



# BLET Auxiliary News

*Working to bring about safer working conditions for Locomotive Engineers & Trainmen, educate spouses, and enhance the lifestyles of railroad employees and their families.*

Volume 6, Number 1

Spring 2015

Sereena Hogan, President • Susie Burrola, 1st Vice President • Lawana Poss, Secretary • Terri Fleming, Treasurer  
Kathleen Bisbikis, 2nd Vice President/National Legislative Representative • [www.bletauxiliary.net](http://www.bletauxiliary.net)

## Sister Caruso, we thank you and wish you all the best!!!

Sister Anita Caruso, we thank you for your many years of dedicated service to the BLET Auxiliary! For those of you who are reading this and are new to the Auxiliary, you may not know that our Past President Anita Caruso served for nine years as National Secretary before she was elected to the position of National President. She will be the first to tell you that when she joined the auxiliary, she never had any intention of attending a national convention as a delegate or running for a national office; however, she rose to the occasion and did an excellent job of serving this organization in both of the national officer positions she held between the years of 1996 - 2014.

Anita first became an auxiliary member when she joined Helen Gould Auxiliary 235 in Osawatomie, Kansas, in 1979 at the invitation of one of its members. This was shortly after her husband Sam had become employed by Union Pacific Railroad. Knowing nothing about railroad life, Anita jumped on the chance to belong to this group of women from whom she could learn what it was going to be like to married to a railroader. She quickly learned that it takes a strong, independent woman to be a railroad wife.

She learned much from the other wives during the eight years she was a member of Auxiliary 235, and then, in 1988, Sam transferred to Omaha, Nebraska. She was not thrilled about having to move 200 miles from her home town, leaving family and lifelong friends behind, but if it was going to be better for Sam's railroad career, she knew she must.

Several years after moving to Omaha, Anita started a new auxiliary there, River

City Auxiliary 12. She ended up being asked to serve as a proxy at the International Convention in 1996 for another auxiliary that was unable to send a delegate. This was a great learning experience to become familiar with the workings of the Auxiliary on an International level. In 1997, Anita was asked to fill the position of Alternate International Treasurer when a vacancy in the that position resulted from the resignation of one of the International officers. In 2001, she ran for and won the office of International Secretary, a position she held for nine years. At the 2010 National Convention, she was elected National President.

During her years as Secretary and President, Anita fully dedicated herself to her position. She made herself always available to the members, overcame her fear of public speaking and did an excellent job of representing the Auxiliary at the regional conventions, and even before a much larger crowd at the BLET 150th Anniversary Celebration in 2013.

Anita was fortunate to have a very supportive and helpful husband during the years she served as a national officer. His support, guidance, and hands-on help were invaluable to her,



Anita and Sam looking blissful as they cruise the Bahamas on Princess Cruise Lines in February 2015.

and we are all grateful to him as well for all he has done over the years for Anita and for the Auxiliary.

Sister Anita, we all thank you for your many years of service, for all the sacrifices you have made for the Auxiliary, for the many ways you took extra measures to preserve precious funds, for all the advances made during your tenure as National President, and most of all for your friendship and sisterhood!

Sam retired last year, shortly after the National Convention, and now he and Anita are free to enjoy their retirement years doing the things they really love. We wish you both the very best and look forward to seeing you here and there in the years ahead!



### BLET Auxiliary Scholarships are due April 1!

For more information on qualifications, instructions for applying, and to download an application form, please go to our website at [www.bletauxiliary.net](http://www.bletauxiliary.net).



## From the President - BY SEREENA HOGAN

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Hope the new year is off to a good start for everyone. After spending the last couple of months of 2014 working on getting the Journal of Proceedings and the revised Constitution & Bylaws ready to go to print, I breathed a big sigh of relief. Many thanks to the BLET National Division for agreeing to print and bind these documents for us. And many thanks also to Past President Becky Schneider

and my husband Ken Kroeger for help with this monumental task! Our National Secretary Lawana Poss has mailed out copies to all of the delegates and national officers who were in attendance at our national convention last October, and also copies of the Constitution & Bylaws to all of our local auxiliaries. It is also available for download on our website.

The new national officers have all been hard at work and I am amazed at how well each of them has taken on their new duties. I am inspired and revitalized by their enthusiasm and competence! We are brainstorming some new ideas to raise funds for our auxiliary so that we may continue to function in the years ahead. If you have some ideas to share with us, please let us know. The Auxiliary is not just its officers... it's all of our members working together to thrive and grow.

One of the cornerstones of our organization is our Care & Assistance Program. As explained by Lawana in her "Tidbits from the National Secretary" article on page 5, this program helps some of our members who may be struggling with financial burdens. It can be on a long-term basis, or short-term to get through an unexpected, difficult situation. Applications for the program can be obtained from Lawana and will be reviewed and evaluated by the Executive Council.

