

Introduction :

This essay covers a series of photos that I spontaneously took in the early hours of a locomotive-minding session on a dramatically stormy Friday night on the 11th December. An advantage of the midsummer months is the extended daylight one has when starting an evening shift. The advantage is almost worth the constant vigilance required for the summer crop of heavy-duty steam-powered mosquitoes!

I wasn't given a very good fire to start with. Sigh.

It had been unusually banked in a wide flat-top pile like a sarcophagus and was only burning fitfully in the very back corners. There was lots of air-choking kibble and slack in the interstices. The front half of the fire bed was nothing but dark, fluffy warm ash. The front face of the coal bank had already died before I had even come on duty. The back half of the grate area was ashed up, which the 12AR doesn't like and the live part of the fire bed had been totally smothered. So I spread the raw coal forward a little more to thin it out and put a cant on the rear side to allow for better oxygen flow through the very rear of the shunter's ash. A touch of blower and I soon had a thin rind of a fire burning in a curtain just in front of the firing door. Blower off and I let it burn down to a transverse wedge of red hot coals.

I ignored the Engineering Manager's rather dry comments and manfully resisted booting him out the cab, simply because he didn't see what I had to start off with!

I lifted and pushed the burning wedge forward and above the fire, enough to ignite the top layer. Then I opened the doors – the incoming air tending to neutralize the heat-driven draft that drives the flames back towards you as they usually tend to move. The tactic worked and I soon had a small but healthily burning bank. The rest of the night's firing was routine – relatively small helpings of coal until 1am, push the fire out to ¼ of the box and then put the main bank of coal in. Gently tickle the blower to get a thin rind of flames on the thin leading edge of the bank. Close down the blower and shut off the dynamo. Should be enough to last 4 or 5 hours as the flames slowly climb the sloping front of the coal bank and move towards the rear, with water at the top-nut of the gauge columns. Once the thin-edged tip of the coal bank is burning – it is bed time, setting the alarm clock for a 1 hr nap on the station couch in the canteen. I'd be up again at 3am to laminate new membership cards.

But while I was fiddling with the smothered fire to render it stable without supervision, the weather changed and irresistibly called me out. There was lightning zigging and zagging, clawing at the bruised, pregnant bellies of the clouds with thunder coughing and clapping across the celestial sphere, but not much rain. I got my camera out for the first time in several weeks and took a series of pictures during the milder moments of the evening thunderstorm, fascinated by the colour and the 3D texture of the mounting clouds in the low ember-light. Many of the pictures were spoilt because of water droplets getting on the camera lens, or by being out of focus as the rain drops were foxing the ultrasonic auto-focus of the camera. I expected that and wasn't too disappointed. But some of them came out fairly decently and I thought I'd share them with you : showing you our old steam depot and one of our locomotives in a very different light. (Pun purely intentional.)

Enjoy!

- Lee Gates – Reefsteamers – Dec. 2009 - All photos by Author.



P01 – The sun is setting over the Metro Rail carriage yards just to the South-West of our depot.



P02 – Our Class 12AR No.1535 ‘Susan’, the oldest of our restored iron ladies, simmering gently in the old single track, two locomotive-long Boiler House, now used as our Running Shed.



P03 – I’m facing west, looking out over the reception tracks and the ash pit, with the locomotive standing right behind me. At least Susan was under cover this night. The last time she was steamed up, she got unceremoniously rained on ... after being freshly polished too! Unfortunately, water still gets in through open-sided clearstory roof and the water leaves dirty streaks on the engine. However, they are soft streaks and easy to wipe off when the locomotive is ‘woken up’ the following morning.



P04 – A wild and restless sky is the backdrop for the running shed and our parachute tank type water tower, which is still catching a bit of low sunlight. Within the back of the shed is the Class 25NC No.3472 ‘Elize’ – occupying the slot where the Sandstone GMAM Garratt No.4079 ‘Lyndie Lou’ was standing for a few months – the latter now in the 15M shed, being prepared for boiler testing for re-certification.



P05 – No pot of gold at the end of this rainbow – just the Saki Saloon. Saki Kekana as handyman during the week and fireman on weekends, lives on site in this caboose. The caboose is still intact and standing on bogies, but the length of track upon which the caboose stands is disconnected.



