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FUNCTIONS OF THE RAILROAD POLICE

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The author is President of the Association of American Railroads, the organization of the principal railroads of the United States, Canada, and Mexico for the more efficient and economical handling of matters of common concern in the whole field of railroading. Better protection for the millions of passengers and the billions of dollars worth of materials which the railroads carry each year is the aim and concern of the Police Section of each member railroad and the Association's Protective Section, the subject of this article.—EDITOR.

The real origin of the railroad police force in the United States is obscure. In one sense railroad police might be said to date from 1865 when Pennsylvania became the first state to grant them recognition as lawful public authorities. But persons who performed police work, at least on a part-time basis, were on the payrolls of railroads long before that time.

The practice of most railroads in the early days was to assign police to each division of the railroad as needed, each officer so assigned being responsible to, and taking his orders from, the division operating superintendent. With the rapid growth of police activity, however, plus the need for uniform action and education, the coordination of police forces under single chiefs of police, such as we have today, was inevitable.

Organized along the lines of municipal police departments, the general superintendent of a railroad might today be likened to a city's Commissioner of Public Safety; the Chief Special Agent or Chief of Police to the Municipal Chief, and the Captains of Divisions to the Precinct Captain. Titles such as Inspector of Police, Captain, Lieutenant, Detective-Lieutenant, Sergeant, Patrolman, and Special Agent are as common in railroad police organizations as they are in municipal organizations.

Similar in more respects than mere organization, railroad police employ modern methods of crime detection and apprehension, including the maintenance of Rogues galleries, the use of automobiles equipped with radio and telephone, lie detectors and finger printing, and scientific methods of analysis, the same as their brethren of the public law enforcement agencies. They work both in uniform and in plain clothes although mostly the latter.

Qualifications for employment as a railroad police officer are often as high as or higher than those for their municipal brethren; while the training after employment is fully as comprehensive and complete.

Strong physical attributes, a prime requisite in the early days, while still important, do not today rate higher than intelligence and common sense, experience, ability to think fast in an emergency, and good character.

The training of most railroad police starts in the yards, where with the help of experienced officers, they must learn to inspect trains, check car seals, fire and safety hazards, and in fact to learn the fundamentals of almost every operation on the railroad. In some states railroad police are now enabled and encouraged to attend training schools which formerly were open only to civic police forces. They must learn to handle firearms and are encouraged to compete in national, international, state, and local marksmanship meets. To train a railroad policeman to the point where he can be depended upon to act independently and correctly in a given situation requires several years at considerable cost. And "correct" action, always important in police work, takes on added meaning to railroad police—a dollars and cents meaning. Suits for false arrest by railroad police stand far greater chance of success than would similar suits where the arrests are made by public law enforcement officers. For this reason railroad police must not only be thoroughly conversant with the rules of their respective roads; they must also have at least a working knowledge of Federal laws and the laws of states and municipalities in which they operate.

Railroad police in the United States and Canada today comprise the largest privately supported police organization in the world. Representing nearly 400 different railroads and numbering more than 8,000 persons who hold commissions in nearly 1,000 cities and towns throughout the 48 states, the District of Columbia and Canada, the combined police organization is nearly twice the size of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

To be fully effective the work of so many men must of course be coordinated both on and among the individual railroads. And so completely do railroad police departments cooperate with one another that where thefts or investigations involve several railroads the railroad police function as a single organization. To carry out this important function of coordination there exists the Protective Section of the Association of American Railroads, the members and officers of which are the Chiefs of Police and Chief Special Agents of the individual railroads.

The Protective Section functions, in part, as a clearing house for data concerning important cases both pending and solved. The information furnished voluntarily by the individual railroads, is assembled, published,

and distributed monthly to all railroads in a News Letter, with the result that railroad police departments not only are able to cooperate more intelligently and effectively with one another in the prompt disposition of cases, but also to keep informed as to methods and means which have been used to best advantage throughout the country.

Through the Section, also, regional and national meetings attended by railroad chiefs of police and their staffs are held each year where common problems are discussed, and where, through association with municipal police, states attorneys, judges, and the like, closer friendships and working relationships of mutual benefit to all are cemented.

A service of great potential value in the training of railroad police is a National Railroad Police Training School now being set up, and soon to be operated, by the Protective Section. Although many railroads conduct their own police training schools, a central school for the teaching of uniform methods and procedures has long been needed and will be a major step forward.

