

*“Last of the promiscuous tank cars”*



*One of Union Tank's promiscuously numbered T108 tank cars passes through South Bethlehem, PA on March 22, 2007. The cars in the same lot with the closest numbers on either side of 48175 were 48168 and 48177. UTLX 48174 was apparently a 50-ton car of unknown size, and 48176 was an earlier T106 tank car.*



Promiscuous is a word rarely associated with railroad equipment. In fact, the only place I ever saw it was in a Pennsylvania Railroad summary of steel cars compiled shortly after the turn of the century. The term "promiscuous numbers" was used to describe that quaint practice of giving new cars whatever car numbers had become vacant through the sale, destruction or retirement of older cars. Rather than transcribing a long list of numbers, the clerk simply wrote "promiscuous numbers" and went to lunch early.

Most railroads including the Pennsylvania found this practice awkward and confusing enough to discontinue it by 1910. However, it was still practiced by Union Tank and General American until fairly recently. Each owned close to 100,000 tank cars and apparently had sworn a oath not to ever give one of their cars a six digit number.

It appears that they maintained ordered lists of vacant numbers and took blocks of them when new orders were built. General American made an effort to find blocks of consecutive numbers when possible, but Union Tank seemed perfectly happy with any group of disjointed numbers.

One of the last groups of promiscuously numbered tank cars that Union Tank turned out was lot 6184 which apparently included 20 T108 tank cars built in 1981. They were numbered 48308, 48310-48314, 48317, 48320-48321, 48325-48331, and 48337-48340. All the intervening numbers were already occupied by various sizes of other tank cars built at various times.

Needless to say, Union Tank's promiscuous tank cars make roster construction and presentation challenging. Fortunately for us, Union Tank first used a six digit number in late 1979, and once the initial shock had passed, they never looked back.

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