

TRAINS ON THE BRAIN

And the sons of Pullman porters
And the sons of engineers
Ride their fathers' magic carpet made of steel.

--Arlo Guthrie

The Pennsylvania Railroad was the economic lifeblood of Renovo. "Pop Pennsy," as townsfolk called it, was that from which the moderately good life flowed. Renovo prospered when America's railroads were in their heyday and began to fall on hard times when American commerce and travelers took to the highways and airways after World War II.

The Pennsylvania Railroad dominated Renovo not only economically but also physically. Half the land area of Renovo proper was occupied by the PRR repair shops and railyard, complete with a hump for inspecting the underside of freight cars and a roundhouse for the servicing and repair of locomotives.

The railroad, especially the trains, also captured the imagination of at least one kid. And as so often happens when something beguiles one's soul, its expression took the form of art.

I started drawing steam locomotives at the age of 3. I drew them on the backside of the extra wallpaper Mom had stored in the hall closet. The wallpaper afforded me the space to depict the engines and their tenders with trailing mail cars, baggage cars, coaches, Pullmans, and diners if they were passenger locomotives and with boxcars, flatcars, coal cars, tank cars, and cabooses if they were freight locomotives.

And to my way of thinking, no detail was too small to overlook--and to get precisely right--when sketching these beautiful smoke-belching behemoths. The engineer's and fireman's cab had to have the right number of windows, and the access ladder and handrail had to be just so. The size of the tender had to match the type of locomotive being depicted. The whistle, smokestack, and sand dome had to be in proportion to the locomotive and positioned correctly. The angle and protrusion of the cowcatcher had to be accurate. The pistons, cylinders, and counterbalances on the wheels had to be true to life. And most important, the number and arrangement of the drive wheels and the wheels on the leading and trailing trucks had to square with the purpose of the engine. (The PRR's two passenger locomotives at the time, the K-4 and the K-5, had a 4-6-2 wheel configuration. That is to say, they had a four-wheel leading truck, six drive wheels, and a two-wheel trailing truck. The I-1 and the I-5, the switch engines that the PRR used in the railyard to move cars hither and yon, were configured 2-10-0, with the zero indicating that they had no trailing truck. And the M-1, a freight-hauling locomotive, had a humongous tender and eight drive wheels in a 4-8-2 arrangement.)

Until I began first grade at age 6, I would stand in front of the Citizens Bank every day at 1 p.m. to study--nay, marvel at--the 1:10 passenger train and to wave at the engineer and the fireman when they departed at 1:20. The Citizen's Bank, which was one and a half blocks

east of the railroad station, was my preferred vantage point because that's where the locomotive would stop. The train's coach cars would then be in front of the station for easy passenger ingress and egress. At any rate, I thought the two men in the locomotive's cab had the most exciting and adventurous jobs imaginable. (Ah, the romance of the rails.)

Because Dad worked for the PRR, train travel was free for our family. In those days, railroads had reciprocal agreements, so a PRR pass was honored on every other line in the country. (Indeed, I used my PRR pass during my college years to ride the Soo Line, the Burlington Route, the Milwaukee Road, and the Santa Fe.)

Our family's two most common vacation destinations were New York City (to watch the Yankees play) and Chicago (to visit relatives). Now, I always enjoyed seeing the Yankees and I always had a great time playing with my cousins, but, in retrospect, I'm not so sure the train rides weren't the best part of those vacations. I loved the quirky characters we would meet in the stations when we changed trains in Pittsburgh or Harrisburg. I loved eating a free (!) slice of cherry pie in the dining car before it opened, courtesy of Lamar Turner, a porter on the PRR's Pennsylvania Limited. (You can bet I looked for Mr. Turner every time we took that train.) And strangely enough for one inclined to explore, I loved sleeping on the train. Inside of 10 minutes after the train pulled away from the station, I would fall asleep to the gentle swaying and clickety-clacking of Dad's magic carpet made of steel.