

Railbuff

or

“Some Things I Think I Think”

**Compiled by Phil Musick,
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette**

Courtesy of Fort Vance Historical Society

RAILBUFF
Or
"SOME THINGS I THINK I THINK" *

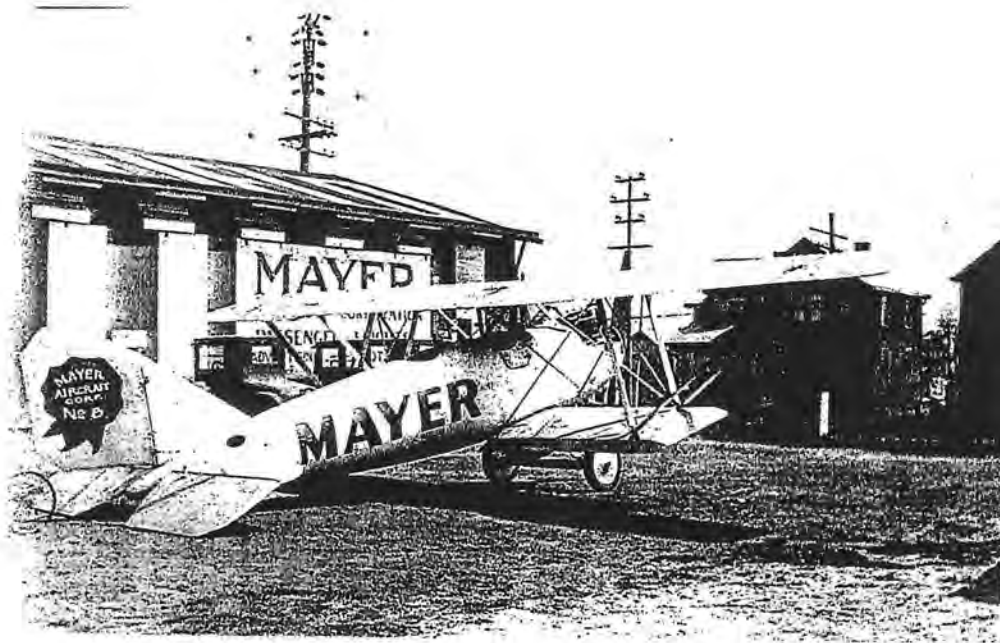
*Coined by Phil Musick, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

I have been a *railfan* or *railbuff*, whatever those terms mean, for 65 years, although I am not comfortable with such labels. Admittedly, there was never a time when I would let a train go by without looking at it. You might say my dad got me into this spectator sport but I think it was more than him just taking me out to see trains. Really, I had an inherent interest in heavy machinery and things mechanical which would have surfaced regardless of what Dad did or didn't do in the way of exposing me to those things. It wasn't so much a learned trait as an instinctual one. On a deeper level, I have no doubt I inherited my dad's genes, which gave me the inclinations I had. Dad was a romantic. He was an interior person whose soul was stirred by *images* of men in positions of power, visibility and glory. It was not so much that he wanted to be doing what they did. It was that he wanted to *watch* them doing it.



Dad

Dad's earliest fascination was with aviation in the 1920's. The town in which he grew up, Bridgeville, PA had one of the region's earliest airports in Mayer's Field. He loved the open cockpit biplanes of first world war lineage that flew 60 miles per hour and landed at 35. When one of these planes went over Bridgeville it was either landing or had just taken off from Mayer's Field. As a teenager Dad could be at the field on his bike in 10 minutes from home and so he kept a very close finger on the pulse at the airfield. Those early pilots were flamboyant characters who loved an audience and got one. Aviation was high on the consciousness of ordinary citizens and one could do worse than spend an hour or two at Mayer's Field on a Sunday afternoon. Word got around when anything special was happening.



Mayer's Field, Bridgeville, 1920's

That airplanes had just been used for the first time to wage war catapulted them even more into the public mind. A little later Lindberg's flight to Paris electrified the nation and the world.

Barnstormers and stunt men emerged and gathered a following. It was not much wonder that someone of my dad's bent would be taken in by all of this. One way for him to express this fascination was to build models of the planes he saw. Dad fashioned dozens of highly detailed scratch-built models and won first prize in a Pittsburgh region model airplane contest in 1926. He had subscriptions to a number of highly technical periodicals on flying, including the weekly *Aviation*.

The milieu that made airplanes and flying such a passion for my dad would last only a decade. The 1920's marked the fullest flowering of this brand of aviation. As flying became more sophisticated and out of reach, so did Dad's fascination for it become more measured, though never completely abandoned. The World War II planes brought a resurgence of Dad's interest and whetted my own appetite for them as well. Ironically it would be Dad's brother George who would learn to fly and have his own plane. George was a different person than Dad. He was stimulated by action. What sent his heart soaring was *adrenalin*. He was a risk taker and did things that could have had bad endings, but he was not dumb about it. He was a smart risk taker who had enough sense, combined with a little good luck, to keep him out of trouble.

Like me, from his early youth Dad was also one who would watch a train go by rather than ignore it. He had grown up along the railroad. As the glory days of the barnstormers and two-wingers gave way to a more placid and matter-of-fact form of aviation, interest in railroading began to fill some of the void that had gone missing in the absence of the colorful flying machines. Railroading was past its peak years too but was still very much in the public eye in the 1930's. Passenger trains remained the chosen way to travel long distances. Commuter trains still held sway in moving large numbers of workers in and out of cities on a daily basis. And freight railroading received a tremendous boost from World War II in the 1940's. It was one of the principal reasons the Allies defeated Germany and Japan in that conflict.