1st Vice President and Outreach Coordinator Susie Burrola and I will be taking off soon to help get a couple of new local auxiliaries organized in Indiana. Rodney Kanous, Local Chairman for Division 348 in Elkhart, is working to get a local auxiliary started in his area, and Brian Farkas, Indiana State Legislative Board Chairman, is working to get an auxiliary started in the Indianapolis area. Susie has been following up with both of these gentlemen and we are looking forward to getting some new members signed up in Indiana this month. It's so refreshing and encouraging to have people reaching out to us in this way. I am extremely grateful to have Susie on board to recruit new members and organize new auxiliaries as well as follow up with our current local auxiliaries to make sure they are doing well. In addition to all that, she serves as editor of this publication and is coming up with some bright new ideas for content. Susie's passion for and dedication to her new position is a beautiful thing to behold!

Our 2nd Vice President/Legislative Representative Kathleen Bisbikis is doing an excellent job staying abreast of legislative

issues and keeping our members informed through her legislative alerts and updates about important news having to do with legislation, health and welfare benefits, and Railroad Retirement. If you are not already on Kathleen's e-mail list to receive the legislative updates, please send an e-mail request to her at [bletauxiliaryr@gmail.com](mailto:bletauxiliaryr@gmail.com) so that she may add your e-mail address to her list. Each time a new legislative update is posted to our website, everyone who has registered as a "user" on the site receives the update via e-mail. If you have not already done so, I highly encourage you to go to the site at [www.bletauxiliary.net](http://www.bletauxiliary.net) and register as a user so that you will receive valuable information as it is posted to the site.

In addition to her accomplished writing and speaking skills, Kathleen shares many other talents with our Auxiliary. She is a very witty and creative person and I am grateful that I can call on her to share her many skills and ideas with us. She often brings a bit of humor and amusement to my day, which is always welcome.

This is an extremely busy time for our National Secretary Lawana Poss as she processes the annual reports and dues monies that are submitted by our local auxiliaries, as well as the dues from our members-at-large. Many thanks to all of you who have sent in your dues in a timely manner! Lawana is also fielding calls from those who have questions about the scholarship program, and processing the applications as she receives them. If you or someone you know has children who are eligible to apply for a BLET Auxiliary scholarship, please have them send in their applications as soon as possible.

Our National Treasurer Terri Fleming has opened a new bank account for our organization in her home town of El Paso, Texas, and is busy "learning the ropes," to keep our accounts in order. Many thanks to Past National Treasurer Helen Brand for all her help in making a smooth transition with the funds and assisting Terri with any questions and concerns as to the operation of this aspect of the organization. Keeping track of the funds can be a daunting task and Terri has proven that she is very capable.

Our Executive Council Meeting has been scheduled for April 25-28 and will be held this year at my home in Tucson, Arizona. At our annual meetings, we discuss the financial status of the Auxiliary; review our membership rolls; grade the scholarship applications for our own program as well as the IWC scholarships; review the current Care & Assistance Program recipients' annual updates and any new applications we have received; brainstorm ideas for fundraising and recruiting; and make plans for the year ahead. I look forward to welcoming the Executive Committee members to my home for this important meeting. We are open to suggestions and ideas from our membership, so please don't hesitate to contact one of us if there is something you would like us to discuss or present on your behalf at this meeting.

In addition to our annual meeting, our Executive Council members are connecting with one another through the use of conference

Railroad worker fatigue has been a major problem since the founding of railroads. In the early 1990s, the National Transportation Safety Board began to focus on fatigue as one of its top concerns to improve safety in the railroad industry. Some minor improvements have resulted from the passage of railroad safety legislation; however absenteeism policies, inadequate lineups and calling practices, and manpower shortages continue to plague the industry and present challenges to railroaders who struggle to get adequate rest needed to stay alert on the job.

In June of 2012, the BLET announced the launch of [RailroaderSleep.org](http://RailroaderSleep.org), an informative website sponsored by the Federal Railroad Administration and produced in partnership with WGBH Educational Foundation and the John A. Volpe National Transportation Systems Center. When it was first introduced, BLET National President Pierce encourage BLET members to visit the website, especially since they had a hand in the creation of its content. He stated that "...it is our hope this new website will benefit our members who want more information concerning how to obtain better sleep given the challenges and barriers to quality sleep presented by working for the railroads."

The site has recently been updated and improved upon. The following announcement offers an overview of the website. Railroaders and their family members are encouraged to visit the site to learn more about how to combat fatigue and develop healthy sleep habits.

## Good sleep promotes good health

Insufficient sleep is a public health epidemic, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) warns. Nodding off unintentionally and finding it hard to manage daily tasks because of sleepiness may contribute to crashes while driving, workplace errors, and industrial disasters.

People who chronically get too little sleep, the CDC reports, also put themselves at higher risk of developing chronic diseases, such as high blood pressure, diabetes, depression, and obesity, than people who get the sleep they need to feel well-rested.

Railroaders, whose often unpredictable schedules may interfere with sleep, will find tips and tools to cope with sleep loss at the **Railroaders' Guide to Healthy Sleep** website.



The website offers articles, quizzes, videos, and charts to help railroaders sleep better, enjoy time with friends and family, and stay connected with their community.

The site also provides practical steps to combat fatigue, including adjusting the times of use of caffeine and naps. It tells how to determine one's individual sleep needs, and tune into normal daily ups and downs in alertness and sleepiness.

