

# Railroading Rallery

by Richard Collins

By now, doubtless, the average Maritime traveller (a classification conferred on those 'fortunate' eastern Canadians of the transient set, who, for the purpose of business or pleasure, have had the experience of journeying through the Maritimes) has had a sound insight into the machinations of travel by rail. Granted, almost all modes of modern travel have their petty drawbacks and inconveniences, but only the ol' iron horse can lift us out of the realm of present-day transportation systems, with their minor irritations and drop us back into the lap of nineteenth-century travel facilities, with its ceaseless discomfort and nerve-wracking tribulations.

Naturally enough, it is the average wayfarer who must acutely feel the agony of a long railroad journey; he has had neither excessive experience by which he might harden himself to the rigors of the trip, nor has he that 'first-time feeling' of the wonder-smitten novice traveller. A seasoned veteran of the rails has the ability of shutting himself out of the situation unfolding around him, and cloaking himself in the sweet oblivion of sleep; while the virtual novice has the advantage of being so struck with the novelty of his first trip, that he tends to forget any discomfort, which under more familiar circumstances, might ordinarily be felt. Alas! Only the 'average' traveller endures, beyond normal limits, the torment of a rail journey. He's neither here nor there; he can't adapt to the rugged versatility of the veteran, nor can he indulge in the delight of being a newborn rail rider.

Such is the predicament of many people traveling through the eastern provinces. The only plausible reason for this is the lack of updated train services which are now being enjoyed in many areas of central and western Canada.

For a more in-depth view of the situation, let's try to visualize this average traveller on a standard journey of a couple of hundred miles. Sitting at home a few days before this supposed rail excursion, he ponders, from the comfort of his armchair, on the possibilities of an economical means of transport from A to B. Mistakenly, he considers taking the train, justifying the thought with the notion that if so many others go by rail, then it really can't be all that bad, and maybe he was just feeling out of sorts when he took that train trip last year, which seemed so distasteful at the time. Yes, he would give it another chance and telephone for reservations. (This classical error is due to his underrating the lesson he should have learned on the last occasion, or, equally possible, the passage of time heals all wounds, and his lack of memory serves him accordingly.)

Contacting the proper authorities, he learns, to his chagrin, that to obtain a sleeper's berth, one must have the foresight to book one some months in advance. Hesitatingly, he accepts a coach seat and sets a date for departure. Shrugging off faint warnings of impending disaster, he seals his fate and unwittingly cements the foundations for a sojourn soon to be fraught with self-imposed misery.

Well, the big day finally arrives and we find our man seated on a bench in the waiting room of the station, impatiently awaiting the train, already an hour and a half behind schedule. Fidgeting, he reflects disgruntledly on his struggle in getting out of the house on time and driving hurriedly downtown so as not to miss the evening express which has already eclipsed his own tardiness by being later still itself. Perhaps he should have packed a lunch and taken that extra reading material after all. At long last, a whistle hoots in the distance, and, eventually, the gap between sound and station is covered, disclosing to view a grimy, oil be-spattered pair of diesels pulling a cortege of some fifteen coaches in its wake. With an almost simultaneous rush, the crowd pushes forward onto the platform and pours into the various cars composing the rail-bound ensemble. Our particular subject manages to worm his way through the congested knot of passengers blocking

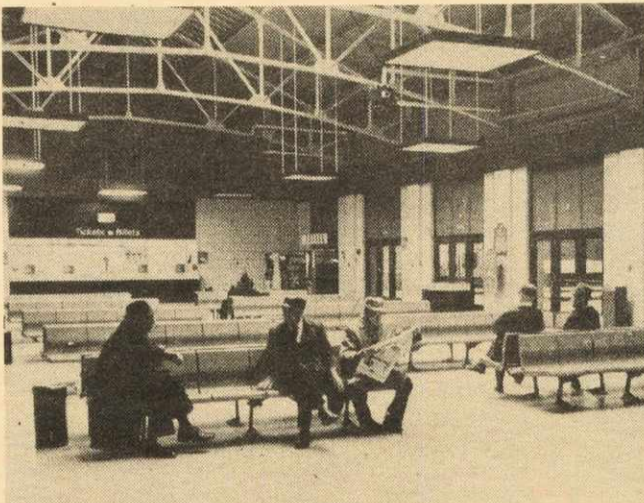


Photo by: Tom Mooney

the entrance, and, amidst the hustle and bustle of the jostling mass, he works a route to his designated seating area. After wrestling with the baggage racks for a few minutes, he contents himself with dropping into his seat with a sigh of relief, to take stock of the scenario unfolding around him.

Presently, the hub-bub and clamour diminishes and the train, after several violent jerks, begins to roll sluggishly out of the station. By the time things settle down to the proverbial "dull roar" as, looking out the window at his side, our pilgrim catches a glimpse of the receding lights of the township. Ahead a dusky sky greets the horizon in an embrace of twilight, and the engine-drawn procession rattles monotonously onward to a variety of destinations.

