

11-12-96

Trains

Trains and my Aunt Nannie belong together in my memory even though that lovely lady might have been mystified by my associating trains with her. We frequently drove to Gainesville to visit Daddy's sister Nannie and her family. She had a large family, each member a distinct personality. Uncle Jack was the member of the household I knew the least. He was frightening because I never knew what to expect from him. Later, I came to understand that he was an alcoholic, but I only remember his erratic greetings, generally roughly teasing. Mostly I stayed as far away from him as possible, with one important exception. He told me once about being a fireman on a locomotive and traveling about the state. He wanted to be an engineer but he felt his talents had not been properly recognized. Except for that one occasion I never really had a substantive conversation with him; nevertheless, he was part of the home and family.

Aunt Nannie, Uncle Jack, and their six children lived on a farm at the edge of Gainesville. The farm, in itself, was fascinating to me. A small amount of land was generally planted in cotton, but for the most part Aunt Nannie managed a moderately sized truck garden with which she fed her family and earned some money at the outdoor market in Gainesville. I liked to watch the older boys, Mike and Ray, milk their two cows. Although I tried mightily a couple of times to milk the gentler of the beasts, I never succeeded. Because I didn't like milk, I refused to let Mike or Ray squirt milk directly into my mouth, a treat my younger brother very much liked. I always managed to be on hand to watch Aunt Nannie or her oldest daughter Ruth churn the milk. I was allowed to try my hand at the churn during the early part of the job. The most fun came when little dots of butter appeared on the concave lid of the churn as the dash was forced up and down. During the depression when butter wasn't a prominent part of our diet at home, I felt that slathering Aunt Nannie's wonderfully light biscuits with butter mixed with honey was the height of luxury. I could never understand why Mutt, Bill, and Louise, the three youngest cousins, considered the sliced "store-boughten" bread at our house such a great attraction when they could enjoy those hot, flaky biscuits three times a day at their house. Ah, the desirability of what is in the next yard.

The biggest attraction between meals at Aunt Nannie's was the passage three times a day of one passenger and two freight trains on the tracks at the edge of her yard. The younger children knew the schedule, and we always lined ourselves up near the tracks in order to exchange greetings with the locomotive crew. I once was scolded by my nervous mother when she saw me putting my ear to the rail, a maneuver I had read would give an audible hum, an early signal of the approach of a train. Most of the time, we could count on waves from passengers on the train to Kansas City as well as from the train men in the caboose on the freight trains.

We were entranced by the distant hoot of the engine for grade crossings, the mournful whistle at crossings, the huffing of the locomotive up the slight grade, the plume of black smoke coming from the smoke stack, and the occasional glimpse of the glowing red coals when we were lucky enough to see the fireman stoking his firebox as the train passed.

We learned to classify the engines by the number of wheels and the couplings of the drive shafts. The vibration of the earth and the noise were glorious to live through, although I'm sure adults might have felt differently. I tried to be awake for the two night trains, but, alas, I was frequently so tired from the unaccustomed activities of the day that I slept right through their passage. I couldn't understand why Mother always claimed to be happy to get back home to her own quiet bedroom.

I don't remember my first train ride. When I looked at a family photograph album of my early years, I was frequently told that Mother, Daddy, and I had several times taken a train to Hot Springs, Arkansas, for short vacations, and of the difficulty of keeping up with my exploring the train, but after my sister was born when I was two, we always took the car whenever we left home.

The first train ride I do remember happened when I was in high school. I went to a Pan American Union meeting in Austin on the train. I was captivated by the different angle from which a train passenger saw the country, higher and faster than the vistas afforded from an automobile. However, the climax of the journey came when the train entered Austin and backed the full length of the main street into the train station. I'd been to Austin several times by car without noticing the tracks in the middle of the street. Viewing already familiar sights in downtown Austin from the vantage point of a train car was a significant thrill. Today I occasionally see the opening shots of "Austin City Limits" on Sunday night television, but the main street train tracks are no longer there.

During the years of World War II before Paul and I got our first car, we had several train journeys. Our wedding trip had many distractions from the people we met during those four days, but the exhilaration of watching the passing landscapes did not flag: the deserts in Arizona, the green crops in California, the snow-capped mountains in Oregon. Two years later, we were hypnotized by the beauty of the Snake River as we rode together to Chicago where we parted, Paul for a meeting in Washington and I for a visit home. I explored Chicago in a radius centering on the train station and returning there for an overnight ride through Illinois. The next morning the novelty of train travel through the flat length of Kansas and across Oklahoma could not compete with the excitement of my first visit home in two years. On the trip back to Portland, we were routed through Colorado, Nevada, and Idaho, once spotting a small herd of antelope bounding across a valley and once enjoying the beautiful spectacle of viewing Boise below us as we stood on the station platform in the crisp, cold air during a brief stop.

