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Chevrolet

PEOPLE AT WORK:

Railroading is Different

Becoming a railroad engineer was only a dream to black youths in the 1940s. Today, there are many in the field. It's not easy to get into, but the rewards are great.

Bill Byrd stands in front of the types of locomotives he handles for the B and O Chessie system.

By Ann Williams-Roblow

The wondrous sight and sound of a speeding locomotive along the railroad tracks, its whistle blasting, is a common experience for many children as they stand beside the track watching the huge machines, with boxcars trailing, rush by them.

The dream of piloting those huge locomotives was unattainable if those children were black, many years ago. Things, fortunately, are changing as more and more black men and women take up railroad engineering as a challenging way of life.

For two men, both the sons of fathers who worked on the railroads, the life of busy freight yards, long hours and equally long pay has become a reality.

William A. Byrd, an engineer with the Baltimore and Ohio Chessie system, based in Baltimore, MD., said his father, Turner Byrd, worked for a Philadelphia based railroad as a red cap for about 17 years.

Turner Byrd's dream of being an engineer never was realized, because in those days blacks were allowed to work at only the most menial jobs, Byrd said.

"He had a desire to be an engineer, but at that time, in the early 1940s, it was unheard of for a black to be an engineer," Byrd said. "The only position a black man could have at that time was on the track gang, clean up, menial labor or be a red cap."

Turner Byrd died about four years ago, but before his death he "was able to see me become an engineer . . . he was very proud of me," Byrd said.

A native of Philadelphia, Byrd said he and his family moved to Baltimore in 1953. He said he began his railroading career at a relatively late age, 33.

He said he joined Chessie as a tower operator, a clerk's job, responsible for issuing train orders "and other material related to train movement" and worked at it for about three years.

In 1975, the railroad's engineers who had been hired in the 30's and 40's were retiring, he said. The company needed replacements and one day as Byrd was talking to a white engineer, the subject arose.

"He asked if I'd be interested in that work and said the money was considerably more than my kind of (tower clerk's) job," Byrd said.

At the controls engineer Bill Byrd prepares for a long run.

After speaking with a supervisor at the railroad's headquarters, he said he was placed on a waiting list and six months later, Byrd was transferred to Chessie's locomotive engineering training school in Cumberland, MD.

The six - month course was no pushover, Byrd said. After its completion, it was as if he had finished college. The class consisted of 10 men, half of whom were black, he said:

Classroom instruction included daily tests, where they were drilled on the previous day's lessons. On - the - job training rounded out the session, he said.

"It was pretty rigid and exacting, but I enjoyed it," Byrd said.

Many railroads across the nation are seeking more college - trained personnel to pilot their locomotives because "railroads, just like all other occupations, are using high technology. They're looking for people with college backgrounds to do the job," he said.

There are many rewards to being an engineer, but the job,

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