

**“When I get to hell
I’ll have more seniority
over everybody....”**

“...because nobody has ever shoveled as much coal
as I have.”



Thelma West

By Jim Anderson and Pat Keena

Thelma West, 77, lived at Hahn's Peak from the age of seven until she went to work on the railroad. Years ago, there used to be thousands of cattle around the peak. Mrs. West often rode and gathered cattle all over that country and drove them to a big ranch near Craig. From there they'd drive the cattle up to Rawlins to ship them on the railroad.

Her father ran a stage line from Hahn's Peak to Rawlins. He owned about ten stagecoachs in his business. Her mother was a cook in a boarding house in Hahn's Peak mining camp. In her 38 years as a railroad employee and cook, she had many experiences.

HER "FAMILY" LIFE

Mrs. West lived with 15 men in 10 to 20 cars on a work train for most of her career. "I call it our train because I feel that I'm entitled to it with all the years I worked on the Road."

She refers to all of the people she lived with as a family. "My husband, he was foreman of 'em, and he could walk clear away an' leave 'em and when he come back, his work would go just the same. If we'd have a snowslide or a rockslide, the train would stop, and I'd get up one, two o'clock in the morning to cook breakfast for 'em."

"Many times I've seen those men go out to work when it was sixty below zero and come in at night with their faces solid ice."

When the men got through enlarging a tunnel, the train would pull into a town, and the men would go see their wives and girlfriends. "The men would go to town and have their troubles with their wife or girlfriend, and I'd be the first one to listen to their story when they come back. I was sorta like a sister to 'em."

There was a time that many of the men left to fight in World War II. "When the war started a lot of our boys went across the water. Of course, we kept up with 'em and some come back, some of 'em didn't come. Those that come back went right back to their old jobs again."

"While we was parked at Tunnel 17, we had two pet bear. When we moved to Tunnel 16, they moved too. They were just like pets. The men would bring gallons of honey and jelly and boxes of chocolate and put 'em out for those bears. Those bear knew all the men that belonged on that train; let a stranger come up there and you wouldn't see 'em at all. But if there was a man at work there at a tunnel, they'd come right up and watch him. They never offered to molest any of us. We put stuff out there for 'em to eat; apples and all kinds of stuff. They got so fat they couldn't hardly walk. They were cute though.

We was at one place, and we made pets out of two foxes, a red fox and a silver fox. They'd come right up and scratch on the door for something to eat. I never did try to pet 'em because I didn't know what they'd do. But they'd just eat out of my hands or the men's hands, also.

Then one time, we had an old blue grouse rooster, and he had four hens. They would stay around the outfit cars, and they would follow along as we went from tunnel to tunnel. Those grouse learned that if they strutted around enough, we'd throw them some feed that we had bought for 'em. There was some deer that'd take apples and we also kept all of our potato and vegetable peelings to feed them. They'd come up to the door and paw the steps or the porch to tell us they were hungry."



These are outfit cars similar to the kind that Mrs. West lived in.

MRS. WEST AS A COOK

"Mr. West was my second husband. I lost my first husband in the first world war. Then I was a widow for about 17 or 18 years. When I married Mr. West he was working on the railroad and in order for me to be with him, I had to take the cook job. That's the only way they'd let me go out on the Road with him.

Mrs. West's main job was cooking for the crew. She cooked and baked in a large double oven with two fireboxes that was fueled by coal. To keep the ovens going, she would put two buckets of coal in each of the fireboxes.

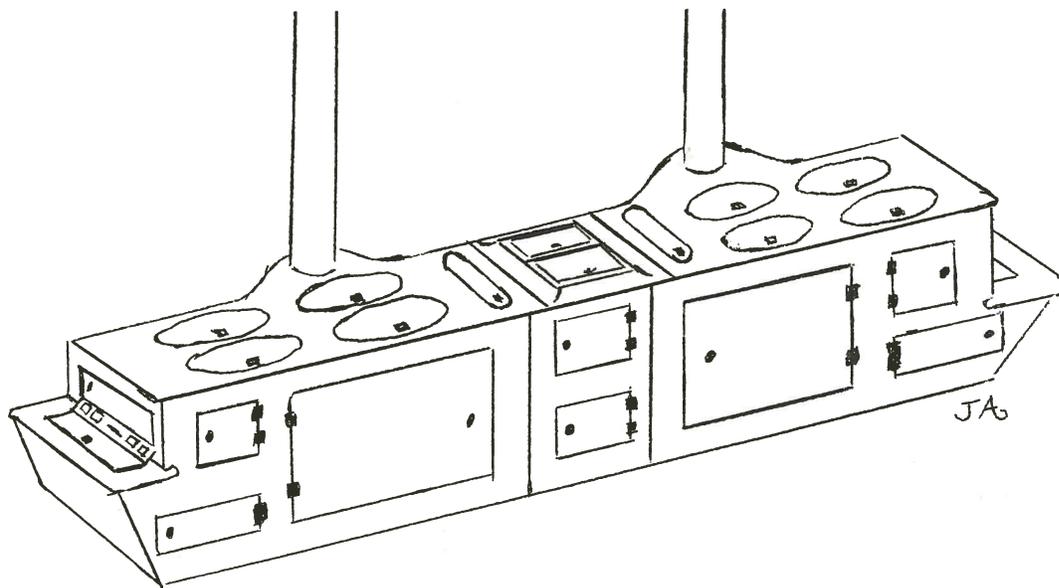
"My record for feeding men was over a hundred men in twelve hours, inside an outfit car."

