Railroad Avenue

Great Stories and Legends of American Railroading

BY

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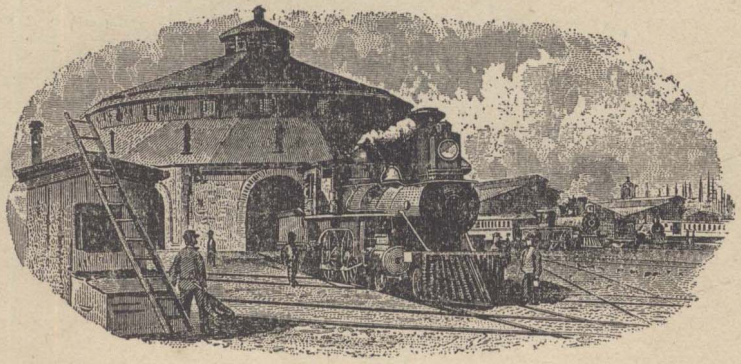

Whittlesey House
McGRAW-HILL BOOK COMPANY, INC.
New York *London*

RAILROAD AVENUE

THIRD PRINTING

PUBLISHED BY WHITTLESEY HOUSE
A division of the McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc.

Printed in the United States of America

TO THE MEMORY OF MY FATHER

WALTER WARREN HUBBARD

WHO WORKED FOR THE PENNSYLVANIA RAILROAD
MORE THAN FOUR DECADES AND INTRODUCED ME
TO THE STRATUM OF LIFE KNOWN AS
RAILROAD AVENUE

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WANDERLUST

RAILROAD AVENUE is as much a part of our civilization as Main Street or Courthouse Square. It is a place —yes, but more than a place. It is a way of life. It symbolizes the human side of a great industry, the men who punch tickets and handle the throttle and throw switches; their families, their everyday existence, and their lore. Its chief appeal is to wanderlust. Railroad Avenue is Casey Jones. It is Kate Shelley and Kitty Sullivan. It is the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen. It is "The Wreck of Old 97," a saga of tragedy, and the humorous never-never land of "Big Rock Candy Mountains." It is James J. Hill, the Empire Builder, who, by laying the Great Northern rails, probably did more than any other single person to populate the American West. It is also the humble laborer who rests in a nameless trackside grave.

The people of Railroad Avenue have their own heroes, their own legends, their own code, their own lingo. To them "Johnson bar" is neither a cocktail lounge nor a cake of chocolate but a locomotive reverse lever. "Highball" is the go-ahead or

come-on signal, to "blackball" is to deny employment to someone by putting his name on a black list, "redball" is fast freight, "greenball" is a perishable fruit or vegetable shipment, and "balling the jack" is making a fast run. Other terms are even more picturesque. For instance, a veteran who retires "gets the rocking chair," while a leaky old steam engine is, disgustedly, a "teakettle" or "coffeepot" or "junk pile" that "couldn't pull a setting hen off her nest." A fair example of the use of such lingo is the poem, "In Railroad Town," by Earle Franklin Baker, which runs as follows:

In Railroad Town the yard goats toil
  And powder up the rails with sand;
While journals get the waste and oil,
  The crummy silently does stand.
The hotshot's clamor fills the air;
  The drill crew men, all lean and brown,
Go dancing nightly to the blare
  Of herding cars in Railroad Town.

I know, for I too was one of these,
  The dumbest boomer of the band,
A youthful spring in legs and knees,
  A bright glim ready in my hand.
From beanery queens I got my cue
  To swap a kiss or play the clown;
It mattered not, when jobs were new
  And likewise short . . . in Railroad Town.

I close my eyes and see them still:
  The bakehead scooping, black with dust;
The pinhead cutting off the mill;
  The play of lights on streaks o' rust;
The girl who worked at Mother Hall's;
  The stake you saved, the Super's frown—
What mem'ries haunt my cottage walls
  In Railroad Town, in Railroad Town.

