

Connections

Robert Drake

OUR TOWN, WOODVILLE, was situated right on the main line of the Illinois Central Railroad—usually referred to, in its advertisements, as the Main Line of Mid-America. Roughly parallel to the Mississippi River, which lay twenty miles to the west, it was part and parcel of the Mississippi River Valley and its culture and was often referred to, if not as the “I.C.,” simply “the Railroad,” just as the Mississippi itself was known as “the River” and “the Late Unpleasantness” of the preceding century as “the War.” And Woodville itself was quite dramatically situated about halfway between its termini of Chicago to the north and New Orleans to the south; and quite often the daytime streamliners, the “City of New Orleans,” one headed north, the other south, would pass each other in mid-afternoon right there—the whole thing enhanced by the double-tracks and automatic block signals in use back then, implying that the whole thing was a class act.

The north and southbound versions of the overnight crack train (all-Pullman and extra-fare too)—the “Panama Limited” as it was called—often did likewise, though hardly anybody was ever there

to see them meet at that late hour since neither they nor the “City of New Orleans” actually stopped there. (Woodville was too small for that and somehow it didn’t seem to matter anyhow: the Panama’s high speed and the resulting commotion only enhanced the drama.) But sometimes you would wake up in your own bed around midnight and hear the two “Panamas” blow for Woodville and for each other, so you knew all was well and under control and on time.

Perhaps the Illinois Central was not without a sense of history too, as well as geography. Its Central Station in Chicago—right off the Loop on one side and Lake Michigan on the other—had been built for the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1892-1893, the fair which so excited Henry Adams; and indeed the “Panama” itself was supposedly named to celebrate the immense Central American banana trade (after all, New Orleans was the second port in the nation) and perhaps the Canal itself, though that didn’t actually materialize until a couple of decades later, duly celebrated in 1915 by the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco—just in time for World War I. Yes, the I. C. had a sense of them both—past and present, history and geography too.

I was even told once that the reason so many students from the South continued

ROBERT DRAKE is Professor of English at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. A new collection of his stories entitled *The Picture Frame* is forthcoming from Mercer University Press.

their graduate work at the University of Chicago rather than at the older Eastern schools was its geographic inevitability and furthermore the same logistics had had a hand in persuading other Southerners to head for Minnesota and the Mayo Clinic, not Johns Hopkins, if they were seriously ill. And along the way there was plenty of scenery, not just something picturesque to be admired but something to be viewed with respect—Lake Michigan, the Ohio junction with the Mississippi at Cairo, the smooth and seemingly endless prairies of the Midwest with their “corn knee-high by the Fourth of July”—marvels all of them, not just something else to be conquered. Nature, weather, all the “givens” were after all the ones calling the shots here; and you would do well to adapt yourself to the realities, not the reverse. And perhaps that was part of the ultimate fascination for me: you played by their rules, not your own.

And yet the ingenuity of man was not wanting either. After all, it was the steel rails, designed and fabricated by man himself, which here carried the great forces where he willed, in our case all the way to Chicago and the Lakes in the north, then all the way southward to New Orleans and the Gulf, even branches leading to both Louisville and St. Louis. And extremes of climate, terrain, time, and place were not wanting (blizzards in the north, hurricanes in the south) quite fitting for a land so diversified, so much its own master. And perhaps that was the real fascination of the train for me and many others—not only an exultation in their achievements in transportation but also a kind of triumph, celebration they imposed on the land—time and place themselves—but, mind you, always with due respect. (These were people, remember, who never forgot that the earth was the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.) Even men—and American men at that—knew who was the boss in all such matters.

And the be-all and end-all, the rationale of the whole business itself was finally *making connections*, bringing people and their wares together at their common destination. I had somehow sensed this from my earliest childhood—all of it on time, nothing left to chance, all predictable.... And the station agent could always tell you where the train was *right that minute*, with no stone left unturned, and no surprises.

The bottom line, you might say, was there for all to see, certainly in the great “union” stations of our big cities—in the central dramatic feature embodied in the ubiquitous *clock* which usually towered over the building itself, showing the whole world exactly what you could expect and of course thereby commanding the respect of all. And in short, it was all something you could *count on*, unlike what you might feel about buses or airplanes or other modes of movement. On occasion it might seem they kept their appointments with whim or caprice, even irresponsibility. And often it didn’t seem to matter: with the motor vehicle it may have been informality that carried all before it, with the airplane it was speed—and much of it highly informal too! Furthermore, you were always more or less helpless in their hands. Indeed, an old friend of mine once referred to the mode of the train as *travel*, while that of all the others was *transit*. And furthermore, she said she didn’t ever again want to ride *anything* where she couldn’t tell them to stop and let her off if necessary!

