

When Did It Begin?

Literary Club

November 25, 2013

Stephen D. Strauss

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That got me to thinking, remembering - - - -

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Frankfort, a port on Lake Michigan, was the northern terminus of the Ann Arbor Railroad.

At that time Ann Arbor carferries transported railroad freight cars between Frankfort and ports in Wisconsin and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

Frankfort was a small town with not a whole lot to do besides going to the beach or playing shuffleboard.

Every afternoon about 5 PM my father and grandfather took me to Frankfort's small railroad station to watch the one daily passenger train arrive.

Even to a five year old the steam locomotive on this train seemed small.

But the smell of coal, the heat radiating from the boiler, and the hissing steam at close range were thrilling to this boy.

Then something happened that made an indelible impression on the boy that is remembered like yesterday by this man almost seven decades later:

I was lifted into the cab of the locomotive where I could see the fireman shoveling coal into the hot, flame filled firebox.

I saw a maze of levers, valves and gauges as well as the rope the engineer pulled to ring the bell. I was permitted to sound the whistle! What an experience!

I had already ridden trains before I was five. We lived in Indianapolis and my mother would take me on the Pennsylvania Railroad's *Spirit of St Louis* to visit her family in Baltimore. On one such trip my mother and I were in a shared roomette in a Pullman car looking out the window after dark, probably near the famous Horseshoe Curve in Pennsylvania. A train passed from the opposite direction and my mother said my father was on that train, returning to Indianapolis from a New York business trip!

Today, I don't know if that was true but I sure believed it then!

When I was three or four, my mother took me on the train to visit my Uncle Richard who was serving in the Army Air Corps and stationed at Jefferson Barracks in St Louis. It was war time and the train was crowded with soldiers and sailors. I remember the servicemen being very nice to me and my young, attractive mother!

Of course, like many of you of a certain age, I had electric trains when I was a kid. I didn't get to play with my first electric train. My father and grandfather wouldn't let me. They were afraid that I'd break the train and *they* wanted to play with it! Later, my father bought me an American Flyer train that we set up in the basement. Dad thought that American Flyer trains that ran on two rails looked more realistic than the Lionels that used three rails.

We moved from Indianapolis to Cincinnati, my father's hometown,

when I was seven. I arrived at Cincinnati's Union Terminal on the New York Central's *James Whitcomb Riley* which ran from Chicago to Indianapolis and Cincinnati.

Incidentally, I have a painting of that train above the mantelpiece in my living room.

When we travelled to Baltimore from Cincinnati, we rode on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, boarding at Winton Place Station on Spring Grove Avenue. Once, we took the B & O's *Cincinnatian*, a beautiful blue streamlined train. The cars had names like *Fountain Square*, *Peebles Corner*, *Eden Park* and *Walnut Hills*. Motive power was a streamlined steam locomotive. A painting of the *Cincinnatian* is on display in my law office. David Reichert and some of my other art aficionado friends were, I believe, unsurprised when I told them that I would rather have my train paintings hanging on my walls than the *Mona Lisa*!

At age thirteen I was riding in a Pullman car to a summer camp in Canada. When we crossed the border at Niagara Falls, a Canadian border official asked me "Where is the place of your birth?" He wanted to know where I was born but I thought he was asking which berth I slept in so I answered "Third one back on the right." I was NOT trying to be a smart aleck but he didn't see it that way and took umbrage! Later that day the kids from Montreal, Detroit, Ottawa, Buffalo, Cincinnati and elsewhere, each carrying his or her canoe paddle, boarded a chartered train that transported us from Toronto north to Camp Arowhon at Canoe Lake, Ontario.

While I was a sophomore at Walnut Hills High, my seat in Mrs. Lappa's English class was by the window overlooking Victory Parkway. At that time there was a Norfolk & Western Railway viaduct across Victory Parkway. This was near the end of the steam locomotive era and I watched lots of large N & W steamers crossing the viaduct. I don't believe that I received a very good grade in English that year!

In the years that followed I rode many famous trains including the Santa Fe's *Super Chief*, the *California Zephyr*, the Great Northern's *Empire Builder*, the Southern Railway's *Crescent* and others too numerous to mention. I was a passenger on the Canadian Pacific and the Canadian National and rode a Mexican train from Nuevo Laredo on the Rio Grande River to Mexico City.

One memorable journey was on the Frisco Railroad from St. Louis to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, when I reported for Army basic training.

Many of you probably know that the line of railroad running from Cincinnati to Chattanooga, Tennessee is owned by the City of Cincinnati. It is formally known as the Cincinnati, New Orleans, Texas and Pacific Railway and is currently leased to the Norfolk Southern Railroad. Several years ago I had the privilege of riding on this line in the cab of a diesel locomotive almost the whole way! To be in the cab was a major thrill! It was also interesting to see how many drivers in old cars and pickup trucks tried to beat the train at rural grade crossings in Kentucky and Tennessee. Fortunately, there was no accident that day but the experience showed that a train cannot stop on a dime and about all the engineer can do is blow the horn.

After Amtrak took over virtually all intercity rail passenger service in the United States I kept riding the rails.

Wanting my son Laird to see more of this country than you can view through an airplane window, I took him on a train from Chicago to Los Angeles through Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona.

Many years later my son and I went to Switzerland and rode trains through the Alps for a week. Spectacular! Perhaps the most exciting trip that Laird and I took together was on a narrow gauge railroad through the Andes mountains in Ecuador where many of the passengers, including Laird, rode *on top* of the train!

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before the Interstate Commerce Commission, the government body that then regulated the railroads. I loved that work except for one fact: We represented shippers fighting *against* my beloved railroads!

I continue to ride trains when I can. I travelled through Ireland and Northern Ireland by train a few years ago and then rode from Banff to Vancouver through the heart of the Canadian Rockies.

There are *still* many trains that I would love to board such as the *Eurostar* that connects London and Paris through the Chunnel, South Africa's *Blue Train* and, of course, the *Orient Express*.

One final occurrence I would like to relate: In 1969 I visited a scrap yard in Portsmouth, Ohio where many Norfolk & Western steam locomotives had been cut up, the resultant iron and steel scrap being shipped to steel mills and foundries for remelting. I happened to notice a locomotive builders plate leaning against a shed. The metal builders plate is about the size of a large dinner plate and is sort of an ID tag affixed to the locomotive. This one was inscribed as follows:

NORFOLK & WESTERN RAILWAY  
J  
BUILT  
NOV., 1941  
NO. 312  
ROANOKE SHOP

I asked the owner of the scrap yard if I could have the builders plate. He said "Sure" so I took it back to Cincinnati where it has been displayed in the various offices I've worked in for the past forty four years.

A few months ago I met the President of the Norfolk & Western Railway Historical Society. I told him about the builders plate and he

got excited. A few days later he came to my office with photographs of the steam locomotive to which the builders plate had been affixed. Then he gave me some shocking news. This type of builders plate recently sold on EBay for thousands of dollars! I was amazed. The first thing I did was to call my son and tell him that after I'm dead, DO NOT throw out the builders plate in the trash!

So, my lifelong love of trains began in the cab of an Ann Arbor Railroad steam locomotive when I was five years old and I've enjoyed every minute of it.

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