Relatively few cities or villages there are in the United States or Canada that did not at one time have a Railroad Avenue or its equivalent. If the thoroughfare did not actually bear that name, it at least paralleled the tracks or crossed them at right angles under some other name. With the coming of Henry Ford's tin Lizzies and modern real-estate development, however, the avenue has been renamed or in many cases has become shabby and disreputable. The phrase "the other side of the railroad track" is too well known to require comment here. But old pensioners can tell you of years when Railroad Avenue held its head erect, when its residents included such pillars of local society as the station agent, the conductor, the engineer, the dispatcher, the roadmaster, the master mechanic, and, occasionally, the division superintendent himself.

In the nineteenth century, when the railroad was far more important than it is today, many communities were linked only by the iron trail. At night, the gleam of an engine headlight through the cut on Saddle Mountain or across the bleak prairie was a star of hope, a lighthouse beacon. It told the settlers they were not alone. No wonder the depot was a social center. Folks assembled there to bid Godspeed to a departing guest or a member of the household starting out on a trip, or to greet someone arriving by train, or merely to watch the train herself as she rounded a curve and made a well-timed stop at the water tower. Often the day's most exciting event was No. 17, the local from Fairbury Junction, pulling into town. How often did grandfather, as a boy, wait patiently at the station just to see the trains come in!

That was the golden era, the boomer period, when a career on the roaring road was the pathway to adventure and independence. Farm lads plowing corn or trudging the white dusty road to district school would wave at the trains and dream of the day when they could go firin' or brakin', or maybe learn how to sling Morse from the kindly, bespectacled, old operator down at the depot, in exchange for doing odd chores around the place, and thus be on the way to hirin' out for a job as brass pounder. City

boys, too, were bitten by the railroad bug. They yearned to discover what lay on the other side of the hill. Railroad Avenue stands for the things they dreamed of.

The actual street, whether it goes by this name or any other, may adjoin a maze of busy tracks known as a "yard"; and if so, the lullaby of babies and the requiem of the dead blend with the cacophony of engine bells and whistles, the clanking of couplers, and the ceaseless rumble of rolling wheels. To railfaring men and women these sounds are as natural as the patter of spring rain. The folk who dwell on such a highway, or near it, or anywhere within earshot of the railroad, may feel a sudden shivery thrill, a wanderlust call, at hearing for a brief moment, especially in the evening, the mournful wail of a locomotive whistle. That nostalgic blast has caused many a fellow to leave a warm bed on a cold night, a meal uneaten, a plow standing in the furrow, a girl waiting at the church.

This book is written for all persons who have followed the lure of the singing rails or ever wanted to do so. As Jim Hill said: "Most men who have really lived have had, in some shape, their great adventure. The railway is mine."

CASEY JONES'S TRIP TO THE PROMISED LAND

OF ALL the ditties that Railroad Avenue has contributed to the barbershop harmonizers, the phonograph records, and the radio programs, none stands higher in public favor than "Casey Jones." And none, I hasten to add, has done more to enrich colloquial English, for the name of this hero is an accepted synonym for the term "locomotive engineer." You might gather from the song, with its fantastic disregard for geography and other known facts, that Mr. Jones belongs to the fabulous realm of Santa Claus, the stork, Paul Bunyan, Little Red Riding Hood, and Rip Van Winkle. Such is not the case. The engineer in the song was a real man.

Born March 14, 1864, he was christened John Luther Jones; he played, worked, and loved like the rest of us, and was catapulted into glory by a train wreck that occurred at Vaughan, Miss., on April 30, 1900. His widow, Mrs. Jane Brady Jones of Jackson, Tenn., helped me assemble material for this chapter. Two of their children are living.

But not even Mrs. Jones can say with certainty where J. L.,

as she used to call her husband, first saw the light of day. She is not sure whether it was before or after his parents moved from Missouri to Kentucky. A Casey Jones biography, which the author, the late Fred J. Lee, admitted was partly fictionized (although Lee himself had been an Illinois Central conductor and a personal friend of the famous engineer), claims that Casey was born "in a backwoods section of southeastern Missouri that cannot be definitely located," that as a boy he used the name Luther rather than John, and that at the age of thirteen he moved with his family to the village of Cayce in the Blue Grass State, nine miles from Hickman. Other authorities insist that the engineer was born at Cayce, at Hickman, and at Jordan, Ky. Because of the difficulty in fixing the birthplace of a modern American celebrity whose widow, children, and friends are still alive, it is not hard to understand the disagreement among historians as to the native city of Homer, who died about three thousand years ago.

