

The Railroad Trestle

By L. Wellington Miller

It was in the early spring of 1940. I was 13 years old, living in the small town of Sunbury in the coal regions of northeastern Pennsylvania. It wasn't a coal-mining town, but it was the home of many railroaders for the Pennsylvania & Reading Railroad. My dad was a fireman on the steam engines for the Pennsylvania Railroad, which was why we usually lived close to freight yards and the heavily traveled railroad tracks.

His job kept him away from home for weeks at a time, so he gave me some rules to abide by: "Listen to your mother; do your chores around the house; and stay away from the railroad tracks, especially the railroad trestle. That's a dangerous place to be when trains come through town. It only has wooden boards as railings, and someone could easily fall through the spaces between the boards."

Our home was located at the end of North Fourth Street. When we stood on our front porch, we could look across the street and beyond the wide-open field and clearly see the railroad tracks sitting high on cinder banks. They were built high that way because the Susquehanna River overflowed during heavy rains and flooded our area.

About three blocks from our home was our

local playground, which was located right along the tracks. It wasn't fancy, but it had a couple of swings, a sliding board and a small, push-it-yourself merry-go-round.

There were patches of grass here and there, but mostly it was dirt and cinders. Cinders came from the remains of the burnt coal used on the steam engines. Those huge, heavy engines used a lot of coal, resulting in a lot of cinders. Instead of the railroad throwing the cinders in a pile somewhere, they used them to fill in areas along the tracks where rain or snow had washed some away. Then, if they had any leftover, they would come by and use them on playgrounds and crude baseball fields.

About 50 feet from the playground was a big wooden trestle (bridge) that was built over the tracks. When a very slow freight train was passing through, which was often, a person could go up the steps on one side and cross over the wooden planks to the steps on the opposite side of the tracks.

One day, one of my buddies happened to be standing in the middle of the trestle when a freight train came by. Purely by accident, he discovered that when the train was traveling south—on the downgrade—the engine would blow white steam

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Good Old Days on
Wheels



through its smokestack. The steam gave off invisible droplets of water that felt like a fine, misting rain. During the hot summer months, it was quite refreshing to stand in the middle of those large puffs of steam and feel the cooling droplets as the engine passed below.



This particular Saturday afternoon, a couple of us kids were goofing around at the playground. It wasn't real cold, but I was wearing a sweater and corduroy pants.

Dan called to me that a freight train was coming. We could hear the engine's eerie whistle as it was passing over some street crossings.

This one was headed north, on an upgrade. It was a long train, with hoppers full of coal. Everyone hollered at me and told me to head for the trestle and give it a try. They were snickering a little, but I didn't pick up on that. I hadn't done this stunt on the trestle before, so this was my chance to be a big shot.

The train was coming. I didn't have much time, so I ran toward the trestle as fast as I could. I had to reach the top before it got any closer. I bounded up the wooden steps two at a time. I

headed for the middle and waited for the engine. The guys were yelling at me to turn and face the opposite direction so that I could watch the engine as it passed under the trestle. So I turned and waited. The sound of that engine, straining from all the weight it was pulling, was exhilarating.

Suddenly, to my surprise, I heard a loud gush from the engine's smokestack and found myself engulfed in black sulfur smoke and soot mixed with stinking droplets of water. My eyes burned and I started coughing and choking from the sulfur.

I never realized that steam engines traveling on an upgrade would blow steamy black smoke. The fireman had to shovel in lots of coal to keep the steam pressure up and steady.

It didn't take me long to run down off that trestle, still coughing and spitting out that horrible sulfur taste. My hair, sweater and corduroy pants were very damp and gritty. I smelled like I had run into a skunk. Needless to say, my buddies were laughing at me; they had known what would happen. But I didn't think it was funny. I knew that there was going to be trouble when I got home.

I went to the back kitchen door, thinking I could sneak up to my bedroom and change clothes. I was wrong!

Mom had seen me coming across the field and she was waiting for me in the kitchen. She grabbed my collar and hollered, "What were you doing? Look at you! All wet, and you smell like a skunk!" When I told her what I had done, she frowned and reminded me about what Dad had said about hanging around the tracks and the trestle.

"Yes, I know," I said. I was scolded, threatened and then sent to my room. I wasn't really a bad kid; it was just too easy for me to hang around with "the wrong kids" and do those dumb things that little kids do. I was never severely punished, but I was sent to bed, often without supper.

To this day I am very thankful to my parents for raising me to respect them and other people. Later in my adult life, as I gained wisdom, I realized that rules were made and enforced to teach. ❖