But those are just the cold, dry facts about the trains of the time. On the level of personal exposure and excitement for a ten year old, Dad began taking me to the railroad after the war when one could again to get gasoline and tires, freeing up the use of a car for something beyond bare necessity. Actually, there was considerable visibility of trains in the war years just in daily life. The Chartiers Branch of the Pennsylvania Railroad was within earshot and almost in sight from our house. So was the Montour Railroad, especially from my school at McMurray. Just about any time we went to Canonsburg we would see railroading of some kind around town in the form of a coal train, the commuter passenger trains to and from Pittsburgh, or the Canonsburg switcher. This action was mundane but always there. From our house, plumes of steam locomotive exhaust, especially the white kind in cold weather, boiled up over the little hill separating us from the railroad, as the trains passed numerous times a day. From a few miles across the countryside we could also hear the freight and passenger trains on the B&O's Pittsburgh-Wheeling Subdivision. The B&O had a completely different look from the Pennsy. The most enchanting road of all, though, was an equal distance away in the opposite direction from the B&O. It was the Pittsburgh & West Virginia. This was a railroad that was a vital link in a series of connecting lines, joined end to end, forming a traffic lane from the east coast to the midwest. Its trains were hotshots of perishables and merchandise that the P&WV delivered between the Western Maryland and the Wheeling & Lake Erie railroads as fast as possible. The P&WV's three regularly scheduled redball freights each day were rounded out by tonnage coal traffic from mines along the line. The railroad was built like a fast freight line with long stretches of even grade and curves that allowed 60 mph downhill running. The standard upgrade speed was 15-20 on a wide open throttle.

One got to know all the engines from seeing them over and over. Many nuances of the railroad, its power, and its operations could be observed by the keen eye. The P&WV was a single track railroad with passing tracks and telegraph offices along the way.

The railroad ran on train orders from the dispatcher, read to the station operators by telephone, and copied by them onto tissue-like forms. These would be handed up to moving trains from special forked sticks holding a loop of string to which a sheaf of train orders would be attached. The orders governed meets between trains and provided crews with any other information that had to be transmitted as trains moved over the road. These small town stations were part of the charm of the railroad and the more important ones were staffed 24 hours a day.



Me

Those best years of train watching on the P&WV were from my age 10 to 16 or 17. The leisure of Sundays provided a good opportunity to get into the car and head for the railroad. We would go to early church, come home, change clothes, and have a good breakfast. Dad would often take the Hendersonville-Cecil road to get to the Miller's Run valley, and the railroad, from our area. This road descended into Cecil from the hilltop above the valley, a hilltop at which we would stop and shut the car engine

off. The purpose was twofold: we looked for subtle signs of smoke up the valley towards Hickory, and we listened. There were no scanners to provide any information on the trains, indeed no radios. There was only the sound of the train itself. This was an exciting moment on those outings but as often as not there would be no sign of anything moving. But we did know when the regularly scheduled trains ran, plus or minus a few hours. So down the hill we'd go and head west on Route 28. Cecil, Bishop, Venice, Hickory, Woodrow and Rea took us finally to Avella, where the operator at the station might provide some information on the trains if we chose to barge into his office and ask. Most of the time Dad didn't do that.

Thus there was an element of doubt – no guarantee we'd see anything at all. But that uncertainty generated excitement and anticipation. In a way it was better not knowing than knowing. If things were quiet in Avella, we'd often go on down to Penowa. Sometimes we'd park up on the hill on the road that overlooked Jefferson Patch and the Cross Creek valley and just wait. One of the best experiences in the world was to hear, from a vantage point of quietness, a train coming in the distance. There was a moment when you thought you heard something, yet you were not sure, a period of uncertainty, then finally an unmistakable confirmation that the rails were hot – in the form of a far off whistle, barely audible steam exhaust, or a hint of the business-like whine of FM diesel power, working on the grade. In the interval before this all materialized, one might be treated to the sounds of nature – tadpoles chirping in the spring, cicadas sounding off in August, crickets and katydids in September, always the songbirds and the crows. Life was good in those moments.

It is human to love beauty. Beauty is order. Order is many things. Nature in its undisturbed state is exquisitely ordered. But the natural state of the universe is to descend from more order to less order over time. That is called *entropy* in the lexicon of physics. It is interesting that many things at the hand of man exhibit this principle, especially in the realm of nature.

Man has an uncanny ability to turn the order and beauty of nature into chaos and disorder. All we need do is look around at the ugly landscape of populated areas to confirm this. More often than not, man makes a mess of anything he touches. Of course, the entropy that physicists are talking about is that which takes place over eons, not that which results from something man does over fifty years. But the idea of order related to beauty is the same. As a result of mining, the Cross Creek valley west of Avella was damaged here and there, but not totally ravaged. Because it was close to the Ohio River it was rugged country with steep hills and deep ravines. East of Avella was farm country. Farming was one of the enterprises of man that was easy on the landscape, precisely because, again, the essence of farming is order. But being along the railroad either west or east of Avella was a joy to the lover of peace, beauty and ever changing season.

