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Folklore in Motion

Untiedt, Kenneth L.

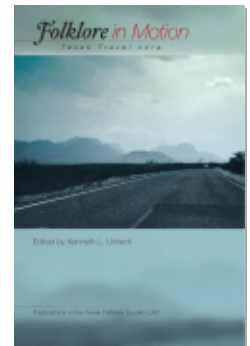
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SAFE IN THE ARMS OF TRAINMEN

by Jan Epton Seale



She was Lana Turner and I was Hedy Lamarr when the train went by. The rest of the time, we splashed about, with hopes of getting properly wet in her twelve-inch-deep concrete swimming pool, née watering trough. The pool was at the foot of her long sloping backyard, a kind distance from her mother's ears but not out of sight of a watchful eye from the kitchen window.

We were seven and eight years old, my friend Priscilla and I, both very white dishwater blondes growing up in that small North Texas town. Our suits were not Barbie bikinis, no spandex, no Day-Glo colors. They were one-piece, colored burnt orange or royal blue, held up by a tie around our necks sometimes defaulting to allow an innocuous nipple to ride over the rim of the décolletage.

But already we were trying out our skills as “glamour pussies.” When that first woof-woof came drifting down the tracks, we stopped what we were doing and prepared for the passage of the Katy some few yards away. We dipped our hair in the water and slicked it back, stood up and patted our soggy suits, clamored out of the water and perched, one on each of the back corners of the pool, like a couple of Acropolis porch maidens. Though we didn't know to suck in our bellies, the rest of us was ready—bony little feet angled, one knee provocatively bent, one hand on a hip, the other couching a head tossed back wantonly.

When the train finally made the California Street crossing, blasting full away at its stiff warning, and proceeded north, parallel to Lindsay Street, the click of the rails drowning out any other reality, we began to giggle like crazy.

For we were doing something forbidden. We held our poses for the engineer and his assistant, sitting high up with their blue caps and red neckerchiefs in the cab of the engine. Yes, we wanted their eyes to pry, to think us beautiful candidates for true love,

always, of course, just beyond reach. And sometimes we did indeed seduce them. Sometimes they would flirt back—or so we thought—with a couple of friendly riffs on the whistle as they charged on down the track.

Then came the challenge of the people in the passenger cars. Now our hand on the hip was assigned to wave, condescendingly, of course, like a pretty beauty queen, not giving over too much heart or heat.

After the heads in the windows blurred by, we'd hop from our posts, traverse the cackleburs to the edge of the track bed, and stand rapt, counting, always counting, as though our lives depended on the correct number. The rattling, dizzying cars holding "c" things—coal, cattle, cotton, chemicals, construction—sped past us. We screamed the count into the chaos, glad for momentary relief of inhibitions imposed on us as nice little girls.

Then we'd sense a slackening of the din and prepare ourselves for the cabooseman. Was he the lowest in the hierarchy? Did he have official duties? We never knew what his job was, except to stand holding the back railing, surveying the receding scene and waving to us.

With him, we ladies of innuendo, we scandalous vamps turned virtuous, our ruse was over. To be sure, we had had about all the excitement we could manage. So we stood, hoarse and shivering now, a little pigeon-toed and pot-bellied, waving our sweet little hands to this uncle of a fellow, this last chance at daring contact with men.

About that same time in my life, there were two other safe men at the scene of a train. On the shoulders of my father, in the summer of 1948, I see the only president I have ever seen, before or since, in person. Harry S. Truman is on his famous whistlestop tour, barnstorming the country, standing where the cabooseman usually stands. This time it's called "the rear platform" and it's flag-draped.

Leaning forward, I yell into my father's ear, "He waved at me." My hands grip the crown of his head, my starting-to-be-long legs yoke his Old Spice neck.

“That’s nice,” he murmurs upward, “but pipe down.”

“No, you don’t understand,” I say urgently, this time cupping his chin in my hand in a play for full attention. “He looked at *me, me!*”

“Oh, all right,” my gentle father says quietly. “Yes, I think I saw him do that.”

And I wiggle a little, satisfied. For what more could a train ask, than to bring a girl’s father and her president into perfect narcissistic alignment for her?

