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Streetcars

Visual memory - the eye - is very important in recalling the past; it may indeed be the primary stimulant to memory. At least *my* recollections generally take the form of a series of pictures, sometimes still, more often moving. The sense of smell is very strongly evocative too; the *scent* of, say, bacon can recall many happy pictures, mostly visual. When, in August during the two weeks as we watched the U.S. Open, I became aware of the function of sound in memory: the ping of powerfully struck tennis balls sometimes called to mind the less powerful sound of my serve or return, or even of specific games I have played. I especially recalled one of my first tennis outings when I was seven or eight. Daddy kept on urging me to "hit it where I'm not," (actually, he said, "Hit'em where they ain't," but I had forgotten that until just now), not very helpful advice for a skinny little twerp whose racket was almost as large as she was.

Then the approving or disapproving roars of the U.S. Open spectators reacting to extraordinary tennis feats reminded me of high school football games with the kids yelling about a Davey O'Brien pass or a touchdown run. The TV experts describing the play or diagnosing the extraordinary serve of Ivanisevich reminded me of great matches I'd seen years ago, such as Arthur Ashe's triumph over Jimmy Connors to win Wimbledon in 1975. But the occasional squeal of wheels on rails as the subway cars turned in Flushing Meadows to return to Manhattan were the sounds that triggered my strongest recollections.



Riding the streetcar to the downtown library or, later, to high school came to mind in one scene or another almost every time I heard that high-pitched sound. Rounding a corner or entering a switching area produced that same screech. I can't remember when the streetcar didn't fascinate me. We lived one stop before the end of the Belmont line. When I rode home from a visit to the downtown library, if the streetcar conductor seemed in good humor, I frequently rode the extra block to the end of the line in order to watch him prepare the car for his return trip. He would walk to the rear of the car, now to be the

front, lower the window, and pull down the trolley, hooking it securely to the top of the car. Sometimes he would let me help him move the reversible seat backs into position for passengers to face forward. Then he would lower the former front window, release the other trolley from its hook, and place it on the overhead wire. Sometimes he opened the door and left the car to pull down the inbound back trolley and to raise the outbound one. The rope used to raise or lower the trolley looked insubstantial to me, but most of the time, even if he remained inside the car, leaning out the open window to thread the pulley onto the power wire, he was unerring in his placement. The rope was certainly substantial enough that mischievous boys could dart quickly onto the tracks at turns and jerk the trolley from the power line, causing the car to stop and the exasperated operator to run to the end of the car to reposition the trolley so that the car could continue. This was no fun in any weather but particularly irksome in the rain.

At the end of the line, the operator would have to move his tray of transfers and punches along with the heavy fare box to the new front of the car. He would also fold up his seat, although most operators stood for most of the route. The corresponding seat in the front would then be lowered. Once the fare box was installed, he would adjust the transfers into the proper position, consult his watch, and, if he had time before his return trip, get off the car to smoke a cigarette. Once all was in place, he would begin the return trip to town, stopping at the first street to let me off and to pick up any waiting passengers.

Because I lived so close to the end of the line and was frequently the first passenger on the car, I liked to sit forward in the car, opposite the conductor and watch his manipulations of the levers and handles which, mysteriously to me, sent the car forward rapidly, slowed it down, or stopped it. I liked to keep track of the rails ahead in order to anticipate turning onto one of the double track switches provided at intervals in the suburbs so that the cars could pass each other when they met. Downtown, all the tracks were dual because most of the routes of the many lines went from one suburb across town to another through the downtown area.

When the streetcar stopped at my street, the operator opened the door with a small lever which also caused one high step to fold down. There was a vertical rail beside the door so that I could use my hands to swing my short grade-school legs up the step and onto the floor of the car. Then I dropped my three cents into the box and, if I was going across town, asked for a transfer. I always glanced quickly at the transfer to identify the intriguing punch the operator used to indicate his line. There were many different symbols, including among others Greek letters, hatchets, plus signs, and quarter moons. Later when I was in high school, I had a bus card which was punched each time I rode. The card enabled over-twelves to continue riding for three cents instead of the seven-cent adult fare. I vied with my classmates to see which of us could collect the greatest variety of punches on our cards.

There were many intricacies to fascinate me on the streetcar, including the box which received the fares and stored the money until the operator could count it. There was the money-changer which the operator wore on his belt and from which he could get change for any coin or bill a passenger handed him. (Those coin holders so intrigued me that I

found one for a Christmas present for Paul several years ago.) There were large cars with doors in the middle, manned by an operator and a conductor. But those operated on our suburban line only during morning and evening rush hours.

The streetcars of my childhood and youth still exert a fascination. When I was in New Orleans several years ago, I took some wonderful, nostalgic rides on a streetcar which journeyed from downtown out through the Garden District and past the zoo. It provided a leisurely way to see part of the city and an even greater opportunity to relive some of my "old days" and to watch once more the passage of an electric car down streets on metal tracks. The rhythm of the swaying of the car and the squeal of the wheels around corners were almost the best show the Big Easy had to offer this visitor.