A well run and maintained railroad also represented order. It was not intrusive but blended with the countryside. The combination of hill and valley, woods, open fields, and streams, accented by the tracks which were usually quiet, but always with the potential of action and excitement, was wonderful. It quickened the mind and made the heart beat a little faster. The message the railroad sent was that all was right with the world.

The noise of steam locomotives was part of this. The exhaust sound from a hard working engine's stack was sharp, rhythmic and regular, and a kind of music to the ears. The P&WV was upgrade eastbound from the Ohio River crossing at Wellsburg to Hickory, 17 miles. The grade was absolutely even and therefore that cracking exhaust from the locomotive was continuous and unvarying for three quarters of an hour before reaching the summit at Hickory Tunnel. We could pace the train in the car. Engineers would often have their swinging bells ringing all the way. Coming the other direction the trains had a steady pull at the same gradient from Bridgeville to Hickory, 12 miles. Eastward from Bridgeville was a four mile uphill stretch to Rook

Yard, the terminal. It was within this roughly thirty mile segment that Dad and I did most of our train watching on the P&WV.

Bridgeville, being the low point at the foot of two grades, invited fast running. It was common for those highly expedited through-freights to scorch the rails over the Murray Avenue and Mayer Street crossings at sixty.

We visited my grandmother at a house on a hill just west of Bridgeville that overlooked the railroad and a chemical works. When a faint rumble of wheels, yet to escalate into a roar, signaled action on the railroad, Dad and I would excuse ourselves from the living room conversation and step to the bathroom window to watch the train by. In winter when it would be dark we could still see the train silhouetted against the lights of the chemical plant. It was a ritual that went on for as long as they lived there.

There were many other things pleasing to the senses of the train watcher. The garb worn by engine crews came very close to being uniforms without being uniforms. Thousand miler shirts under dark blue or pinstriped bib overalls and denim jackets, with red neck bandana and the ever present denim caps gave railroaders a look distinct from that of any other livelihood. This provided the stereotypical image of engineers, firemen and brakemen waving from cab windows. Those outfits served the practical purpose of protection from the dirty environment of the steam locomotive. The men dressed in layers and could put their dirty outerwear in their grips or in the roundhouse locker so as to be presentable at home and getting to and from the job.

It took a lot of men to run a railroad. A huge part of the appeal of train watching was the men themselves. They each had an important full time job to do. They were very visible. Had they not been there, a good part of the charm and interest would have been missing, to say nothing of the fact the trains would not have run.

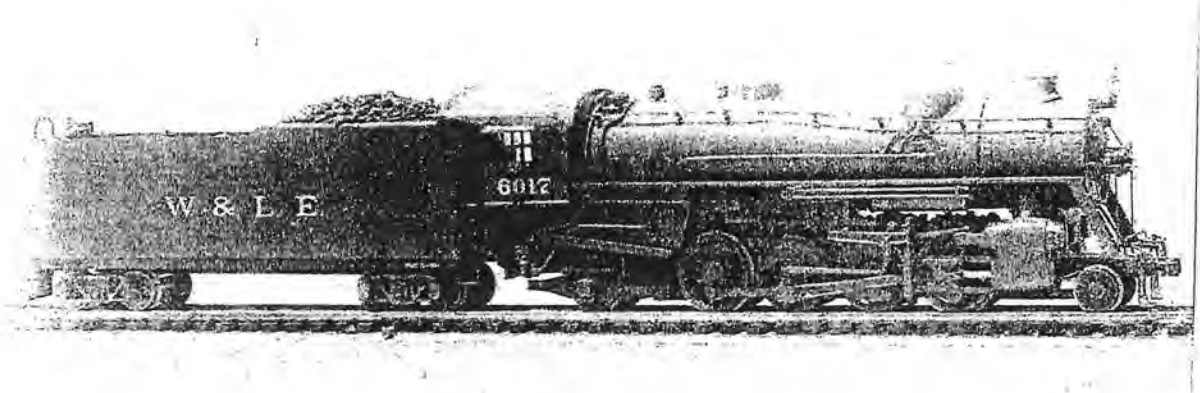
The experience of the passing train meant the intoxicating smell of coal smoke and hot valve oil, mingled with the aroma of creosote from the ties and telephone poles, or the heady perfume of nearby fruit trees or freshly mown hay or manure fertilizer from the farm that happened to be at trackside. Clover, honeysuckle and locust tree blossoms added to the sweetness in early summer.

Other things being equal, there were two times during a typical week that Dad and I might be seen on an outing to the P&WV. I have already mentioned the late Sunday morning hours, extending into the afternoon. The other time was early to mid evening, when eastbound and westbound trains ran and would often meet somewhere between Rook and Avella. The season didn't matter, nor did it matter that winter evenings would be dark.

I witnessed my first diesel locomotives on the New York Central mainline at North East, PA. Within a year or two the P&WV took delivery on a pair of Fairbanks Morse H-20-44 road switcher units and assigned them to Trains 92 and 95. It was exciting to see this new breed of power. It seemed possible that over a long period of time this type of locomotive might gradually increase in numbers, as steam locomotives disappeared by attrition. But it would be a slow process as steam engines ran out their expected 50 year lives. However, about the same time the B&O, in one grand move, replaced steam with diesel power on all the freight trains on the Pittsburgh-Wheeling line. The two passenger trains each way everyday remained in steam, but the freight train change was the first wholesale shift to diesels we had seen. Even then, we did not think too much of it. Of course, what did I know or question at age 13?