"They ate every mornin' at 7:00 on the dot. I would call 'em with one of those big triangles. If some of the men were working around the outfit, I could just call them, but I usually called them with the triangle."

Mrs. West always made large meals for the crew.

For breakfast:

ham	sausage
bacon	fried and boiled eggs
hot cakes(pancakes)	hot biscuits
creamed gravy	potatoes
hot and packaged cereals	
honey	jelly
some kind of fruit	prunes



For Lunch:

stew	Irish stew
chicken and noodles	
two big sandwiches made with homemade bread	
baked ham	roast pork
lunchmeat	peanut butter and honey
cookies	cinnamon rolls
donuts	cake
pies	

Instead of coming back to the outfit cars to have lunch, the men would have their lunch in a small shack that was called the "doghouse". Inside there was a stove to heat up the soups and stews. Also, they always had a big batch of salad in the shed to go with their lunches.

For Dinner:

cake	fruit
steak	roast beef
roast pork	sausage
potatoes, sweet and white	
ham	vegetables of some kind
salad	peaches
pears	apricots
once or twice a month--turkey and dressing	

"One time one of the women whose husband worked on the railroad was out there and she had three little boys; one had just learned to walk and the other two were just little babies. One day she was going to scrub the bunk car out, so she put a big can of water on to heat. After a while, she set the can of water on the floor so she could put more coal in the stove, but by this time the water was boiling. Well, this little boy ran right over and fell into that

hot water. The woman grabbed the baby up and started screamin', 'Micky, come here, I've killed my baby, I've killed my baby!' Oh, she just screamed it! So I came over and took the baby from her. When I looked at it I could see that it was burned all over it's head and everything. And here we were about a mile out of town so there wasn't any phone that I could get at. That woman fainted when I took her baby and so I took the baby and layed it in on the table. I had a big can of cooking oil in the ice-car. (The ice-car is the car that we kept our meat and other food in to keep it from spoiling). So I went and got that and that oil was real cold, but I didn't know whether to use it or not. Here that woman lay right where she had passed out. I kept talking to her to see if she would come to. Here those two little babies was up in her car just screamin' bloody murder. I didn't know what minute they was goin' to fall out. So I layed this baby on a sheet and I took off all his clothes, as best I could. Some of it I couldn't get off because it was just stuck right to the hide. Then I took some sody(soda), a whole package of sody and poured it all over the baby and then the oil on top of that. I knew that both of them was good for burns, but I didn't know what to do in this case. I went and put a sheet over the baby and finally got that woman to come to. I said to her, 'Now set there and watch that baby so I can go see those other babies.' I got up there, and in some way, the oldest of the two, even though he couldn't walk, got off the steps and was helping the other baby down." The burned baby lived and is now running a gas station in Englewood, Colorado.

"Another time we was at Plainview workin', and one day about two o'clock in the afternoon, that same woman came out of her outfit car so I hollered at her, 'Come on, we'll have some tea,' and I'd just baked some fresh doughnuts and she just loved doughnuts. So they came over, and we all sat around the table. The door was open and all of a sudden a big old fella came in. Oh, he was the roughest looking guy you ever saw. He had long whiskers and long hair. And boy, was he dirty. He stepped up to the door with a six-shooter in his hand and said, 'Don't holler, don't make a sound,' he says, 'If you do, I'll shoot ya.' And that woman, she fainted again! So I looked at him and said, 'You don't need that gun.' I said, 'What do you want?' And he said, 'I want something to eat, and I want some cigarettes, and I want what money you got.'

