

A Chat with Conductor Robert Howe

Part One

FBDP's oral history program continues to introduce us to interesting people who have wonderful insights to share about our local railroad history. On June 8, 2005, your editor had the pleasure to videotape the recollections of **Robert M. Howe**, a 40-year veteran of the Boston & Maine Railroad. Mr. Howe worked principally in passenger service as a trainman-conductor. In fact, the Lexington Branch was among his assignments.

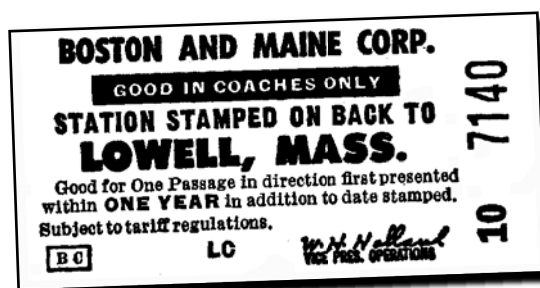
Upon arriving at the Howe family home in Lowell, Bob shared with me numerous B&M documents and photos from his personal collection. Some of these you'll see in this and future newsletter issues. Then, we retreated to Bob's comfortable living room for nearly three hours of conversation about his railroad career. The below excerpts were transcribed and edited from that interview.

After reading this article, be sure to check Robert Howe's video clips on FBDP's web site. Go to www.BedfordDepot.org and click on the Oral History button.

I was born a railroad person. My father and two uncles were railroad men. My father was a conductor on the **New Hampshire Division**, which was the Southern Division then—the same division I worked on. I grew up here in this house seeing my father come and go in his conductor's uniform. Of course, in those days [the B&M] went to different places, not just commuter service like we have now. He ran Montreal trains and the *Bar Harbor Express* from New York to Portland; and he did quite a bit of spare conductor's work, so he was going to different places here and there.

My father's name was Elvin Augustus, but everyone on the railroad called him Gus. Everybody on the railroad knew Gus Howe! He started [on the B&M] in 1898 or '99. He had 32 years on the railroad when he died. My uncle was on the Portland Division and he had 48 years when he quit. I had 40 years. So, for about 118 years there was always a Howe on the railroad! We all were B&M men.

My father had the **Milk Train** [job] for a long time. He was the conductor. He wasn't home at night when he was on the Milk because he went up one night [to White River Junction] and down the next. So, he'd have to leave [home] in the afternoon to go to Boston, and then go to White River Junction. In those days, it was a second class train. So, it took a long time to clear for other trains and meet trains and set off cars. They'd get to White River sometime in the early



morning. They left [to return to Boston] in the evening. If they had a good trip, it might be 6 or 7 o'clock in the morning [when he got home]. If they had a bad trip, it would be 8, 9 or 10 o'clock before he got in. He'd come home and sleep a few hours and then go back. It was a seven-day job. There were no two days off like now.

Unfortunately, my father died when I was just a youngster, so I lost contact with the railroad for a number of years when I was going to school. But I used to enjoy hearing my mother tell about my father's experiences on the railroad. She used to tell where he went and the jobs he had. So, that sort of got me interested in the railroad and thinking that might be a nice occupation.

When I started high school, I had to go to downtown Lowell. [The bus fare] was a dime or 15 cents. To save the money, we used to walk home. Of course, I'd go through the railroad station at Middlesex Street. I would stop and watch the trains come and go, and that sort of piqued my interest. By stopping there every afternoon, I became acquainted with the railroad men. They were all very nice—but they were especially nice to me when they found out who I was because most of them had worked with my father. Of course, they were his brakemen—and [later] when I went to work they were my conductors! So, it was sort of an evolution.

The railroad men were good [to me]. They said, "Gee, if you'd like to get on the railroad, we'll help you." They sent me to Concord [New Hampshire] to see the superintendent. But at that time, they weren't hiring trainmen. They had hired a bunch of people in 1939 and in '41. So, by this time, they weren't hiring.

In 1942, I got a job at the **Lowell Station** in the baggage room. I worked there for a year until I went into the service. That was quite a job. It was a lot of work! In those days, Lowell was a busy place. There were trains 24 hours a day. We'd handle mail, newspapers, baggage, express items, company material—we handled everything [including] checking baggage for people. I was on the night shift.



Collecting Boston & Maine Railroad artifacts is one of Conductor Howe's hobbies in retirement.