I built a crude model of that first set of P&WV diesels. I was also greatly enamored by trucks at that time, seeing many of them go past on McMurray Road during the Route 19 detour when that artery was being four-laned. So I built a number of truck models. About 1950 I saw a United States Railroad Administration Heavy

Mikado type steam locomotive advertised in Model Railroader, an O-gage kit by Hines Lines products. The P&WV had four of these and the Wheeling & Lake Erie, whose trains also ran over the P&WV, had twenty. They were what we were seeing all the time on our P&WV outings. So I sent away for a partial kit, just the engine. I proceeded to produce a finished engine from the kit, fabricating many of the details, along with the tender, and painting and lettering the engine as W&LE 6017. I became pretty good at soldering brass and tinplate.



W&LE 6017

It was a surprise and shock when the P&WV added diesels to their fleet at a rate that saw the complete demise of their steam roster in just five years. All the other local roads were doing the same thing. It was a devastating blow when the full realization set in. Could this really be happening? Yes it could. The property was being shot from under us. By the end of March, 1953 steam was all gone from the P&WV.

The B&O passenger trains through Washington, PA kept the railroad's 5000 series Pacific types all the way to the end of passenger service in the summer of 1956. Having lost steam power from the P&WV, those passenger trains were a real treat

for Dad and me for three more years. We would often watch them come into the station at Washington and chase them out along the line. Dillonvale, OH was one of the last strongholds of eastern Ohio coal mining and was a bastion of Nickel Plate (ex-W&LE) steam over the same period. We made four or five trips out there.

The last show of all was on the mainline of the B&O on Sand Patch Grade. We had enjoyed steam down there from 1949 and it too lasted until 1956. That was mountain railroading at its best, with a mixture of steam and diesel power. We finally closed out the steam era out completely with a trip to Roanoke, VA in 1958 when the Norfolk and Western was slipping fast as the last domain of steam. It felt almost like an aberration, anti-climactic.

Diesel power was not without some merit. I liked the first generation EMD F units the best because they looked massive and high, and the exhaust of their 16 cylinder, two-cycle diesel engines had a husky beat that fairly shouted *power*. They sounded great whether from several miles away or from 50 feet, or whether their throttles were in *Idle* or *Run 8*. On the other hand the burbling sound from comparable ALCO's and GE's was about as inspiring as the sound from a Greyhound bus. Dad used to say their cylinders sounded as though they had tin cans rattling around in them.

After the early diesels, the railroads and their equipment in general went down a path of continual degradation and disappointment to the romantic. Each successive generation of railroad rolling stock and infrastructure, even as it improved the company's bottom line, lost something of aesthetic value. The so called second generation hood units were not remotely photogenic. Modern auto rack cars or hi-cube boxcars dwarf them, which just doesn't seem right. Although I continue to do it myself on occasion, I really do not understand why anyone would want seriously to photograph modern diesel trains. They are come up short from practically any angle.

EMD power has continued to sound decent over succeeding generations because the same basic V-16 engine design is still being used. However, various modifications and new appurtenances have quieted that sound more and more. It has gone from outstandingly exciting and vibrant to rather ordinary.

Having said all that, I must admit that big diesel power in close proximity is still stirring and I think, because of scale, it somehow makes a better appeal to the senses when standing nearby at rest than from a distance when moving.

I have previously mentioned that I devoted some time to modeling. I was good at it. The first locomotive I produced to any degree of realism and professionalism was the W&LE USRA Heavy Mikado No. 6017. My incentive for building this model was that the prototype was something I still saw on a regular basis. That criteria also applied to my truck models. In the fall and winter of 1952 I took some time off the railroad-related models and scratch-built the E. J. Dunn oil rig that drilled the Hahn well a quarter mile from our house. My reason was the same – I was motivated because I was watching them drill that well in real time, working day and night. Those models emulated that which *was*, not just something on paper. The joy was not in the model itself but in the prototype that was being copied.

In the fall of 1953 I took my modeling to a new level. I sent away for a kit to a company in California named Little Engines. What I ordered was a actually a partial kit for a live steam Atlantic type locomotive that would be to a scale 1 inch per foot. The kit would create an engine that ran on steam, an engine that had a boiler and a firebox and burned coal. I spent the money I had earned working all summer between my junior and senior year in high school on that kit. Dad let me know that the money might have been better spent towards college, but he didn't stop me. Here was my reasoning: the beloved steam locomotives I had grown up with were vanishing. It was a terrible, disheartening development. I reasoned that the only way I could combat this problem would be to have my own steam locomotive. It was like

I would be saying to the railroad industry which opted for the diesel, "I'll fix you!"

The kit was basically a great number of rough, but high quality castings of bronze and cast iron that would have to be machined and fabricated according to a detailed set of plans, often to a tolerance of a thousandth of an inch. It would be a daunting challenge.

