

Trains

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I really love trains, both as a passenger on 'real' trains and toy ones.

As a child, I received a Lionel toy train set which we set up in the living room every Christmas. It became as much a symbol of the holiday as the Christmas tree or stockings.

My grandfather had a wooden platform built to support the tracks. There was a man who had a workshop down the hall from Grandpa's office who built whirly gigs who helped him create the set-up. The platform was built with two pieces of plywood, raised up on slats, which fit tightly together. On the surface there was a path for the track in an oval pattern with a cross track. There was fake grass defining the path and a tunnel created from paper mache with a cigar box top under the arch of the top. A wooden train station was positioned by the cross track. Things like a cattle car and signal were added over the years.

What a lucky kid I was!

As for real trains, one of my earliest memories is of taking the train with my mother, along the Hudson River Valley from Syracuse to New York City. I must have been right around age 3, just before my mother returned to the job market. The thing I remember most clearly was eating in the dining car. There must have been a special kid's placemat which had the stories of Rip Van Winkle as well as the Legend of Sleepy

Hollow, the first on the way south and the other on the return trip. We were certainly in the right area of the country for the regional lore of the Catskill Mountains.

As an adult, I'll pick the train for travel if it is a practical option.

When I lived in Mt Carroll, IL, we could drive over to Savanna and hop on a train to Chicago. You could take it in for the day or overnight, a much nicer option than driving. No need to park in downtown Chicago either. Sadly, that train has long since been discontinued.

That particular track ran between the farmhouse of my friends, Diane and Ed Panozzo and the state highway. One night on his way home, Ed crossed the track and saw the train fly by in his rearview mirror. Ever after that, the engineer blew the whistle long and hard when he came to that rural crossing.

One train trip was to California for a family reunion. Bob drove out with Ian, maybe age 5, but the other two boys went with me on the train, accompanied by my bother-in-law Warren, his wife Patty, and their boys Jonathan and Daniel. With Robin and Mischa, that made four boys between the ages of nine and twelve. The cousins were really close in friendship as well as age. They had a grand time roaming the train. We didn't worry. They couldn't go anywhere far. We did keep an eye out at the stations when the train stopped to be sure the boys didn't decide to disembark for a few minutes. They never did.

On that trip, we had opted to just sleep in our seats at night, but my friend Dot and I decided to take a sleeper on a ski trips to Montana.

That was the first and only time that I've done that. The conductor really watched over us and we felt totally pampered. He had to wake us up in the middle of the night to disembark.

Unfortunately we were cheated out of a train trip on the way home. As we prepared to leave for the station, we got the word that there had been an avalanche just east of our stop which totally blocked the track. They were several days digging the track out and we heard that they had to drag the west bound train back to the nearest station. We were forced to take a plane to Minneapolis and a bus home from there. It may have been fortuitous because I was coming home on crutches and I'm not sure how well I would have been able to navigate the moving train, especially that first high step when boarding the train.

If I get the opportunity, I would take another train trip in a heartbeat, especially overnight. I wonder if I can still make it up to the top berth!