

LONELY TRAIN WHISTLE CALLED  
TO MENTAL ADVENTURES

Second Thoughts

By J. B. Leftwich, Guest Columnist

*Now the rain is falling, hear that train a-callin'. Whoeee. Hear that lonesome whistle, blowing 'cross the trestle. Whoeee. By Johnny Mercer*

In today's homes shut off from the outside world, air conditioned and flooded with the sounds of television. I often wonder how as a boy it was that I slept so well on summer nights in a room with none of the above.

To be honest, I don't miss the sweat trickling down my body during sticky nights in July. I miss the sounds. The whippoorwills, the bobwhites, the owls, the insects.

Most of all, I miss the whistle of the steam locomotives forever embedded in my memory. Not the anemic whistles seeping from the diesel engines although the diesels now try to duplicate the steam engine's whistle, even though they are a bit off-key.

No sound is more etched in my mind than the whistle of old Tennessee Central locomotives which sent out a call that was melodic, haunting and romantic.

And no sound was more distinctive than the whistle of the locomotive that rumbled through Buffalo Valley, my childhood home, each night at about 11:30. The Midnight Train, we called it, for obvious reasons.

It was a whistle that was more than a whistle. It was a call to adventure, to romance, to excitement, to lands beyond my realm.

I was on that train, a hobo headed beyond the confines of the Tennessee Central Railway, to the West. I was in Montana or western Texas, riding my horse into the sunset. I was the gunslinger who drew as a last resort and always shot the gun out of the hand of the other guy.

I was the cowboy who broke the wild horses, who road a black stallion that ran faster than any other horse in the West.

With that sound echoing in my thoughts, I drifted to sleep and to dreams that later were shattered when during a trip through the West, I saw how the cowboys actually lived. Then I concluded I had been much better off in the hill country of Middle Tennessee than I would have been in the bunkhouse or on the range branding steers.

Though I never lived those dreams, I vicariously experienced unrealistic but imaginary exploits, adventures denied the current video game generation of boys who will never hear the whistle of a steam locomotive or the call of a whippoorwill drifting through an open window on a hot summer night.

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Our tribe, four generations of us ranging from infants to advanced AARPs, was gathered at Fall Creek Falls State Park for our annual family vacation.

Lynn, our grandson-in-law with longest tenure, was hosting a cookout, in which he cooked camp stew over an open fire while eschewing the offers from others of his generation to assist.

I was the first to hear it, a whippoorwill nearby probably observing and mildly protesting our intrusion into his territory. I closed my eyes and listened, but no locomotives whistled and no cowboy rose from my psyche to ride into a western sunset.

In the real sunset in which I neither ride a black stallion nor pack a six-gun, the yen for adventure has faded. Along with the glamour of the old west and imagined derring-do, the capacity to imagine and to conjure up adventure has vanished like a receding fog.

Dreams are the province of the young – or once were the province of the young. One wonders if boys in the new century, overfed as they are with electronic entertainment, have the capacity or the will to amuse themselves with mental adventures.

One also wonders if Bill Gates or Michael Dell ever slept with his window open and if they ever heard the haunting whistle of a steam locomotive. And if either did hear the whistle, did he dream of wide-open spaces or were his dreams fixed on pixels and electronic memory capacity? And if Bill or Mike had been more romantic and less pragmatic, would Steve Jobs's Macs, offering a superior system as they do, now prevail?

But what if Steve Jobs had heard the lonesome whistle?

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It was wonderful, a time when you were often alone and challenged with the adventure of exploring your own mind for amusement. The circumstances were austere but rewards of mental adventure were gratifying.

Would I want to go back to that golden age? I was asked.

What, and leave my computer and remote controls?

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