This tied into another thing that was going on. I had always loved Uncle Paul Kline's home machine shop in Bridgeville, at the same house from which we watched P&WV trains from the bathroom window. That shop had a big Sydney lathe running off a line shaft powered by a Model A Ford engine burning natural gas, a massive drill press also running off the line shaft, a smaller bench drill press, a chain fall with trolley that ran on the steel beam that supported the roof, an electric welding outfit, a grinder, and an acetylene/oxygen cutting and brazing outfit. The shop was loaded with machinists' tools and other heavy duty tools and equipment. It was messy and cluttered and dirty. Uncle Paul tutored me in that shop on the ways of machinists, and promoted my desire to undertake the live steam locomotive project. We found a second hand 8 inch swing South Bend bench lathe for sale in the newspaper. Uncle Paul went with us to check it out and on his advice we bought it. We installed it in our cellar. Now I would really be in business.

In total hours, Uncle Paul's tutoring on the basics of machine shop work probably did not add up even to double digits. But I did have an intuitive grasp on everything he showed me, and advanced in ability. I was able to self learn once I could use my own lathe at home.

Now a serious blow would be struck. It had been coming on for a while. My years at home with everything provided by my parents were approaching an end. I had to go away to college. Responsibility was falling on my shoulders. After five years of schooling, the demands of work and career then took over, along

with time for a social life and the search for a life partner. By the grace of God I found that partner and entered a whole new phase of life in marriage. Next followed children. If I could do it all over again, I wouldn't change a thing.

Uncle Paul died while I was in college. I bought the big lathe from his widow, Aunt Berta, for a modest sum, and also acquired his machinists' tools. We moved the lathe to my parents' home and several years later moved it again to my house. It languished for a couple of decades in my garage until I found time in my retirement to rehabilitate it and set it up to run. Now it would be powered by a Westinghouse electric motor bought second hand from Kidder Electric in Canonsburg, and still driven off a countershaft mounted on the ceiling. That whole installation required careful and precise work, and it turned out wonderfully well. It was fascinating and rewarding to have done it.

Getting back to my motivation for modeling, as I said, my stimulation came from actually seeing the real thing in real time, and *copying* it. My pleasure also came from building from scratch or at very least, building from a kit. I was not one for buying a model ready to run or display. I'm sure I was influenced by those airplane models that Dad made, and I had his ability to do the same thing. I suppose I may also have been affected by the old Model Railroader magazines from the 30's and 40's, in which scratch building was much more common simply because there was limited availability of finished models. In that era M. D. Thornburg had series after series of illustrated articles on fabricating superbly detailed O gauge B&O locomotive models from brass stock, sheet brass and tinfoil, entirely by soldering, drilling, tapping, filing and turning using the simplest of approaches. It was tedious and slow. That was the fun of it. But it is not the fashionable approach to modeling in this day and age. In fact, modeling anything nowadays is almost hopelessly and pathetically out of vogue.

This brings up another point, about which I am probably as wrong as I am about every other thing I am certain of. I have been observing my brother-in-law Bill Ritz's brand of railfanning and model railroading for fifty years. He does not have and never has had the patience to make models from scratch. He buys them outright. And it's not that he couldn't make them from scratch if he wanted to. He did a beautiful job of painting, lettering and numbering and weathering a fleet of Western Maryland HO gage engines. He built an operating turntable for his HO pike, tunnels and several bridges, along with constructing the scenery for the whole layout. That was all before building his current massive layout which incorporates every model railroad gage there is, from standard gage down to Z gage. It includes sound systems and all manner of operating appurtenances such as loaders, car wash, milk platforms and other auxiliary equipment that used to be featured in the Lionel catalog.

It is important for him to get things done. His satisfaction seems to come from the *finished product* rather than in the *doing*. I would describe him as a *collector* as much as anything else. He is a grown man who *loves toys*, not so much because they evoke the real things they represent but just because they are fascinating little machines in and of themselves, and he regards toys as an important part of his personal history.

My own incentive for modeling diminished as the prototypes disappeared. At that point I began to realize that models were hopelessly inadequate when it came to mimicking the real thing. An electric train looked like an electric train. Those small gage trains ran too fast and uneven. They stopped and started with a jerk. The essence and beauty of real steam locomotives was that most of the time they were moving exquisitely slowly, exhibiting a grace that few other machines other than ships possessed. Even the most advanced technology of recent years has not been able to emulate this property in the model locomotive business. Unfortunately, a model is nothing more than a model. There is so much more to the real thing in the way of sight, sound and smell that just does not scale down.

Sad to say, over time I have also come to realize that the same thing applies to my live steamer. When I sent away for that kit 56 years ago I naively imagined that the finished product would look and sound exactly like its full-size counterpart. By having seen some of these miniature engines in action at live steam meets, as well as on video tape, I now know that even though they burn coal in a firebox and generate steam in a boiler, that is about as close as they come to imitating their big brothers. It's the same old thing. The explosive exhaust out the stack and the ballerina-like smoothness of the prototype are qualities that just do not scale down. Jack rabbit starts and mushy, rapid-fire exhaust sounds are what you get, something like you might expect from a steam powered sewing machine. The engines do not make much smoke, let alone dense, black smoke.

This is not to say that it wouldn't be a wonderful, satisfying experience to successfully construct one of these intricate models, labor intensive as it is. The knowledge gained would be tremendous. One need be willing to pay the price, though, both figuratively and literally. To do it, it helps if one is (1) wealthy, (2) willing to be a recluse, focused singularly on his hobby and (3) a person having a reasonable remaining life span. In my case I am coming up wanting on all three. So I am left with the next best thing, which is to concentrate on one component of the live steamer at a time and be content to get pleasure from producing that *one piece of work*.

