

The Night Train from Omemee



"My great uncle James Dickson (pictured at left above) started working for CN in Toronto in 1929 as secretary to the comptroller. In 1932 they moved the office to Montreal. He worked for CN for 44 years. My grandfather worked for the railway for 27 years. Both my grandfather and great uncle grew up on the railway as my great grandfather started working for the railways in 1883, with the Northern and NorthWestern R.R. in Georgetown as Station Agent. Later with GTR and CN until 1935 where he retired in Omemee.

I relate this information because my great uncle was a great story teller and I have many of his stories of the railroad. I have heard others talk of the service Via provides, some good , some bad. But the main theme running through them is how much better the service used to be. However they are mistaken. Here is one of my great uncle's stories "The Night Train From Omemee" (see map at upper right). The middle picture above is of Omemee Station in 1927 taken by mygrandfather. I'm not sure of the date of his train ride, but the story was written in a letter (read it below) to my aunt in 1964.

Bob Dickson, TRHA"

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4053 Beaconsfield Avenue
Montreal 28, Quebec,
June 1, 1964.

Dear Barbara:

I was pleased that you liked my suggestion to make a swimming pool out of an old steam locomotive. This shows that you have a bit of railroading in you - you should have, you know, after three generations. Once a railroader - always a railroader, even if you did marry a competitor, and probably none of your lovely children have ever been on a train.

As you know, your father and I were practically born on the railroad - we could not have got much closer

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to it without getting run over. We spent a lot of time around trains as we grew up - in fact sometimes I wonder how we got to grow up in one piece. I guess you yourself had some train rides, but I doubt that you ever took THE NIGHT TRAIN FROM OMEMEE!

I did, many times, but the first time I shall never forget! I took the week-end off and went to Omeme for a bit of lazing around. That is Omeme's strong point - it is the best place for lazing around. But this week-end did not work out that way, I spent all night on the train getting there and your Aunt Marion had some friends visiting from Toronto and we all had two full days of whoopee in the Little Pigeon River and dancing or eating most of the night. When I got on THE NIGHT TRAIN FROM OMEMEE I was completely, through and through, pooped.

I naturally thought we would have a fast run to Peterborough, but right away we started stopping. We made three stops before we got there and I had no chance to doze off like I usually do on a train. At Peterborough a big tall guitar-player got on, slouched past all the empty seats (this was before Pierre Delagrave) and said' "Sir, do you mind if I join you?" Of course I said "Sure thing" and he said "That's mighty considerate of you." Right away I could see that he was putting on that Western stuff that seems to ooze out of guitar players.

I sighed to let him know I was too tired to talk, and leaned against the window. My eyes were closed, but I was wide awake. I hadn't slept more than minutes for two days and now I was too tired to talk or sleep.

The guitar-player sat with his guitar across his knees. It was an expensive looking one, with a vine of roses and philodendron leaves painted around the edge. On the black frets down the neck he had a list of all the towns he'd been to: Lindsay, Bobcaygen, Haliburton, Marmora, and even Oshawa. I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye and that was all he needed. Right away he says "This shore ain't much of a car, is it?"

I was too weary to look up, but he was waiting for my answer. "Not much." I felt guilty about not saying that I worked for the line. I looked outside, we were finally leaving Peterboro.

The guitar-player said "Where are you heading?" "Montreal." I grunted. "That's a fine town." And he moved his hand so that I could see that Montreal, too, was listed. Then he said "You know, I've been riding on this line since I could walk but I 'spect this is the sorriest car I've ever seen. Look at those old gas spigots up there. They made this car before they had electricity.

The train hit a bump and bounced. Ash dust from the big iron stove at one end shot into the air and drifted over us. I didn't bother to brush it off. I stared outside. The black fields seemed to relax me. I counted the hours since I'd slept, and it came to forty-seven. I figured a few more wouldn't matter. Then he said "Sir, I'd be obliged if you'd let me pick my guitar a little, my fingers are getting itchy." I spoke toward the window, "Go right ahead."