With a casual glance around the glaringly lit interior, our traveller's eyes come to rest on the form of a young woman seated across the aisle. Hazzarding a nod in her direction, he is about to invite conversation, when she abruptly shifts her sitting posture to that of a slouch, and, ignoring his acknowledgement, shuts her eyes. Not wishing to disturb her repose, he checks his urge to communicate, and focuses instead on the family chatting excitedly in front of him. With no desire to indulge in extensive animated prattle, he soon loses interest in his observations, turning instead to a perusal of the paperback he had stuffed hastily into his valise before leaving the house.

After a short interval of reading, he feels a slight drowsiness coming on, a result of the regular, rhythmic clacking of wheels against track, together with the stuffiness of the atmosphere in the public compartment. Dozing momentarily, he's rudely awakened by a piercing cry of agitation from the distraught child in front of him. Then, as if in a chain reaction, the youngster's wailing fires a burst of screaming from the infant in the lap of a woman some few seats behind him. It's really quite damnable, he thought, how one always manages to get caught in a crossfire of juvenilia this way. Invariably, it'll happen; always, and specifically, with him. Is there no justice? With a resigned shrug, he sinks deeper into the cushions, as though hoping to shrink out of the whole fatiguing predicament. However, the children, become weary of this noisome sport, largely due to the endeavors of their parents to pacify them with offerings of candy. Feeling a kinship close to that of the ancient mariner, our man, weary of the struggle, just wishes to exclude himself completely from the affairs of his fellows. Once again, though, fate beset our beleaguered buddy in the form of an old woman, who, prior to this, had been moving inconspicuously up the aisle, scanning the area for vacant seats. Finding the one adjoining his to be empty, she falls into it, complaining at the same time of a draught in the rear of the coach. Mustering up a courteous smile, he then busied himself with peering out the window, hoping the old belledame would do her part in maintaining the silence he had imposed upon himself. He simply wasn't in the right spirits for any silly palaver. As fortune would have it, despite his desires, the old one breaks his mood of melancholia with a tirade on the

prices of tickets, the ineptitude of the porters, and such like, straying from there to supposed energy shortages, rising costs of general consumer articles, and what did he think of the whole situation? With a look bespeaking the tedium and trials he had thus encountered, he tells her that as he's a stranger to the region, and knows little of the economic policies here, therefore he thinks nothing whatsoever of the matter. Giving him a sullen scowl to reproach his indifference, she takes up a ball of knitting from her bag and busies herself in the intricacies of crocheting. Before more than a few minutes elapse, however, she starts rambling, almost inaudibly on another score of trivial topics. A long sigh, and our friend deliberates on the possibility of obtaining a muzzle from one of the conductors.

On through the night, the despondent traveller is plagued by a confused clamour of shouting ticket collectors, droning conversation, station stopovers (together with lurching halts and grinding, screeching machinery), not to mention the annoyance of vendors peddling warm pop and stale sandwiches with each successive stop.

Morning finally dawns on a dim scene in the coach; sleeping bodies are sprawled grotesquely over seats, and the stifling odor of stale smoke and perspiration hangs in the atmosphere. At last, silence reigns, broken only by the intermittent snores of slumbering passengers. Answering the breakfast call with a few others, our subject stumbles up through a dozen cars or so to the dining area. Stopping at the washroom to freshen up, he stars groggily at his reflection in a mirror. Shaking his head with disbelief, he refuses to acknowledge the sack of wrinkled, unshaven flesh before him as being the image of his own face. Pushing his way out through the narrow door, he takes his place in the line-up, and orders the usual bacon, eggs, toast, and coffee. Paying the typically outrageous price, he perches on a nearby swivel stool and tries to choke down the cold toast, dishwasher coffee, greasy overcooked eggs, and the limp undercooked bacon. Consuming only half of his meal, he forsakes the rest of it and plods wearily back to his coach. Finally arriving at his destination, with a heartfelt prayer of thanks, he disembarks from the train and makes his way to the station, hails a cab, and without so much as a backward glance at the train, drives away to the comfort of the nearest hotel. After this grueling ordeal he has no strength left.

Sun streaming through the car window, he hears the sound of a passing jet overhead, and reflects on the relative comfort those aerial travellers must be enjoying, in contrast to the night he spent in the coach. Considering the speed and ease of a journey by air, he chides himself for his having taken the abominable train in the first place; next time, yes, perhaps next time, his common sense and experience might prevail in a decision regarding his mode of travel. Until then, the incident will be swept aside and forgotten ... yes, yes, he nodded his approbation to the idea ... next year will be different!



Photo by: Tom Mooney