



Wilmette Historical Museum

Train Tracks

By Mark Jespersen

In the 1950s, the old elms that still lined Greenleaf Avenue, formed a tunnel through which the tracks of the North Shore Line carried dark green commuter trains to and from Chicago. The 1950s were, well, another world. Unlike today, it was safe for kids to go anywhere, almost any time of the day.

Except for that one time in late 1949. My parents had decided to return to Denmark, my mom's native country, to visit friends and family not seen since before the war. An obscure aunt from god knows where was brought in to take care of me, my two brothers, and my sister, Pauline.

We called her auntie-tantie. She was a strict disciplinarian with a thick Danish accent and a very limited knowledge of the English language. On day one, while she cleaned up after breakfast, we all went our separate ways without so much as a by your leave.

I was only four, maybe five, but felt older with my genuine Roy Rogers holster and cap gun strapped on. I was out of caps and was headed to Stremmel's five and dime at 4th and Linden for a new box of ammo. As I approached the curve in the North Shore Line's tracks, where they crossed a vacant lot before stopping at Linden Avenue, I looked west and saw the glowing orb of an oncoming train, lumbering my way under the elms.

Was I influenced by some corny cowboy western I'd seen with my brothers up at the Teatro del Lago in No Man's Land? I can't remember. Whatever the reason, from various accounts I have heard over the years, I stood in the middle of the tracks, pulled out my little cap gun, and pointed it in the direction of the oncoming train.

The screech of metal wheels on metal tracks was loud and long, bringing out most of the neighbors on Greenleaf Avenue. When the train finally stopped, about ten feet in front of me, the conductor and engineer jumped off, yelling some things about god and all.

The engineer, when he finally got a good look at me, burst into laughter and then sat down on the front coupler, or the "cowboy-catcher", as he called it, laughing louder.

The conductor was less amused and, grabbing my free hand, asked me where I lived. I pointed my gun over in the direction of our house at 318 and off we went. By that time, auntie-tantie had come out front as well, to see what the commotion was all about.



Wilmette Historical Museum

She did not like being accused of negligence by some man in a uniform, if she even understood what the conductor was saying. As he stormed off back to his train, auntie pointed a long bony finger at me and said, "*Ikke flytte.*"

I knew from experience with my mom that *ikke* meant don't even think about it. So, while she went in search of something in the garage, I didn't move.

She came back out with a coil of rope and, lifting me over to the big old maple tree in our front yard, tied me to it like a pet dog.

Nothing was ever said when my parents returned later that month. My aunt went back to California I believe, and it wasn't until years later that my sister Pauline told me the whole story and how a neighbor, Barbara Wayne, had let it slip one day that I'd held up the train.

Though my parents never mentioned the incident, they did spend a lot of time teaching me how to respect large heavy moving objects like trains, cars, and buses. They even built me a fold-down layout for my new Lionel train set, where little plastic people were safely glued in placed away from the tracks.

Wilmette was full of trains, from the steam engines running along the Chicago and Northwestern line to the CTA trains that ended at the classic 4th and Linden terminal, across from Stremmel's. A young boy from my class at Central School once climbed over the wall at the CTA storage yard and was electrocuted on the third rail. We all learned a lesson that day.

I suppose I was about eight when I discovered the crossing-gate man, where the CTA train tracks ran over Maple Avenue, a few blocks from our house. The CTA trains began their journey south out of the 4th and Linden terminal every ten minutes or so, heading to Evanston and then on into Chicago. One day, riding my bike over to a friend's house, down came the gates and I stopped to wait for the train to pass. It was one of the older wooden trains.

An older man poked his head out of the doorway of the little shack that housed the levers that operated the gates. "You wanna see how it works?" he shouted over the rumble of the train. My folks had taught us to be cautious with strangers, but his voice and demeanor were non-threatening. There was a kindness in his eyes.

As the train passed by, I leaned my bike against the shed and, from the doorway, watched as he pulled mightily on the two wooden levers to lift the gates back up.



Wilmette Historical Museum

"What's your name, son?" I told him who I was, and that I lived nearby, and that more than anything, I loved trains. He said his name was Tom and that every day he drove to Wilmette from his home in Evanston. "That old heap is gonna be the death of me," he said sadly, pointing to a beat-up Plymouth that was parked in the weeds across the street. It must've been from before the war, the late 1930s. I was pretty good at identifying makes, models, and years of cars. It had big swooping fenders up front, rust had eaten through along the bottom. The headlights sagged and there was only one windshield wiper on the driver's side that I could see. "You know how old she is?" I ventured a guess with 1939 and was only off by a year. "Yep, she came out new in Deetroit just about the time I got married. My two best gals. And then I got drafted into the army not long after Pearl Harbor." He paused for a minute to light up what was left of his cigar while I pondered the meaning of Pearl Harbor. "When I finally got back home in forty-five, folks had broken the windows and stolen just about every spare part on her. She was more beat up than me after four years of fightin' in the Pacific. But that weren't the worst part."

I wasn't sure how to ask what the worst part was but, luckily, he just kept on going. "See, the worst part was that when I got home from the war, my wife and my two kids was gone. The apartment was still there, with one bed left, and a little note pinned to the pillow sayin' I needed to sign the divorce papers that were under the blankets. Well, that's when I moved to Chicago. Figured it was time to make a new start."

I tried to imagine what it might feel like if I hopped on my 3-speed Schwinn, rode home, and found my entire family gone, with a note pinned to my pillow. I looked at his eyes, how they sagged like the headlights on his Plymouth. But he couldn't have been much older than 35.

And yet, somehow, having experienced the worst of it, he got up and went to work, in that old heap, to raise and lower the crossing gates on Maple Avenue.

He shook his head slightly and then smiled at me. "Oh, now don't worry too much about all that. I'm OK now. Those days are over. And you come by here anytime you want. Next time I'll tell you about when I got lost on an island and had to survive in the middle of the jungle for two weeks without ..."

Just then the warning bell rang in the shack, cutting him off while announcing an approaching train. "OK. See ya, kid. Gotta get back to work now."

I never told anyone about the many hours I spent listening to his stories that summer. Not that my parents would have prevented me from going. If they'd met Tom, like I had, they would've approved.



Wilmette Historical Museum

Tom taught me to respect a man who, in those days, was not as privileged as me. Because of him, I view the world a bit differently now. And I thank him for that.

Copyright Mark Jespersen 2020

About the author

Mark Jespersen grew up in Wilmette, Illinois, during the 1950s. He began his career in media communications as a photographer. His first major client was Sundance, in Utah, and his photos from the film, *Jeremiah Johnson*, still hang on the walls there.

Today, he and his wife, Kim, split their time between the coast of Maine and a medieval village in the south of France. His upcoming book, *When I Saw Her*, is close to completion. A second book, based on his early years in Wilmette, is now underway in 2020.