

THE RAILROADS OF MY MEMORY

OR

"CLICKITY CLACK, CLICKITY CKACK"

PRESENTED TO THE

HOPKINSVILLE ATHENEUM SOCIETY

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BY:

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At long last the calendar, if not the weather, tells us that Spring has arrived, and like many of my male counterparts in this room, that creates a whole new list of "Honey Do's." Several weeks ago after finishing up some planting and mulching for the better half, I was sitting in the front yard, enjoying a dram of Kentucky's finest, when I heard that lonesome whistle or horn making one of its many calls for me to take to the road. Well, perhaps road is the wrong word. In reality, I have spent much of the past four decades resisting the call to take to the rails.

You see, from the time that I was a small child, the tracks have held a special lure to me. Many were the nights that I would lie in bed worrying about tomorrow's spelling test or homework left undone that the cry of the whistle, or the rumbling of the freight cars seemed to be my best option to avoid the wrath of my parents and teachers. It would be simple, out the window, a quick walk downtown, jump a freight, and after a short ride I would meet up with Boxcar Willie or Freddie the Freeloader, who would welcome me into the brotherhood and teach me the carefree life of a hobo. But sleep would come, and the hustle of a new day would postpone my plans until the next test.

My Father's business sat at the corner of Tenth Street and the Railroad, downtown. And many were the times that my brother, sisters, friends and I would be left at the Warehouse while Mother ran "just a few errands," or we would stop by just to visit. Being located on the main tracks, I don't recall a time that I stopped by the Warehouse that a train didn't come by.

The trains of my childhood offered the daring many an opportunity for adventure and distraction. Counting the cars was the first of many educational activities offered down by the tracks. A pastime that I'm sure many of us still engage in when we happen to get caught at the crossings today. Or reading the names from the boxcars, Union Pacific, Burlington,

Illinois Central, Rock Island, Northwestern, Tennessee Central, The B. & O., The Penn. Central and of course the L. & N.. The list was endless and stirred the imagination of a youngster. Where were these places, and how were they linked to my hometown?

I recall playing in empty boxcars left on the sidings. What had these cars carried, and how was it used in Hopkinsville? I got the answers to these questions as I got a little older. By the time I was eleven or twelve my dad allowed me, after much pleading on my part, to help unload a boxcar of his wares. It was fun at first, but few who haven't unloaded a boxcar by hand can truly appreciate just how much can be transported in one storehouse on wheels. Still later as a teenager I was lucky enough to work for a firm that unloaded the chemicals for the water treatment plant, as well as all of the newsprint used by the New Era. As a summer worker, I can assure you that there are few places hotter, this side of Hades, than a boxcar in a Kentucky summer.

As a child, I thrilled at placing a bottle cap on the tracks as a train approached. Later, it was a penny, and on a rare occasion, when I was rolling in the dough, a nickel or dime. What a treasure to wear such a fine piece of jewelry, a squished coin, with a hole carefully drilled in it, on a piece of string around one's neck. It was the envy of all your friends. However, I must warn everyone to never, and I do mean never, put anything larger than a nickel on the tracks. For as we all know, this would cause the train to derail and surely bring all manner of hail and brimstone down upon your shoulders.

Today I am fortunate to visit our local museum on a regular basis. I still thrill at sitting on the old bench from a railway station. But my favorite item from the Railroad exhibit is the freight wagon. Many was the time when we would watch for the station master to step across the street for a bite just so we could pull this behemoth of a wagon a few feet. Heavy, sturdy and on one occasion unstoppable. It rumbled as it carried the latest load of necessities

and dreams to the citizens on our fair town.

Yes, the railroad was truly a haven for the few of us who were allowed, knowingly or unknowingly by our parents, to explore its equipment and rails . But unknown to me at the time, I was growing up in the decline of the railroad's influence on the towns of America. For by the end of the Fifties, Americans had forsaken the railroad for the freedom of the open highway.

The railroads of America began their rise to transcontinental growth shortly after the War of Yankee Aggression. With the joining of the rails at Promontory Point, Utah the U.S. truly became a united country, tied together by the steel in the rails and the iron horse. As old equipment was replaced by new and with the safety added by

Westinghouse's air brake, America began it's great love affair with the railroad.

The 1870's and the 1880's were used by the railroad to span our great country. By enticing European immigrants to buy and settle the western lands given the railroad by the government the railroad companies became financially viable, and were able to finance their growth. However, with financial wellness also came complacency. The railroads overcharged the farmers for freight and tried to control other aspects of their lives. From politicians to general stores or newspapers to grain elevators the barons of the railroads kept a tight rein on the Midwest farmers' future while lining their own pockets. The reaction of the average American to the railroads was a love/hate relationship. Along with their disgust and mistrust of the big business and owners of the railroads also came an infatuation and love for the trains and rail travel in general.

After rising to greatness and elegance during the 1890's railroad managers again sat on their laurels. By World War I the railroad system of America was in such sad shape that it could not begin to handle the demands placed upon it by the War. This was true both before and during the United States involvement in the conflict.