But again, the emphasis was all on what you could expect, what you could more or less set your watch by. I remember my father telling me that all the railroads in the country—their time, their schedules—were regulated by a central control system based in Washington. And whatever time was laid down there was what the whole country followed, making allowance of course for different time zones. The key to the whole system came

when the noon hour was struck from there every day of the week—which went out to every railroad station in the country in a signal which sounded like the mild “tick” of a telegraph instrument—mild in sound but gigantic in significance. And there was no guess work about any of it. *Time* then was the essence of the whole concept: that was its master and its attraction, towering above all in the dominant station clock, which sometimes flaunted a Mercury-like figure from its pinnacle, to show who and what was in command—something like fortune or fate, something you couldn’t argue with. Indeed, you almost bowed your head accordingly. And it all originated in Washington, just as the rails, the tracks themselves began and ended, for the I.C., in Chicago and New Orleans. And it was all *connected*. And though my father always refused to change his watch whenever he had to leave the Central Standard Time zone, even he had to submit to this fundamental principle.

Well, this of course was only part of its hold, part of the drama which held you fast, your attention never faltering. Because embodied in the whole concept was something almost mystical, almost like magic. *Look*—there was all that speed, all that power and yet all of it ultimately controlled by ribbons of steel only four feet, eight and half inches apart, a steel highway, if you will, all dependent for direction on a surface no wider than the length of a piece of chalk. But this tiny surface, this delicate control had the last word, and its word was law, wherever it was headed. And so the gigantic force, the pride of time and place which was this monstrous creature was directed and controlled by something like a microcosm, a never-failing device you could, again, count on. Something of course which had to obey you, provided you played by the rules of the game yourself—all balance, all harmony you might say. And nobody failed to believe in it, to

accept its dignity and pride. People across the country would set their watches by the most prestigious trains, never doubting their reliability except in the most extraordinary circumstances—floods, blizzards, tornadoes, all agents of the unpredictable—all that trains were not.

And when I speak of drama here, I mean just what I say. To hear the whistle of a steam locomotive several miles away, especially at night, to *know* exactly when you could expect it at your station with bells ringing and steam pouring forth like a volcano, with dignity and force, was not to be ignored—right on time, nearly always true to the where and when—something like an old friend: these were the greatest of gifts, reassurances. And then the arrivals by night, which my father always said made everything feel spooky—the wind whistling around the station’s eaves, as it sat there in the midst of almost total darkness, then the headlight which you could glimpse down the track, sometimes even around a corner, not seeming to slow down at all except just as it pulled up to the station waiting room, because it knew you would wait for it, and you knew it was always in control. And thereby you knew what an *entrance* was like, like something on the stage or screen: bold and peremptory, it was not something you could ignore. And the very idea of *missing* it was unimaginable if not intolerable.

Trains had a glamor then, no doubt about it. But even more than glamor there was a force, a necessity which commanded all the rest. Because if they often led to romantic journeys and exciting things you couldn’t say nay to, they often foreshadowed things that were portents of disturbance, disasters which you ignored at your peril, to say the least. After all, it was on trains that dead bodies were shipped home from big city hospitals, transports which brought back disasters from the battlefield, and the ominous news brought by newspapers and tele-

grams—none of it pleasant. And this was its business side—no excursions, no gaieties here. And again, it was not anything you could ever argue with. Once when my mother's father, who had been Woodville's Marshal for years untold—you could always spot him on his big gray stallion, they said, in a procession, a parade or whatever the occasion—was down at the station, waiting for the arrival of a desperately sick lady from a tuberculosis sanitarium, he was right there to help remove her stretcher from the baggage car where they always carried the dying and the dead in those days. And I never forgot what she was supposed to have said to him when she looked up and saw him there: "Mr. Wood, I've come home to die." And that was all that was necessary, though it had all the overtones of *Camille*. I couldn't imagine buses or airplanes arriving in such circumstances: with them there was no ceremony.