P06 – The old engine yard with tomorrow's train waiting on road number three. The place looks a bit empty as both of the Shongololo Express train sets happened to be out for the day.



P07 – The east end of the old loco yard. All of these tracks converge to the turning balloon. There is an overgrown track to the far left, upon which the Saki Salon stands, which used to be a storage spur.



P08 – The faint rainbow bravely extends its arc as the sun sets lower through the drizzle. The photocells have just realised that darkness is descending and the flood lamp on the old lighting mast has just switched on.



P9 – A rooftop view of the sunbeams trying valiantly to break out behind the carriage sheds. It was right after this picture that an unexpected long, rippling bolt of lightning skating along under the eastern cloud banks at my rear and forking over my head reminded me that perhaps it's not such a good idea to be standing on top of a railway tanker under a thunderstorm. I got down quickly, but with dignity. ☺



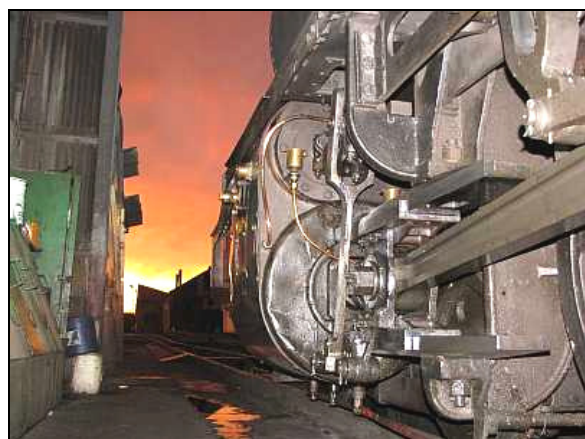
P10 – Two of the three water tankers we keep on site stand serene under an ever changing sky, the bronzed armada of the low clouds revealing the deepening blue of the clear but darkling sky beyond. I clean forgot to check the train's 33 000 litre canteen (Background) until just after I opened the loco's fire at 5:15am in the morning. Thankfully, it had been properly filled up during the day. Phew!



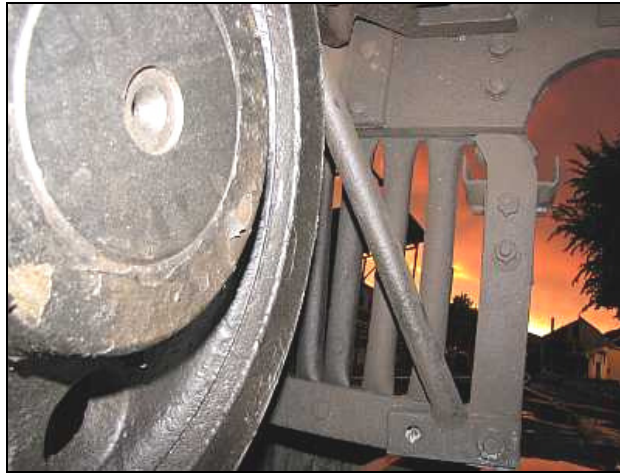
P11 – The battling currents of the sky have shifted and an aggressive wind now scours the land. The shutter-frozen wind-tossed branches of the tea-tree bear testimony to the bluster. It's not so bad yet, as those faded maroon chairs on the lawn are still standing on their legs. When the moulded plastic chairs have tipped over, then you know that it's blowing a bit thin for the day.



P12 – Snug in her shed, Class 12AR 'Susan' looks out into the wild weather – her old fashioned barrel headlamp and her name plate saluting the sun with its own reflected glow. I hadn't banked the loco yet, having just spread a thin new layer of about 5 shovels and woken it up with a touch of blower before closing the blower and taking pictures. She's now burning nice and thin on top with pale yellow flames, not showing the lazy smudge of grey smoke you get from a freshly laid coal bank on top of shunter's ash.



