

HAVE TRAINS KEPT YOU AWAKE ONCE YOU'VE SLEPT?

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I usually have a problem sleeping, not going to sleep but when I wake for one reason or another at 3,4, or 5 a.m. Before I can get back to sleep, my mind becomes flooded with thoughts and I start to dwell on them.

This one particular morning it was about how trains were an integral part of my life for a good many years. It's not because I worked for any extended period for the railroad, although I once did. In the beginning my childhood years were spent, one might say, in proximity to it. In short, we lived next to the tracks.

Our lawn ran right down next to the tracks and so close that when old 866 picked up steam and rolled by, the whole house shook.

I cannot remember how many trains a day (and many times nights) went through. It was the main line between Syracuse and Oswego when roads were barely wide enough for passing vehicles and nearly all heavy freight traveled by rail. One might think the disturbance would have been unbearable, but it wasn't. Growing up in that house I hardly noticed it.

There was one aspect of the location that was at times really annoying. It was the signal used at the crossing. Instead of the usual lights and bar used today, it was a bell - a bell that clanged incessantly and harshly whenever a train was passing or in close proximity. On more than one occasion when it malfunctioned it went on for hours.

Our neighbor across the street, Leonard Eccross, worked nights at Halcomb Steel in Solvay and he fixed the bell a couple of times. The train noises blended with the bell and one soon became acclimated to that, but not to the bell alone. Leonard took an axe and chopped the cable in half when it became too disconcerting.

The bell was run by electricity from huge batteries. They were in big glass jars filled with plates and acid. We kids were always fascinated watching the batteries being serviced. Charley, the service guy, was a great big man who was never too busy to explain the workings to the assemblage of kids that it attracted. We were all eager to learn what was in the huge concrete box with the locked metal lid.

My path to and from school often took me along the tracks or else along the adjoining roadway when there was no train activity. It was surprising the number of interesting objects one would find that had rattled loose from the cars.

I always felt sorry for the poor sparrows that sometimes built their nests behind the square wooden sign boards near the top and on one end of the boxcars. This would happen when the car was parked on a siding for a week or more. There was almost no chance that they could finish nesting before the train moved to the next destination.

My last summer in high school, my best friend Mick Morgan and I worked on the railroad section gang. It was hard, hot work and we tried to quit the first day.

The war was on and they had a manpower board assigning people to jobs where they were most needed. You had to have a release from your present

employer before you could be assigned to another job. Mr. Ross Ferris, the foreman, would not give us one explaining how we had not given the job a real chance and maybe if we stuck it out we would go on to make it a career like he had.

Well, he was wrong about the career part, but right in making us stick it out. We learned that you did not quit climbing when the hill starts to get a little steep, which is something that many first-year college students should think about when the task somehow seems insurmountable.

So...that is how the railroad was intertwined with my life, right up until we moved to Thendara in 1958. The railroad was still booming then, although tenuously. I am glad to see its reemergence if only for recreational purposes.

The next time I wake up and my mind begins to dwell on the subject, I may have to go into the next phase of how railroads continued to become a part of my life after childhood. If I am lucky that may come before my mind - like the railroad - begins to fade and no longer matters to the extent it once did.