited any more than I to no that we Employes of this company wil have a Christian God Fearing man to stand at the Head of our Hole Enier [entire] system of RR.

“Having spent 43 years as a Faith full servent contunuely whitch brings me fair Dow the shady side Life no one has Tryed to Walk the straight and narrow Path any more than I. I no that Have had many mistakes but it has allways benn the Head and not the Haste.

“While no one Lament any more than I the Loss of our President but the good Lord Giveth and taketh and no man can Hender and we must worship and serve him jest the same whenn upon my bended nees offering up my Devotions I have allways (in the Past and wil continue to do so In the Futur) asked for Divine Gu8dence to be given to my

superior officers so that they may meet our Justice between man and man. Hoping to meet you some Futur Day Face to Face

“Respectfully yours

WWBrakefield  
only a Conductor”

(Underlined parenthesis, Editor’s interpretation.)

W.W. Brakefield, who humbly signs his letter “only a conductor”, actually received an answer, dated four days later, Dec. 27, 1913. He must have been very proud of it and saved it, ---perhaps for the day when he would actually meet this man face to face?

Mr. Peyton answers:

“Your letter of the 23<sup>rd</sup> instant has just been received and read with much interest and appreciation. I shall hope to have the pleasure of meeting you frequently after I assume my new duties

“I fully concur in the sentiments expressed in your letter. I have not the shadow of a doubt that if I have the guidance that you are asking for me that all will be well while I am the Executive Officer of the Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis Railway. With earnest desire that such will be the case, I remain,

Yours truly,

Jno. Howe Peyton”

(E.K.)

### **PORTRAIT OF A RAILROADER, PART III**

*(Published in the Cowan Bell, Vol. II, No. 5, March 6, 1975)*

In the conclusion of the portrayal of one conductor, W.W. Brakefield, who started his career in 1873 here in Cowan, we will let two “men of the cloth” give their impression of this man’s strict adherence to railroad rules.

It seems that the crowning experience of Mr. Brakefield’s career was a clash with two lady passengers on keeping their pet cat with them in the passenger car. The incident obviously had it repercussions in the form of a complaint by these two ladies to the Superintendent of Transportation, M.J.C. Wrenne.

To get to the bottom of the disturbance, inquiries were made about Mr. Brakefield's conduct on this memorable day, July 31, 1911.

One reply, dated Aug. 10, 1911, from a Rev. J.A. Whitener, is quite clear: "I was a passenger on train No. 94 July 31<sup>st</sup>, 1911 and saw all that took place between Mr. Brakefield and two lady passengers in reference to a cat. The conductor did his duty and did in it explain in a gentlemanly way. The ladies were to blame for all the trouble."

However, a more explicit letter, dated August 2, 1911, from Rev. Troy Beatly, describes the situation so well, that we will let it speak for itself:

"Replying to yours of yesterday in re conduct of the conductor on train Chattanooga to Nashville July 30<sup>th</sup> (31<sup>st</sup>?). Am Sorry to write by hand, but am away from home and haven't my typewriter with me.

"Yes, I saw the entire transaction from start to finish so far as the cat being carried from the car was concerned. I left the train at Cowan and up to that time the only possible adverse criticism of the conductor was that he was far too considerate and patient with a most annoying and vulgarly self asserting passenger in skirts. He explained time and time again in a most courteous and gentlemanly manner that her cat would be perfectly safe in the baggage car and that he has no option but to carry out orders. Both women abused him, the road, the state and the entire south for objecting to her cat traveling in the coach. It had far more sense than he did and lots of sort of disgusting talk. I was seated just opposite them and so had the full benefit of it. When he finally took the cat and cage both women clinging to it so that he was compelled to loosen their fingers as he did gently as he could; the younger of the two women, probably well in the forties, followed him to the baggage car to be with and comfort her dear cat leaving the mother apparently past eight to shift for herself as best she could. This will give you some idea of the sort of people your conductor was dealing with.

"As a clergyman, or as a gentleman, I stepped across the aisle to try and comfort the old lady and to assure her that her pet would be in no danger. Much to the amusement of the other passengers she mistook me for a railroad man and threatened to box my ears, break my head, and several other terrible things unless I attended to my own business. On account of her age I persisted and did finally convince her that my intentions were good and was then able to quiet her some what.

"There was not one word of criticism of the conductor from any passenger on the train except the two owners of the cat. His conduct was in every way courteous, and such as might be expected from one in the employ of such a splendid Company. When I tell you that I gave him my card and address unsolicited in case these people tried to make trouble for him you can understand how his manner impressed me.

“You may feel at liberty to use this letter as you please but am sorry that it is not typewritten.”

Mr. Brakefield has long since past away; it is safe to assume that the two helpful pastors are also no longer with us. But the letters and documents in this three part series remain to give us a vivid picture of the character of one railroader. More important, they describe an era that will probably never return.

We are most grateful to Mr. and Mrs. James Cantrell for the loan of the documents used to make up “Portrait of a Railroader”. (E.K.)