Additionally, it offers a free self-quiz, the Anonymous Sleep Disorders Screening Tool, to help railroaders learn their risk for having one or more sleep disorders. The site also includes a downloadable sleep-wake diary to help railroaders chart daily patterns of sleep, naps, exercise, medication use, and other factors that may affect the amount or quality of sleep they get.

The Railroaders' Guide to Healthy Sleep represents a collaborative effort by experts in sleep and health from the Harvard Medical School Division of Sleep Medicine and in educational media from WGBH Educational Foundation, with support from Volpe, The National Transportation Systems Center, and funding from the Federal Railroad Administration of the U.S. Department of Transportation.

Visit us at <http://www.RailroaderSleep.org>, or email us at [RailroaderSleep@dot.gov](mailto:RailroaderSleep@dot.gov).

call meetings. We had one such meeting in January and found it to be very useful to meet with one another in this way.

In closing, I wish each of you a beautiful spring! This is my favorite time of year as the temperatures get warmer and new life springs forth everywhere we look. Take time to enjoy the colors, the sounds, and the beauty of this magical season of rebirth and renewal!

**Sereena Hogan, National President**  
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## In Memoriam

Our hearts go out to the wife and family of BLET Division 20 Engineer Glenn W. Steele who passed away on March 3, 2015, from traumatic injuries sustained in the collision of a Metrolink train and an abandoned heavy duty pickup truck on February 24 in Oxnard, California. Division 20 has established an assistance fund for the Steele family to help with expenses during their tragic time of need. Donations can be made at: [www.gofundme.com/nbytn0](http://www.gofundme.com/nbytn0).





## Guest Columnist

By Libby Rector Snipe, Director of Communications - Operation Lifesaver, Inc.

# Do you know what happens every three hours in the United States?

Federal safety statistics show that a person or vehicle is hit by a train roughly every three hours in the U.S. At Operation Lifesaver, our mission is to raise awareness of – and work to prevent – the injuries and fatalities that occur every day at highway-rail crossings or on railroad property. We rely on organizations like BLET Auxiliary to help us spread this important safety message.

Operation Lifesaver started in 1972 when the average number of collisions at U.S. highway-rail grade crossings had risen above 12,000 incidents annually. To address this, Idaho launched a six-week public awareness educational campaign called Operation Lifesaver to promote highway-rail grade crossing safety. After Idaho's crossing-related fatalities fell that year by 43 percent, the successful program was adopted by other states, and in 1986 a non-profit national Operation Lifesaver office was created to help support the state efforts and raise national awareness on highway-rail grade crossing issues.

Today, Operation Lifesaver's network of authorized volunteers offer free rail safety education programs in 50 states. We speak to school groups, driver education classes, community audiences, professional drivers, law enforcement officers, and emergency responders. Need a free safety presentation for your group? Go to [www.oli.org](http://www.oli.org) for more information, to locate your State Coordinator or request a safety presentation.

In addition to our education programs, Operation Lifesaver creates public safety campaigns to reach audiences across the country. Our "See Tracks? Think Train!" campaign launched last year to make safe behavior an automatic habit near train tracks. Visit [www.seetracksthinktrain.org](http://www.seetracksthinktrain.org) to see the television ads, download infographics and posters, and find safety tips for drivers and pedestrians.

**THE MOST LOPSIDED  
★ CLASH IN HISTORY. ★**

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**MAN**  
175 LBS.  
OF PURE, HUMAN  
FLESH AND BLOOD

**VS**

**TRAIN**  
6,000 TONS  
OF SOLID BUILT  
AMERICAN STEEL

**IT'S NO CONTEST.** Every day, people tempt fate and die trespassing on railroad tracks.

OPERATION LIFESAVER | ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN RAILROADS | See Tracks? THINK TRAIN | SeeTracksThinkTrain.org

We need your help to spread the Operation Lifesaver message! Members of the BLET, BLET Auxiliary, and their family members make great Operation Lifesaver Authorized Volunteers. Learn how you can use your passion for rail safety to help us spread this important message: <http://oli.org/training/volunteer-for-oli>.

Everyone can make a difference by following Operation Lifesaver, Inc. on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Pinterest. Each time you share our stories, statistics, and safety tips with your friends and family, you could save a life!

*Libby Rector Snipe  
Director of Communications  
Operation Lifesaver, Inc.*

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## Tidbits from National Secretary Lawana Poss

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Spring is just around the corner and I know everyone is looking forward to warmer weather!

The 2015 Regional meetings will be held soon. Make your plans to attend!! I am so thrilled to have the opportunity to attend each year. Regionals are very busy and exciting. We always learn something new and make some new friends.

Stop by the auxiliary table and say hello! And don't forget to purchase tickets for the raffle drawing and pick up a copy of the Auxiliary Cookbook!! Thank you to everyone for supporting the Auxiliary by purchasing raffle tickets and donations that go to our Scholarship Fund!! A Scholarship can change the life of a child and your support means the world to us.

I do hope you plan to attend! I look forward to seeing you! The dates and locations of this year's meetings are listed on Page 12 and also on the BLET website at <http://www.ble-t.org>.