There are two other aspects of modern railfanning that fall short. The first is the phenomena of video tapes and DVD's of train runbys. The ones that have traditionally picqued my interest are the ones that have been remastered from old 8 and 16 mm movie film and feature steam power. The original film versions are nearly always without sound and it has been customary to dub in sound on the videos as part of the production process, to make them more attractive to buyers. This has invariably been done in a sloppy way that does not even come close to synchronizing with the video one is seeing, to say nothing of the fact that the

dubbed audio is woefully lacking in quality. Nor does spoken narration or music generally add anything worth listening to. Either the producers of these tapes have no idea what authentic sound would consist of or they don't care as long as they can sell a few thousand copies of their product. Another downside is that videos made from old movies so often run too fast. With all the technology available it seems inconceivable that this could still be a problem but it is. Thus it is, once again, that a medium fails to capture what it is attempting to portray. Anyone who must rely on movies or video to experience railroading in its heyday is bound to be disappointed, although he will not realize it. As Walter Kerr says, in *The Decline of Pleasure*, people do not see the Grand Canyon even in peering over its rim, what they see are abstractions of it from the thousands of images to which they have previously been exposed.

And while I am at it let me cite one more aspect of railfanning that does not live up to its promise. That would be the railfan excursion. It does not mimic real railroading. It does not capture the imagination because it is phony. As I spoke earlier, the true magic of my type of train watching comes from being alone or with a single companion, in the beauty and silence of nature, and not knowing what to expect, if anything. Preconceived notions are enough to spoil most good things. The best things in life catch one by surprise. A railfan excursion, with a trainload of riders and an equal number of chasers, rarely offers the unexpected. Everyone knows what will happen. That is where the phoniness comes in. And as with any large assemblage of people there will be annoyances and stress and jockeying for position, all contributing to the degradation of true pleasure.

Now I want to lament the countless losses that have so diminished railroading's hold on the imagination. First and foremost, of course, was the devastating loss of the steam locomotive, with all its associated trappings such as the water tank, water plug, coal dock, turntable and roundhouse, even the dirty overalls. Except in the coldest of weather, engine crews

kept their big cab windows wide open, displaying their attire and themselves very visibly as opposed to engine cab windows that today are closed.

The installation of CTC, along with radio communication, meant the end of the wayside telegraph offices on the smaller roads like the P&WV, and the slow demise of interlocking towers on the big, multi-track railroads like the B&O. Actually, CTC on the P&WV was not too bad a trade-off with the stations. Those home and distant signals associated with the passing tracks were like sentinels that enabled one to "read" the railroad. A green signal was always a statement that something was coming, the dispatcher having given an enroute train another section of railroad, whereas red, as the default indication, meant nothing was moving. An amber distant signal usually meant a meet was brewing at the next siding. Sadly, even the signals and passing tracks they controlled are now gone, and in many cases the railroad itself has vanished.

CTC also spelled the slow disappearance of another ubiquitous part of the railroad infrastructure, the multi-wire telephone lines with the wires attached to green, glass insulators mounted on cross arms. As they stretched down the tangent and around the next curve, they were as much a part of the scene as the track.

Missing also are the section men who maintained the railroad, the dozen or so workers who were responsible for a given segment of track. They took pride in their work and competed with other sections. Not only did they keep the rails aligned and surfaced, but they unceasingly evaluated and replaced ties, and groomed the ballast to a neat line at the edge of the "six foot", and maintained the drainage and ditches. Their work did not stop there. They mowed the weeds and kept the brush cut back on the sides of the cuts and fills. Absent this trimming on a regular basis, especially on single track lines, the railroad degenerates into not much more than a swath through the woods. Combine this with the demise of the small farm and the treeing over of open fields, and the landscape becomes one big

jungle, hiding everything, especially in summer. Under these conditions one cannot practice railroad photography even if one would. In western Pennsylvania this is a staggering problem, not just on the railroad scene, but everywhere one looks.

Nor was continuous welded rail an improvement from an aesthetic point of view. Something went missing with the disappearance of those rail joints, both in the way the track looked and in the way it sounded under a train. It is disappointing when a train can sneak up on you so quietly you don't know it's coming.

The disappearance of cabooses was another dreadful loss. Its result is the absurd image of the last car in a train with nothing more than the end-of-train device flashing away as it recedes into the distance. Again it comes down to the vanishing of the men themselves, the human face and presence.

In spite of these losses, there is a breed of railroad enthusiast that persists in going through the motions of railfanning and rail photography even though there is nothing of substance to work with. Their results appear on the current pages of Trains magazine. Since there is no longer legitimate subject matter out there, they must resort to gimmickery. Telephoto lenses, time exposures, and shutter bursts get them their foreshortened images of undulating track, dancing heat waves, streaks from headlights in the dark, and rails and wires reflecting the sunset. It is a pity because today's SLR cameras are much superior to the Graflex's and Lieca's of Lucius Beebe and Richard Kindig. But there is not much railroad reality for these modern instruments to capture and thus the photo section of Trains has become largely an art salon. These photographers are the same people who build pavilions along the track so they can sit and have gab fests between trains.

