By Sulkair

There are few occupations that conjure up images of romance and prestige like that of the quintessential locomotive engineer. To be the man holding the reins of the iron horse has been a sought after position for nearly two centuries. It requires dedication, endurance, a sharp mind, and nimble hands. Here are 5 things you need to know before you submit your application.

1. **The office is pretty dang cool.**

American Railroads today are not your grandfather’s railroad. Technology has exploded in our nation, and the railroads have been among first in line to exploit it, and in many areas they have driven much of it. Modern rail companies abound in technology from their elaborate complex dispatching centers to vast yards filled with electric switch technology and humming remote controlled locomotives. There is no better place to witness today’s technological computer revolution than in the cab of a modern day Locomotive. They are beginning to resemble the cockpit of an airplane more than they do their predecessors of even a couple decades ago. Packed tightly with electronic displays and touch screen options many young people today would feel right at home. Comfortable seating and aesthetic interior design, these newer generation engines are beginning to feel like warm, quiet, comfortable control centers vs. the loud, cold, grey rattle boxes of yesteryear with their levers and knobs.

2. **You will start out on the ground.**

Getting hired for a Class 1 American railroad is one of the most exciting experiences of a lifetime. You are in for one adventure after another, an incredible learning curve, and the pride and prestige of knowing you are doing a job that matters and matters greatly. You are participating in the heartbeat of the nation, and being the guy in the lead unit of a 10,000 ton train is something few in life ever get to do. And you will do it well. But the big freight railroads don’t directly hire engineers anymore, they hire trainmen. You will be hired into the train service division or department which is comprised of the following: Switchmen (Foreman and Helpers), Brakemen, and Conductors. Fireman, Hostlers and Engineers are categorized as Engine Service positions. You’re first job out of the shoot will be as a switchman helper, if you’re lucky
you may be able to grab Conductor straight away. As you gain seniority you can
move through the Train Service ranks and eventually when the company needs
engineers you can put in a bid for Engine Service. If you’re seniority can hold
it you will be awarded a training class for Engineer. From day one to full blown
Engineer could be a period of months or years depending on the growth and
hiring needs of the railroad and often the particular geographical area where
you reside.

3. You are going to be tired.

Fatigue and the entire swath of negative affects therein, is one of the biggest
problems Railroads face, not only for Engineers but for all the railroad crafts.
Of all the crafts however, the engineer will bare the brunt of the onslaught of
fatigue, as it is up to him more than anyone else to keep his eyes on the rail and
every fiber of his body tuned in lockstep with the powerful mega monster he
pilots. The American railroad is a 24 hour operation, 365 days a year. It never
stops and it never sleeps. The machines that move this nation’s goods cannot
afford to sleep, unfortunately the locomotive engineer is human, at least last
time I checked. He must do his best to keep up with the persistent unending
endurance of the operation by getting his rest on his own time. A person who
can balance his work, family life, and sleep schedule around a railroad schedule
is a talented person to say the least. It will require your best effort to succeed in
this pursuit, but with experience you can learn how to do it. That said, there is
still no getting around it, you are going to be tired, much of the time.

Railroads are regulated by the federal railroad regulations; as of this writing
they mandate a rail company give its engineers 8 hours of rest between work
cycles. They also mandate the maximum amount of time a railroad engineer
can work is 12 hours. What this equates to, in a worse case scenario, is working
12 on, 8 off, indefinitely. Now don’t panic; I said in a worse case scenario. This
is rarely the case. Usually a typical engineer will work an 8 hour shift on a yard
job for example, and will get 16 hours off before he reports for his next shift
the following day. This is similar to a regular banker’s job, except that it could
be one of three shifts. Yard jobs are highly sought after for this regularity, and
especially the daylight shifts go very high in seniority. The road engineer
however, is a warrior who faces fatigue straight on. He must wake to the ringing
of the phone, report for duty 90 minutes later, and orchestrate his ship and crew
across prairie, mountains, rain, snow, blizzards, blistering cold, or beautiful
sunshine. He will do this for a maximum of 12 hours whether he runs 300 miles
or 30, after which he will dismount for a hot shower, hot meal, and 6 hours in
the rack if he’s lucky. The phone will ring again and in 90 minutes he’s on the
road headed home. There he will need to recoup as best he can in the comfort of his home before he reports again.

4. Do you like School?

I hope you do, because you’re in for some learnin’. Obviously this job requires a broad range of knowledge and applied skill to do properly. Railroads are centers of higher learning in their own right, and what you will learn academically, in my opinion competes head on with anything a traditional college might teach. You will start out learning in a classroom before you ever hit the ground as a switchman, and you will never stop learning whether it is from instructors in class or trainers in the field. You will learn from them, you will learn from other railroaders and you will learn from yourself. You will learn by reading and you will learn by doing. Educating yourself in Railroad operations will be a never ending pursuit as long as you hold the title of Railroader. Studying will require commitment and self discipline. Having confidence in your abilities as an engineer will be predicated on having a solid working knowledge of thousands of complex rules, signals, procedures and standard practices. These rules were written in blood as they say, and safety will depend on your knowing them. If you’re going to join a railroad as a vital part of their team, you’re going to have to commit to learning.

5. You’ve hit the jackpot

Competing for the job may not be easy. Applying, interviewing and getting accepted will be hard, and you must be prepared to shine above the rest, for Railroad jobs are highly sought after. If you manage to survive the hiring gauntlet and get a training date then the rest is, well, yours to lose. Work hard, study hard, sleep hard (at home), and be proud of what you do. The day every railway worker stops, is the day this nation will die. America was built by railroads and it lives and breathes today by them. You’re part of a great heritage. If you stay on track and keep your nose clean you’ll no doubt qualify as Engineer and one day sit behind the throttle of 4000 horses, two stories high, looking down at the rest of the sleeping world from your command tower of power. What follows is a secure, solid, financial future for you and your family. You will make very good money, and you will retire with a very rock solid package of benefits. Don’t take this lightly; it is getting harder and harder to pull off these days. The railroads will work you, but you will be taking care of what you care most about, your own livelihood, and your family, and you will be doing in with style. The days of prestige for the locomotive engineer are not over; they will never be over. Anyone who can control five units equaling 20,000 horsepower pulling 100 cars of coal weighing 10,000 tons across this
great nation’s wasteland is worthy of hero status in my mind every day of the week. “Here’s to your future as an American Hog Head – my hat is already off to you.” – Notch ‘er out!

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