### SCHOLARSHIP NEWS

If you have children who are college bound, they may be eligible to apply for a scholarship with the BLET Auxiliary. To qualify, one parent must be a member of the BLET and one parent must be a member of the BLET Auxiliary for one year.

BLET Auxiliary Scholarship information and applications can be obtained on our website at [www.bletauxiliary.net](http://www.bletauxiliary.net). You can also find a link from the BLET website at [www.ble-t.org](http://www.ble-t.org) under "Departments," then "BLET Auxiliary." **Scholarship applications for the 2015-2016 academic school year are due in**

**my office April 1, 2015.** Late applications will not be considered.

### COOKBOOKS

We are still selling BLET Auxiliary Cookbooks! We have a limited quantity of the first edition MAIN LINE COOKING and we also have MAIN LINE COOKING II. These books make wonderful gifts so contact me for information. The cookbooks can be shipped directly to you.

### MAL REMINDER

Thank you to the Members-at-Large who have sent in their Dues. March 1 is the due date for Auxiliary Membership payment. Mail your Dues to me and I will get your 2015 Membership Card and receipt to you.

### CARE AND ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Established in 1921, the Care and Assistance Program (CAP) is our organization's way of saying thank you to long-time members. These members are usually elderly and their incomes are such that some of life's little pleasures are out of their reach. The CAP provides financial assistance to qualifying members and helps them to maintain a little bit more of the dignity they deserve. Our CAP recipients are grateful for what we do.

Please check to see if someone in your Auxiliary may be eligible and encourage them to apply. Members at Large are eligible also!! Contact me for applications!!

Please call or e-mail me or any National Officer when there is a death of a member or the death of one of their family members. We want to be able to send our condolences to the family. We would like to also share in the joy!! Please let me know of any exciting happenings!



*Lawana Poss can be reached at 770-497-8898, by e-mail at [Lewp2007@bellsouth.net](mailto:Lewp2007@bellsouth.net), or by mail at 1394 Bywood Court, Suwanee, Georgia 30024.*

If I can answer any questions for you, give me a call or send me an e-mail and I will get back to you as soon as I can!!

*— Lawana*



# LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

BY KATHLEEN BISBIKIS, NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE REPRESENTATIVE



***In our glorious fight for civil rights, we must guard against being fooled by false slogans such as “right to work.” It is a law to rob us of our civil rights and job rights.***

—Dr. Martin Luther King

## High Speed Rail

A transformational moment in U.S. history took place on January 6, 2015. On that date, the ground was officially broken on the nation's first-ever high speed rail system. The ceremony took place in Fresno, California, at the location that will serve as the future train station that will link high speed rail travelers from San Francisco to Los Angeles. It is estimated that it will take approximately five years to complete the Central Valley portion of the bullet train and a decade to finish all of the proposed sections across California. At the dedication ceremony, California Governor Jerry Brown said, “The high-speed rail links us from the past to the future, from the south to the north.”

The high speed rail project is estimated to bring approximately 66,000 new jobs to California annually over the course of its construction. The estimated

cost of completion of the high speed rail system is 68 billion dollars. After completion, a traveler will be able to enjoy a high speed rail experience going from San Francisco to Los Angeles in just three hours at a range of 200 to 220 mph.

## Acting FRA Administrator Named

Sarah Feinberg has been named acting FRA Administrator replacing Joseph Szabo who stepped down on January 1, 2015. Feinberg was appointed by U.S. Secretary of Transportation Anthony Foxx, who she served as Chief of Staff. Feinberg is only the second woman to lead the agency since it began in 1966. She joined the Department of Transportation in 2013 after the deadly derailment and explosion in Lac-Mégantic, Quebec. U.S. Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx stated in a press release: “Sarah has the right mix of experience and skills to adeptly lead the FRA as it continues its important work to ensure the safe, reliable and efficient movement of people and goods.”

## Rail Unions to Bargain Together

In a joint negotiating effort, the BLET and SMART-TD rail unions, as well as four other rail workers unions, have joined together to work as a team for the next collective bargaining agreement talks. In a press release dated December 17, 2014, BLET President Dennis R. Pierce stated, “Today we build on the successes of joint bargaining during the past two national rounds.... Now more than ever

before it is imperative that the unions representing railroad operating crafts sit side-by-side at the national table, and I am pleased that we have been able to accomplish that.”

## SEPTA Update

Last November, we reported that a tentative agreement had been reached between members of BLET Division 71 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and SEPTA, the commuter rail system. The tentative agreement included a pay increase of 13.32 percent for engineers. However, at the time, SEPTA refused to negotiate with the union about the critical safety concerns that remain unresolved. In the BLET Newsflash dated November 24, 2014, BLET Vice President Steve Bruno stated: “This is no way to run a railroad. Safety has to come first, but SEPTA is more interested in cutting payroll costs. They haven't lived up to the promises they made when they got the first waiver; there's no reason to give them a second one.” Added Bruno, “We've seen some terrible accidents due to sleep deprivation on other railroads. We don't need that to happen here.”

