

## **MEN OF THE RUSTY RAILS**

*Story and Photos by Randall Hill The Sun News*

Engineer Marty Fowler may talk with only two people during his average work shift at The Carolina Southern Railroad. "You can get a lot of peace and quiet out here on this train," he says while surging the train's throttle to make a crossing in Conway. A few moments later, he spots a tanker truck waiting for the train at a busy crossing. The driver hesitates, then at the last moment crosses the track, forcing Fowler to lay off his throttle and sound his train whistle. "People don't realize I can't just stop on a dime," he says with some frustration. Fowler, a 10-year veteran of the railroad, operates one of the company's mid-20th century General Motors locomotives.

Nicknamed "Bullet Nose" because of the two large headlights protruding from the front of the engine, the cockpit of this F7 locomotive shows its 50-plus years of service. Rust patches have replaced most of the interior's original industrial green color. Even so, it is kept clean and trash is placed in a small plastic bag tied to an instrument cable.

The engine is heated by a factory-installed cabin heater that rattles with every turn of the blower motor. Fowler regulates cabin temperature and releases some of the faint annoying scent of diesel fuel by opening a window. Fowler's hand clutches the red-handled train whistle on the engine's control panel. At crossings, he pumps it as if the whistle were controlling the train's heart. In reality, the locomotive relies on a combination of the engineer's skill with the throttle and brake to keep running.

### Conway to Chadbourn

Through the small, antique windows, it's as if you're caught in the past and watching a TV show about the future. Misty, dreamlike images show motorists standing impatiently outside their cars waiting for the slow, old train to pass. Many lean to the side of their vehicles, placing hands on hips and shaking their heads. Their body language is an indication of the frustration they feel as they are slowed in their daily pursuits.

On this day in February, Fowler and conductor Jerry Stevens are returning 65 empty coal cars from Conway to the company's Chadbourn, N.C., rail yard. Unlike conductors from the past who rode a caboose at the rear of the train, Stevens follows closely in a company pickup inspecting from the road. Modern radios and cell phones keep him in constant contact with Fowler and allow him a better angle for spotting problems or derailments. Stevens says this mobility helps him keep better records of car inventories and make switches and brake tests. "He's like another set of eyes for the engineer," says Carolina Southern vice president and general manager Jason Pippin. "You may have the 60th car come off the track and the engineer won't know it. The conductor's main job is to aid the engineer on what's going on."

This F7 unit is one of the company's oldest and most difficult engines to operate. High, dangerous steps make entering the locomotive like climbing into a tank. The speedometer remains at 10 mph on the engine control panel as Fowler brings the train to a stop for empty cars in Tabor City, N.C. Broken for years, Fowler keeps the black speedometer dial manually set to 10 as a reminder of his regulated track speed. "I know this train, and I can tell you its speed just from the feel of the engines," he said with pride.

### Under 100 miles of trackage

The Carolina Southern Railroad operates on just less than 100 miles of track in Horry and Marion counties in South Carolina and in Columbus County, N.C. "Our railroad is like a big 'T,'" Pippin said. It starts in Myrtle Beach on Oak Street, runs parallel to U.S. 501 to Conway. It runs on the outskirts of Conway, through the center of Loris, Tabor City, N.C., and up into Chadbourn, N.C., he said. Chadbourn is the middle of the top of the "T". From there, the company heads back through Fair Bluff, N.C., Nichols and into Mullins. They also go the other way into Whiteville, N.C. Pippin says the average Carolina Southern train is about 70 cars long.

The usual cargo is coal to Santee Cooper, building supplies to local contractors, and rock and landscaping materials. Carolina Southern owns 11 engines, nine of which are currently in service. Most are General Motors model GP-18s, engines rolled out of the factory in the early to mid-1960s. "Economically they're feasible because they are less expensive," Pippin said. "New locomotives cost somewhere in the neighborhood of 1.5 million. Right now, the GP units are going for \$125,000. The GP units are easy to work on. A good diesel mechanic can make the engines run forever."

