

HERBIE AND THE LOOSE ENGINE

By J. B. Leftwich

A long time ago when I was a teen living in the Buffalo Valley community in Putnam County, the Tennessee Central Railroad sent a loose engine down its track from Cookeville to our station each night.

There were no cars attached, just the engine and its tender. Actually, the loose engine did not reach our station and actually it may have originated at some station other than Cookeville. I don't remember and it doesn't matter because this is not history, it's just a story that adds to the flavor of the times.

The loose engine ran in the late evening hours, before midnight. Perhaps about 11:00 p. m. The hour doesn't matter, either, but an approximation is handy to give the reader a sense of what was happening at that period of the night.

Actually, nothing else of any consequence was happening on a regular basis late in the evening hours because most of us rural people were long before tucked in bed on our straw ticks or in our feather beds, depending on whether it was winter or summer time.

I never saw the loose engine, but some of my cohorts boasted they knew all about it. They told any new listener who happened into our midst about the freight train's struggle up the grade from Buffalo Valley to Silver Point.

The loose engine connected to the freight train, giving it more muscle to climb the grade. This train was said to be longest of any that made the trek eastward from Nashville to Harriman and on other rails to Knoxville.

Not everybody in the hills and hollows along the Tennessee Central route knew of the existence of the loose engine. Even when let in on this choice bit of railroad lore, some people scoffed at the information and remained doubting Thomases or Thomasinas.

Two of my cronies claimed they knew all about it. They rode it from Baxter to Buffalo Valley one night, they said.

Most of us accepted their claims with a degree of skepticism albeit we wanted to hear their dramatic story. Herbie, whose name was not Herbie at all, was the spokesman for the duo. Since he was older and more muscular than the rest of us, we willingly yielded the dialogue to him. Besides, he looked a lot like President Hoover from whom he derived his nickname and whose uncanny resemblance gave him status in our group, especially among the Republicans.

According to Herbie, he and his buddy missed the school bus from school in Baxter to Buffalo Valley and had no way of getting home except to walk the 12 miles along U. S. 70. They hit on an idea: walk along the tracks to a rural road crossing and there wait for the loose engine.

When they heard the engine approaching, according to their report, they doffed their shirts and vigorously waved them hoping to catch the eye of the engineer. At this point, the story becomes a bit vague, but the upshot was the engineer did see them, stopped the engine, and inquired about their shirt-waving frenzy.

You could tell when Herbie started embellishing his story. He told of the engineer's understanding their plight and graciously inviting them to ride in the cab to the Buffalo Valley station. Then Herbie laid on his zinger.

"The engineer was such a good guy, he let me blow the whistle at every crossing," Herbie boasted.

Keep in mind how awesome a steam locomotive was in those days. Most of us had never seen an airplane except as it flew overhead and appeared model airplane size. Many families had no automobile, and electricity for us was a few years into the future.

Herbie's adventure may have happened. I don't know. He never altered his story and never will since he now resides on another planet. He never proved his claims, but we chose to believe. In fact, some of the gang told the story to out-of-town cousins using first person, singular.

Of course, I never did that since I didn't want to exaggerate and since I had a high regard for the truth. It just wasn't my nature to embroider on the facts.

But once, trying to impress a pretty female, a distant cousin from up north, I told the story in first person, plural.

(J.B. Leftwich is a veteran journalist and a columnist for *The Lebanon Democrat*.

Email: leftwichjb@charter.net)

<http://www.ajlambert.com>