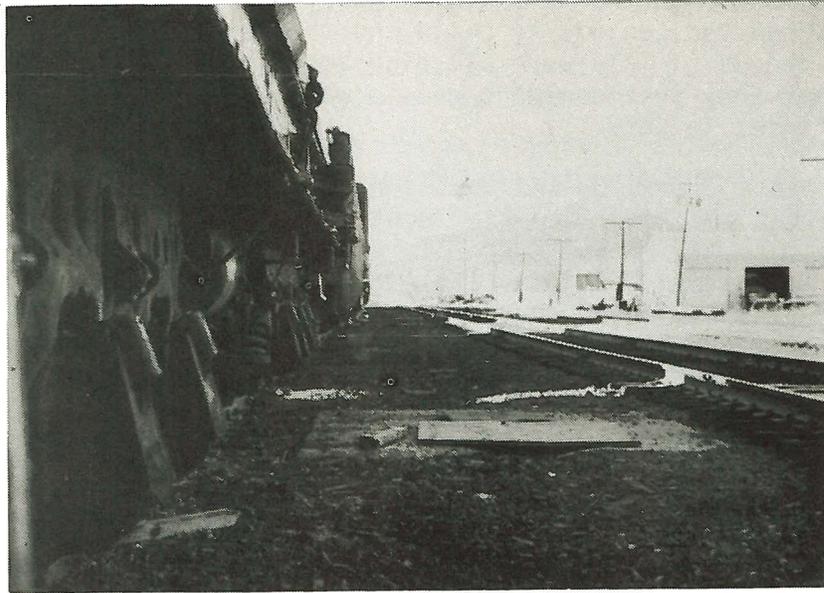
Well, I did some hard thinking then, because that morning was the day after payday and just that morning I had put over a thousand dollars in that baking powder can and then put it in the flour bin. I had my pocketbook laying up on the cabinet and I think there was five dollars in it in change. But anyway, I just got through takin' out a cold ham that I'd baked and a whole pork loin. I'd baked bread--I didn't know how many loaves of bread I baked. I had baked doughnuts, a big cake for the next day and two pies that I had along the back table. I'd been ironing, and he picked up two pillowcases--put one inside the other. And he went up to the food and I said, 'Now, whatever you want, just go ahead and take what you want.' And then I said, 'I got to do something with this woman and these babies.' So I finally got some cold water and some ice on her and got her to come to. And this guy, he was tussled completely, I'm tellin' ya. And he took the ham and four packages of cigarettes. He didn't want bread and that because by this time his bag was full. When he went to go out, he said, 'Now, don't leave this place or don't let anybody leave here for an hour. 'Because,' he said, 'I'm where I can see your car and I'll shoot anybody that tries to leave this place.' Well, he hadn't been gone very long until Mr. Harper come by

our cars on the way to the depot to pick up the lineup (the schedule that the trains were coming that day so the crew would know when to get the "jumbo" out of the tunnel).¹ After Mr. Harper stopped and talked to us, he was going to go to the phone. I said, 'No, don't do it because,' I said, 'that man on that hill, he could shoot you in the head.' You see, the hill was right behind the train. So we made him stay there for about an hour. The woman and her kids were scared to death and so was I. But time went on, and we left there and went to Craig. We came back through there about a month after that and when I got up one morning, I saw an envelope stickin' under the door and there was a 50 dollar bill in it and it said, 'For the groceries and cigarettes I borried.'



The yards and depot at Steamboat Springs.

¹ Refer to page 47.



A view along a string of cars.

"One time we was parked in Craig along side the gilsonite sheds. Well, this one guy of ours, he started painting the roof of the sheds. He was up on that tin roof with a five gallon can of paint when this wind come up. A big gust picked him up and threw him right over the top of the outfit. I saw it all, I was standing on the steps. And when this guy lit, he broke every bone in his body."

"One time we pulled into Mt. Harris for a few days, and we met about six men who had answered an ad that was about working for the railroad. Well, the men didn't have any money with them or anything like food. They had to stay in the woods by the river, they were so poor. So one day this one guy comes up and he says, 'Is there anything we can do to get something to eat? We're down here without anything to eat.'" So I gave him a whole bunch of stuff. He said, 'Now if we can stay here for five days, they'll put us on to work.' But, this tunnel had caved in, and they couldn't get to work. Since they didn't have any place to stay, Mr. West had a big tarp that we had taken out huntin', and he told them to take that and fix a tent or something of that sort. I kept those boys for five days. Every day they'd come right up and ask if there was anything they could do. I saved my coffee grounds from when I made coffee in those big coffee pots. So I kept them in coffee grounds for coffee and in bones and vegetables and stuff to make soup. When we left, they all come up and said they'd go to work the next day. I gave 'em a whole bunch of stuff for lunch when they went to work.