There is also a category of railfan who concentrates on history. They go out looking for remnants of the past, either a past they themselves never experienced and can therefore ponder with

studied dispassion, or past glories they did experience and for which they are trying now to recapture the fervor. The former is likely to be more successful than the latter, I suppose. In either case they are seeking an abstraction, an image on paper, something not real. It is like obsessing over a long lost love. The real thing has disappeared. It is gone. It cannot be found again and any attempts to do so will inevitably fail. It is probably better to get one's sights on new horizons. It is better to look ahead than back.

A final word on the railroad's appeal to the senses: Steam locomotives and all their attendant infrastructure, including the men who worked on them, made the railroad what it was in the eyes of the beholder. Because they were custom designed and built, every railroad's engines were unique and different from those of any other road. It was not unusual for a given company to have a dozen different classes of engines or number series, with varying wheel arrangements. Even if you witnessed only the locomotives of one or two local railroads, you were aware of the motive power of many other railroads around the country from magazines and books that were published. You could often identify them without help. Each railroad had its *look*, some looks more pleasing than others.

Railroads with fleets of engines I thought classically handsome included the Southern, Missouri Pacific, Chesapeake & Ohio, Texas & Pacific, and Denver & Rio Grande Western, to name a few. There was a reverse side to this, too. Most steam power on the Delaware and Hudson was an aesthetic disaster because of an unconventional streak in their president, L. F. Loree. My favorite of the big eastern roads I witnessed was the Baltimore & Ohio. They hardly had an ugly duckling on their entire roster. Their President Class, 5300 series, P-7 Pacifics, *as delivered*, were without peer, but unfortunately were later degraded by cosmetic changes. The other big road in my region was the Pennsylvania. Aside from two classes that were unquestioned beauties, the K-4 and the M-1, most other PRR power was no better than mediocre in appearance. Even these two classes

suffered ignominious modification late in life. In my era, the last 15 years of Pennsy steam, their power was notoriously dull, dirty and disreputable, which did little to improve their image.

It seems to me in discussing the aesthetics of steam power, one must break the argument down into two eras, the era of the classical designs running from about 1918 through the decade of the 1920's, and the later superpower era from the mid-30's to the end of steam in the mid-fifties. It is almost a matter of two distinct breeds, the first possessed of the elements of *standard* practice that had come into common usage about the turn of the century. Aside from automatic stokers, power reverses, feedwater heaters and superheaters, these designs employed no major breakthrough technology. The engines built by the United States Railroad Administration during a brief period of railroad nationalization after World War I were the epitome of the good, solid, no-frills steam locomotives of the era. Their handsome lines were a defining mark of that generation. In the thirties, a new order of steam locomotive design was emerging, that of the "superpower" category. The Berkshire, or 2-8-4 wheel arrangement was born, first to the Boston and Albany, then the Nickel Plate, Pere Marquette, Erie and Wheeling & Lake Erie. These engines were championed by the Lima Locomotive Works and had fireboxes, boilers and appliances that substantially increased horsepower, speed, and tractive effort. They had a definite new look about them, with big square front ends, cylindrical boilers, huge sand domes, sometimes front mounted air pumps, massive trailing trucks, and large tenders. They too could be very handsome machines but in a different way from their earlier post WWI counterparts. That is why it is hard to lump engines from these two eras together.

What constitutes good looks? In the earlier era, a nicely tapered boiler with compatibly proportioned domes, standard slatted pilot, uncluttered front end, and a nicely shaped cab and correctly dimensioned cab window would be the basics, along with of course a tender that was well sized relative to the locomotive, not too large or too small. Too small a tender ranked

perhaps highest on the list of aesthetic sins. Headlights could be center mounted or top mounted. I always believed the bell should be front mounted and that it should be a *swinging* bell, with an air actuated automatic ringer to produce a steady pealing. A graphite painted smokebox and firebox was an extra touch that was very pleasing. The B&O excelled at this. The B&O also saw merit in Vanderbilt tenders, along with a handful of other railroads. I thought they were great. On the matter of trailing trucks, I had objection to neither the standard exposed-spring USRA truck with 43 inch spoked wheels (Cole-Scoville, if you want to get technical) nor the commonly used Delta trailing truck with cast steel frame. Parenthetically, I must state that Bill Ritz *did* find fault with the former. A hideous design was the inboard-bearing trailing truck which mercifully was used sparingly by the railroads of the period.

Many of the same principles applied to the later-era superpower machines. The nearly identical Lima-built Nickel Plate, Pere Marquette and Chesapeake & Ohio Berkshires all had very well balanced and clean lines, with well proportioned, six-wheel-trucked tenders. Their massive two-axle trailing trucks with cast steel frames were befitting the size of the engines. They had the outboard bearing engine trucks which came to be popular in the late steam era, which struck me as perfectly acceptable. Large sand domes and forward positioned steam domes, along with big cabs, blended pleasingly with the ample size of the locomotives.

I have always thought Elesco feedwater heaters mounted ahead of the stack were a nice complement to an engine, making it look masculine and brutish. The Texas & Pacific was good at this. Among the best looking articulated locomotives of the modern era were the Chesapeake & Ohio's 2-6-6-6 Alleghenies. They were by some accounts the heaviest steam locomotives ever built, a convincing boast when one studied their six-wheel cast steel trailing trucks, their enormous fireboxes, the long boilers and front ends decorated with a pair of cross compound air pumps that themselves were at once menacing and attractive.