When the U.S. entered the War , the government had no choice but to take over the railroads. This was a humiliating experience for the railroads since no other major industries had received this kind of treatment. But after the war when the lines went back to private hands, things got no better. There was an extended period of labor unrest; there were increasing complaints from shippers that rates were too high; and little had been done to improve or maintain the physical condition of the lines.

By the late 1920's roads, automobiles, and trucks were beginning to make a strong dent in the transportation monopoly which railroads had enjoyed since the pre-civil war period. The combination of the gasoline motor and publicly maintained roads, free for use by all citizens, would, slowly but surely, cut into the business of the railroads and deliver a blow to them from which they would never recover. The economic drain on the railroads was not immediately evident, and it would take more than two decades for railroad managements to realize that their wounds had been potentially mortal. Even throughout the Depression years of the 1930's, when many previously healthy railroads fell into bankruptcy, few believed that the railroads could actually fold - after all, most industries were in a sorry state during those years.

At the New York's World's Fair of 1939, several million visitors sampled a large and dramatic exhibit that dramatized the achievements of the American railroads. It contained a thousand-seat auditorium that allowed visitors to view an enormous diorama, which displayed over five hundred pieces of equipment along with a forty minute show, demonstrating every important function of modern railroading. The major goal of the exhibit was to demonstrate the historical contributions and solid paternity of the railroad. An extravaganza called "Railroads on Parade" brought to life the great meeting of the rails at Promontory Point, Utah. A cast of "thousands" and two accurately rendered locomotives made their appearance as did the Indians and troops of the U.S. Cavalry. The real stunners of the show were the latest

developments of railroad technology, - sleek diesel locomotives and redesigned steam locomotives with aerodynamic cowling. The Pennsylvania Railroad exhibited a 140 foot long, 526 ton steam locomotive. Weighing in at more than a million pounds, this was the largest locomotive ever built in the famous Altoona shops. It was the piece de resistance of the railroad's exhibit and was kept continuously fired up and running on a roller bed at a speed of sixty miles an hour.

The emphasis of the exhibit was naturally on the power and dynamics of the railroad industry. Even more importantly, here was proof that the railroads had a glorious future, that railroads were marching boldly ahead, and were expecting to reach the twenty-first century in a blaze of glory.

Not too far away in that glorious spring of 1939 were exhibits by a number of railroad's modern competitors. A large number of buildings were devoted to the automobile. There was also an impressive half-domed aviation building in which the latest aircraft were displayed suspended in a cyclorama. Everything about aviation seemed modern in the extreme in that now distant year on the edge of World War II. On the other hand, those great hanging birds seemed to most fair goers to have something of a futuristic and fanciful air about them. So, too, did exhibits of city planners, which showed sparkling inter-city highways, limited access roads, sometimes of eight or more lanes, in which automobiles sped to their destinations while bypassing spired cities with their brutal factory environments. The difference between these other transportation exhibits and those of the railroads was that the railroads seemed to have a firm grip on the immediate future, while the others seemed yet exploratory, tentative, and idealistic. One thing was certain about the railroad, it was here, it was now; it was alive and it was healthy!

In the 1890's the railroads suddenly began to discover two qualities that they had formerly neglected but which began to whet the appetites of Americans everywhere. One of these qualities was a love of speed; the other

was a penchant for luxury. Throughout their early history railroads had been looked upon as performing a utilitarian function, even though this function might have been carried on with some zest and relish. But now, the railroads had the technical expertise and the prosperity to offer travelers a good deal more. They could move people faster, and they could move them in style.

And trains were becoming more stylish with each passing year. Style and luxury became the calling card for the masses to travel. Year by year, passenger equipment got more solid, more comfortable and more ornate. Every year new technological advances were coming off the drawing boards of the Pullman Company and other car manufactures. Electric lights, steam heat, and larger wheels all added to the comfort of the rail traveler. By 1891 the Pennsylvania Limited was an all-Pullman train carrying a barber shop, a bath, a valet service for the gentlemen, and a maid service for the lady travelers. There was a superb wine list in the dining car, and passengers could order the latest fashion in cocktails in the observation lounge car at the rear of the train. Company literature showed a well-groomed train secretary with a cutaway coat and a boutonniere seated at an L.C. Smith typewriter ready to take dictation from an obnoxious man of affairs.

The railroads outdid themselves in attempting to produce passenger equipment that was more luxurious and fanciful than whatever was being offered by the competition. In railroad parlance of the time, passenger trains came to be known as "varnish," or sometimes "high varnish," so named for the expensive, exquisite, and highly polished woods used on their interiors. No effort or cost was spared to convince passenger that they were entering the world of royalty.

The style and luxury of the railroads was evident in tens of thousands of stations in the U.S. during the golden age of railroading. While many depots were simple platform stations in rural areas, some were ornate landmarks such as Grand Central and Penn Stations in New York City. Not to be out done,

many small communities demanded stylish architecture when their stations were replaced. These stations were a vibrant symbol of the railroad industry to generations of Americans. They were all tied together, in a huge network, capable of delivering anyone or anything to any destination in our country. Most served as a vital cog in the affairs of the community. The local L.&N. depot was instrumental in directing our town's growth to the south from the downtown area.

