

# Crossties + RTA + Railroads +...

## Over The Last 100 Years The Plusses Add Up

By Jim Gauntt, RTA Executive Director

In the last issue of *Crossties*, I wrote about the strength and longevity of RTA over the last 98 years. At the time, I intended to write a follow-up Part 2 for this issue, focusing on the importance of the mechanism by which we are able to function effectively as an advocate for our industry.

That idea received an unexpected kickstart when I received a letter the second week of May. It reads:

*Dear Mr. Gauntt,  
I read with a great deal of interest your HOW TIME FLIES and about John Fristoe of T. J. Moss Company. First, I am the same age as the RTA (98). I began my career with T.J. Moss in 1938 and retired some 47 years later. I have been retired as of now 32 years, and I look forward to receiving Crossties every two months. It is nice to keep up to date within the industry.*

The letter was from Robert Hahn a former President of AWPA and member of the RTA board in the 1970s, about the time I finished college and began a business career of my own.

Mr. Hahn enclosed a copy of a speech that he provided at the RTA conference in St. Louis in his capacity of president of AWPA. In that speech, he connected several dots for the audience by first acknowledging that there are plenty of challenges faced by railroads as it relates to crosstie procurement and logistics, but there were plenty of things to remember on the “plus” side of the equation.

Plus #1 was Hahn’s faith in producers even with wild fluctuations in demand and difficult decisions on how much to invest in sawmill equipment and timber. He said that even though our jobs are often monotonous and thankless, producers had

learned to remain dedicated to doing their work better each time.

Plus #2, he said, was the Railway Tie Association. In expounding on the many attributes that made RTA so valuable he relayed

*the past, its promise for the future, which is that it represents the means by which we all, railroads, associates and producers alike, can proceed from a parochial outlook, to achieve an industry-wide viewpoint, to have access to industry-wide information, to attain a better understanding of each other and our common problems and to feel in our hearts that we are building up, not tearing down.”*

After that Mr. Hahn relayed even more plusses and then asked the members of the audience “...the next time you look at a crosstie perhaps you’ll imagine a plus mark somewhere on its surface and think a bit about the effort necessary to get it to the proper place, at the time needed, in the quantity wanted and, lastly, as a quality product.”

Since the early 1970s, RTA has found its path brightened by the 2-cents-per-tie dues program (another plus). This has led to many more marks on the ledger in the plus column. Without belaboring all the specifics of the myriad research, programs, forecast models, SelectTie models, videos and training services that RTA has been able to produce for members and their customers, let me simply put it this way:

The wood crosstie in 2016 maintained a market share of over 95 percent of all new ties installed in track throughout North America.

That’s remarkable. I continue to believe, as did these venerable men who served RTA, that it is our work together, focused on the things at which we can get better (new treatments, quality, logistics, legislation, the environment) that makes RTA so

valuable to members and to the industries it serves.

It does take money, of course, but at only 2 cents per tie, and for what is accomplished



This eight-pound broad axe (feeling much more like 20 pounds) is similar to the one prepared by Robert Hahn and presented to the first Broad Axe award winner in 1974. This one was presented to tie industry legend Paul Webster who entrusted it to RTA in anticipation of its upcoming 100th anniversary.



what E.E. Pershall had said in 1958 when he received a special award from RTA.\*  
“I cannot fail to mention the underlying principles of this Association, its purpose in

with it, RTA may be the biggest bargain in the history of associations.

Hahn completed his letter:

*Your article brought back many memories. One in particular was when I was on the RTA Executive Committee in 1974 with Randy Wingard, Tom Gross and Doug Maffett. We had decided on an individual who was to receive the very first Broad Axe Award [ed. Harry Dunstan of Southern Wood Preserving Company, Atlanta GA – ah, the irony considering where RTA is now headquartered]. I remember I was given the task of securing a suitable award. I was given no help.*

*Not having much imagination, I ordered a new full-sized broad axe complete with handle...and had a suitable bronze plaque prepared and affixed to the blade. I wrapped the axe in brown paper and made a rope handle to carry to the convention. I boarded the plane and put the axe in the overhead bin. No one seemed to notice the strange object.*

*I believe it is safe to say that times have changed. Keep up the good work.*

*Sincerely,*

*Robert S. Hahn*

Now I know that Mr. Hahn meant that as a pat on the back, but I would like to suggest to every RTA member that we should consider it an admonition. I'd like to think he meant that we should persevere, to not stop doing the things that make this association and the products and services it represents the best they can be.

There's are a lot of plusses that have added up over the past 10 decades. Let's keep adding to them. ■

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*\*E.E. Pershall, board chairman of T. J. Moss Tie Company, was given a special award for having done the most to advance the interests of the Railway Tie Association and the crosstie industry over the 40 years of the existence of the association at its 40th Annual Convention held at Peabody Hotel, Memphis, Tenn., Oct. 29-31 – Cross Tie Bulletin, November 1958.*

Forest Products Laboratory new building



## Meet The Researchers Making It Happen At The Forest Products Laboratory

The Forest Products Laboratory (FPL) has a long history of involvement with the U.S. railroad industry.

Even before FPL was built in 1910, researchers at the Bureau of Forestry were evaluating durability and track performance at test sites in Gulf and Western states from 1902 to 1907 under the direction of Dr. Herman Von Schenk.

FPL played a critical role in the adoption of preservative treatment by the railroads, which was already commonplace in Europe because of the scarcity and high cost of timbers. In the United States at that time, wood preservation was thought to be too costly, and replacement of decayed timbers was easy due to a steady supply of white oak.

Early work by F.M. Bond, George Hunt, and others at FPL was involved in the development of the first pressure treatment options for North American rail ties. Even the first location of FPL on University Avenue was based in part on its proximity to the junction of the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul Railroads.

Early FPL preservation research mainly focused on creosote and zinc chloride, but the focus gradually shifted over the years with changing preservative chemistries and treatment technologies<sup>1</sup>. The kiln drying research conducted at FPL in the early 1920s was largely responsible for the incorporation of several wood species that had previously been deemed unacceptable, Red Gum being a good example.

A quick keyword search using “railroad” on the FPL website (<https://www.fpl.fs.fed.us/search/index.php>) brings up 41 research publications ranging in date from 1976 to 2015 and in topics from methods for pre-

venting corrosion in timber bridges to load design specifications for large timbers to intumescent coatings for railroad ties<sup>2</sup>.

Fast-forward 110 years, and FPL is still striving to provide groundbreaking fundamental and applied research that serves both industry and the American people.

Following is a brief overview of selected research projects currently underway at FPL and some background information on the researchers.

### Grant Kirker

Grant Kirker, a research forest products technologist in the Durability and Wood Protection group (RWU 4723), focuses on microbial interactions in decaying wood, naturally durable woods, accelerated decay testing, and genetic identification of microbes in decaying wood.



Kirker

Grant has a Ph.D. in forest products from Mississippi State University and has been working at FPL since 2010. He is evaluating soil and wood fungi from different zones of the AWPA hazard map to identify key fungal species within a region that contribute to the decay of southern yellow pine in soil contact.

This is a collaborative project between FPL and the Department of Soil Sciences at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. The work is being conducted in national forests within each of the decay hazard zones on the AWPA decay hazard map. The outcomes of this research will provide much-needed baseline fungal biodiversity data to improve the current AWPA hazard map and our ►