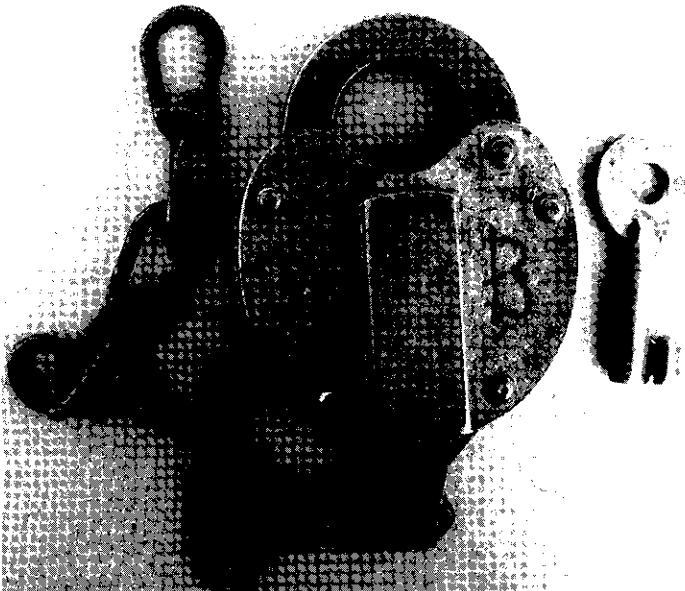


Unraveling the Case of the Mystery Rich.Con.R.R. Lock.

by Jane Silvernail

First, a huge thank-you to all of the RCAI members who contacted me with thoughts and suggestions about the identity of the lock pictured in the Spring 2011 edition of the *Express*. I had discovered it among others in the estate auction of a railroad man's collection. This lock stood out because it is all original, in fine working condition complete with what must be its original key. From the general appearance and markings, I believed it dated from sometime around 1900, but had no clue what the railroad markings on it meant. Since it was such a neat lock, and a fascinating old working set, it seemed well worth trying to unearth more about.



Made by the Wilson Bohannon Company of Brooklyn, New York, the lock is the familiar heart shape of a switch lock. The key has matching Bohannon stamping, and an incised ring around its slightly tapered barrel. The lock is fully stamped on the shackle with Bohannon's name and a patent date of June 25, 1879. On the opposite side of the shackle is the familiar large "WB" initials of its maker stamped into the lock face. There are no markings on the dust cover over the keyhole, but on the shackle is stamped RICH.CON.R.R. in tall serif Roman letters.

Thanks to some extremely helpful and very generous RCAI members and antique padlock authorities, and especially thanks to David J. Heuermann, we discovered that this particular model was advertised in

Bohannon's 1901 padlock catalog (and almost certainly other places) as a "railroad grade padlock."

To digress just a bit, on April 19, 1891, a horrendous collision between two Lake Shore & Michigan Southern trains occurred near Cleveland, Ohio. Nine people were killed - a major disaster in those days. Investigators determined that, tragically, the accident could have been prevented had reliable timekeeping been used to prevent the two trains from being on the same set of tracks at the same time. Apparently, one of the engineers had relied on a faulty timepiece — his watch had been stopped for four minutes. To prevent future similar accidents, the federal government determined that a universal timing standard was essential, and created a commission to adopt requirements for precision standards and a reliable timepiece inspection program, with which all railroads would be required to comply. The commission drafted the General Railroad Timepiece Standards, which by 1893 had been adopted by almost all American railroads. A number of watchmaking companies immediately leaped into production of "railroad grade" watches — models specifically made to meet the stringent federally-set standards for precision.

Returning to our story, Wilson Bohannon — one of the greatest lockmaking success stories in America — also took advantage of clever marketing that beyond selling products designed to meet customers' needs, would conjure images in their minds. Understanding the value of the term "railroad grade" — a term that customers would associate with precision and highest quality of manufacture — Bohannon offered a number of padlock models as "railroad grade" — an implicit promise that users would find them to be sturdier, tougher, more durable and longer-lasting than more cheaply made equipment.

Now, which railroad company bought this lockset from Bohannon? Checking out the RICH.CON. stamping, there appear to be some "almosts" among the combinations of initials and abbreviations that were used by railroad lines, but we could not find any railroad companies that used that exact abbreviation.

Enter the Richards & Conover Hardware Company, which was founded in 1881 in Kansas City,

Missouri and operated very successfully as a family run business until it finally closed its doors in 2000. Richards & Conover — “Rich-Con,” as the locals called it—built a lasting reputation thanks in part to its high sales standards and integrity in customer service. The company bought a variety of equipment from Bohannon, among them this very model of “railroad grade” locksets. Richards & Conover took so much pride in offering these that they had them stamped RICH.CON.R.R. This marking was a “guarantee” intended to reassure customers that they had purchased not only a top quality lock, but to remind them where they could find more.

So, as it turns out, this lock is a “railroad grade” lock made by the Wilson Bohannon Company and sold to a hardware company in Kansas City, Missouri for resale to customers looking for the best made, durable, working padlocks. It may (or may not) have been used by a railroad line, but there is no way to document who any of its previous owners were.

This picture sent to me by Carroll Harper of Meeker, OK who confirmed that Richards & Conover was a large hardware company that not only sold to retail customers through their own branches but wholesaled to smaller companies.

The photo, dating from around 1908, shows what a group of gentlemen (employees?) showing off merchandise outside a general merchandise / hardware store in the town of Payson, Oklahoma. If you look hard, you can find the name RICH-CON on the side of a child’s wagon that is apparently holding not one but two good size brass bells with yokes.

“And now,” as Paul Harvey used to say, “you know the rest of the story.”

