

# One Full Decade & Counting

a lot of progress (only a little gray hair)

## By Jim Gauntt

This year's visit to the Heavy Axle Load test facility at the Transportation Technology Center Inc. (TTCI) afforded an opportunity to reflect on 10 years of work for the Railway Tie Association (RTA). Yes, believe it or not, it has been a decade since I first accepted the mantle of RTA Executive Director. The ensuing years have brought a world of change to our industry and a lot of progress for RTA. And, I can honestly say that only a very few of the gray hairs I now possess are attributable to this wonderful career working for you.

Looking back, I am pleased to see that RTA has implemented its strategic plan with vigor. The accomplishments of our committees and our members in developing superb programs and services are really astounding.

Consider this: In 1995, we had no website and only one computer to work on. We reported only a smattering of statistics, were concerned about the viability of our annual convention, and couldn't even count all the tie treating companies in the marketplace as members. We had no mission statement, no presence in Washington, no structure for railroad participation in RTA management, and no stand-alone membership directory.

Probably the most dramatic thing that occurred early on was born of the strategic planning process—the development of a mission statement and the subsequent inclusion of railroads as members of RTA's Executive Committee. Armed with the enviable knowledge of what the railroad customer needed, this allowed us to maintain a keen focus on what our manufacturing members wanted us to do. I cannot overstate the importance of the foresight of your board at that time to encourage this development. Of all the things that have made a difference in the past decade, this is the most important.

Other positive developments were around the corner, including the production of RTA's first video, "The Legacy of the Wood Crosstie;" the incredible number of research papers accepted for publication by the American Railway Engineering and Maintenance of Way (AREMA) Association; numerous new educational

tools, such as the tie grading CD-ROM, TieDefect posters and award-winning "From Tree to Track;" and an annual convention that is second to none as a must-attend railroad event.

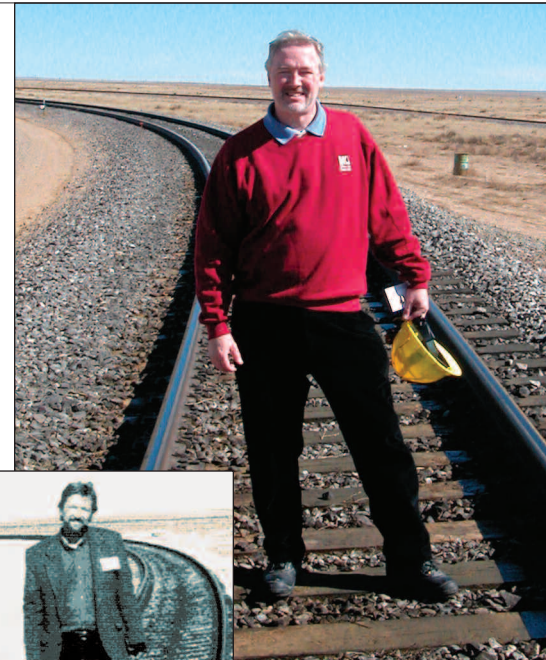
When reflecting on the past decade, I cannot help but think about the fact that RTA is not only the first timber trade association to ask its customers to be on the executive board as directors, but also is the first rail-related association in modern history to be asked by the Federal Railroad Administration to conduct research on optimizing tie maintenance methodologies on its behalf.

Our presence in Washington has also increased in the last 10 years. Through the keen leadership of its members, RTA is now viewed by others as an important ally when it comes to railroad issues in Washington and beyond. Coordination with other associations such as the Association of American Railroads, the American Short Line and Regional Railroad Association, the Creosote Council and others has brought RTA unprecedented recognition.

When I consider how far RTA staff members have come in terms of efficiency and productivity, I naturally find that a completely integrated and networked state-of-the-art computer system is an important advance. This year, the new network document processor that RTA purchased will allow us to provide customized color laser printing services to members and provide unmatched scanning capabilities that will allow us to e-mail and store files efficiently and easily. In short, we continue to do more because your board allows us to invest in the necessary equipment to do the job.

Have you looked at RTA's website, [www.rta.org](http://www.rta.org), lately? If you have, then you know that not only do we have a great website but that it also has recently been redesigned to provide even greater usability and flexibility. Try the online ordering process sometime and let us know what you think.

