

Nostalgia & The Future

By Jim Gauntt

My wife, Susan, and I will celebrate 25 years of marriage this year. As I began to ponder this recently, I could not help but think about a number of other things for which to be thankful and to remember with a great deal of fondness.

For example, when I was a high school student I was given a book written by John G. Neihardt called "Black Elk Speaks." Neihardt, who, incidentally, lived part of his life in and around Branson, Mo., the site of this year's RTA conference, tells the story of an Oglala holy man, Nicholas Black Elk (1863-1950), and his people during the waning years of the 19th Century around the time the Lakota Sioux battled Custer at Little Big Horn. As Neihardt tells it, "Black Elk gave him the gift of his life's narrative, including visions and rituals he had performed." As it turns out, this has become one of my favorite books to read and reread over the years.

I related this information last summer to one of the many, many friends I have in this industry of ours, Kim Sigurdson of Aboriginal Cogeneration Corporation. Kim and I began to deepen our friendship through many emails about the history of the Ojibwe (Chippewa) groups of Native Americans (Sigurdson's heritage). I learned he, too, is a spirit keeper, and he honored me with a gift of an eagle feather and my own Indian name (his words).

To the Ojibwe people, I am now known as "Iron Horse." Kim tells me the name is mine because I have "dedicated my life to the railways."

I am in my 16th year with RTA and cannot now easily remember what it was like when I was not thinking about crossties, the members who make up this incredible association and, yes, the rail-

ways. It has been a great time of service to a phenomenal industry. As I take a nostalgic look back, I can remember saying time and again that even though our members are fierce competitors, they always find a way to keep their eye on the most important thing: the improvement of the treated wood crosstie that makes it the most successful industrial product in history. That familial bond

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that puts the success of our products ahead of competitive interests is strong within our association and has truly made this a very special place to work.

But that is not enough. There is much work yet ahead for RTA. As our industry has grown more successful, it has consolidated. This, in and of itself, brings new challenges. So, there can be no laurel resting on this watch.

The future holds two immediate challenges that must be addressed. The first is communication to all of our members. There are new plants being built; new company owners ranging from sawmills to treating operations to railroads; and lots of new faces who don't know the heritage of RTA and what all is being done for its members. Thus, RTA must redouble its efforts to tell the story about our work together and the real heroes the association represents—treated wood crossties.

To do this we need every viable communication method available to us. We need word of mouth, we need the Internet, and we need *Crossties* magazine.

That brings me to the next challenge. *Crossties* is a self-supporting enterprise. RTA is capable of distributing this bi-monthly magazine to hundreds of rail-

roads and rail contractors and more than 3,000 RTA members, most of whom are hardwood sawmill owners, based solely on the advertising revenue produced from each issue.

You may also note that advertising has slowed over the past few years. Certainly, industry consolidation and economic times have been the biggest culprits in the attrition, but there may be something more to consider as well. I think that we have not been as vocal in soliciting new advertisers as we should have been recently.

So, let me state this unequivocally: We NEED you! We need you to take a look at the value that *Crossties* offers in getting your message out to thousands of individuals every two months. We need you to remember that this is one of the most important ways we continue to tell the success story of treated wood crossties to suppliers and customers alike. And, we need your advertising to make this effort successful.

Please take a close look at your budgets and consider carving out a slice for your association's primary mode of communication. Please call me here at headquarters at (770) 460-5553, or call Kristen McIntosh of Covey Communications at (251) 968-5300, our partner in this communication endeavor we call *Crossties* magazine. We'll help your message reach your best prospective customers. Your return on investment will be great and, at the same time, you'll know with pride that you are helping RTA carry on our important efforts on behalf of its members and the treated wood crosstie.

As Kim Sigurdson would say in his native tongue, Meegwetch (thank you)! §



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