Railroad police operate in close coordination and cooperation both with other railroad police organizations, and with public and private law enforcement agencies, including the F. B. I. And by no means is the cooperation extended such agencies a one-way street. Because the railroads are essentially carriers of interstate commerce, and thus protected by, as well as subject to, the Federal Interstate Commerce Act, the help of municipal police, and especially the F. B. I., is frequently sought and obtained. Without this help the job of the railroad policeman would be infinitely more difficult than it is, and many cases on which the books have long since been successfully closed would have been transferred to the ledger of the unsolved.

The job of the railroad policeman today is fundamentally the same as that of his predecessor of about a century ago, in that he is still a protector of persons and things. How much better he is performing that job is shown by the record.

Thirty years ago when railroad police departments were less adequately staffed and organized, losses from theft of goods were costing the railroads nearly $13,000,000 each year. With the organization of the AAR Protective Section, in 1921, losses were reduced to less than $10,000,000. Gains were registered, also, in each succeeding year, losses going from $4,800,000 in 1922 to $3,000,000 in 1923; to $2,000,000 in 1924; and to $1,000,000 each in the years 1925-27. In only one year, 1934, since that time and until the end of the war in 1945 did losses from theft exceed $1,000,000.

During World War II and especially in the years immediately following, due to the combination of a rise in the dollar values of the commodities transported, plus a greatly increased volume of traffic which had to be handled with thousands of new and relatively inexperienced employees, the downward trend in losses due to theft was temporarily reversed. Payments in 1948 rose to a war and post war peak of $3,369,000. In 1949, however, the downward trend was resumed, and in 1950, preliminary estimates are that theft payments by the railroads dropped to only a little more than $1,000,000, or about what they were before the war.

As might be expected, shipments of freight in less than carload lots are most susceptible of theft. They suffer proportionately heavier claims than carload lot freight, and in general cause infinitely more trouble for railroad police.

Items such as cigarettes, cigars, and tobaccos are especially attractive to thieves, partly because, in bulk, they are of great value, but also because of the ease with which they may be disposed of, and because of the difficulty of proving identity and ownership even if found by police. On such commodities, therefore, especially when the shipments are large, special police are sometimes assigned to accompany the train, their duty being to stay with the train at all times; to be especially watchful at stops; and to see that only authorized persons approach the train.

While the presence of railroad police is usually an effective deterrent to persons intent upon theft, it is no absolute guarantee. In a recent case in North Carolina a police lieutenant was shot and critically wounded while protecting a shipment of valuable merchandise as the train stood in the yards. The attempted theft was only one of several made by a well organized gang whose method generally was to follow trains containing cars loaded with cigarettes and other tobaccos for as much as 200 miles, stopping as the train stopped for water or for other reasons to break into the sealed cars and load their automobiles with 10 to 50 cases of cigarettes. Well organized and equipped for their job, the thieves had modern weapons including mounted machine guns and tear gas guns; warehouses in several cities to store their loot; and "fences" who gave regular orders for cigarettes as needed.

So serious was the problem that the police chiefs of four railroads serving the territory met and decided to combine forces in a determined effort to break up the ring once and for all. An undercover agent was placed at a critical point with instructions to make contact with a suspected "fence" and to make purchases with him. So well did he succeed

in collecting the evidence needed that within a period of only about three months most of the gang were behind bars. Two who escaped were later apprehended for other crimes and are today serving time also.

When it is not possible to assign special police to accompany valuable shipments, as in the case just cited, responsible railroad officials along the route of movement are notified in order that special precautions may be taken for protection at stops. Thefts of tobacco, cigarettes, and cigars which in 1922 cost the railroads $838,409, or 1.74 per cent of claims for loss and damage from all causes, by 1949, had been reduced to $74,323 or only 0.07 per cent.

Not so much success has attended the efforts of the railroads to reduce losses in a class of goods listed in railroad reports as "Dry Goods, Clothing and Textiles." Like tobaccos, clothing and dry goods because of their value and ease of disposition hold special attraction to thieves, and the theft of these items, while materially reduced in recent years, still is by far the largest item in the combined robbery accounts of the railroads. Payments on this class of goods alone continue to account for nearly one-third of all theft claim payments by the railroads each year.

Although small items which can be concealed and carried away are most susceptible of theft, the fact that an item is too heavy or bulky to be carried away without mechanical help does not necessarily insure it against theft. Thefts of carload and less-than-carload shipments of scrap metals are interesting cases in point.

