

Backtrackin’

“Climb aboard” and recall the golden age of rail transportation.

Grandma Was a Railroad Lady

FROM THE AGE of 2, I was raised by my father’s parents, Harry and Naomi Sweikert, in Enola, Pennsylvania. My father was a railroad man, but my grandmother was a railroad lady, meaning she rode the trains almost as much as he did.

With her free pass and five sons to visit, she spent many hours—along with my cousin and me—in train stations and on trains.

We’d always be up before daylight with Grandma grabbing us by the arm, getting us off to the bathroom and ready to go. Grandma always took some sandwiches that we couldn’t wait to eat, with a little coffee that we got on the train in paper cups.

Once we lived within a block of the train station, but you had to detour about 2 miles around a housing complex to drive to it.

We didn’t have a car, so Grandma figured that we could walk across about eight tracks a lot faster and easier, and that’s what we did.

We made many train trips during the 1930s, and they were always memorable.

—Bill Sweikert, DeRidder, Louisiana

Door-to-Door Service

WHILE WE WERE VISITING a former neighbor, Jesse Pimienta, in Bakersfield, California, he showed us around the area of Oildale, a nearby community, where he and his 13 siblings were raised.

As we drove over some railroad tracks in an industrial complex, he pointed to a spot where their house had stood.

His father was a Southern Pacific railroad engineer who hauled tanker cars from the oil fields around Bakersfield to a refinery.

Come evening, Jesse's father would park his steam engine by their house after completing a day's work.

In the morning, he would go out early and fire up the boiler. When the engine was ready, he would blow the train's whistle, and all his children around Jesse's age would run out of the tiny house and climb into the locomotive cab.

Down the track they'd go and, after a few minutes, the engine would stop by the school and all the kids would scramble out.

Jesse would then take us to the Kern County Museum, where the old locomotive is now on display. He pointed to it with pride and said it was his own personal school bus.

—Richard Schaeffer, Santa Maria, California

Train Took Them to Healthier Climes

IN 1939, my brother and I contracted scarlet fever while living in Williamsville, New York, a suburb of Buffalo.

As was the practice at that time, our doctor recommended we go to a warmer climate to recover. My father drove my mother, brother and me to Chicago, where we took a Union Pacific train, the Challenger, to Los Angeles.

I was a few weeks shy of my fourth birthday and don't remember anything about the trip, but Mother kept one of the children's menus from the train's dining car.

We stayed in California for the winter, and my father drove out in the spring and took us home.

—Dan Ford, Peoria, Arizona