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An Electric Train

When he was six years old in 1930, my brother Willett, better known simply as Brother, got an electric train for Christmas. It was an uncomplicated Lionel H0 gauge set consisting of an oval track, engine, coal tender, freight car, flat car, passenger car, and caboose. He was immensely proud of its satisfactory chugging sounds as it went around the track, and he ran it by the hour, patiently returning it to the track when it derailed. He found that the oval was the only configuration he could make of the track, but he experimented with placing the track around more or less stationary objects, such as one end of the living room sofa or two legs of the dining room table. After the relaxed Christmas holidays, he had to return it to its storage box after every use, but he set it up anew every chance he got.

The next Christmas he placed the track around our Christmas tree. This inspired Mother to move her miniature village from its customary Christmas location on the living room mantle; she spread cotton batting around the tree inside the track and placed the small houses, the store, and the church on the hills and valleys of the snowy tree skirt. Daddy was then inspired to place tree lights inside the houses. We turned out the room lights and were enchanted with the miniature village with its railroad train. This custom continued without much change until our twin sister and brother, Ruth and Roland, became mobile, making the train an attractive nuisance to two rapidly moving toddlers.

After the twins were old enough to enjoy the train, it once again appeared around the tree, but by age four or five Roland found the continuous circuit of the engine and cars around the track so boring that after Christmas he invented a more exciting game. Discarding the cars, he stretched the straight parts of the track across the room, up and down over the tops of various sized cardboard boxes, ending with the open end at the beginning of a long uncarpeted hallway. He had some wooden balls which rested conveniently on the rails. Holding one end of the track high, he would launch a ball down the track. After some adjusting of the heights of the boxes, he was able to watch the ball roll up and down the rails and onto the polished floor of the hall. He conducted tests to see which of his several balls could roll the farthest down the hall, sometimes into his bedroom. The sound of the accelerating and decelerating balls as they traveled on the track and down the hall was a source of considerable delight to him and reassured the rest of us about where he was. We all watched his game with pleasure until Brother discovered that the rearrangement of the pieces of track and the pounding of the balls on the rails had warped the rails, making them unsuitable for the original purpose of carrying the train around. The twins were such pets of all of us that Brother, now a teenager, decided to turn the train entirely over to Roland, and we sought other decorations for the base of the Christmas tree.

None of us has any idea what happened to the track and its train, but it remains happily in our memories first as a toy, then as a Christmas decoration, and finally as a different kind of toy.