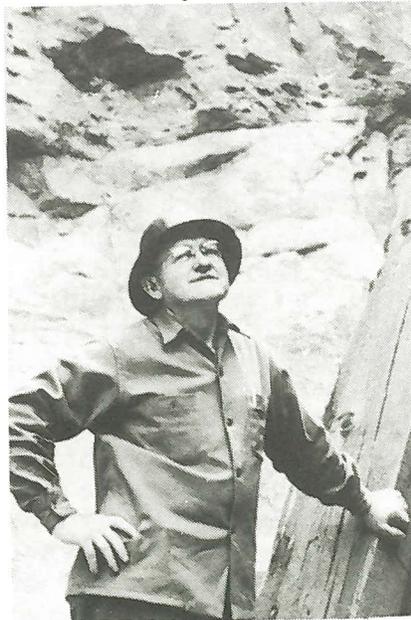
We left to go to Craig and that was when that man got blowed of o' the sheds. We left about three weeks after that, and we come back through Mt. Harris. We pulled in there to take on some nails or something of that sort, and here come those men and they had

candy, big boxes of candy, three and four pounds of candy, and silk stockings, two beautiful slips, and nuts, gum, all kinds of stuff. They also had two ten dollar bills and they said, 'Here, this is for when you fed us.' They were all nice men, they weren't tramps or anything. But they just couldn't get to work. There's times a person just can't get to work."

"We was a Plainview and that's right outside of Denver, and the boys went out, and when they went out of our outfit cars after breakfast, one of 'em hollered, 'Come see what we got out here!' They had a big, big, big old rattlesnake. Well, this one woman, one foreman's wife was there with her four little kids, and later on after the men had gone to work, I heard the little girl holler, 'Mama, Mama, come here, come here!' So I looked out and here these kids had that big old rattlesnake and were pokin' it with a stick as it went along the track. They were sayin', 'Mama, here's that thing those men had this morning.' Their mother liked to--I had to talk like everything. I kept talking to her and telling her, 'Now, don't say nothin'. Don't excite those children.' And I said, 'Get them away from it, if you can. Just talk real easy.' So she started talking to that oldest little girl, tellin' her to come into the car, and that she had candy for them. They got away from it and then that old rattler went down under some ties. When the men come home they dug it out and killed it."

MRS. WEST'S HUSBAND'S EXPERIENCES OF HIS JOB

William Audrey West, better known as Bill West, worked on the railroad for 45 years. When the Denver and Rio Grande Western took over the railroad, they awarded Bill with a trip to Chicago for having a record of 15 men per shift for 20 years without a reportable injury. The reason this is so big a feat is the work that the men did.



A newspaper photo of William Audrey (Bill) West standing at the entrance of the Moffat Tunnel.

Bill and his crew had the job of raising the roof of the tunnels along the Road. When they all got finished with the tunnels, they had done 52 out of 54 tunnels. To do the tunnel, they would start by wheeling in a "jumbo"(a large wooden scaffold on wheels). Then they had to take out all of the rotten wooden supports in the tunnel so they could work. The crew drilled holes in the roof of the tunnel to put dynamite that was used to blast three feet off the roof of the tunnel. When enough rock was blasted away, they would bring in large steel bows to support the roof instead of wooden ones which would rot out in a short time. While they were doing all this, they had to keep track of all the trains that were coming through. Every day they had to get the schedule of the trains that were coming that day. By knowing this schedule, which was called a line-up, the crew would know when to get the "jumbo" out of the tunnel. This was often a nuisance because the crew had to clear away the rocks to get the "jumbo" out of the tunnel. It would take several weeks to do a tunnel because of all the hand labor involved.

This was hard work because of the cold the men had to fight. Even in the summer, the men had to dress warmly to keep warm. When the wind blew in the winter it was especially bad. The tunnels would be like hurricanes when the wind went through them. The men often had to hang a big curtains over the mouths of the tunnels to keep them from being blown out of the tunnel.

If the crew had a hard time getting the "jumbo" out of the tunnel, they had a safety feature. Bill would put flagmen about 70 feet away from the mouth of tunnel to flag down the train if they couldn't get the "jumbo" out of the tunnel.



"I retired because I broke my legs when the steps on the outfit car come off while I was standing on 'em. I went rollin' down the mountain and got 17 breaks in one leg and 4 in the other."

Thelma is now residing in Alpine Meadows Nursing Home in Steamboat.