

How I Joined the Operating Department

- Nicholas Manos

For some years, I had read about the Operating Department and thought about signing up to work the trains. I kept putting it off because I didn't think I had enough time to dedicate to it. I had read the service requirements, seen how many active people were already in the department and calculated that I might get the opportunity to be qualified in about 38 years. Thirty-five if I got lucky.



Then I left the 9 to 5 world. I had more freedom to direct my days at the same time I started to see the more frequent appeals for volunteers. I even heard there were some weekends the train didn't run at all due to lack of crew. I thought of the people who had run the trains for my family to ride all those years and knew I had a debt to repay. I signed up and scheduled myself for crew training, not really knowing what to expect.

Training day arrived and we met in the dining car. Training was led by Greg Elems, with the indoor component mostly reviewing safety procedures. I introduced myself to the gentleman sitting next to me, and he responded with his introduction as 'Steve Lee'. I immediately recognized the name as the operator of UP 844. I've chased that locomotive every time it came to California, what a coincidence I would end up seated next to the man who waved at us on his way through the crossing.

Once the indoor work was done, Greg directed us newbies outside for some ground work. The three of us were introduced to hand signals and coupling operations. We took several turns trying our luck while Ethan Doty patiently and safely ran the locomotive to support us. Greg was all business, as this was clearly his element. After observing my lack of technique for some time, he urged me to just relax. Perhaps he wasn't aware 130 tons of metal were rolling directly at me,

but I tried to at least *act* relaxed. We finished out the day learning how to board and exit the locomotive.

After training, I told my wife I had scheduled myself two weeks out. I would plan on once-a-month if it worked out, not really knowing what I had gotten myself into or whether it would be something I would enjoy. She said that was fine with her.

By the end of the season, I was working every weekend. My wife declared herself a train widow, or so I was told because I wasn't there to hear such complaints.

The oft-heard cliché is 'it gets in your blood'. I realized this hadn't just 'worked out', I was having a blast. My brother, a railroader who works for the UP, openly wondered if I had become a 'foamer'. I didn't care. The combination of the equipment, history, people and the continuous opportunity to learn is unbeatable.

I follow the viewpoint that hardship is disguised opportunity. The hardship, in this example, is the museum having fewer operations personnel than in years past. The opportunity is for those who wish to join operations, as you can now get just about all the student hours you would like to sign up for. I had plentiful opportunities for student hours and was able to qualify faster than I expected.

We welcome your help to keep these trains running. If you've been thinking about joining the Operating Department, now is the time to quit thinking about it and take the plunge. Don't worry if you have never worked in this environment before, as there are plenty of knowledgeable and helpful people here that want to see you succeed. The next crew training day is May 4th, 2024. Sign up at https://wplives.org/register_for_crew_training.html

You just might end up enjoying the work as much as I do. If so, feel free to tell me in person. You'll be able to find me at the museum just about every weekend.