The value of scrap metal has increased steadily since before World War II, until today it may bring as high as $40 per ton. In junk yards which are the principal sources of scrap metals the scrap is hydraulically pressed into bales weighing from 350 to 900 pounds for shipment by rail to the steel companies. The weight on arrival determines the amount which the steel companies will pay, and any discrepancy between the weight at the point of origin and destination is charged to the railroads. While error is sometimes made by the railroad clerk who weighs in the shipment, railroad police are more concerned with the theft of entire bales of scrap which can only be accomplished either by the use of cranes or magnets or both.

Still another class of heavy freight which seems to hold special attraction to thieves is automobiles and trucks, farm and construction machinery, etc. On such items the danger is not so much that the entire piece of equipment will be stolen (although many such cases are on record), as it is that removable parts such as batteries, generators, spark plugs, gauges, spare parts, and the like will disappear. Theft loss on this class

of commodity in 1949 showed a reduction of about 83 per cent under 1922 when it amounted to nearly $500,000.

The contribution of railroad police in reducing losses due to theft is by no means limited to what might be termed strictly "police" activity, important as that is. Because of their close and constant association with the movement of goods railroad police are in unusually good position to observe the causes which lead not only to theft but also to loss and damage from other sources, and the recommendations they have made have contributed to safer transportation practices all around. The almost universal practice of floodlighting yards, for example, is one which they have constantly advocated as an effective means of preventing theft from standing freight cars.

The investigation of prospective employees is another activity of railroad police which has contributed increasingly to safe transportation by rail. While the practice is not yet universal, many railroads will not hire a new employee for any class of work until his background has been thoroughly examined to determine not only his mental and physical fitness for the job but also his moral fitness; his police record, if any; and in general to make reasonably certain that he is the type of person who can be relied upon to work loyally, honestly, and conscientiously for his employer.

While the part of railroad police in preventing theft of freight and in the apprehension of criminals is of inestimable value to the railroads and their customers, it is by no means their only function of importance. The protection of passengers is also a matter of no small concern. Of course the dramatic train robberies so prevalent in the days of Jesse James are now almost a thing of the past, as are also the card sharps and gamblers who used to ride the trains, preying on unsuspecting travelers. But the confidence man and the pickpocket, who have taken their place, still find crowded trains, stations, and ticket windows fertile fields in which to practice their nefarious art.

And as the railroads are obliged to protect their customers, so they are also obliged to protect themselves from passengers who deliberately, or otherwise, take items such as towels, bed clothing, silverware, etc., from trains. The problem is not so small as it may seem. In one six-months period during 1948, the Pullman Company reported that it had 617,870 pieces of linen either lost or stolen at a cost of $139,210.11. In the same year more than 9,000 blankets were lost or stolen at a loss to the company of nearly $34,500.

Perhaps the most serious problem of all with which railroad police must deal is that of trespassers on railroad property. Aside from the danger of theft, there is also the possibility of interference, intentionally or otherwise, in railroad operations, possibly resulting in train wrecks with serious loss of life and property. The problem is especially acute among juveniles, many of whom not only do serious damage to railroad property but are themselves killed or seriously injured in the process. Obviously railroad police cannot constantly patrol some 350,000 miles of track and yards throughout the country. They can, however, and do keep it under periodic surveillance, and of perhaps even greater potential importance, they carry on, with the help of railroad safety officers, educational programs in schools designed to instruct children in the dangers of trespassing on railroad property.

In wartime, of course, as well as during periods of defense preparation such as we are now facing, the threat of sabotage places upon railroad police a greatly increased burden and responsibility. It is to their everlasting credit that throughout World War II not a single case of successful war-inspired sabotage was reported on any railroad in the United States or Canada.

Mr. Tennyson Jefferson, Post Office Inspector in Charge at Boston, Massachusetts, well summed up the story of railroad police and their part in railroad operations when he told them at a recent meeting of the AAR Protective Section:

> "Your record of achievement is excelled by no other investigating agency. Ninety-eight per cent of all persons arrested by you are convicted. You work long hours quietly and successfully, and you possess the confidence of police forces everywhere . . . The cost of your service is returned 100 fold in the saving of lives and property . . . The crimes you prevent are more important than the arrests you make . . . Railroad management is to be congratulated for supplying a service such as yours . . ."