

12-3-96

Railroad Stations

Recently Paul and I attended a party in the Virginia Science Museum, which occupies a renovated grand old building which once was once a train depot, the Richmond Broad Street Station. We were seated at a table near the center of the cavernous concourse of this wonderful old structure. It's a beautiful, spacious room with marble floors and the remnants of the grand architectural details from its heyday as a busy travel center. It is enjoying a wonderful renaissance as the entrance to a burgeoning museum for science. At this party, during brief lulls in the conversation, we became aware of a kind of music under the buzz of several hundred voices. Until we located a lone acoustic guitar player on a low platform near us, we couldn't even guess what kind of instrument was making the sporadic sounds we were hearing. The guitarist had what looked like an amplifier just behind his instrument, but it wasn't doing much to amplify the music. We weren't able to identify any of the music being played, but something about the confused echo I detected took me back to days past when I could sit happily in a large train station waiting to take a trip or to meet a guest. The sights and sounds in those waiting rooms left indelible impressions on me. And the sounds were remarkably similar to what I heard the other evening.



Missing from the scene, however, were the long oak benches which filled the waiting rooms of stations in Dallas, Chicago, Washington, and New York, the only large stations I have been in. They must have existed here in Richmond, too. I can remember sitting for fairly long periods of time without becoming impatient or bored because of my surroundings. Small stations lacked the sound but compensated with their own interesting sights. The big station sound had an echoing quality which made the announcements about departing trains a nearly impossible puzzle for me unless I had some prior knowledge of what the voice was going to say. The amplified announcements in the no-frills Amtrak station in Henrico County are difficult in a similar way, but not impossible to understand. The high domed ceilings of the large stations produced an erratic hollow echo of the un-amplified voices telling of exotic destinations on Track 3...or 29. The tone was wonderful. The reverberating, almost undecipherable, sound smacked of mystery and romance. Wouldn't it be wonderful to answer at random one of those boarding announcements and take pot luck on my destination? The stations just brought out such imaginings. Actually, I eventually took a few of those imagined, romantic trips.

Perhaps the echoing, strangely rhythmic pronouncements enhanced the other pleasure of a railroad station – people watching. Was the sophisticated young woman who was waiting impatiently on the bench across from me with her well traveled leather make-up case on her way to New York to audition for a Broadway play? Would she be successful? Why was that middle-aged man wearing shiny new cowboy boots? Was he really a cowboy in West Texas or was he beginning a trend of much later times when men almost everywhere wore western garb? I decided he just might be a real cowboy, not often seen in Dallas. Was that weary mother with a sleeping infant and a rambunctious toddler looking forward to a reunion with the children's grandparents? Were the worried man and woman seated with a suitcase between them going to visit an ill father? There were endless stories to make up about each traveler although, for some reason, I never considered that, like me on occasions, they might be meeting a happily anticipated guest. I've tried the same game in crowded airports. It doesn't work: the airport atmosphere is too anonymous, too rushed. Even an occasional young sleeping soldier doesn't stimulate my imagination. The same thing is true of the Amtrak station - every person is a blank with no past and no future.

I have some stories of my own belonging to train stations. Take the Chicago station in 1945. Paul and I arrived together about ten in the morning. He went with me to check my carry-on luggage; then we took an elevated train out to the Edgewater Beach Hotel. We had a wonderful lunch overlooking Lake Michigan before we had to return for him to catch his train for Washington, D.C. My train for Dallas didn't leave until eight that evening. I spent the afternoon exploring some of the Loop and seeing *The Good Earth* at the largest movie theater I'd ever been in. When I got back to the station after a quick dinner, I went to pick up my suitcase. The man at the check counter couldn't find it. I had my ticket, but I needed clothes for the next day on the train. Half an hour of searching convinced him and me that their checking system had failed. In desperation, he invited me back into the storage area to look for my bag. To our mutual discomfort, he had to take me through the men's rest room. After fifteen minutes of going up and down aisles, I spotted my suitcase. We reversed our route through the men's rest room and I hurried to my train, which was already loading. That's all I remember of the Chicago train station, a side of a station I've not had to investigate again.

Mercifully, the tracks in Chicago were on the same level as the station. If they'd been far below the main station, as they were in Dallas, I'm not sure that my tired sightseeing legs would have taken me down the steps. By the time I reached Dallas late the next day, I was rested enough to climb miles of steps if they had been there. After all, I was returning home for the first time since my wedding two years before.

Two weeks later, Paul and I played my game of making up stories about other waiting passengers in the Dallas waiting room while we awaited our train for Denver and before we walked down those same long steps to the train tracks. We arrived in Denver but I have no memory of the station there. We checked our bags between trains so that we could see as much of Denver as possible. The next leg of our trip back to Portland, Oregon, took us by and through a great number of small stations, only one of which we

entered. The small stations we saw as we sped through without stopping all looked very much alike, only the names of the towns changed. I was especially interested in the number of small and medium-sized small towns in Colorado, Wyoming, and Idaho that had Harvey House Restaurants adjacent to their stations. I'd read about such restaurants and hoped that some day I'd be able to have a meal in one. We did, years later, when we were on an automobile trip to the West Coast from Texas, but the only station we saw first-hand on that trip to Portland was the Boise station, which gave us a wonderful panoramic view of the town of Boise and the mountains in the background. Recently, that scene was called to my mind when Tom Brokaw stood on the same station platform for his Nightly News program. The scene is still as idyllic and peaceful-looking as it was fifty some years ago.



Later when I read Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*, I was reminded of that western train trip when he wrote with great nostalgia about the possible stories behind the lonely little stations in many small southern towns. The ones in the west looked lonely, too. I felt sure they were full of untold stories.

One of my favorite train station memories is from a forgotten small southern town in Georgia. We were traveling by car back in the days before interstate highways made all our trips hurry-up-and-get-there affairs. As we drove down a dusty street near the railroad track, we saw a neglected-looking station, obviously not open. Perhaps the train no longer stopped there. A denim clad man was sleeping, propped up against the wall with his hat covering his face, under a tired sign that said "NO LOAFING, NO LOITERING."

Train stations, large with marble floors, domed waiting rooms that do wonderful things to the human voice or are deserted and small ones with an unwelcoming sign on the wall, all seem to me to harbor many stories, if we could only know them.