In a letter to the FRA, BLET National President Dennis Pierce stated that since receiving a safety waiver in October 2012, SEPTA has systematically reduced “the number of locomotive engineer assignments while simultaneously increasing the number of trains and route miles in the public schedule.”

In December, the union asked the FRA to reject SEPTA's

waiver from safety rules and asked that a public hearing be held to listen to both engineers and passengers. The hearing was set for February 10th in Delaware County. At the hearing, SEPTA managers and Regional Rail workers differed sharply on the possible safety effects if SEPTA is permitted to avoid the requirements of a federal rule designed to limit fatigue. Engineers and conductors argued that a waiver would endanger passengers by forcing train crews to work with too little rest. The safety waiver in dispute involves the time employees spend traveling from home to start work somewhere other than their usual assigned location.

The FRA safety officer who conducted the hearing stated that the FRA is likely to make a decision on SEPTA's waiver request by June or July.

## Two Person Crews

The BLET and the SMART unions have joined forces in a joint lobbying campaign to secure laws on the state level mandating a minimum two-person crew in locomotives. To date, two-person crew legislation has been introduced in 14 states: Alabama, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Louisiana, Kansas, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, Texas, Utah, Washington and Wyoming.

The law would require all trains or light engines used to move freight be operated by at least two crew members. The Quebec derailment of 2013 has brought to light the potential danger of a one-man crew and



the devastation that can be caused when a train hauling hazardous materials derails. States that have hazardous materials hauled through them via rail are recognizing the potential safety concern of a one person crew and are asking that safety concerns not financial concerns be the number one priority of the railroads.

### **Utah Bill to Regulate Vans & Shuttles for Railroad Crews**

SB 127 in Utah addresses a loophole in the law that does not require the state's department of transportation to regulate safety of vans or that of its drivers for vehicles that shuttle 15 passengers or less. Railroad conductors and engineers are often transported in these vehicles. They have frequently complained that the vehicles have had serious safety issues, as well as drivers who oftentimes have driven already for several hours and have trouble staying awake. The already tired railroad employees feel like they cannot relax and must keep their eyes on the road for their own safety.

If this legislation passes to correct this oversight in the law, it will give the Utah Department of Transportation the ability to regulate companies that transport railroad employees and hold them accountable through reporting of incidents, which is not currently being done.

### **Right to Work Battle**

The following was taken directly from the BLET website from February 20, 2015, and I felt that it is an important topic that perhaps some may have missed. Please read the following as it does affect us all.

A perennial threat to organized labor and the American middle class is once again making an appearance in state legislatures throughout the United States.

Our elected officials at the state level have taken it upon themselves to consider anti-union legislation called "Right to Work" or "Freedom to Work." While this phrase is crafted to appeal to the most patriotic among us, the fact of the matter is that these proposed laws would severely undermine the rights that workers have on the job. "Right to Work" laws eliminate the workers' financial obligation (dues) to a labor organization, forcing unions to perform their services for free toward the goal of eventually bankrupting the union. A bankrupt union would not be able to defend the true rights workers have.

We as railroaders enjoy decent pay, benefits, safety, retirement, and certainly have a sense of dignity and pride in what we do. These above mentioned benefits aren't "rights" given to us by gracious corporate benefactors; rather, they are benefits that have been provided to us by the BLET through more than 150 years of negotiating and fighting with the business elite.

It has been documented across the country that these "Right to Work" laws are certainly not beneficial to the blue-collar worker. Some of the negative effects of such legislation can be seen in the following:

- It creates a situation where unions are legally required by federal law to represent all workers including those who do not contribute their fair share of the cost of that representation.
- It is meant to eliminate or at least stifle the voices of

the workers by cutting off essential funding to our unions.

- Right To Work deteriorates our communities' quality-of-life.
- Workers in Right to Work states make an average of \$5,500 less than workers in worker friendly states.
- With less disposable income, workers in our communities will spend less and the economic impact on our state could be disastrous.
- Fewer people have health care in Right to Work states (higher burden on taxpayers).
- The poverty rate is higher in Right to Work states (higher burden on taxpayers).
- Right To Work will bring substantial increases in Medicaid (higher burden on taxpayers).

The following are states that have already passed Right to Work laws: Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Kansas, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, Nebraska, Nevada, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia, and Wyoming.

### **Positive Train Control**

Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx has stated that he will not allow an extension for commuter railroads to install positive train control and is standing by the December 31st deadline. In an article dated February 11, 2015, Foxx stated his department is "continuing to hold the industry's feet to the fire in getting PTC done as quickly as possible" instead of allowing "a blanket extension." PTC is part of the

Rail Safety Improvement Act of 2008 mandated by Congress. It's believed that PTC will help eliminate collisions like that of the Metrolink accident of 2008 through the use of Wi-Fi signals on a dedicated radio frequency that will prevent trains from passing fixed signals.

### **Oil Tank Cars**

The recent derailments of the CSX train in West Virginia and the Canadian Pacific train in Ontario carrying crude oil will hopefully spur the federal government to announce its proposed new regulations for the building of rail tank cars for safe transport of crude oil and ethanol. The primary goal of the new tank car design will be its ability to stay intact in the event of a derailment.