Well, they're more or less all gone now—the big steam locomotives, with their glitter, their power. And I remember when the streamlined, diesel-equipped "Panama" first charged through the deep cut right in the middle of town under what was called the "overhead bridge," just after World War II began. And you could hear its big flat whistle, sounding just like what it was—a machine, and you could see its big electric headlight going back and forth making a monstrous figure "8", all in the interest of safety and security. But it was all too mechanical, all too artificial for my taste—and I gather, the taste of many others. There was no particular drama, no vibrant life, to set it all wild and free. Instead, there was only the more or less calmly efficient and predictable, just as you might have expected—not the "on time" shibboleth always demanded of the bold chargers in the old days. Now there were no exceptions, no variety to heighten one's excitement, his participa-

tion in the whole scene, no drama either. Instead, just the inevitable predictability, with no surprises and no excitement.

Long after I had left Woodville and gone off to school, every time I came home for a visit I would sooner or later go down to the depot, to see what was going on. Of course the best time was mid-afternoon, when I could see the "City of New Orleans" groaning its way round the bend at the end of the cut, even if I was lucky, see the two "Cities" meet right in front of the station and know that their passengers were exactly halfway through their respective journeys, wondering about them, what they thought of the journeys' ends they were approaching, what they hoped or feared as the result, wishing too that I might be on there with them—the excitement, the mystery it might hold for me.

On the other hand, I could recall some actual memories about the "Panama" because part of my schooling had taken place in Chicago and sometimes I came home by that route, leaving there about 5:00 in the afternoon, arriving up the road from Woodville around midnight at a larger, more important station. And there were lots of memories to call up after that: a seat in the observation car since there were no "day coaches" available, a "club car," where I could sit reading, say, one of Conrad's or Hardy's novels, at nearly 100 miles an hour, with a martini in my hand, oblivious of all except the soft, swift swaying of the car as we sped down the Illinois prairie. And then duly taking myself back to the diner—two units, one for dining, the other for cooking—for one of the I.C.'s fine dinners, especially when sea food reigned supreme. And naturally it would often do so since their trains went in and out of New Orleans every day. Then a liqueur to finish off with before returning to the observation car, where the lights were now dimmed and you could sit watching the world outside lit up—for Christmas if

it was that time of year or hot summer time which you could only feel. And since you were in the last car, it often felt as though you were at the very tail of some lightning-like animal or even a comet, which was giving you a larruping fast ride for all it and you were worth.

Then as the evening waned and passengers sitting beside you might begin to nod, your own spirits would rise expectantly at the thought of home and family which now drew nearer every minute. First there would be the Ohio to cross at Cairo, safely of course at only 20 miles an hour, I was told, then some miles of running right beside the moonlit Mississippi as it slowly but steadily moved south on its way to Memphis and the Delta. Then ultimately to "The Big Easy," as New Orleans was sometimes called, and finally into the Gulf itself and the wild freedom lying ahead. Soon now there would be the slowing down and grinding of brakes and you would get your things together and make your way to the door leading back into the Pullmans and other cars, all ready now for the dramatic arrival just ahead, no matter how often you had done it before.

And finally, in what might have been one of my last such homecomings, I was suddenly presented with something like a splendid surprise, perhaps as a sort of benediction to all these years of adven-

ture: the train made an extra stop. It was Christmas and an even larger crowd than usual seemed on board—more cars, more people. So the train stopped first where it usually did—its length about halfway beyond the station. But that apparently didn't seem adequate enough to "discharge" so many passengers, so the "Panama" pulled up until the observation car was halted right in front of the station. And now looking around, I saw that there was nobody else waiting to get off there but me; so I raised my questioning eyes to the conductor, whom I thought I recognized from previous journeys. And he bowed and smiled as if by way of saying yes, go ahead. Could anything in my life, my career ever have been more exciting? Was it all some kind of reward for my lifelong fidelity to this mode of transportation and my old friend, the I.C.? Perhaps even then I might have had some sort of idea that this might be one of the last of my train journeys, so dwindling did the trains seem to be in numbers and frequency as the years fled on.

Well, so be it. Perhaps, in addition to my smiles at seeing my parents again, there were a few tears also. But again you gave thanks for what you had been given, been allowed as sure and certain, what finally you could count on. And that ultimately was all that mattered, with trains or anything else.