

# The Real Origin of the Sperry Rail Inspection Car

by Dick Munnikhuysen

The management on the E&P recently demonstrated an increasing level of interest in track maintenance on the E&P. As part of this program they procured the services of the Sperry Rail Inspection Company and the revolutionary induction based testing technology associated with their rail inspection car (herein modeled).



A bit of background is in order here as most railroad modelers are suffering under some misconceptions regarding the origin and history of the technology involved in rail inspection. Like Most, I was laboring under the assumption that the original technology was developed by Dr. Elmer Sperry of upstate New York who later gained national prominence through his development of the gyro compass and the Sperry Rand Corporation. It was only after considerable research that the real story was unveiled.

It seems that in 1924 there were three brothers (Buford, Burt and Bubba Sperry) living in their ancestral home in Sperryville, Virginia. At that time, Burt (the youngest) was still in high school, and was an exceptional student. Bubba (the middle brother) was a true good old boy, but was not the sharpest knife in the drawer. He was also the town drunk. Buford (the oldest and the "brainiac" of the family) was a science professor down in Charlottesville at UVA. Buford had always been interested in the creation of electro-magnetic fields via the use of large pulses of voltage. He developed a steam powered flux capacitor capable of producing huge power pulses and very large momentary magnetic fields. Unfortunately there seemed to be little practical demand for the technology and as such it was not widely know and Buford was somewhat frustrated by the lack of acknowledgement for his development. Fortunately, Bubba came to the rescue.

Bubba and the superintendant of the E&P had grown up together and they were now drinking buddies. It seems the "Super" had a habit of ducking out of White Hall whenever the CEO was on one of her frequent shopping excursions. He would drive down to Sperryville and meet up with Bubba at the local honky-tonk. Several hours later the afternoon would typically end with the sheriff providing the "Super" with a complimentary ride back to White Hall and then take Bubba back to Sperryville for a night in jail.

One day late in October of 1924, Buford was at the jail bailing out Bubba when Bubba related his previous afternoon's conversation with the E&P "Super". It seems that the "Super" was despondent about the condition of the track on the E&P. There had been numerous derailments and several serious accidents. The CEO was furious about the associated loss of profitability and the potential impact that could have on her shopping budget. It turns out she had told the "Super" in no uncertain terms that he would either fix the problem or she would find someone that could.

It was as if the proverbial light bulb went on above Buford's head. Here was a chance to put his flux capacitor technology to work. He whipped up some power point slides and made an appointment to brief the entire E&P Board of Directors at their upcoming meeting. Buford proposed to develop a rail inspection car that would detect defects in the rails through the use of induced magnetic fields. He presented a draft contract that called for the E&P to fund the development effort in favor of which they would own the prototype inspection car and share in patent rights for all future models. The "Super" being desperate to get the CEO off of his back came out strongly in favor of the idea. The CEO thought the idea was a frivolous waste of money, commenting to the effect that the "Super" was fluxing crazy to support what was an obvious waste of funds (that could otherwise be devoted to shopping) but, the E&P Board approved the contract. Development of the prototype started the following week.

The brothers Sperry assembled the prototype in record time. As you can see, the rail car was pretty simple other than the key component - the steam powered flux capacitor. Sperry #1 was successfully tested on the E&P on December 15, 1924. For the next six months it was in regular use throughout the E&P empire and proved to be extremely effective. Typical operating practice called for the inspection car to be slowly pushed over the section of track being inspected. Buford would regulate the flux capacitor cabinet, Bubba would fire the boiler, and Burt would manipulate the induction boom and watch the flux-o-scope for indication of faults in the rails.

All went well until the day they were working the section of rail that ran through Flat Top. At that time, Flat Top was a bustling town of 10,000 citizens with the full suite of small town stores, businesses and residences. The rail inspection train had taken the siding to wait for a meet with an approaching passenger train. Given that on the E&P, those "waits" could last for hours; Buford shut down the flux capacitor and hopped down from the car to get a cup of coffee from the diner alongside the track. It is important to note that at that time, the E&P tracks ran right down Main Street in Flat Top (much like the RF&P tracks run through Ashland). Sperry #1 was located roughly between "Murphy's Mercantile" on the left and "We Be Shoes" blacksmith on the right side of the tracks. As fate would have it, the "Super" happened to be in Flat Top that morning and seeing his buddy Bubba on Sperry #1, he climbed aboard to see how things were

going. Always the social one, Bubba just happened to have a couple of beers in the water tank so he pulled them out and he and the "Super" had a taste.

They wandered up to the front end of the car to chat with Burt who climbed out of the operator's chair and was sitting on the boom next to the flux capacitor cabinet. One thing led to another and before you knew it, Bubba turned to the "Super" and muttered that infamous redneck phrase - "Here, hold my beer, let's open this thing up and see what it will do". With that he stepped over to the flux capacitor cabinet, cranked it up to full power, and smacked the "Contact" button.

All hell broke loose. On the right side of the tracks, the entire inventory of "We Be Shoes" was yanked through the walls of the shop and plastered along the rail. Unfortunately the anvil tipped over the forge as it flew by and the resulting fire engulfed the entire shop in no time. On the left side most of the inventory from Murphy's Hardware was now stuck to the left hand rail. Similarly the kerosene lamps and numerous can of kerosene, various oils and other lubricants in Murphy's store also started fires there. With major fires spreading on both sides of the track, the Flat Top fire department was quickly overwhelmed and the entire town burned to the ground. All that was left of the town was an ash gray flat spot. Even today, there are not many buildings in Flat Top.

Fortunately, no one was killed at the scene, but after the CEO got the liability claim, the "Super" was never seen again. The rumor is that he had Sperry #1 pushed to an abandoned siding on the E&P and he and Bubba used the boiler and equipment to build a major moonshine operation. Buford went back to the university and later became famous for the development of a very special DeLorean automobile. Burt was never seen again. He left town to become a circus clown and lost touch with his brothers. It's funny, but if you look into the life of Elmer Sperry, there are very few details of his early life, and no record of his existence before 1920. Makes you wonder...