

# In Early 1900s Railroad Engineers

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## Were Heros

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In 1928 "The State" newspaper ran an interview with George Washington Fetner, who at 72 years of age had been a railroad man for 41 years.

Fetner was the son of a railroad engineer who went to work for the C.C.&A. (Charlotte, Columbia, and Augusta) Railroad in 1847. A.C. Fetner Sr. had handled engines that carried the names of York, Mecklenburg, Richland, James Gadsden, Columbia, John Springs, Edgefield and Caleb Bouknight. The Richland was destroyed in Columbia while it sat in the roundhouse when Sherman's troops came through in 1865.

The largest railroad locomotive in the senior Fetner's time was the North Carolina, nicknamed the "Great Mogul." The giant engine could pull 20 cars. G.M. Fetner's largest engine was the Franklin H. Elmore, which weighed 75 tons and had a 12-inch cylinder.

Fetner described the Franklin H. Elmore as having red wheels with a green tender. On the tender was painted a forest with deer grazing in it. The painting was done by the artist James Milne, who put horses on the other C.C.&A. engines. The brass bands, casings, and brass dome were kept highly polished by the proud crew.

People flocked to see George Washington Fetner bring his mammoth engine into the station. Always alert to everything around him, Fetner was letter-perfect in his maneuvers. The only accident of his career occurred in 1886 when a work engine ran into the rear of his train. On board that day was Dr. James H. Thornwell, eminent Presbyterian theologian and former president of South Carolina College. Thornwell was knocked unconscious and was rushed to the hospital at Chester. Fetner fractured a rib and sprained a knee, leaving him with a permanent limp.

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Fetner established a record for speed while engineering for the old Richmond and Danville Railroad on its run from Charlotte to Columbia. At stake was the contract for the Cuban mail, which would be awarded to the fastest delivery. The main competitor was the Atlantic Coastline Railroad.

P.O. Wells, the superintendent of the Richmond and Danville, told Fetner to take the tender and one car and to break all records — publicity from the feat would do the rest. Fetner's record of 108.3 miles per hour was talked about for years. The fireman shoveled coal non-stop for two hours and three minutes. The Richmond and Danville got the lucrative government contract.

Fetner had a twin brother, "Willie," who was also an engineer. Fetner liked to tell how the twins looked so much alike that they would swap clothes and girlfriends for the fun of it. Fetner also had five sons, and four of them worked with the railroad in some capacity or other.

From his father's long railroad experience, Fetner gained many stories that he loved to tell. His father's memory stretched back to 1833, when the South Carolina Railroad, which ran from Charleston to Hamburg (near North Augusta), was billed as "the longest railroad in the world."

In the early years of South Carolina railroad building, the people had to be convinced that trains were safe. Sparks were likely to set fire to the neighborhood. Some people worried that the engines would strike their cattle. This was a time when few people fenced in cattle. It was easier to fence one's gardens and field crops than to fence livestock.

Towns and villages objected to the smoke and the noise. Charleston would not allow a freight depot inside city limits for the first half-century because of complaints from citizens.

Eventually people stopped complaining. Engineers like George Washington Fetner became heroes, especially to small boys. When a railroad man had served 25 years he got his name stenciled on the cab.

On March 21, 1916, Pres. Fairfax Harrison of the Southern Railway presented a veteran engineer G.W. Fetner a medal for 41 years of service to the railroad.