## History

In 1995, Pippin's father Ken Pippin bought The Mid-Atlantic Railroad and changed its name to Carolina Southern Railroad. CSX, the East Coast's largest railroad, decided to spin off some of its smaller short lines in the mid-1980s. Mid-Atlantic was one of those short lines. Two train crews work 12-hour shifts on the company's lines. One crew brings freight from CSX's lines in Mullins to the Carolina Southern's Chadbourn Yard. The second crew then brings the freight from Chadbourn to Conway and Myrtle Beach. The two crews constantly exchange empty and full cars in Chadbourn Yard where the railroad splits into several side tracks.

Of Carolina Southern's 30 employees, eight work directly on the trains. "The sideline companies like Carolina Southern are the last link to the chain," says David Whorton, communications manager of The American Short Line and Regional Railroad Association in Washington, D.C. "They bring the freight from the big guys (such as CSX) and take it to its final destination. "There are about 550 short line track companies across the U.S.," Whorton says. According to the railroad association, the average short line company in the U.S. operates 87 miles of track. Carolina Southern along with 400 other short line railroads make up ASLRRRA's membership. There are 3,800 locomotives in service on short lines and regional lines currently in the U.S., Whorton says. Many operate older, less expensive mid-century diesels just like Carolina Southern.

There are short lines and regionals in all 50 states except Nevada, with Hawaii operating only one short line. Coal was the top commodity for these short line and regional railroad companies in 2004, the most recent data available, accounting for 20 percent of all carloads across the U.S., according to the association. Short line and regional trains carried more than 10 million carloads, and the equivalent of 2.1 million carloads of intermodal containers coming from seaports, the association says.

## Slow and steady

The trains run slow on Carolina Southern's tracks. With a federal class track rating of 1, the company's train speeds are limited to 10 mph, Whorton says. Train class ratings are divided into 5 categories ranging from 10 mph to 60 mph. Twenty-seven percent of all railroads in the U.S. operate on Class 1-rated rails.

## Derailment of coal cars

Sparks fly in a swirling motion over and around Brent Piver's head the cool morning of Feb. 2, the day after an 85-car Carolina Southern train carrying coal derailed near the Allsbrook community while en route from Chadbourn to Conway. The company's road master is using a blowtorch to break a track connection bolt. Behind him, two pieces of rail twist and disappear under 11 derailed cars. The yellow derailed car closest to Piver spilled its load at the edge of a large hay field near S.C. 701. Several train wheels have separated from the cars and are buried halfway in coal. As the torch breaks the connecting bolts holding two pieces of the long rail together, a loud bang shakes the ground around him.

The vibrations prompt Piver's crew to pause and seek the source before resuming their digging and scraping, part of the time-consuming clean-up process. "If you don't have derailments, then you don't run trains," Pippin says as he surveys the damage. "Usually we have a wheel that comes off. This one, because of the forward movement and the incline it's pushed all these cars together and flipped some of them over and created this scene that we have here. It looks pretty bad. It's not as bad as it looks, but it's not good either." Pippin says it is challenging to stay competitive because of the high costs of operation and maintenance. "Out of the big four in shipping - railroads, trucks, ships and planes - the railroads are the only ones that pay for their own infrastructure," he says.

## Mullins to Chadbourn

Engineer Jason Housand of Tabor City, N.C., comes from a long line of farmers. Somehow, he ended up operating a locomotive instead of a farm tractor. "I got out of school, went to college, but I wound up doing this and I enjoy every bit of it," he says. "My daddy was a farmer, my granddaddy, great-granddaddy. Everybody in my family grew up on the farm," Housand said as he held the controls of a GP-18. "My grandma told me I had a great-great uncle that worked on the railroad." Housand and his conductors Kenny Hamilton and rookie Derike Perritte are busy on this day in March, carrying 92 empty rock cars back to the CSX lines in Mullins from the Chadbourn Yard. "We are depending on each other to stay safe," he said as the battleship gray locomotive crosses over a trestle on the Lumbee River. "It can be a dangerous job, so you have to stay alert."

## Father like Son

Jason Pippin always wanted to work in the family business. "I always tell people, 'Look, if we sold toilet seats, I guess I'd be selling toilet seats.'" Over time he has learned why trains are important to the community and how people in all walks of life seem to have some fascination with them. "It's very hard not to meet someone who doesn't have some connection with railroads," he said. "Children, especially boys, love trains, and it's something they did with their fathers. The little kid in you gets excited when you see the big locomotives. They're so larger than life."