

Comin' Down That Railroad Track

At the end of a new movie called "Racing With the Moon," a couple of young men are shown chasing after, not the moon, but a railroad train -- and catching it. The movie takes place, it hardly needs saying, in the far-off past. (I doubt if it does any good to chase after an Amtrak train.) According to the reviews the movie is set in 1942 or 1943. I haven't seen the picture because it was difficult enough to live those years in the first place, and I don't want to relive them. If it's like most re-creations of the past -- the film version of "The Great Gatsby," for instance -- the movie doesn't recapture the spirit of the times anyway. Yesterday is not today decked out in old costumes.

But the railroad train! I haven't ridden a train since 1947, but trains were so much in the foreground of my existence when I was a kid living in railroad towns of the midwest that they still seem more of a fact, a presence, than jet liners and space shuttles. As a matter of cold reality, of course, passenger trains have almost vanished from the American scene, aside from the semi-visibility of Amtrak. Railroad companies long ago phased out passenger trains on the theory that they were unprofitable and cluttered up the rails in the way of freight trains. Only a few shellbacks like E. B. White protested the eclipse of an institution that helped illumine and glorify the nation for more than a hundred years.

While admitting that there is a "strong streak of insanity in railroads, which accounts for a child's instinctive feeling for them and for a man's unashamed devotion to them," White writes elsewhere that "a land without rail service is a land in decline, or in suspension." He remarks, "If our future journeys are to be little different from flashes of light, with no interim landscape and no interim thought, I think we will have lost the whole good of journeying and will have succumbed to a mere preoccupation with getting there. I believe journeys have value in themselves, and are not just a device for saving time...."

The railroad has, or had, one great advantage over jet liners which is memorably expressed by an ex-bomber pilot: "I like trains because their landing gear is always down," and perhaps even more memorably by an Amtrak passenger: "You can see the ground all the way." In the case of accident you don't have so far to fall. But another advantage, in the past, was that you hadn't missed your train till it outraced you on the open track. Like the two kids in "Racing With the Moon," you could catch a train on the fly as it steamed away if you were fast enough on your feet. Try that with a 747 next time you're held up in traffic and arrive late at San Francisco International airport.



NO.4

JULY 1984

My father often told of chasing trains successfully, no doubt on many occasions, but of one time in particular. He arrived at the station just as his train, with a gush of hot steam and a well-greased clank of the drivers, lurched into motion. He was wearing a hat and he was burdened with his suitcase in one hand and his grip in the other. The grip, a familiar travel bag of bygone days, was of triangular shape when seen in cross-section but opened to straight sides to facilitate packing. He always carried it. The grip was taken from the closet and packed first thing when he left on a trip to Fargo or Minneapolis. It was black and gleaming and smelled richly of good leather.

As he gained the platform, already puffing from his hurry, and saw the train departing, a big blast of wind almost tore the hat from his head. He thereupon set down his bags momentarily, removed his hat, and clenched it firmly in his teeth. The hat flying off and getting lost is a standard gimmick in movie scenes depicting such mad flights, perhaps even in "Racing With the Moon," but my father made sure it wouldn't happen to him. The hat was held tightly in his bared teeth as he dashed frantically after the train. I was not there to witness the drama. Perhaps the incident took place before I was born, but it was spoken of for years afterward. With my own eyes I inspected the famous hat with tooth marks gashed deep in the brim. In those days you didn't dispose of a hat just because it was marred with an arc of ragged indentations.

I can still see the scene in my mind's eye: my father sprinting desperately after the swiftly accelerating train, his flying figure half lost in the smoke billowing back from the stoked-up locomotive, travel bags swinging from his fists, feet churning rapidly in the cinders, breath sawing in and out of his lungs, and the hat flopping wildly against his chin and chest in the wind of his passage. I can imagine him drawing alongside the speeding cars at the last possible moment, hurling his bags aboard, reaching the grab-rail on the last coach and being jerked aboard by the speed of the train. It must have been one of my father's finest hours. I wish I had been there to see it. O. J. Simpson galloping through an airport terminal in the commercials is a poor spectacle in comparison.

Speaking of Hats

When I was a kid I always liked time travel stories where the hero traveled backward or forward or sideways in time and met himself. The best of these stories, obviously, is "By His Bootstraps," which I have reread many times. In real life, unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately), I have never met myself coming or going, but sometimes I have phoned my home number and talked to myself. That's something that Bob Wilson did in the Heinlein story, if you remember. In my case, however, my voice at home is taped, being the outgoing message on my Record-a-Call. Still, like Whitman ("A call in the midst of the crowd, / My own voice, orotund sweeping and final"), I find the experience a little bizarre.

I had an even stranger vision, not many nights ago, in a dream that shook me a little when I awoke and remembered it. I dreamed that I was living, more or less as I am just now, in an apartment complex of two buildings separated by a patio. Looking out the door I saw that someone was moving out of an apartment in the other building. The man was wearing, unlikely as it was, a blue western hat.

The sight of the odd hat inspired me to don my own cowboy hat, which is a high-crowned XXXX beaver Stetson, certainly not blue, but brown. But I couldn't find the hat. As I searched futilely among the litter of my possessions I became aware of someone sitting behind me in an easy chair. "There's the hat," he said, pointing, and sure enough I saw it perched on the top shelf of a tall bookcase. I turned and regarded this person puzzledly. He not only knew where my hat was, but without being told, knew that I was looking for it. He was dressed in very familiar attire: a brown corduroy sports jacket, Thunderbird bolo tie, red trousers.... My own clothes! With a shock I realized that the man was myself! There the dream ended, as it should have.