According to W. H. B. Jones of Galveston, Tex., who tells me that his grandfather was a brother of Casey's father, the celebrated hogger was closely related to a governor of Mississippi, James K. Vardaman, and a popular nineteenth-century evangelist of the Billy Sunday type, Rev. Sam Jones. We know that Luther was the oldest son of Frank Jones, a poorly paid rural schoolteacher, and Anne Nolen Jones; and that there were four other children, Eugene, Frank, Philip, and Emma. All four boys became engineers employed at one time or another by the Illinois Central. Luther and Phil were killed while handling locomotives, Eugene died of a bullet wound, Frank succumbed to pneumonia, and Emma was drowned in a rain squall on the Ohio River. Not one of them reached the age of fifty!

Luther was about sixteen, working as a farm hand at Cayce, when the railroad bug bit him. Hoeing corn, he decided, was much too tedious. So he journeyed fourteen miles—said to have been his first train ride—to Columbus, Ky., which was then a terminus of the Mobile & Ohio line, and arranged to do odd chores around the depot there without pay, in order to learn

telegraphy. Presumably he lived off his meager savings from farm labor; maybe his father helped out a bit. In due time the lad qualified as a ham operator, but instead of following up this branch of service he hired out as messenger or caretaker for livestock shippers. His duties were to ride M & O freight trains and attend to the cattle then being shipped out of western Kentucky. From this job he graduated into brakeman, on the same road, with a freight run between Jackson and Columbus; and later went firing.

At Jackson two important events happened to the pedagogue's son, both of which were to help shape his destiny: he met Miss Jane Brady, his future wife—who, according to *Life* magazine, had "the prettiest legs in town"—and he acquired the nickname that is now known to millions of people. I asked Mrs. Jones how the monicker originated.

"When J. L. came to Jackson to work," she says, "he ate breakfast at a boardinghouse which my mother kept for railroad men. There he introduced himself to a young engineer named Bose Lashley. 'Your name won't do,' said Mr. Lashley. 'There are too many Joneses on this division. Where did you hail from?' J. L. mentioned the town of Cayce [pronounced "Casey"] and his new friend said: 'That's fine! We'll call you Cayce.' So that is how my husband got his name."

The prevalence of Joneses in railroading, as elsewhere, is shown by the fact that in 1944 there were 1,078 Joneses on the Canadian National pay roll, of which 118 were John Jones and 4 John L. Jones.

Anyhow, it seems that J. L. liked his new nickname very much. Letters are extant showing that he used it in writing to his correspondents, signing himself "Cayce." Many folks, among them newspaper reporters, preferred the Irish spelling; so the headlines in local papers that told of his death spelled the name "Casey" and that form was adopted when the song was written.

All three of Casey's railroading brothers stood above six feet in their socks. Casey himself was a giant of a man, six feet four, with friendly gray eyes, a ready smile, and raven-black hair.

Perry L. Walker, who occasionally fired for him, describes the late engineer as a "long, lean, lanky man, weighing about 190 pounds, who was so tall that he couldn't stand up in the engine cab without sticking his head outside, and then his head would protrude above the top of the cab, looking for all the world like that of a young giraffe."

Casey married Jane Brady in 1886. About that time his attention was drawn to the Latin-American freight traffic that the Illinois Central was hauling, especially bananas; and the ambitious young fireman made up his mind to work for that road some day. The scarcity of men as the result of a yellow-fever epidemic in the summer of 1887 gave Casey his chance—on March 1, 1888, he hired out to the IC. Two years later he was promoted to the right side of the cab, his first assignment as engineer being on a yard goat at Jackson. This was followed by a period of pulling a local mixed train, known colloquially as the "Irish Mail," between Jackson and Water Valley, Miss. A once-popular ballad, "Flight of the Irish Mail," eulogized this string of varnish.

