

Trails of Steel

by

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The Chisholm Trail hasn't really gone away, nor the Santa Fe, that bit of the Oregon Trail that Kansas had, nor other cattle or freight trails or explorers' paths: they haven't gone away. But they have reverted to heritage now, displaced though not supplanted by trails of steel.

Railroads. One must be practically practical, I suppose, and begin with facts and figures. According to the State Highway Commission, Kansas ranks fifth largest in railway mileage among the states; some 8,732 miles of rail lines cobweb the state, the lines operated by 16 railroad companies.¹

Yet there is so much more.

I want here to initiate an irregular series of *Heritage* numbers dealing with railroads. The burden of this number will be the Union Pacific, earliest in the state if you allow its ultimate origins. The main trunk of the Union Pacific was constructed between 1864 and 1869; it was the first transcontinental line. But the following articles deal with facts, and I should like to deal here with meanings.

We must all remember something from the golden times. That is, something from the far or near past must, by the nature of things, impinge on the present and make the everyday better than it is and what it really is. For what is behind us is at least positive and measurable, and the future being what it is, anyone sensitive and sensible will allow this past: in the past there is evidence both of our weakness and strength, there is sustenance for now, and there is wise guidance and counsel for tomorrow.

We all know about the golden age, but we do not enough make it our own. How does Johnny Appleseed, or Paul Bunyan, or Mike Fink talk to you? Or John Henry or Casey Jones? These are figures answering a deep human need, a common human need. All they ask is our permission to enter our lives.

This is a point extremely difficult to be made. I am talking right now, right for the minute, about railroads. They swept across our state with a certain impunity. They ground out a new life for virtually everyone who then lived. Now they still sweep and touch us all, but they touch us with less intensity. Yet for the happy, dreaming heart there still exists the great possibility.

I offer as evidence what a little girl tells me. It has no special meaning for her yet, but it contains the special meaning that is needful for all of us.

Shall we take a little trip,
Shall we board a train,
We shall travel miles and miles
Over hill and plain.
Whoo-whoo, the whistle blows,
Whoo-whoo, away,
Good-bye, good-bye,
We'll be back someday.

Here is the unknown great romance. Here is the legitimate power of tradition. Here is a new land flexing its muscles. Here is where a little girl's perfect heart is. It is, of course, sad enough that railroads aren't what the little girl thinks they are: it is, it seems to me, much sadder that the adult mind can no longer accept them as she thinks they are, even with obviously necessary reservations, and thus loses so much of life.

The same little girl who told me the poem is completely able to encompass in a vague and beautiful way all that there is to know about, say, John Henry and Casey Jones. Great heroes out of a heroic time. She knows John Henry was a ". . . li'l baby, uh-huh/Sittin' on his mama's knee, oh, yeah" and that "De Big Bend tunnel on de C & O road/Gonna cause . . ." his death. She knows, too, that the great Negro culture hero, the necessary product of dreams, would gladly abandon mortal life and a magnificent heart with definitude to enter the golden realm of imagination.

Nor is Casey Jones any real problem to her. The innate heroism of a man who "stuck to his post both day and night" as a very part of things that "Belong to the life of a railroad man" gives her no pause: she believes it all simply because it is necessary to believe.

Touched by adulthood and somewhat of maturity, one finds the magic going out of things. I have a good friend who is an ex-railroader. He is a man who has every reason to see the practical side of things, the now, for he lost a leg in a railroad accident. We have talked long hours about this and I probably won't be precise, but I'll be accurate, in reporting his ideas. "There's nothing like it," my friend said, "because it's different everyday and it's a free life. Only it's bad when they get you down. Then they think you're just another cog in a great big wheel, and when you wear out they just get another. A big outfit'll buy an arm or leg for two bucks."

This is a hard thing for a man to have to say. And my friend has to say it. He has every right to. There is no blame in him, nor in magnificent organizations such as railroads. The blame is that we put off totalities and cease remembering.

Anyway, the following articles purport to deal both with fact and fancy. Their substance and what I've tried to say here point to this: the need for a large step forward in intellectual and emotional and spiritual evolution is harshly upon us. This, of course, is a private and individual

process. But there is great ferment to this end in our time if only we don't try to institutionalize it. The pull of the future and the heavy pull of the past make the present. The bad of the past must be excoriated.

As I work here in the early morning hours, I can see the sun emerging confidently into a new day. The first sign of his coming was a reddish eastern glow. Now there is a striated pattern of red-gold and blue. Soon it will be sun himself. Sun with his past and forever new. By contrast, across the field from my home is an abandoned branch line; before it died, it had given life to many. The death of anything must either be mourned or not allowed to die and be preserved and given new life in mind. So the railroad. Its angry aspects must be quietly and gracefully decried, and we must use its greatness.

The sun is nearly here. I see the rusty rails of the old, dead track more clearly. The little girl is right.