I don't know what my dream means. Maybe I am becoming schizoid. More likely it means I read too many time travel yarns when I was young.

A Lovely Day

I am sitting on a bench alongside the BART elevated in El Cerrito this warm and windy afternoon. I have violated a custom of long standing. Usually I carry letters all the way home from the post office to open and savor in private over coffee or Coca-Cola, or sometimes Campari, one higher pleasure among low animal ones. I don't have many pleasures any more. But I have read your letter out here in the open air, and now, holding your letter in my hand, I am feeling pleased, but thinking of almost nothing. The day is too spacious and beautiful to inspire anything but contemplation.

In a dreamy, trance-like state I notice the sky, how delicately blue, crowded at the edges with light hazy clouds. In the yard just beyond the fence from the BART right-of-way geraniums -- a whole hedge of them -- are nodding in the wind, pink and white and red. A small palm tree is twiddling its fronds in the wind like a woman waving goodbye. A Twix candy wrapper eddies at my feet.

The pillar to my right, supporting the BART trains that from time to time shudder and rumble overhead, is painted grey in irregular patches to obliterate graffiti. A new crop of graffiti is already being laid down, a Troy atop Troy, each sadder than its predecessor in the layer underneath: "Kill niggers!" "Rock rules" "The Scorps" "Heavy Metal Thunder" "Los Latin Image Cyclones." And there's a swastika in red spray paint, or maybe blood. Only this swastika is traced in "Z's" instead of squared-off "S's," and unlike most (not all) Nazi symbols it stands square on its bottom instead of on a point. I can only suppose that these markings were put there by very stupid, perhaps rather frenzied children. God has given us spray paint, but has not inspired us to say anything worth publishing to the world.

A few joggers steam past like engines laboring up grade, sloomy and puffing, straining against air, earth, gravity, and advancing age. The female joggers are lighter on their feet and run more gracefully, like dancers rather than athletes.

Nobody says a word to me till an old woman strolls by, leading a little brown dog on a leash. "A lovely day," she says, more animated than her dog that sniffs sadly at the pillar with the swastika. She

limps slowly on, unaware that she has suddenly become part of a letter, a fanzine. Who knows, perhaps I have become part of a letter too, or a phrase or two in her diary. As we travel through the world we stir up cross-currents that have unknown and unforeseen influences.

I look again at the misty sky, the pink and white and red geraniums and the smeary, ignorant swastika, marking all of it as if it were every bit important. "A lovely day," the woman said, but who is to know this if I don't report it to you? This is what the world is all about. Composing this message as I go, I trudge homeward, carrying your letter in my hand. I am sorry to leave the swaying geraniums, but I hide my eyes from the swastika. The little palm tree waves goodby to me.

Incoming Egoboo

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Penseroso #3 received and enjoyed. ...
I suppose there was a time when I might
have joined Shad, Mesh and the rest of
the boys in joyously rushing to immolate

nickels in one-armed brigands (immolate to -- ??), but that, as the lyrics put it, was long ago. I spent nearly two years in Nevada's permissive boundaries and, during that while, lost every last scintilla of enthusiasm for gambling I ever had or am apt to get. Nowadays, if I find myself in Nevada, as may happen every decade or so, I make a ritual sacrifice of one nickel in one machine, pull the handle, walk away and don't look back. I'm not certain what I'd do if I ever heard the merry jingle of falling coins. So far, the question has never arisen.

I share your distaste for those who seem bent upon milking fandom like some docile dairy herd. Like you, I've never made any money to speak of off fandom and, in recent years, have not spent any more than I could help. I've not been to see "Star Wars" nor any of the other highly touted sf films since or for some while before.

Oh, I suppose I'm not utterly without guilt. The cover gun for the July 1984 Gun World is an A.R.C. -- an acronym for Automatic Rifle Corp. Made over in Arizona, its arrival was awaited with mounting tension (a Little-Known Game Animal for whose history the world is not yet prepared). The guy said he'd sent it. The days passed, and then weeks. Finally it arrived and we chained it to the conveyor belt of production. I'm assigned to try it out and write it up. I plan to make up and fire some reloads in it, as well as the usual factory fodder, by way of justifying my proposed title: "Reloaders of the Lost A.R.C."

I do not propose to administer a copy of Battlefield Earth to you in the brusque manner of a Strasbourg goose, although I should issue fair warning that the pb collection of the Little-Known Game Animals is inching relentlessly toward the roaring presses and may commence yarding almost any day. When copies are on hand, I propose to send you one, but will not take harsh measures (N.B.: another uncatalogued LKGA) to make you actually read it.

I've a little red darkroom safelight bulb, with carbon filament yet, which is still functioning nicely. I bought it in 1948. So there!

PENSEROSO is published occasionally for the Spectator Amateur Press society by Redd Boggs, P. O. Box 1111, Berkeley, California 94701. This is issue #4, July 1984, SAPS mailing #148. Heading by Lee Hoffman.
THE GAFIA PRESS : At the Sign of the Idle Gestetner. p-2445889