P13 – Latent thunder of another sort, the geometric, steely form of the LHS cylinder contrasts with the angry, organic sky outside. The vertical rod in the center is the combination lever. It is operated by both the radius rod (Top right) and the short, horizontal union link. (Bottom center) It combines the movement of the adjustable valve gear with the fixed movement of the piston rod to provide a little valve lead. It advances the valve timing a bit to allow steam to enter the cylinder ahead of the piston just before it reaches the end of its stroke. It provides a beneficial cushioning effect as well as ultimately allowing time for a little more steam to enter the cylinder at very high speeds.



P14 – Sunset as seen through the slats of the bovine puncher. The dimple in the bogie wheel axle center is not a lubrication hole – but is a centering dimple for machining after casting.



P15 – Twilight of steam. The very last Class 12AR locomotive looks out into the dying day. Although there is no steam leaking and thus lending visible life at the front end, the boiler is warm and there is a fire beating within the iron heart of the firebox ... but with increasingly difficult times, I sometimes ask myself ... for how much longer?



P16 – Class 12AR No.1535 'Susan' bears a reminder on her cab sides of her last work for the SAR – she was once the Germiston station pilot. Although she was known to be a troublesome locomotive in the early preservation era, particularly with weight distribution problems on the front bogie, this steam locomotive is one of the select few in South Africa that has never lain derelict or stripped. She has remained intact right through to this day.



P17 – The ember light as seen through the driver's window. Our 'Lil' Susie' is the only Reefsteamers locomotive driven with the right hand on the regulator, the steam locomotive's equivalent of a 'throttle pedal.' (Hanging down in the corner.) The brass contraption to the left is the vacuum brake ejector.



P18 – Rooftop view. The nature of the boiler fittings such as the single, centrally mounted turret manifold, the taller steam dome and the proudly standing safety valves shows this loco was built well within the loading gauge. It looks as if the blower is on, but the smoke is merely streaming via a long exposure.



P19 – I'm standing on the crossover points with the 'tea tree' just peeking in from the left. There has been some tight shunting going on. Road number 2 is jam packed with rolling stock and you can see there was barely enough room to put the C&W marker between the tanker and the pedestrian walkway. The signal-red coloured marker indicates that a train is not to be moved, usually because it under repair or inspection. It is analogous to the blue flags and lights used by American railroads.



P20 – OK, now it's getting dark. Now that Luca Lategan has gone home after completing (surviving) six months service at the depot, his royal residence, the Management Coach No.42 is back under cover. This frees up a section of road number 1 to be used as a spur to store the Hunslet Taylor Shunter. Unfortunately, Mr. Taylor has to sleep outside, but his new paint job is fending the tin-worms off well.



P21 – The Hunslet Taylor in moodily lit repose. Diesels aren't as exciting as steam, I guess, but this tough, hard working little fellow was built in 1951 and is older than some of our steam locomotives! Visible just behind the Hunslet is the end of the K-boose where the overnights sleep.



P22 – The main body of the thunderstorm has passed and is now gracing Boksburg with its presence. We were left with a roiling, filthy looking, low lying cloudbank which was torn apart by the wind by 10pm.



P23 – Lord Sauron’s shunting yard, serving the military might of Mordor. The clouds of Mount Doom haven’t yet eclipsed the horizon although in this picture, what looks like the setting sun is actually one of the yard lights. Hobbits would be useful as steam engine men – small enough to get into fireboxes!



P24 – A long exposure shot in the very last light of the day shows the stripped, rusty hulk of the last of the dozens of deadline Class 15F’s that was retired and eventually scrapped at Germiston. But for the efforts of the dedicated people at Reefsteamers, Friends of the Rail, Umgeni Steam Railway, Paton County Railway and the Sandstone Heritage Trust, amongst several others – when steam’s long day finally draws to a close, this will be all that’s left.



P25 – Tail Marker. I trust that you enjoyed browsing these evening photos as much as I enjoyed putting this little essay together. I haven’t taken a spontaneous series of photographs for a long time, always being busy with other stuff, Reefsteamers and otherwise. But sometimes it is good just to take time out and do what you enjoy. Even in this amazing hobby and passion of ours, one can get bogged down in work, documents and mundane responsibilities, and forget the original interest that attracted us to steam and railways in the first place.