One of the jobs for the **baggage master** in those days was to fire the boiler for the station. We carried 200 pounds of steam in the boiler. As an example of what we had to heat, there was a big waiting room with a high cathedral ceiling, the ticket office—and the bus depot had an office, the cab company had an office, the baggage room, and Railway Express. To add insult to injury, there was a store at the top of the stairs. We heated Barlow's Store. Then, when the Pullman came off of the train from Concord, they'd hook that up to the steam. The last train in at night they'd put up against the sidetrack. They heated it all night for the first train in the morning.

In the meantime, there were trains coming in. We had local trains, of course, then we had the paper train out of Boston. We had the *State of Maine* that came up from Portland. We took all the mail and baggage off of it to transfer to the

White River or Concord trains. Also, we took the mail from [those trains] to transfer to the *State of Maine* coming from New York. Then, if you were trying to do something else, all of a sudden the Milk Train would show up. They probably had eight or nine cars. You'd have to go unload the milk [that was] in the 40 quart jugs. It was all packed in ice, so it was nice and cold when you went into the car. The **Shop Train** used to come down first thing in the morning to pick up the men for the **Billerica Shops**. So, that was our business at Lowell Station.

I was in the [military] service for three years. When I came back in 1946, I hired out in train service. At that time they were hiring, thank goodness, but I was at the lower end of the roster. They hired a lot of people during the war, you know. They all got ahead of me. I worked, but I was on the **spare board** for 22 years before I could get a regular job. I covered most all the jobs

on my own division plus some on the foreign divisions when they were short of help. I worked every branch line on the New Hampshire Division, [ones] that don't even exist now. I worked Worcester to Peterborough, Worcester to Ayer, Concord to Claremont, Boston to Stoneham, Boston to Bedford, Boston to Clinton.

One of the first jobs I was assigned was out to Clinton [on the **Central Massachusetts Branch**]. I worked the first job of the morning out of Clinton, mainly because nobody else wanted to go out that way! It was a long way to go. But it was a nice job, and I ended up on a **gas buggy** in the afternoon.

The gas buggy was one car. The engineer and the engines were in the front, and next was the baggage compartment which was very small. In the afternoon when we made that trip, we [carried] all the Boston papers that came out. At that time, we had the *Boston Record*, the *American*, the *Herald*, the *Traveler* and the *Globe*. A lot of papers! They used to pack the baggage compartment right up to the ceiling with the newspapers. So, I only had room to stand at the doorway to open the door when we got to the first station. I couldn't even get back into the coach. That was great in the summertime because you were packed in there with no air and with all the heat from the engines! We unloaded papers all the way to Clinton. Once we started unloading them, after a couple stations I had room to breathe.

I guess I got bumped off [that job]. I was bemoaning the fact that I wasn't getting much work. My mother mentioned to one of the old-time conductors that Bob is a little discouraged that he is not getting work. "Well," he said, "you tell him to hang on because in about a month he'll have all the work he wants." Sure enough, about the week before the Fourth of July, they started the **camp trains** out of Worcester. All the rich people in Washington and New York sent their kids to camp in Maine for the summer. They all came by train in those days. Practically the whole spare board in Boston went out to Worcester. We were there probably two or two and half weeks. It never stopped! All Pullmans—there were 8, 9 or 10 cars on each train. They'd come in, the crew would get on, and away they'd go to Portland. Then, the next train would come in 15 or 20 minutes later, and another crew would get on.

What was involved in becoming qualified on different passenger trains?

All right—I'll tell you that! At first, I think you had to break in for two weeks. You had to study the jobs and learn how they worked. You had to learn the hand signals. Then, you had to take two

		PASSAGE CANCELLATIONS HERE		
		OUT	IN	
		FORM	Book No.	Check No.
Boston		B	8795	-34
W. Medford				
Wedgemere				
Winchester MASS.	Lisbon			Springfield
Cross Street	Littleton & Bethlm			Holyoke
W. Medford	Whitefield			N'hampton
Winch'r Hids	Gorham			So. Deerf'ld
Walnut Hill	Berlin, N.H.			Deerfield
Wilmington	Tilton			Greenfield
Silver Lake	Winnisq'm			Mt Hermon
E. Billerica	Laconia			E. N'thfield
N. Billerica	Weirs B'ch			Battleboro
Lowell	Meredith			Putney
N. Chlms'r'd	Cambridge			Westmnstr
Nashua	Clematis B'k			Bel'ws Falls
Manchester	Beaver Brk			Charlestown
				Clarem't Jc.
				Windsor
				Waltham (NORTH)
				WalthmH'ds
				Weston
				Cherry Br'k
				Tower Hill
				Wayland
				E. Sudbury
				So. Sudbury
				Ordway
				Gleasondale
				Hudson
				E. Lexington
				PiercesB'dge
				Munroe
				Lexington
				N. Lexington
				Bedford

trips on a through freight. You had to work two local freights. One of the locals I worked was the **BB Local** with Eddie Schuler's father, Ted, who was very helpful. Then the passenger trains, the same thing. You had to work a through passenger train. I had two trips to Concord. Then, you had to work a local passenger train—and the train that I worked happened to be [to] **Bedford**. This was a night train that went out to Bedford. At that time, the White River trains had the Bedford trains attached to their run. So, they had to make a trip to Bedford, then back to Boston, then up to White River.

