

THE HISTORY & ACCOMPLISHMENTS

of the

**Brotherhood of Maintenance of
Way Employees Division**

of the

**International
Brotherhood of Teamsters**

BMWE Division – IBT
41475 Gardenbrook Road
Novi, MI 48375-1328

2012

HISTORY OF THE BROTHERHOOD

In 1830 there were 23 miles of railroad track in the United States. Seventy years later that number grew by more than 190,000 miles. The railroads expanded with the help of Congressional land grants and economic growth following the Civil War, pulling people and prosperity with them.

The men who made this travel possible were forgotten in the rush to crisscross the country. These men would have to keep the track safe and stable for passengers and for the growing freight traffic. As the nation grew dependent on this faster mode of transportation that replaced the stagecoach, there was an ever-increasing demand for railroads and employees to maintain them.

The initial rush to lay rail had produced poorly laid track that could not handle the speed and amount of traffic. The early makeshift crews gave way to other crews who could rebuild, repair and maintain the track. These men worked from sunrise to sunset – 14.5 hours a day – with a one-hour break in the winter and ninety minutes in the summer. There were no job guarantees and wage cuts were forced upon them. There were no benefits for injury or death and the average pay was eighty cents a day.

It was these conditions that led John T. Wilson, in 1887 at the age of 26, to risk his job and welfare to form an organization to offer some protections to his fellow maintenance workers. This new group, the Order of Railway Trackmen, was conceived solely as a benevolent society that would offer death and disability insurance to its members.

The industrialization of the United States brought with it great clashes between labor and management. Anything that meant an alliance of employees was a threat to railroad owners who would do anything possible to stop workers from organizing. Leaders were fired, workers were blacklisted, and prospective employees were forced to sign contracts agreeing not to join a union. People were beaten and chased out of their communities and unions could not meet in public places, but John T. Wilson persevered.

Though membership roles were fluctuating and rival organizations kept challenging the fledgling union, Wilson continued his crusade to stand up for the trackmen's rights. He created grievance procedures, negotiated wage increases, and shortened the work day – all without calling a strike. It was not easy and Wilson faced many obstacles. But, in 1900 with a membership of 1,500, the Brotherhood joined the American Federation of Labor and ensured its dominance as the union for maintenance of way employees.

The road was still going to be rocky, however, because any advances made to this point were shaken by Wilson's death in 1908. The transition from Wilson's driving leadership to new, untested leaders would prove to be a slow one. When the United States entered World War I, rail labor got a much-needed respite from the antagonism of management when the government took over the railroads for the duration of the war. Once the railroads were returned to private hands in 1920, the Brotherhood

was beset with problems that ranged from financial difficulties to worker disenchantment with the union.

The middle of the decade brought a partial solution with the Railway Labor Act of 1926 (RLA), which abolished the Labor Board – an entity that sided with management more often than labor – and helped solidify collective bargaining as an accepted procedure.

Gains for the union came slowly in the way of increased membership, unity and higher pay, but that all came to a near halt with the Great Depression. Hundreds of thousands of jobs were lost and unions had to work to shore up what they could and negotiate minimum wage reductions instead of increases.

The recovery from the depression brought greater government involvement in the railroad business as legislation was passed to create retirement plans, unemployment benefits and national minimum wage standards for additional employee protection.

The 1940s brought World War II and rail labor worked hard to support the war effort by keeping supplies and troops moving. The government effectively prohibited strikes and kept a close watch on the status of labor negotiations.

After the war, technological advances threatened employment levels and inflation threatened standards of living. Once again, the union held its ground and continued to get wage increases and improved benefits, struggling against railroad claims of decreasing profits resulting from competition with the trucking and airline industries. This period also ushered in the beginning of a decline in BMW membership.

With the advent of deregulation in the 1980's, the union's membership continued to decline. The 1990's brought legislative attacks from an anti-labor administration that fought to remove the safeguards that the Brotherhood spent 100 years fighting to achieve.

As this next century begins, the need for the Brotherhood and solidarity with other rail unions is greater than ever. The fight for job security in the face of short line spin-offs, safety in the face of deteriorating conditions, and fair wages and benefits in the face of cutbacks continues; however, rail labor leaders are looking at new and innovative ways to fight back from a position of strength.

In 2004, the membership of the Brotherhood voted overwhelmingly to join the International Brotherhood of Teamsters' Rail Conference. Under the leadership and guidance of President Freddie Simpson, the Brotherhood begins a new era in the struggle that was started by John Wilson over one hundred years ago. Uniting all transportation labor under one roof will provide workers with a stronger voice and the support of other transportation workers.

The benevolent society started with a few trackmen on a hot day in Alabama. The BMWED has since shown it can meet the challenges of an ever-changing industry and is committed more than ever to protecting its members' rights.

Some of the accomplishments during our Brotherhood's first one hundred years are reflected in the list of benefits described on the following page.

BMWED ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Right of Representation
- Protection Against Discrimination
- Rules Agreements
- Eight-Hour day
- Overtime Pay
- Retirement Benefits
- Unemployment Benefits
- Sickness Benefits
- Paid Vacations
- Forty-Hour Week
- Union Shop
- Holiday Pay
- Health Insurance
- Life Insurance
- Accidental Death, Dismemberment and Loss of Sight Benefits
- Improved Wage Rates
- Job Security
- Travel Time and Away-from-Home Expenses
- Off-Track Vehicle Accident Insurance Coverage
- Jury Duty Pay
- Check-Off of Dues
- Supplemental Sickness Benefits
- Dental Insurance
- Early Retiree Major Medical Benefits
- Bereavement Leave
- Personal Leave
- Safety Legislation and Regulation
- Vision Care

In addition, substantial improvements in hourly rates of pay for our members have been negotiated by our Brotherhood and are reflected in the average hourly rates set forth below in three-year increments:

2015 – 28.62	1994 – 14.40	1973 – 4.68
2012 – 25.98	1991 – 13.62	1970 – 3.28
2009 – 23.82	1988 – 13.09	1967 – 2.83
2006 – 21.28	1985 – 12.02	1964 – 2.46
2003 – 19.10	1982 – 10.80	1961 – 2.28
2000 – 17.93	1979 – 7.92	1958 – 2.08
1997 – 16.06	1976 – 6.02	

The current goals of the Brotherhood remain basically the same, namely protecting the jobs of our members and improving wages, benefits and conditions of employment.

NOTES PAGE