In an article dated February 18, 2015, House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee ranking democrat Peter A. DeFazio of Oregon, said the derailment "is just another example of why the federal government must act.... The federal government should not delay further — it must issue the new rules for safer rail tank cars as soon as possible."

The CSX train was using a newer model of tank car, the CPC-1232, which was introduced in 2011. The CSX reported that at least one of the rail cars appeared to have ruptured and caught fire. The surge in movement of crude oil by rail has grown from 9,500 carloads in 2008 to approximately 500,000 in 2014.

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# Retirement Rocks!

By Felomino Elle, Associate Member, Nor Cal Auxiliary 39

Hi my name is Felomino Elle and I am a retired "rail." In April of this year, my beautiful wife, Jeannette Elle, and I will celebrate 26 years of marriage. We have three wonderful daughters—Serena, Micala, and Miranda. Our daughters are all grown up now and each of them has made me one of the happiest father-in-laws in the world. They each have loving husbands and in turn have given me the "sons" I have always dreamed of. Miranda and her Husband Ricardo have blessed my wife and I with two beautiful grandchildren—Matix, 3, and Lydia, 2. We are fortunate to live close to our grandchildren and I am able to see them daily.

Since my retirement in March 2014, I have been able to spend the time with my family that I had sacrificed for so many years. I worked for the railroad for the last 30 years—four years with Central California Traction and 26 years with Santa Fe and then BNSF. In 2014, I finally put in enough time to retire at the age of 60. Retirement has been anything but boring, although my friends and family call me the CEO of the "Bum Club." I now have the time to attend many school functions with my niece and nephews and I was able to go on some high school camping trips to the ocean and other fun destinations. I have also had the time to get some of my old hot rods pulled out of my 2000 square foot shop and set up for restoration.

Along with all of this, my oldest daughter decided to get married in August of last year, so my semi-relaxed retirement suddenly took a turn to becoming a very busy time of renovation of our family property. In six short weeks, we transformed our

five-acre farm into a park-like setting so that our daughter could get married at her childhood home. Even with all the work and stress that goes along with remodeling and renovating, we felt that the finished product was worth it all.

After the wedding, things didn't slow down for us at all. We went straight into car show season and more family activities until the holidays rolled around. Retirement to me is something precious that not everyone is lucky enough to enjoy. And just within this first year, I have had the opportunity to enjoy my family like I was not been able to in the past. I am so very grateful for my past rail life and all of the lifelong friendships that I have made. I'm so thankful that I was given the opportunity and ability to provide for my family and give them the life that I never had. I am even more grateful for the time that I am now able to spend with my wife getting to know her and starting to "date" her again after all these years. To watch my grandchildren grow right before my eyes and getting to spend time with them daily, and see my own children in their eyes, is something that I am both grateful for and so blessed to be able to experience.

Jeannette and I, and our daughter Serena, all became members of Nor Cal Auxiliary 39 shortly before I retired. We had always participated in the auxiliary events, but found time to take a more active part after retirement. We are very active in our community with coaching, cheerleading, 4-H, and FFA. It is from that involvement that we were able to get the Nor Cal Auxiliary members to work at the beer garden for the Blues and Bones Festival last year, where we raised a little over \$3000 for the Nor Cal Auxiliary scholarship program.



Felomino and his mom Daisy



Jeanette, Serena, Felomino, Miranda, and granddaughter Lydia at the 2014 Nor Cal Auxiliary Bowling Tournament

The first 60 years of my life were dedicated to myself growing and finding who I wanted to be and what kind of life I wanted for myself and then for my family, doing all that I could to provide a way to make that life a reality. This next chapter in my life will be full of laughter and memories to share with my closest friends and family and to experience every moment that I can enjoying all the things I love the most, like rebuilding my hot rods and attending as many car shows as possible!



# Railroad Retirement Spouse Benefits



In addition to the retirement annuities payable to employees, the Railroad Retirement Act, like the Social Security Act, also provides annuities for the spouses of retired employees. Payment of a spouse annuity is made directly to the wife or husband of the employee. Divorced spouses may also qualify for benefits.

The following questions and answers describe the benefits payable to spouses and the eligibility requirements.

## 1. How are railroad retirement spouse annuities computed?

Regular railroad retirement annuities are computed under a two-tier formula. The spouse annuity formula is based on certain percentages of the employee's tier I and tier II amounts.

The tier I portion of an employee's annuity is based on both railroad retirement credits and any social security credits that the employee also earned. Computed using social security benefit formulas, an employee's tier I benefit approximates the social security benefit that would be payable if all of the employee's work were performed under the Social Security Act.

The tier II portion of the employee's annuity is based on railroad retirement credits only, and may be compared to the retirement benefits paid over and above social security benefits to workers in other industries.

The first tier of a spouse annuity, before any applicable

reductions, is 50 percent of the railroad employee's unreduced tier I amount. The second tier amount, before any reductions, is 45 percent of the employee's unreduced tier II amount.

## 2. How does a railroad retirement spouse annuity compare to a social security spouse benefit?

The average annuity awarded to spouses in fiscal year 2014, excluding divorced spouses, was \$1,050 a month, while the average monthly social security spouse benefit was about \$614.

