

A witness to history

The railroad has been a big part of Steve Hunter's life for as long as he can remember.

In fact, as one famous photograph proves, it was a big part of his life even before he could remember.

Hunter, a machinist in Russell, Ky., Locomotive Shop, has worked 34 years with the railroad, and heard plenty of railroad stories long before his career began. Both his grandfathers were engineers during the steam locomotive days, working from Hinton, W.Va., to Clifton Forge, Va. His father, a railroad machinist, retired from the Russell Roundhouse, and several of his uncles were trainmen.

"I grew up with the railroad, and I've always loved it and its lifestyle," he said. "This type of work suits me much better than working in an office."

Originally from Hinton, W.Va., Hunter was pictured in a widely published photograph of the aftermath of a June 1953 steam locomotive explosion in Hinton.

The photo appeared in newspapers throughout the country, as well as *Look Magazine*, the *Saturday Evening Post* and other national publications. It also was featured in the book "C&O Power," a historical account of the old Chesapeake & Ohio Railway. It shows a shredded steam locomotive and ravaged track after an explosion that killed four trainmen.

It was a day Hunter remembers vividly, even though he was only 3 at the time. He and his grandfather had just returned home from a morning of enjoying the summer weather when the earth shook. His grandfather instantly recognized the sound, and the two sped



to the other side of town to investigate.

Hunter does not recall standing beside the tracks surveying the damage with his grandfather, as the photo shows.

"But I do remember the sound of the explosion," he said. "That sound, and feeling the ground shake beneath my feet, is something I'll carry with me for the rest of my life."

Throughout his career, Hunter has worked injury free. For him, safety has always been a priority.

"Safety is crucial, especially around any mechanical and electrical equipment," he said. "If we don't keep a close eye on equipment, bad things can happen."

Hunter's advice to newer employees: Pay attention and don't hurry.

"Don't get into a big hurry or make rash decisions to make a decision that makes things worse," he said. "Find solutions, and don't add to the problems."

When he is not at work, Hunter enjoys hunting, fishing and collecting model trains and other railroad memorabilia.

He also indulges in his lifelong



ABOVE: Russell Machinist Steve Hunter holds a print of a famous 1953 photo of a locomotive explosion in Hinton, W.Va., in which he and his grandfather are pictured. LEFT: The widely published photo of the aftermath of a 1953 locomotive explosion in Hinton, W.Va. Steve Hunter, Russell machinist, is the little boy on the left edge of the photo, holding his grandfather's hand.

love of music. Both he and Carla, his wife of 38 years, have extensive musical backgrounds, playing guitars and writing songs — some of which have been published.

Carla even toured with recording artist Gary Stewart. During one of those tours in the early 1980s, she met country and western star Tanya Tucker in Houston, and the Hunters have remained close friends with the legendary singer ever since.

Before joining the railroad, Hunter and his wife worked constructing cooling towers for refineries and energy plants, living out of hotels in 35 different states over a five-year span. That construction experience sharpened Hunter's focus on working safely.

"I've had an interesting life, and it isn't over yet," he said. "It's always fun to see what's coming next."

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— Steve Hunter, machinist