

# Boy Made Tracks to School by Hopping (Over) a Train

IN THE 1940s, it was a 10-minute walk from my home in Portsmouth, Ohio to Portsmouth High School. But it took longer when there was a Norfolk & Western train rumbling along the tracks I had to cross.

My route was up an alley from the bakery where I worked 3 hours before school each morning, then over a low wire fence, across the tracks and four blocks of city streets to the school.

I had three ways to get across the tracks: wait until the train passed, get a few blocks east to an underpass or go over the train—my normal choice.

During World War II, the N&W had an expansive freight yard in Portsmouth where coal trains of up to 90 cars were put together. Coal was being carried from Virginia mines to industries in the North.

It wasn't unusual for the tracks to be occupied, and waiting for a 90-car train to pass was time wasted, as far as I was concerned.

My technique was to run alongside the slow-moving train, climb up the ladder of a coal hopper, crawl through the structure to the other side and hop off, hitting the deck running and hot-footing it to school.

If I hopped a flatcar, that was easier. Tank cars were no problem, since there was a rail I could hold on to.

Boxcars were the hardest. I'd hop on the ladder at one end, climb to the top of the car, walk to the other end and climb down the ladder at that end. Once at school, I excused myself from homeroom to wash the coal dust off my hands and arms.

I had plenty of practice hopping freight trains. My neighborhood buddies and I would grab a train as it came out of the freight yard, ride to the far end of town, hop off, cross the tracks and catch a train of empties headed back to where we started. Then we'd do it all over again.

My somewhat risky routine for getting to school on time—not a recommended method and likely illegal—didn't end until I acquired a girlfriend. My method of crossing would have been impractical for Betty Jane's dresses and skirts and downright unladylike for her.

And besides, now the walk was much more enjoyable.

—Paul B., Westerville, Ohio