Of the articulated engines of the earlier "standard" era, it is worth mentioning the Denver & Rio Grande Western's 3600 series 2-8-8-2's as having as much aesthetic merit as any. It is an example of an engine I never saw, but which enthralled me just from its pictures. My other non-articulated favorites of the standard era were the Southern's green and gold Ps-4 Pacifics and their similar USRA 4-8-2 Mountain types. They were unsurpassed in elegant beauty.

I always liked large engine numbers on the side of the cab, that could be read from a distance. Some railroads practiced this and others didn't. I preferred gold lettering to white. One thing I did not care for were white painted driver tires and edges of running boards, which looked cheap. A nice touch was keeping the bells wiped, at least to the point you could tell they were bronze.

Many of the big railroads had their own unique breed of whistles. Five cell chime whistles were the sweet sounding melodious ones we all heard on various roads, and the B&O's, by some undefined virtue, were the best in my part of the world. The Pennsy had chime whistles on their passenger power, that sounded good, but a little different. The PRR's freight power was equipped with single tone whistles whose sound could only be described as a hideous, ear piercing shrieking. Whistles on the Western Maryland were chimes, but of the deep throated, steamboat variety. The Norfolk & Western's freight engines, the last word in steam modernity, had single tone "hooters," a seeming disconnect from what might have been expected from so successful and professional a company. The first diesels had single tone air horns that sounded like foghorns. Later on these would be universally replaced by chime horns that were easier on the ears.

This piece has cited things that stirred the soul of the writer over his adult life. Being in touch with the world around me, exposure to the beauties of nature, pondering complicated machinery, watching trains, watching people – all have fired my imagination. But that is not all. There are gifts of this life that

send chills up the spine to an even greater degree. For me, one of these has been music, which can evoke a peace and joy in the heart that exceeds briefly that felt from any other source. In that just-right state of the soul, hearing a beautiful composition performed by a master can be almost like touching the face of God. It is as if it is transporting the listener to a vaguely remembered, earlier life that somehow is the essence of his being. The beauty of music in its fullest expression goes beyond the mere sound that fills the concert hall. *Seeing* music performed live makes all the difference. The visual is as important as what the ear takes in. It embodies the *presence* of the performer, that is, his or her body language, grace, ability to communicate with the audience, and physical appearance, including attire. A man in tuxedo, a woman in black gown, whose motions convince an audience that they are really *living* their craft, add a dimension to a performance that is sadly absent in a radio broadcast.

I find that a *learned speaker*, one who actually has something to say, can thrill me as well. He does not necessarily have to be smooth and polished. If he is speaking from the heart and has decent intelligence and vocabulary, the words will come out alright. I abhor *political-speak*, *business-speak*, *media-speak* and *fast-speak*. One of the clues that a speaker is worth listening to is the presence of pauses in his delivery, in which he is thinking of just the right word, or the right phrase, and comes up with exactly that. Beware the fast talker and rote speaker, more impressed with himself than with his subject matter. He does not fool anyone. Most politicians fall into this category. Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill would be exceptions.

I am a poor practitioner of spectator athletics. I do not understand the western world's obsession with it. But a play of extraordinary grace and beauty on the ball field can none the less send my heart soaring. Again, it comes back to *order*, strength against strength, and ultimate truth.

Another form of spectator sport and source of undeniable pleasure in my life is people watching. For a man it may be looking at a woman whom he perceives to be beautiful both inside and out. There is nothing better in God's world. For a woman it may be observing a man, not necessarily handsome, but with the same imagined qualities, or it may be looking into the face of a new baby. Such things are wonderfully elevating.

It is natural to seek beauty and order and good. But Emerson warns, "The shows of day, the dewy morning, the rainbow, mountains, orchards in blossom, stars, moonlight, shadows in still water, and the like, if too eagerly hunted, become shows merely, and mock us with their unreality. Go out of the house to see the moon, and 't is mere tinsel; it will not please as when its light shines on your necessary journey. The beauty that shimmers in the yellow afternoons of October, who could ever clutch it? Go forth to find it, and it is gone: 't is only a mirage as you look from the windows of diligence."

Walter Kerr says it this way: "our minds will meet with no profound pleasure until they have ceased being acquisitive, that they will never be able to fasten firmly upon the very joys they most desire unless they first show signs of a willingness to let go."

This is a lesson of life I have had to learn over and over. It has applied to nearly everything. On reflection, one realizes that things get this way around the age of puberty, the end of the formative years. After that the paradoxes of the soul set in and life is never the same again. Granted that, it has still been good riding and, as I said earlier, I can't imagine how I would want my life to have been different if I had it to live over.

WNP

May, 2010



August 24, 1946

**There was a time when meadow, grove and
 stream,
 The earth and every common sight
 To me did seem
 Appareled in celestial light,
 The glory and the freshness of a dream.
 It is not now as it hath been of yore;
 Turn wheresoe'er I may
 By night or day,
 The things which I have seen I now can see
 no more.**

**The rainbow comes and goes,
 And lovely is the rose;
 The moon doth with delight
 Look around her when the heavens are bare;
 Waters on a starry night
 Are beautiful and fair;
 The sunshine is a glorious birth;
 But yet I know, where'er I go,
 That there hath passed away a glory from the
 earth.**

Wordsworth