Another time, just before I drift off. My mother and I are going somewhere on a Pullman. The porter, tall and pure black, with pink palms that my blue eyes cannot quit staring at, has boosted me into an upper berth. Strange, he’s done it so aseptically that it’s as though he’s not even touched me. Still, I lie there honored, flattered, feeling delicate and rich. Then he’s said, “Goodnight, little lady,” and drawn the curtains, taking my brown oxfords off somewhere to be shined like a princess’s before morning.

The scene is a far cry from my maternal grandmother, Dora Pearl Bell, riding the train from Tupelo, Mississippi, to Clarksville, Texas, in 1895, as a seven-year-old. The family had had a hard winter, with nothing to eat but sowbelly and beans, and her father determined to give it a go in Texas. The womenfolk and children were in the passenger car, up front, while the men and boys were two cars back, with the cattle and household goods. If they kept the windows closed, the air was suffocating with body odors and tobacco, as well as stifling hot in the southern humidity. With the windows open, the wood-burning engine belched ashes and cinder on them.

I do not think my grandmother had any train flirtations. I hope she had safe men on her train.

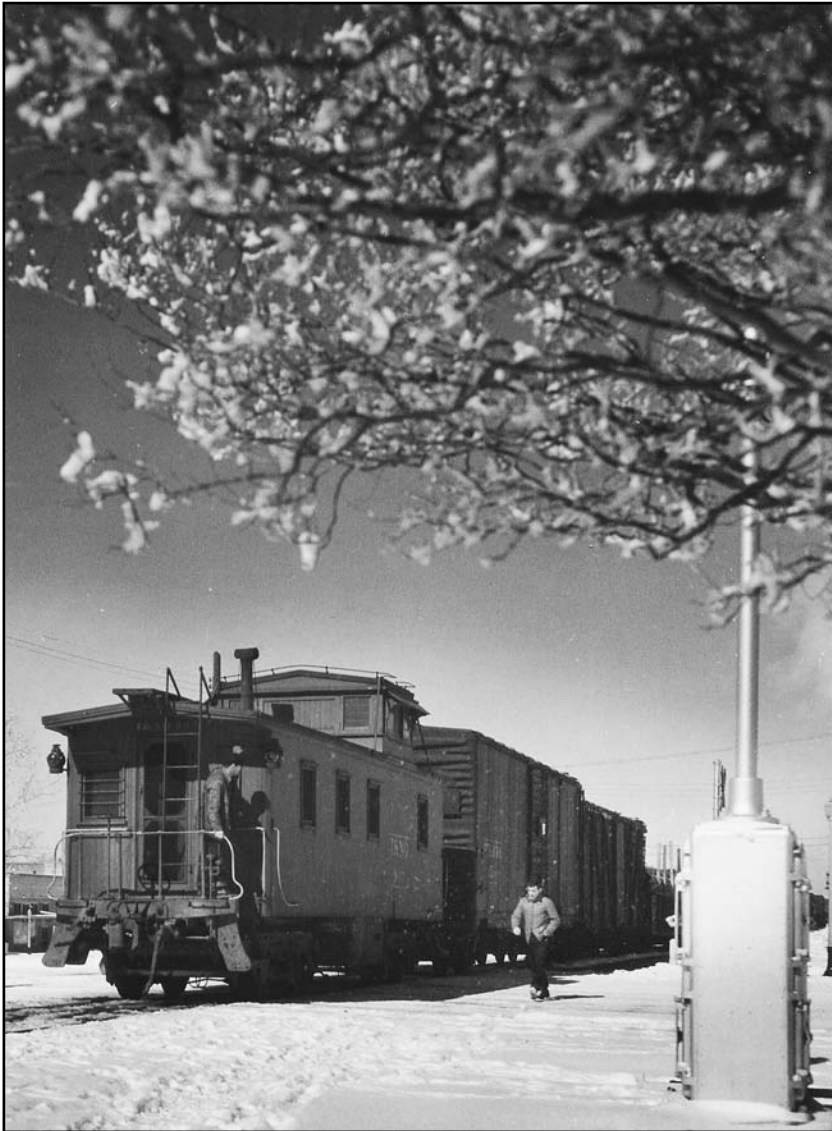
By the time I knew of trains, I knew of the dangers of men. So why do the trainmen, all of them, chug in and out of my memory as such wholesome personages? For one thing, they were public figures, to be trusted like policemen and postmen. They wore uniforms; they had hats. And they were kind to us kiddies, parasites forever waving alongside their tracks. They thrilled us with their

whistles, and most of the time they bothered to raise their big worn hands to return our greetings. We could prance, preen, flirt, try all our instinctual wiles on them, and there was no chance they would stop the engines and come down to “get us,” whatever that might mean.