Annuities awarded in fiscal year 2014 to the spouses of employees who were of full retirement age or over and who retired directly from the rail industry with at least 25 years of service averaged \$1,224 a month; and the average award to the spouses of employees retiring at age 60 or over with at least 30 years of service was \$1,425 a month.

## 3. What are the age requirements for a railroad retirement spouse annuity?

The age requirements for a spouse annuity depend on the employee's age and date of retirement and the employee's years of railroad service.

**If a retired employee with 30 or more years of service is age 60**, the employee's spouse is also eligible for an annuity the first full month the spouse is age 60. Certain early retirement reductions are applied if the employee first became eligible for a 60/30 annuity July 1, 1984,

or later and retired at ages 60 or 61 before 2002. If the employee was awarded a disability annuity, has attained age 60 and has 30 years of service, the spouse can receive an unreduced annuity the first full month she or he is age 60, regardless of whether the employee annuity began before or after 2002 as long as the spouse's annuity beginning date is after 2001.

**If a retired employee with less than 30 years of service is age 62**, the employee's spouse is also eligible for an annuity the first full month the spouse is age 62. Early retirement reductions are applied to the spouse annuity if the spouse retires prior to full retirement age. Full retirement age for a spouse is gradually rising to age 67, just as for an employee, depending on the year of birth. Reduced benefits are still payable at age 62, but the maximum reduction will be 35 percent rather than 25 percent by the year 2022. However, the tier II portion of a spouse annuity will not be reduced beyond 25 percent if the employee had any creditable railroad service before August 12, 1983.

## 4. What if the spouse is caring for a child of the retired employee?

A spouse of an employee receiving an age and service annuity (or a spouse of a disability annuitant who is otherwise eligible for an age and service annuity) is eligible for a spouse annuity at any age if caring for the employee's unmarried child,

and the child is under age 18 or a disabled child of any age who became disabled before age 22.

## 5. What are some of the other general eligibility requirements?

The employee must have been married to the spouse for at least one year, unless the spouse is the natural parent of their child, or the spouse was eligible or potentially eligible for a railroad retirement widow(er)'s, parent's or disabled child's annuity in the month before marrying the employee or the spouse was previously married to the employee and received a spouse annuity. However, entitlement to a surviving divorced spouse, surviving divorced young mother (father), or remarried widow(er) annuity does not waive the one-year marriage requirement.

## 6. Can the same-sex spouse of a railroad employee file for a railroad retirement spouse annuity?

On June 26, 2013, the Supreme Court found Section 3 of the Defense of Marriage Act, which prevented the Federal government from recognizing marriages of same-sex couples, to be unconstitutional. As a result, the Railroad Retirement Board (RRB) now accepts applications for benefits from those eligible spouses in same-sex marriages.

## Railroad Retirement Spouse Benefits, *cont'd*

Applicants should be aware that the Railroad Retirement Act requires that in determining whether an applicant is the spouse of the railroad employee, the RRB must use the rules for determining relationship for benefit entitlement purposes under the Social Security Act. In general, that Act requires that the Social Security Administration refer to State law. Accordingly, the RRB will determine whether an applicant is a spouse under the same conditions as the Social Security Administration.

### **7. Are spouse annuities subject to offset for the receipt of other benefits?**

The tier I portion of a spouse annuity is reduced for any social security entitlement, regardless of whether the social security benefit is based on the spouse's own earnings, the employee's earnings or the earnings of another person. This reduction follows principles of social security law which, in effect, limit payment to the higher of any two or more benefits payable to an individual at one time.

The tier I portion of a spouse annuity may also be reduced for receipt of any Federal, State or local pension separately payable to the spouse based on the spouse's own earnings. The reduction generally does not apply if the employment on which the public service pension is based was covered under the Social Security Act throughout the last 60 months of public employment. Most military service pensions and payments from the Department of Veterans Affairs will not cause a reduction. Pensions

paid by a foreign government or interstate instrumentality will not cause a reduction. For spouses subject to a public service pension reduction, the tier I reduction is equal to 2/3 of the amount of the public service pension.

In addition, if the employee was first eligible for a railroad retirement annuity and a Federal, State or local government pension after 1985, there may be a reduction in the employee's tier I amount for receipt of a public pension based, in part or in whole, on employment not covered by social security or railroad retirement after 1956. If the employee's tier I benefit is offset for a noncovered service pension, the spouse tier I amount is 50 percent of the employee's tier I amount after the offset.

The spouse tier I portion may also be reduced if the employee is under age 65 and is receiving a disability annuity as well as worker's compensation or public disability benefits.

While these offsets can reduce or even completely wipe out the tier I benefit otherwise payable to a spouse, they do not affect the tier II benefit potentially payable to that spouse.

