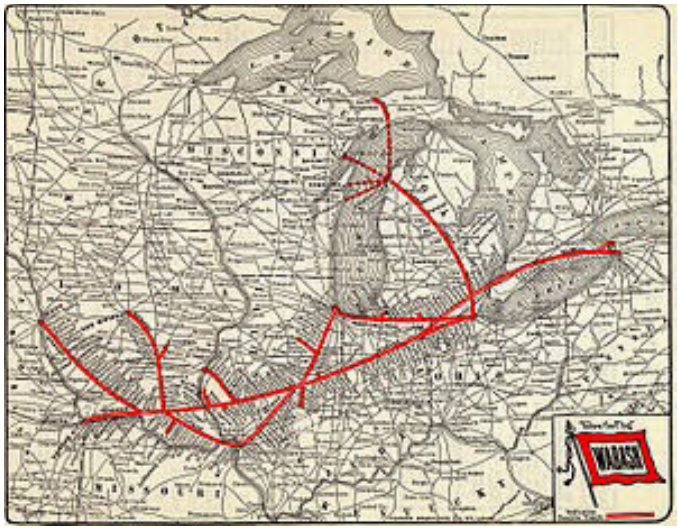
L.I. & Ella Mae Smith Cunningham

Clan William

All Aboard! The Railroad Men of the Wabash Railroad

by Lori Hahn

As major railroads stretched across the country, allowing people and freight to freely travel to and from major settlement areas, smaller, regional railroads cropped up as well. The railroad business has long been one to have lines pop up, merge with other, larger railroads, and then for more to pop up later on. One of the enduring regional lines, which was brought about as a result of a merger, was the Wabash Railroad Company. It operated primarily in the Midwest and was considered a "bridge" railroad. Major rail lines were forced to use these bridge rail lines to to get from one main line to another. One branch of the family relocated to Moberly, Missouri, a town completely beholden to the previous Northern Missouri RR for its very existence when founded in 1867, and embarked upon lives in a true railroad town.



Wabash Railroad Lines

Ella Mae Smith was the fifth surviving child of William Smith and Mary Ann Munson. She was the first Smith to be born in Iowa and was born in 1866 in Butler County, near Plainfield (Bremer County), shortly after the end of the Civil War. A young man by the name of Howard Sean Cunningham had moved alone to Bremer County and worked as a farm hand. He was the son of Edward Cunningham and Delilah Griffith, of whom little is known other than they were born in Ohio and lived in Guernsey County at the time of H.S.'s birth in 1861. Ella and H.S. married 30 Aug 1885 in Bremer County and then relocated to Moberly, Missouri, where H.S. started working his way up the ladder for the Wabash railroad, ultimately becoming a common sight at the train station in his job as conductor. They lived a comfortable life in Moberly. Howard died in 1918 and Ella in 1924.

He and Ella had four children, three girls and one boy. His oldest daughter Effie Mae was an outgoing girl born in 1886. She was the talk of the town when in 1905, her father presented her with a bicycle, still a novelty item for most. Effie grew up and and married railroad man L. I. Bouque. Effie was frequently mentioned in the Moberly society pages for her untiring efforts in various women's groups and most importantly, for her almost fanatic devotion to her pinochle clubs. The girl didn't miss her pinochle.

L.I. worked on various routes along Wabash lines, but one he rode as engineer for many years was the Pacific Coast Special, which ran from St Louis to Kansas City, ultimately destined for Los Angeles.

The railroad men of Moberly made a decent living from the Wabash, but there were very real hazards. Rail accidents were not uncommon. Trains met animals, bad rail line, cars, people, and even each other far too often. Howard was involved in at least two accidents. One had no fatalities, but he was involved in one of the most tragic accidents in Wabash history. Ten people were killed that day in 1942, nine of whom were African-Americans working the Section Gang (maintenance of railroad way). They didn't hear the approaching passenger train on which L.I. was conductor.

Effie Mae's bright light shut off in 1949, leaving L.I. alone. He remarried in 1950 to the widow Florence Dayton Eichelberger and took the opportunity to travel to visit the children they'd raised who had scattered to the wind. All had had opportunity to attend college. His oldest surviving son Lester, became a successful engineer with Sinclair Oil and an investment house in St Louis, and then became a highly-placed civil servant, serving as chief of the requirements planning division of the European Command for many years in post-war Germany. Lester shared this story about his father at his bible study class while he still lived in Moberly. Leaving home for the meeting, Lester invited his father L.I. Bouque to come along, explaining that refreshments would be served.

"That's nice," said Mr Bouque
"And we're going to have several speakers," Lester added
"That's nice," Mr Bouque repeated.
"And after the speeches," Lester continue, "We're going to

have a round table discussion of the Devaluation fo the Dollar."

"Well, son," said his pater, "On second thought, I guess I'll just stay home and sleep. But if you find out anything about the dollar, you wake me up when you come home."

And after the discussion, Lester, retelling the story, had to admit that Mr Bouque's sleep was uninterrupted that night.

L.I. Bouque died in 1964 in Moberly.

Published 01 Sep 2024