And what about *Crossties* magazine? If you look back to 1995 and compare the issues then with the issues now, you'd find that our partner in the venture, Covey Communications Corp., continues as a



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leader in the field of magazine design and content. Of course, staff still has a lot to do with producing the magazine, but without the incredible folks at Covey, *Crossties* would be a mere shadow of what it is every two months.

Now that we publish some of the most complete data in the wood preserving industry, we have to look at why this is possible. The reason is that membership grew in the early years of the last 10-year period to include 99 percent of all tie producers in North America. As the membership grew to be all-inclusive, so did our understanding of the market and, through the better data, our ability to forecast those markets.

We have developed a TieLife model and Tie Usage Indices to encourage the use of all the appropriate species of wood for ties. We've published numerous articles in technical journals—twice so far this year. Our

presentations to customer groups have increased as has the importance of attending RTA's annual convention (which, by the way, is in its 87<sup>th</sup> consecutive year). And, our self-sustaining membership directory reaches every railroad and railroad contractor in America every year.

What I am most proud of is that over the last decade our members have altered the landscape in wood preservation. The goal of eliminating decay as a primary failure mechanism in ties has produced stunning results. Borate pre-treated ties over treated with creosote are in commercial use by two Class 1 roads—and in a big way. More than 30,000 of these ties have been installed over the past three months, with hundreds of thousands more to come. More railroads will follow this trend and help further extend the life of wood crossties. Today, the wood crosstie has an

average system-wide service life of between 30 and 35 years. Can you imagine what it will be 20 years from now when ties in high-decay areas are still healthy and still in track?

And there are other changes for wood preservation—options such as copper naphthenate have seen approval for use by railroads in ties—and preservative research continues to promise even more options in the future.

I know this may seem inconsequential in the scheme of things, but did you have an RTA shirt in 1995? Maybe it's also the little things that have changed that continue to inspire pride in your association. Not one railroad event goes by that I don't see at least four or five of our members advertising their pride in membership by wearing their RTA logo shirt.

And, of course, education continues to

be the number one focus of RTA. From the engineering-based seminar to the tie grading seminar, to the very informative and now association-wide annual field trip, RTA keeps improving these offerings as a vast resource of knowledge for members to consider.

It's also remarkable that all of this has been accomplished with the same staff we started with 10 years ago.

I receive many compliments from members and others in the industry for what RTA has become over the past decade. I accept them on your behalf, of course, but I always tell those who offer praise the real reason we are where we are today. And that's you, the RTA member. If it were not for the foresight and perseverance of RTA members in authorizing what we do, no one could accomplish any of the things that I mentioned above. This is a testament to how

great your association truly is. You have become architects for meaningful change, and you have embraced that change with a vitality that is inspiring.

No family is perfect and, thus, no association is perfect. In fact, I get kidded all the time that all my gray hair must be because of doing association work. As I said, there are a few of them I can directly attribute to a few association things, but not many. There will always be the occasional disagreement or discord, but never have I known an organization like RTA and its members. As we move into the next decade of my service to you, let me express to you how much I enjoy doing the work that you allow me to do.

By the way, if you think I've forgotten Debbie in this you're wrong. I know it's not a secret that she's a big reason that so much gets done. §

## Thoughts From Debbie Corallo, RTA Administrator



To say that the last decade has been incredible for me would be a huge understatement. When I came to the RTA, all I knew about wood crossties were that they laid in track and trains ran over them. I really never gave much thought to them or what they represented—at least not prior to 1996. Wow, did that all change!

When we opened the Fayetteville, Ga., office, we were pretty much starting this business of running an association from scratch (at least from this location). We had some wonderful help from both Randy Wingard and Carol Corrington during the transition, but the time came for Jim to “direct” and for me to “administrate,” so that we did.

We have had the extreme pleasure of working with several different versions of the RTA Board of Directors and the diverse and very productive standing committees—as well as the general membership and the general public. It has been a true pleasure being in this office and an eye-opening learning experience for me. I thank each of you who has taken the time to share your stories and insights, as well as a lot of kind words along the way. I am sure what I know at this point about crossties still does not even scratch the surface, but I do know this...the opportunities that both Jim and our board have given me over the years have been both tremendously challenging as well as rewarding, and I am extremely grateful for them. §