### **8. Under what conditions can the divorced spouse of a rail employee receive a spouse annuity?**

A spouse annuity may also be payable to the divorced wife or husband of a retired employee if their marriage lasted for at least 10 consecutive years, both have attained age 62 for a full month, and the divorced spouse is not currently married. A divorced

spouse can receive an annuity even if the employee has not retired, provided they have been divorced for a period of not less than 2 years, the employee and former spouse are at least age 62, and the employee is fully insured under the Social Security Act using combined railroad and social security earnings. The amount of a divorced spouse's annuity is, in effect, equal to what social security would pay in the same situation and therefore less than the amount of the spouse annuity otherwise payable (tier I only). The average divorced spouse annuity awarded in fiscal year 2014 was \$624.

### **9. Would the award of an annuity to a divorced spouse affect the monthly annuity rate payable to a retired employee and/or the current spouse?**

No. If a divorced spouse becomes entitled to an annuity based on the employee's railroad service, the award of the divorced spouse's benefit would not affect the amount of the employee's annuity, nor would it affect the amount of the railroad retirement annuity that may be payable to the current spouse.

### **10. What if an employee and spouse are both railroad employees?**

If both the employee and spouse are qualified railroad employees and either had some railroad service before 1975, both can receive separate railroad retirement employee and spouse annuities, without a full dual benefit reduction. If both started railroad employment after 1974, the amount of any spouse or divorced spouse

annuity is reduced by the amount of the employee annuity to which the spouse is also entitled.

### **11. Are railroad retirement annuities subject to garnishment or property settlements?**

Certain percentages of any railroad retirement annuity (employee, spouse or survivor) may be subject to legal process (i.e., garnishment) to enforce an obligation for child support and/or alimony payments.

Also, a court-ordered partition payment may be paid even if the employee is not entitled to an annuity provided that the employee has 10 years of railroad service or 5 years after 1995 and both the employee and former spouse are 62.

Employee tier II benefits, vested dual benefits and supplemental annuities are subject to court-ordered property settlements in proceedings related to divorce, annulment or legal separation. Tier I benefits are not subject to property settlements.

### **12. How can a person get more information about railroad retirement spouse annuities?**

*For more information and/or a benefit estimate, a person should contact an office of the RRB by calling toll free at 1-877-772-5772. Most RRB offices are open to the public from 9:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, except on Federal holidays. Persons can also get this information from the agency's website at [www.rrb.gov](http://www.rrb.gov).*

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## Greetings from Editor Susie Burrola

As the new year begins so does the enthusiasm to achieve new goals.

With so much going on in the world today, the need for us to unite and stand together in solidarity is at an all-time high. That being said, my goals are to continue to grow this great organizations as my sisters and brothers did before me. Over the past few months I have had the opportunity to talk to some great people and am excited to be traveling to start up some new auxiliaries. It's always a great feeling to see more people get involved.

My job is not only to seek new members but also help existing auxiliaries. I would like to also reach out to any established auxiliaries and offer any help or answer any questions that you may have. With the help of our members, I feel we can continue to grow and achieve great things. For an organization to be successful, we must be open to new ideas and any suggestions.

Lastly, I would like to thank and congratulate Nor Cal 39 on their five-year anniversary. We have accomplished much over the past years and have grown to become a family. Our efforts on including families to take part in our meetings and activities has been the success of our chapter. The more I get involved, the more I find myself feeling blessed to be part of such a great organization!

In closing, I leave you with this short inspirational poem about unity and solidarity by family law attorney and faith-based poet Raymond A. Foss:

### *Walking Because They Do*

*In groups large, small,  
to share a few hours, a few dollars  
to walk, as they must, for food, for water  
for solidarity with our brothers, our sisters  
around the world, who need to walk  
for the essentials of life  
Out of our abundance, emulating them,  
walking as they do, to understand  
to lift them up, to provide for their needs  
to be, for a few minutes,  
our neighbor's keeper.*



## 2015 Regional Meeting Schedule

### **88th Annual Southeastern Meeting Association (SMA) Atlanta, Georgia - June 14-19, 2015**

Arrangements Chair Teresa Bryant, Local Chairman of BLET Division 30, will host the 2015 SMA at the Lake Lanier Islands Resort just north of Atlanta.

### **77th Annual Eastern Union Meeting Association (EUMA) Boston, Massachusetts - July 25-31, 2015**

Arrangements Chairman Kevin J. Moore, Springfield Terminal/Delaware & Hudson General Chairman and Legislative Representative of BLET Division 191 (Lunenburg, Mass.), will host the 2015 EUMA at the Boston Park Plaza Hotel in historic downtown Boston.

### **75th Annual International Western Convention (IWC) Denver, Colorado - August 17-20, 2015**

Co-Chairmen Jim Wilmesher, Chairman of the Colorado State Legislative Board, and Cory Runion, Chairman of the Wyoming State Legislative Board, will host the 2015 IWC at the Embassy Suites Hotel in downtown Denver.

### **80th Annual Southwestern Convention Meeting (SWCM) Tulsa, Oklahoma - September 13-17, 2015**

Co-Chairman Dana Marlow, 1st Vice Chairman of the Union Pacific-Southern Region General Committee of Adjustment, and Jeff Tryon, Local Chairman of Division 179, will host the 2015 SWCM at the Hard Rock Casino and Resort in Tulsa.

**We welcome your submissions for our publication. Please send your stories, articles, photos, poems, etc., to:**

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