

Roger S. Plummer

For at least a quarter of a century, Roger Plummer was the general manager of the Carnation milk plant located in Sulphur Springs. Roger was an avid railfan and most who either knew him, or know of his work in the field would consider him as one of the Lone Star State's greatest rail photographers.

A visit to Roger's home or office in Sulphur Springs was like visiting a railroad museum. The walls of his office at Carnation were totally covered with 8 x 10 prints of his photographs, and mostly those featuring his beloved Cotton Belt.

Roger was a shameless wheeler and dealer. As a steady customer of the Cotton Belt in Sulphur Springs, it wasn't long before Roger used his position as the plant's general manager, as well as a rail photographer to get in good with the local switch crews. Because Carnation shipped 3 to 4 cars of milk a day via the Cotton Belt, Roger was accustomed to meeting each of the two daily locals that served Sulphur Springs. Times were much different back then and it was not uncommon for train crews to know customers on a first name basis. But that alone wasn't good enough for Roger Plummer. Before long he had maneuvered himself in such a high position of good standing with the Cotton Belt crews that he would usually climb aboard the local's ALCO RS-3, sit in the engineer's seat, and to do all of the plant's switching on Carnation's own spur track. If that wasn't enough, after completing Carnation's switching, he would often remain in the engineer's seat to do the rest of the switching in Sulphur Springs as well. Unfortunately this fine hobby ended one day when he failed to stop a cut of cars on the Rockwell Manufacturing spur east of town in time, and as a result he put a few wheels on the ground. But even that didn't mean that the Cotton Belt still didn't welcome him on the property, he just couldn't run any more trains.

After the incident he would send copies of his prints to various railroad presidents and then talk them into getting cab rides on their trains when he traveled. And he was extremely brazen as well. He would often climb atop block signals on the nearby T&P mainline or in Texarkana to get good photo angles of approaching trains, something that if you attempted to do today you would quickly find yourself at the peril of being arrested by the Department of Homeland Security.

And finally, Roger was generous to a fault. One local boy who grew up in Sulphur Springs during those days was named Fred Frailey. And by the way this is the same Fred Frailey who has written railroad books and articles for TRAINS. Anyway when Fred was a young boy, Roger learned of his fanatical love of trains. So Roger began taking the young Frailey with him on his Saturday and Sunday railfan expeditions to nearby Texarkana, Tyler and Ft. Worth. This started when Fred was just 11 years old and Fred will tell you what a thrill it was. Thanks to Roger, this no doubt opened a whole new door in Fred Frailey's life.

Roger outlived two wives and suffered terribly in his later years from arthritis. To combat the effects of the disease, he took up bicycling in his 70's. And until the time of his final illness, his generosity to others never wavered. His home, decorated from floor to ceiling with his photographs and railroadians, was always open to others, especially children. And no one who visited him ever left without leaving with an envelope of 8x10 prints.

Although Roger passed away in the 1980's, his photographic work still lives on, primarily his black & white photography which has been published in a number of excellent books featuring the railroads of Northeast Texas. Just a few of the titles include:

America's Colorful Railroads by Don Ball

Cotton Belt Locomotives by Joe Strapac

Katy Power by Joe Collias

Missouri Pacific Power by Joe Collias

and **Texas & Pacific Power**, also by Joe Collias

During the mid 1990's when I embarked on my own quest to document the railroads of Texas with my own series of books, one name naturally came to mind... Roger Plummer. Unfortunately Plummer had already passed away and his photo collection had already been sold and subsequently broken up to such a point that it was almost impossible to know where to begin. Roger never took many slides to begin with as black & white was his chosen format, but I had seen a few of his color images from time to time, namely a handful which had been published in Don Ball's "America's Colorful Railroads", which was the hobby's first real all-color railroad book. And so I had my work cut out for me.

As I began my search I learned of various events that disturbed me. Some indicated that when Ball first visited Plummer in the mid 1970's that he had taken large quantities of slides for use in his two all-color books and had never returned them. Others claimed when the collection was being broken up that according to Plummer's will that the collection was originally to have been donated to the Age of Steam Railroad Museum where it was to have remained completely intact. Others claimed that they had purchased Plummer slides through slide and rail photography brokers who had bought them for pennies on the dollar, and subsequently resold for anywhere from twenty to fifty dollars each. And in a few instances I discovered that Plummer had actually given away a few slides to his closer contacts shortly before his death.

Armed with names I began retracing the collection's activity. I quickly located a handful of names of those who had either purchased some of the collection, or knew

where portions of it had gone. I would eventually contact people like Gordon Bassett in Colorado Springs, Joe Collias in St. Louis, Louis Marre in Ohio, Dick Wallin in Illinois and Al Chione in Colorado, all of which either had either acquired some of Plummer's slides, or knew of their whereabouts.

My first book was on the Ft. Worth & Denver in 1996, followed by the Texas & Pacific the following year. Beginning with these works I was able to track down several of Plummer's better known color slides for these subjects. However, since my third book was to feature the Cotton Belt, I already knew that if the book was to meet my own standards, I would need to locate the majority of Plummer's extremely rare Cotton Belt images.

For those of you who have my book, I think that you would all have to agree that there is no finer coverage of the last years of Cotton Belt passenger service in Northeast Texas than the images that Plummer captured on color film during the 1954 to 1956 time frame.

Since then I have continued my quest to locate and identify as many of Plummer's color slides as possible. Although we may never know exactly how many color slides Roger shot through the years, I have managed to collect 90 of his color images to date. Unfortunately there are many others still at large, many of which were obtained by third party interest who had acquired them not through the actual sale by the Plummer estate, but through the acquisition of images from the Don Ball collection which sadly included a number of slides Ball had borrowed from Plummer in the 1970's and had never returned.

I only met Mr. Plummer one time during a Fort Worth train show and I asked him about his color slide collection. He told me that he always enjoyed black & white photography better and that its medium captured the essence of railroading better than color. However, he added that the only reason that he began carrying around a second camera loaded with Kodachrome was because this was the same period that most of the railroads were switching over from steam to diesel, and since the new diesels and streamliners came in so many colors, that color slides were the only way to do them justice. When asked if he ever shot color slides of steam locomotives, Roger quipped that he rarely saw the need to waste a perfectly good color slide on a locomotive that was basically black to begin with.

Although Roger S. Plummer will forever be associated with his fantastic black & white images depicting Texas railroads during the 1940's and 50's, I hope that everyone will enjoy today's brief look into his lesser known world of color photography.

Steve Allen Goen

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