

GAYLE TENBRINK

“Go west, young (wo)man!”

I've always had a hard time saying “no” to the NCTA. So when I was asked to share my “Reflections” for *Coal Transporter*, I decided that my “Yes, why not?” would provide an opportunity not only to reflect on my career in the rail and coal industries, but to thank the many people who guided and befriended me along the way.

In 1981 I was fresh out of college, having transferred from the University of Michigan to the University of Texas at Austin for my senior year and marriage to my petroleum engineering student boyfriend, Alan. Upon graduation, he accepted his first “real” job in San Francisco with BP, then operating as Sohio. With the mortgage on our newly purchased home at a staggering 17 ½% interest rate, I needed a job—fast. Luckily, I quickly landed a job with PLM, which managed railcars purchased by individuals as investment tax credits. After a few months in an administrative role, I moved to a position with their railcar

maintenance division (later spun off as Transisco). This was my entry into the world of coal, as this division had established unit train maintenance facilities located along major coal transportation routes emanating from the Powder River Basin, as well as smaller shops in the east.

My new responsibilities took me to large shops in Wyoming, Montana, and Nebraska, as well as to scattered locations along other coal routes. I remember my first business trip to visit AEP: my luggage missed the connection in Chicago and followed me a day behind as I travelled to power plants throughout the Appalachian region. It was a good lesson in learning to adapt and roll with the punches! On another occasion, I had the chance to ride in our small company plane, visiting Arizona Electric Cooperative's Cochise plant.

The pilot, Woody, asked if I wanted to sit up front with him—sure! After a time, I noticed the fuel gauge moving quickly toward empty. Woody noticed my nervous glances, calmly advised that the fuel gauge didn't





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—Gayle TenBrink

work, and assured me that we were fine. Not sure that made me feel better!

After eight years of working in San Francisco, Alan and I relocated with our growing family to Seattle, his childhood home, and I thought I had left the industry for good. The next few years were happily busy raising our two children and renovating an older home. One day, however, the phone rang and an old PLM colleague asked if I would consider working for Transcisco out of my home for as many hours as I could manage. It took me about two seconds to say “Yes!” A year later, Trinity purchased Transcisco and, after some initial hesitation about my telecommuting, decided they would allow me to continue the arrangement. It wasn’t as easy to do 25 years ago, but we made it work!

It was during my Trinity years that the NCTA became an important part of my professional circle. While my tenure with the group doesn’t reach as far back as that of some other old-timers (and I can’t believe that I’ve just put myself in that category!), I have a vague recollection of the organization being divided into eastern and western groups. I heard stories of the B.C. (Before Canter) days, but never experienced them. There weren’t many women at the conferences when I first attended—something that has certainly changed over the years. At one fall conference about 20 years ago, I recall talking with a small group of men at a reception. A colleague said jokingly that he was going to have to scold his wife for having forgotten to pack his tie pin. Then another man in the group asked me if I left meals ready in the fridge for my family when I travelled. Wait a minute here, I told myself ... a man has someone *pack* for him, while I’m expected to have dinner on the table even though I’m 1,200 miles away from home? I need a wife!

The NCTA Operations and Maintenance group provided invaluable opportunities for learning and networking, and I spent 10 years serving on its Executive Committee. With their backing and support, I’d like to think that I played at least a small role in furthering the equipment health monitoring that is now such an important part of moving coal safely. I also spent several years serving on the AAR Arbitration and Rules Committee, where I strove to be a

voice for the private (non-railroad) railcar community.

After transitioning from an operations to a commercial role at Trinity, it was time for me to move on from the O&M Executive Committee. But it wasn't long before I was asked to consider sitting on the NCTA Board. I truly enjoyed working with both groups and strongly encourage those of you who can to get involved! Believe me, you won't find more dedicated, hard-working people anywhere.

Leaving Trinity was hard—but easy. Hard because after 25 years with the company, not to mention more years with earlier employers, I'd developed strong personal and professional relationships and I truly enjoyed my job. On the other hand, it was easy because after many years and many thousands of miles of travel, it was nice to be able to put my suitcase away and shut the laptop for days at a time. I now have a granddaughter who *loves* to sit on Nana's lap and read books, and grandchild number two is on the way.

As I write this, we as a nation are struggling with the uncertainties caused by the COVID-19 virus. Uncertainty is something the coal industry battles increasingly, and it can be hard to find optimism for the future. But as COVID-19 has shown us, we never know what the next weeks and months will bring. My hope is that dependable, affordable, plentiful coal will continue to be an energy choice for our future, and that the NCTA will grow and thrive. ▲



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