So, they assigned me to go out on the last train to Bedford. This was early spring, March, so it was dark. The crew dispatcher took me down to one of the brakemen. I worked with him afterwards and he turned out to be a nice guy, but he was sort of a gruff type, you know? [The dispatcher asked him:] "Want to take this fellow out and show him around?" "What can I show him in the dark?" he said. "It's going to be pitch black out there!" "Well," the dispatcher said, "he's got to go out and get his papers signed by the conductors." The other brakeman on the train was a guy from White River Junction, also a nice fellow, named Eddie Milligan. He said, "You come with me. I'll take you out and show you around."

We got out to Bedford like he said in the pitch dark. They stopped and got water for the engine, and then we went around the **wye**. I had no idea where I was because [the wye] went right into the woods!

The brakeman got off and threw the switches and explained to me what he did. But I couldn't see a thing out there at that time! Then, we went back down to the station and returned to Boston.

That was my first experience with Bedford. I did get out there for my breaking-in period. After you covered all these trains and got an idea of what they did, then they'd assign you to a job if you were qualified for it.

You'd lay on the spare board. It was a seniority [-based system]. The senior men got the jobs. If there were enough jobs to come down to you, then you worked. But there were a lot of times when there weren't many jobs available for the day, and you didn't work. You'd call up and they'd tell you, "You're 10 times out," which meant that there had to be 9 guys to get a job before you. A lot of days went by like that! You might catch a job that paid four or five hours overtime in a day, or you might catch a job that just paid the straight day.

All the "through jobs" to White River Junction and Portland were what we called straight days. At that time, I think we got \$12 and something a day. Of course, we had to spend about \$5 or \$6 of that for the hotel—then, whatever it cost you for a couple of meals. So, out of two days, you didn't make that much.

I never cared too much for the freight jobs. Once in a while they'd call you if they were short of help. The passenger jobs I loved! I went anywhere. One guy said to me, "Boy, the crew dispatcher loves you. You go anywhere for him." I said, "Yeah—so long as it is a passenger job, I'll go anywhere." I worked all those branch lines. I worked out of Concord for a long time. I worked all the jobs to White River Junction. I worked down to Portland. If they got short of help, they'd call you for another division [on the B&M].

I had a job out of **Rockport** one time. I think I had that job for a month or more. Nobody else wanted it. Once again, it was work! You had to handle a baggage car; you had all kinds of mail and papers and everything. I didn't get home because at that time I didn't have a car. So, it made it a little hard to get around. Fortunately, we had trains to deadhead on. I'd work the last train down to Rockport; and most of the time, I would sleep in the car. Then, I'd deadhead back in the morning and get washed up and have something to eat in Boston. Then, I'd deadhead back to Rockport and go through the routine again.

Most of the passengers [on my trains] were good—but we always had this joke about **Woburn** that they seemed to have the prettiest girls and the drunkest guys you ever saw. About 90 percent of the guys who went to Woburn were drunk. We



B&M Employees Magazine • May-June-July 1958

Locomotive Engineer Joseph R. Annis, of Portland, Me., on No. 82, the State of Maine, and Warren Barnes, Pullman conductor on the same train, retired July 1. Annis had 46 years service and Barnes, 31 years. In this farewell scene, left to right, are: Fireman S. A. Davis, Engineer Annis, Conductor S. G. O'Malley, and Pullman Conductor Barnes

knew most them. We'd unload them and put them on the bench at Woburn Station. I worked most of the time on the night jobs, so we didn't get exactly the high class business people! But they were good people.

You know, the railroad was my ambition. Even after I came back from the service, I said, "That's the job I want. I want to get on the railroad." Happily, I did. I never regretted [that decision]. I enjoyed every minute of it. I never had a day that I hated to go to work. There were some days that were stormy or lousy or something, and you'd say, "I'd rather not go." But after I got to work, I was always happy. We had a good crowd to work with—a good bunch of fellows on the railroad. It was congenial, you know? ✧

(To be continued in a future newsletter issue)



View excerpts from Robert Howe's oral history videos:

<http://www.bedforddepot.org/oralhistory>