He looped the guitar cord around his neck. He cocked his head to one side and as he played he kept time with his big broughan. He wore no socks. When he sang he seemed to be singing to the red roses on his guitar. He sang "I recommend the Lord to You" in a low voice that carried the length of the car. Then he strummed some more and said "How do you like that?" The lights were on in the coach and he looked around and exchanged nods and smiles with the other passengers. No one was sleeping. A man in a glare-blue suit across the aisle had some whiskey hidden in a brown paper bag. He offered us the bottle. The guitar-player shook his head and went on strumming, so the man in the blue suit said "Boy, do you know any fast music?" "Something besides hymns?" The guitar-player banged his big foot down on the floor and flew into "She'll be Coming 'round the Mountain, When She Comes." The man with the whiskey shouted to sing the words but the guitar-player said he couldn't sing the words he knew because there were ladies present - but he banged through the whole tune again.

My head was splitting, but the man with the whiskey applauded, and the guitar-player stood up and beamed at the rest of the passengers. "I feel a lot better now," he said. "How about a little something to eat?" He reached into his zipper bag and handed me a bologna sandwich. They were made with thick bread and were heavy but good. "I just can't sleep on an empty stomach" the guitar-player said. He wiped his fingers on his red bandana, laid the guitar

carefully across his lap, and the minute he closed his eyes he was asleep. I moved closer to the window, with the guitar neck brushing against my leg.

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The lights were still on and the car seemed warmer. I was thirsty. The window began to rattle and I leaned against it to make it stop. I tried to sleep straight up like the guitar-player, but the window noise was too loud. I shifted away from the guitar and tried crossing my right leg over my left, Then I tried crossing my left leg over my right. The window had to be held tight and my legs kept going to sleep.

The train kept stopping at small stations, and sometimes at crossings. I never saw anyone get on or off and gave up trying to figure out why we made so many stops. With my knees wedged up into the seat in front of me, and leaning hard against the window, I rooted down into the bottom of my backbone. Somehow I got to sleep near Campbellford. I don't know how, but I did.

When we were coming into Belleville yard the train bounced hard and then stopped. Everybody woke up. It was quiet and I thought we were getting water and coal. All of a sudden the door burst open and this terrible racket came at me. I thought it was a hold-up, maybe some crowd like the Jesse James gang. But it wasn't. It was 2:17 in the morning and this was a band! There were about seven of them, all about ten years old, and they had coronets and little tambourines. They paraded up the aisle and back and you never heard such a racket in your life. They seemed to be playing different tunes. One of them did a little dance while the others came around collecting money. Everybody was groggy, but they were nice kids and they said they needed the money for uniforms for their baseball team, so we all chipped in dimes and quarters. Then the train started moving and the kids jumped off into the dark. I began to dose again, in little short snatches, leaning against the window.

At Belleville a new conductor had got on. He examined every ticket and every passenger. He got in close to peer into my face. He had a breath like a cat.

Another few miles and we stopped so hard I thought we had hit another train. Everybody came wide awake. The lights were on full blast and someone was shouting. A whistle

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sounded and the new conductor shouted "Napanee! Napanee! Everybody out for Napanee." I was delirious. The whistle kept on screeching and gave me palpitations and my hands were wet. There were no lights outside and we seemed to be in the middle of a swamp. I shouted at the conductor "What do you mean waking us all up for this mud hole?" He looked at me and shouted "Napanee" again. I began getting up. He was too old to hit, but I figured I could shake him a little. The guitar-player touched my sleeve. "He can't hear. He's stone deaf and it won't do a bit of good to holler at him." I knew I would never get to sleep again.

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At Kingston the passenger in front of us got off and the guitar-player swung the back of his seat forward so we each had a full seat now. He said "You better lie down, you look like you could use some rest."