After we moved to the Washington, D.C. area, I once took a train trip to New York to see my brother before the Navy sent him to sea and to bring his wife home with me. The quiet of the passage from Washington to Baltimore ended when we swapped our initial electric engine for a coal-fired locomotive for the bulk of the journey. It was not a scenic trip. In fact, I saw little of the passing scene, for I spent most of the time trying to get comfortable with the heavy head of a clearly exhausted sailor resting on my shoulder. It was wartime and I was grateful to be seated; several of the passengers, mostly servicemen, had to stand the whole trip. The arrival of our train in Pennsylvania Station liberated me from my sailor, who stumbled off apparently without being aware of my

help. When I ventured out to cross the street to the Pennsylvania Hotel to meet my sister-in-law, a woman grabbed my arm and begged to walk with me. It seems that in a year of living in New York she was still frightened by the frantic traffic. I didn't think she would have been reassured by the fact that that was my first visit there!

There followed a number of years without any train travel. One Easter vacation in Chapel Hill, Paul and I were able to get tickets to a Metropolitan Opera matinee performance of "Rigoletto." The thrill of hearing our favorite tenor, Jussi Bjoerling, sing overshadowed the fact of our train ride, and anyway the scenery through the backyards of most of that urban corridor was far from beautiful. Then, participating in the Easter Parade on Sunday morning proved to be an unexpected crown for the weekend. We must have ridden the train back to Chapel Hill, but I don't remember anything about the trip.

One more train memory needs to be added to this list, although I did not ride that train at all. When we lived in Blacksburg, Paul and three-year-old George boarded a three-car train in Blacksburg to ride to Christiansburg, seven miles away. Called the "Hucklebuck," this was a coal train that supplied the heating plant at VPI. Besides the locomotive and coal cars, it carried one combined passenger/American Express freight car, although it seldom had any passengers. The trip took an hour because the train wandered through the countryside past all of the small coal mines in the area. I met the travelers with the car in Christiansburg. George had a great deal to tell me about his first train ride which even included an investigation of the locomotive, thanks to a kindly engineer. Hearing about it was every bit as exciting as living it, I thought.



Except for several trips on Amtrak to Washington, a truly luxurious substitute for driving I-95, I've not been on a train in years. Planes, with their entirely different scenery, have pretty well taken the place of the trains; however, I would still like to take two train trips, one across the United States, say from Washington to Oregon, and one across southern Canada, from Montreal past Lake Louise and Banff on the way to Vancouver. What scenery those two trips would provide! I've not taken a great many train trips, but the ones I did take left indelible impressions on me.

(bit from "Railroad Stations")

Missing from my contemporary scene the other night were the long oak benches which filled the waiting rooms of large stations in Dallas, Chicago, and New York, the only large stations I have been in. I remember sitting fairly long periods of time without becoming impatient or bored because of the sounds and sights about me. Small stations lacked the sound but compensated with additional sights of interest. The big station sound had an echoing quality which made clarity of the announcements a virtually impossible puzzle for me unless I could anticipate what the announcer was saying. The amplified announcements in the Amtrak station in Henrico County are difficult, but not impossible, to understand, but the high domed ceilings of the Dallas, Chicago, and New York stations produced a hollow echo of the non-amplified voices telling of exotic destinations on Track 17 or 29. But the tone was wonderful. The reverberating, almost indistinct sound smacked of mystery and romance. Wouldn't it be wonderful to answer at random one of those boarding announcements and take potluck on my destination? Such imaginings are the stuff of dreams.

Between the echoing, strangely rhythmic pronouncements, I enjoyed people-watching. The sophisticated young woman waiting impatiently with her well-traveled leather make-up case must have been on her way to New York to audition for a Broadway play. Would she be successful? The man with the one-day growth of beard must have been returning home from a successful business trip, having to change trains. The weary mother with a sleeping infant and a rambunctious toddler had to be going back home for a reunion with her parents and high school friends. There were endless stories to make up about each traveler. For some reason, I never considered that, like me on occasions, they might be meeting a returning husband. I've tried the same game in crowded airports. It doesn't work: the airport atmosphere is too rushed and anonymous. Even an occasional sleeping sailor doesn't provoke my imagination. The same thing is true of the Amtrak station - every person is a blank with no past and no future.