In the 1890's engineers had locomotives assigned to them more or less permanently. Every man considered that he owned his iron horse, took a personal pride and interest in her condition, and had many of her fittings adjusted to his individual liking. There was no standard whistle on the Illinois Central then as there is now; the engineman put on a whistle of his own with a tone that suited him and then practiced a technique of blowing it that would be distinctive. This was called "quilling" and was a highly developed art. Many people who lived along the railroad could tell the engineer's name the moment his whistle was heard.

Casey soon "went on the air" with a long, plaintive wail that advertised to the world that "the man at the throttle was Casey Jones." This business of quilling was especially dear to the Negroes and seemed to induce in every colored boy within earshot a peculiar hero worship for the engineers, often expressed in ballad form. The untold number of primitive chants that were improvised and sung and forgotten would have made a rich addi-

tion to American folk music. Engineer Jones had a six-chime whistle, formed by six slender tubes banded together, the shortest being exactly half the length of the tallest. With its interpretive tone the ballest scorcher could make that quill say its prayers or scream like a banshee.

Even during his lifetime Casey built up a sort of legendary reputation for himself. Dispatchers regarded him as a "fast roller," a runner who could be depended upon to get his train over the road "on the card," to take advantage of every break they could give him at passing points. They knew he never dawdled at coal chutes, water cranes, or cinder-pit tracks or wasted time along the pike.

So much Casey Jones tradition is associated with the South that some readers will be surprised to learn that in the early 1890's he pulled fast freight between Chicago and Champaign, Ill.; and in 1893, for a short time during the World's Fair (Columbian Exposition), he shuttled passengers between Van Buren Street, Chicago, and the exposition grounds.

One day, while visiting the Transportation Building at the fair, he developed a liking for a new, ten-wheeled, freight engine, No. 638, which formed part of the Illinois Central exhibit. This locomotive, a Consolidation type, was larger than any hog used in the South at that time. Casey walked around her, studied the mechanism from every angle, climbed into her cab to get the feel of throttle and brake valve. He decided that he *must* run the 638 and, although he was still under thirty, managed to get permission to wheel her back home with him. On the last day of the fair, Casey strode over to the show engine and assumed charge. He spent several hours that day familiarizing himself with her. The next day, after she'd been fired up, he proudly opened the throttle and threaded his way through the maze of tracks in the Chicago yards, and over five divisions to Water Valley. The average run of a road engineer is over one division. It was Casey's greatest triumph, except, perhaps, when he took over the *Cannonball Express* about six years later.

Consolidation engines have enormous tenders, but the water

stops on Casey's division were far apart, and the water in his tank often would drop rather low if the engine were hauling a heavy train. Nearly all the engineers could be counted on to use up their water somewhere and be obliged to put the train away on a passing track and "run for water" to the next point. This practice caused annoying delays. But not so with Casey. That tall fellow could get more mileage out of a tankful of water, according to tradition, than anyone else on the road. Seldom did he cut off and run for water. According to Tony Hayes, one of his fellow engineers, "when Jones ran for water he took his train right with him."

In those days many runners considered it smart to keep roundhouse work on an engine down to a minimum—the fewer the defects they reported, the better standing they had at the roundhouse. Consequently, flues would be leaking and cylinder packing worn through, but if the locomotive could move at all she was taken out day after day and reported "in good condition." Naturally, fuel consumption would get out of proportion, and the pulling power of an engine would often be much less than was expected. Casey Jones did not follow this general custom, however. Casey turned in his engine for every slight defect, so that she was always kept in prime condition. And Casey's fuel-consumption record was among the best on the Illinois Central. He understood his "old girl" as a cowboy knows his horse; he knew just how much she could perform and how to treat her to get the best results.

During his ten years at the throttle, from 1890 till his death in 1900, Casey was never involved in a serious accident or in the death of a passenger or fellow worker, although he was disciplined nine times for various infractions of rules, with suspensions of from five to thirty days levied against him on such occasions. Some of these lapses, such as running through switches or leaving them open behind him or negligence in handling train orders, could have led to serious consequences. Casey was never the type known as a "rule-book engineer." On two occasions he was concerned in a minor way in smashups, for which he drew