A center of activity, the L. & N. Depot was the point of arrival for most visiting dignitaries to our town until after 1950. On passenger trains such as the Floridian and the Humming Bird all manner of folks came and went. Personalities such as Billy Sunday, Elenaor Roosevelt, and Andy Divine, among others, have all stepped onto our humble platform on Ninth Street.

In 1899, the Pullman Company bought out the comperitor that had been providing sleeping cars to the Vanderbilt empire of railroads, and from that time until the coming of Amtrak the word Pullman became synonymous with sleeping cars on American railroads. The secret of Pullman's success stemmed from the economics afforded by the open-section sleeping cars, and various protocol in operating the cars themselves. For many years, the Pullman Company not only manufactured its sleeping and parlor cars but it operated them itself, providing and training its own conductors, porters, and other personnel.

Whenever George Pullman was asked to explain the success of his company, he replied it was due to a system he called "The Pullman System." From early in his company's history, he had decided to maintain and operate his equipment on a high level. He established and enforced standards and conditions of service down to the smallest detail. The Pullman Company developed a system of smooth baggage handling. It hired conductors who enforced company rules and standards of decorum. One of the company's great contributions to railroad comfort and lore was its invention of the

Pullman porter, fully trained by a company school to render efficient and courtly service to passengers, to make up beds, and to keep the cars spotlessly clean.

The highest standards of cleanliness were always maintained both on the road and in company depots. The Pullman Company hired "spotters" to ride as passengers and take note of soiled linen or less than gleaming washbasins, and to report on disagreeable porters or conductors. Hygienic conditions were unexcelled, even in an age when the word hygiene was not bandied about much.

The open section Pullman car was an icon of American ingenuity. Not only did it permit the accommodation of the largest amount of passengers in the smallest amount of space, it somehow appealed to potent instincts in the American's psyche. It allowed the traveler comfort and luxury, but it also administered to his love of sociability. The open center aisle arrangement allowed passengers to wander up and down the aisle, and the new vestibules allowed them to pass safely from car to car. People could chat freely with one another in easy familiarity; while children could play in the aisles.

The sleeping car at last had made long-distance travel by train comfortable and delightful. But the through sleeping car train would need another innovation to be successful, and that was the dining car. Here too, George Pullman was in the forefront. Again he did not invent the dining car, but as early as 1870 he introduced something he called the "Hotel Car," a modified version of his sleeping car that had fewer berths, a small kitchen, and a place to set up tables for meals. A short time later, Pullman designed his first dining car, calling it Delmonico. In due course, dining cars would be found on most long distance trains. For a number of years, the Pullman Company operated its own dining cars, but they proved to be unprofitable, so the function was passed along to the railroad lines. Although it was usually a losing proposition the railroads continued to offer this service. This course of

events proved to be a boon to the traveling public, since it invariably made food service available to all passengers, not only those in first class.

Dining on the train in first class was an experience to be remembered by most. With place settings of sterling silver, bone china, fine crystal, on a linen table cloth, the finest wines of the day, and gourmet meals were served by courteous, white jacketed waiters. Both the service and food would at least match, if not outdo, that of most of the fine restaurants in America today.

But alas, The highways and the skies have taken railroading's true crowning glory away. They may have taken away its glory but they can't destroy its nostalgia and romance. Some passion for the railroad has been maintained by those of an older generation who remember the steam locomotives. Those who can recall the thrill of riding in a train behind this primordial monster. Much of the romance of the railroad faded when steam disappeared from the scene. Perhaps there was something akin to human nature in these simple machines. The steam locomotive from the beginning was likened to a horse, a comparison which gave it a natural and personal element, something that could be kept under control and understood. The diesel locomotive doesn't have this kinship; neither does the automobile nor the airplane. They are alien and impersonal creatures.

And while the romance of the railroad has faded, the nostalgia lives on. Which of the fathers of boys among us hasn't shared the joy of a quick trip back to our boyhood with our sons, sprawled on the floor creating our own Limited or Express Line. As for myself I put off buying my son a model train until his first Christmas, when he was eight months old. It was a few years before we shared the building of our line, complete with city and railroad crossings and signals. But last year while cleaning out the basement I did hear both of my sons laying claim to the train set with the engine that blows smoke.

The Diner Car and the Pullman are things that I have experienced only in my imagination. To tell the truth my travels by rail consist of a trip to

Guthrie with a youth group, a ride to Nashville to visit cousins, a Dinner Train and the Gracey Special from the Fairgrounds several years ago. But in my heart, I have traveled with the Vanderbilts on their private car and I have chatted with Truman on his whistle stop tours. I have even felt the thunder of the old steam horses as they struggle to get their big loads moving. I have ridden with Casey Jones as he rushed to keep on schedule. And late at night, when I hear the lonesome whistle blow in the distance, I shall continue to reach for my engineer's cap, coveralls, and oil can and ride the well worn rails of my mind into yesterday.