And they had power. They operated those screaming, blasting behemoths up and down the land, dragging miles of cars, in a display of muscle that was so far from the domain of girl dreams that it seemed, at the least, the job of Assistant God.

And what of the other men in my life, hubbed around the memory of trains? The gentlemanly black porter, with more elegance than salary; my father, allowing his daughter up on his shoulders after a long wait on the brick-inlaid depot yard, to afford her a glimpse of a president he roundly disliked—the same Harry S. Truman on his presidential tour who waved at *me*, just an ordinary American girl. Gosh!

They were all, all of them, honorable trainmen.



The mysterious caboose man. *Photo by J. F. Curry, from the Dane Williams Collection*

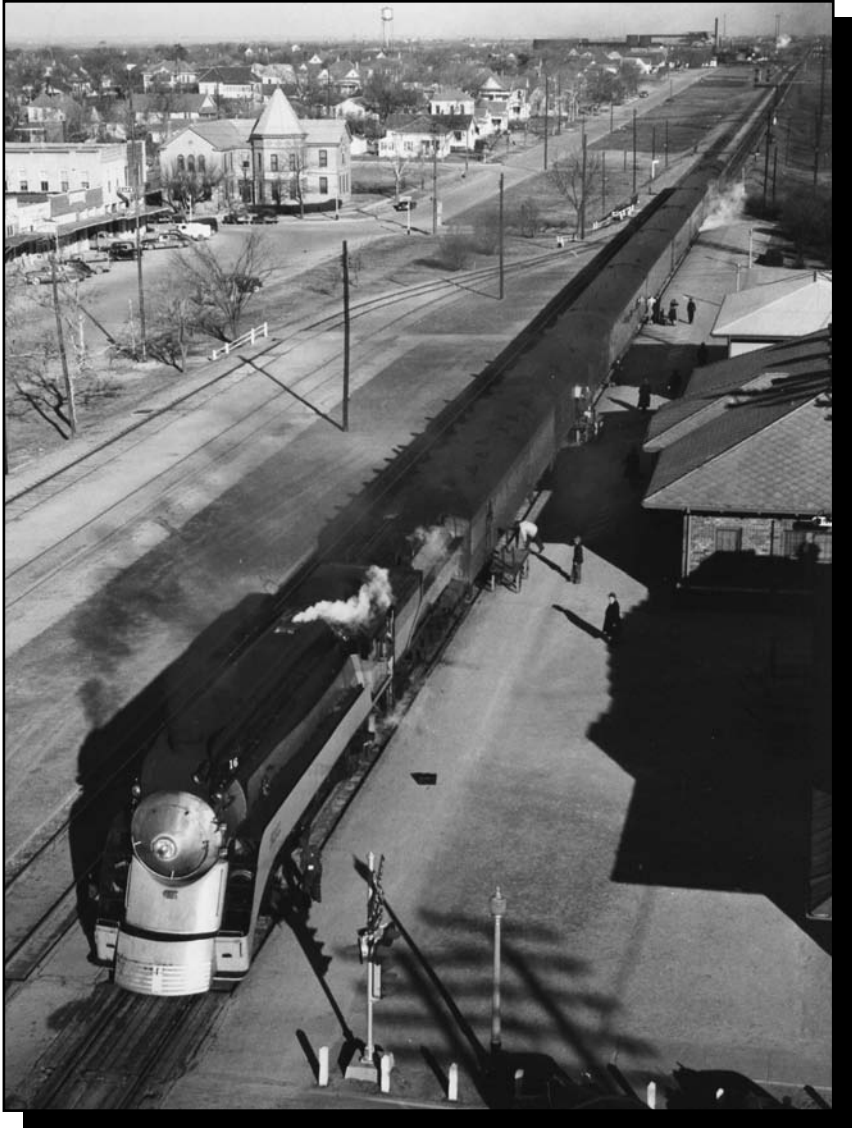


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