I stretched out. The window was chattering away, but it didn't bother me any more. I was desperate for sleep. I put one hand under my head and one hand in my pocket. That is a tough position to sleep in! There is just enough room in the seats to confuse you. You can't lie down, but you still feel that something can be worked out. But it can't unless you can go to sleep in a hurry. I lay there a while with my feet and legs asleep and nothing else. I could feel the imprint of the woven cane seat on my hand and face, but I was too weak to care. Finally I dropped off. It was like sinking into a hot black well.

I hadn't been asleep more than twelve minutes when the conductor started shouting that we were in Brockville. It was 4:30 and still dark. When the train stopped two kids came running through the aisle selling sandwiches in a box. I thought I was going to be sick. When I sat up my feet prickled and when I put them on the floor the pain was terrible. The bones in my face ached and the hand I had kept in my pocket was paralyzed there.

Before I knew what I was doing I bought a box of the sandwiches. The train sat in Brockville for fifty-two minutes. The conductor shouted a couple of times that a bull was sleeping on the track and they could not find the owner. The guitar-player ate some sandwiches then said to me "When you lay back down you better turn the other way; that cane pattern has kind of messed up the side of your face."

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Finally the train started again and I knew the sandwiches had been a terrible mistake. The heavy doughy bread stayed in a lump at the top of my stomach. The guitar-player went to sleep again. His mouth was wide open. His left index finger was on the fret marked "Cobourg". I began to think, when had I slept last? It seemed like a hundred hours. It was getting light outside. My hands were getting wet again and I could hear my heart pounding. Every fourth beat sounded different, like it was leaking. Everything seemed blurred; the lights looked orange and had purple halos. My legs and left arm were sound asleep and I tried to figure out how I could make the sleep come up from my legs to my head. It seemed simple. It was down there, all I had to do was pull it up. I loosened my belt to let it flow up - I was clean out of my mind.

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There was a light in the east, and I tried hard to keep my eyes shut. I knew what it was. It was the sun, and I didn't want to see it. But I did. It was tipping up over the fields and I knew that the night was over. Then I went to sleep! I slept for forty-five minutes then woke up jumping. The train had stopped and a vendor was shaking me. "Coffee!" he screamed. "Coming into Montreal, get your coffee while it's hot." The sun outside was getting high and every bone in my body was aching. I said "How far to Montreal?" "We're right at it. Get your coffee now, your last chance." he yelled. I looked down at my hands. In my right hand was a Dixie cup of coffee and in my left was a package of raisins. I stared at the guitar-player. "How'd I get these?" "You bought them - fifteen cents for the coffee and ten cents for the raisins." He pointed at the coffee. "You better drink that. Them cups melt fast."

And then I noticed my fingers were burning. I dropped the cup and watched the coffee spread off my shoes into the aisle. I wiped my hands on the raisin box and started to get up.

And then I saw the sign outside. Cornwall. We weren't even close to Montreal. We had over an hour yet. The vendor was leaving the car and I hollered at him, "You said we were in Montreal. You lied. I could have slept another hour." I started after him and the guitar-player said "Where are you going?" I said I was going after the

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vendor, but the guitar-player took my arm and lowered me into the seat. I gritted my teeth and said if I had had any sleep I would fix him. The guitar-player said "He knows." I said "He knows what?" "He knows you have been on this train all night and you are pretty weak. He does it all the time and when someone gets mad and goes after him he just touches them on the shoulder and they sit back down." I looked out the window as the train started to move and saw the coffee man counting his money.

The guitar-player said I was lucky. "Sometimes he sells cupie dolls." He looked me up and down and said "I don't want to say anything against the railroad, but I think you got a complaint."

When we got to Montreal the guitar-player helped me off. My feet were still asleep, and wet from the coffee, and my arms were so weak I dropped my bag. The engine of the Ocean Limited on the next track blew steam all around me. The guitar-player climbed on to the Limited and it pulled out of the station, headed for Halifax and the sea.

With love, from your Uncle Jim