

One of the earliest “perks” given to railroad employees was the privilege of free transportation on the railroad for which they worked. Based on their jobs, this was granted either on a case by case basis, or an annual basis, and whether it was for the employee to use in performing his job or for his entire family.

Very soon, the idea took hold that granting of free passage to employees and executives of other railroads also had value to a railroad. Passes were “exchanged” so that if you gave a person a pass to ride your railroad, it was expected that you would get one in return.

Large shippers and friends or associates of the owners or major stockholders were given passes as well. Members of the Clergy, and local physicians were often included. Passes given to executives of other railroads often not only included the executive and his family, but often his business car or private railroad car as well.

All of this led to a profusion of multiple type and grades of passes issued by railroads large and small. Large railroads for all of the reasons above, and small railroads in the hope of getting a pass on a larger carrier in return.

The mania for issuing passes peaked in 1888-1892, when the owner of a pair of narrow gauge railroads in Colorado, Otto Mears, began issuing his passes, first in buckskin, then in solid silver, as a silver watch fob, in silver filigree, and finally in gold filigree. To my knowledge, only one complete collection of these passes is known.