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Comment

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Comment by the Editor

YOUTHFUL RAILROADING

"When I was a boy in a village in eastern Iowa," writes Mr. Hoeltje retrospectively, "one of my greatest pleasures in the summer vacation was to play along a creek that ran near the railroad east of town. There I used to sit and wait for the afternoon flier. It came around a bend near some tall poplar trees; then it went straight ahead into town, not stopping, of course, but disappearing finally at another bend. It was a grand sight. When it had gone, I still saw it in my mind's eye. . . . I can see it there now."

When I was a country boy in northwest Iowa, I could hear the whistle of the locomotive of the east-bound passenger train five miles away on clear crisp autumn mornings. And I wished ever so much to be seated in one of the orange-colored coaches, going to visit my grandfather where another railroad ran right through the pasture back of his house.

Sometimes, when we were in town on Saturday, I had the rare good fortune of being at the depot or the grain elevator when a train came thundering by. Once the engine stopped with a tremendous sigh only a rod or two from where I stood. It must have been running

fast because it panted all the time it stood there. Such a mighty creature, I thought, ought to have a name as glorious as any of the "Giants of the Republic", for it was quite as much a leader. Certainly a number, even with three figures, was inadequate.

Yes, I would be an engineer when I grew up.

The new railroad from Gowrie to Sibley ran not more than two miles from our farm. One memorable Sunday afternoon we went to see the construction train in operation. It seemed incredible that the railroad had to be built so fast that men must work on the Sabbath. Such labor was justifiable only when the dead-ripe oats were beginning to lodge.

But the ethical question was suddenly dissipated by the sight of the train. The engine was in the middle! Flat cars in front were loaded with rails while behind were car loads of ties and other material. Along each side of the train were troughs with some kind of endless chain in the bottom that conveyed the ties and rails forward. Directly in front of the first car men worked frantically — four men to a tie, eight to a rail, four spiking the rails to the ties, and, down on their knees almost under the wheels, two others hurried to bolt the rails together. But always the engine whistled before they had finished, and the train moved forward, ponderously, inexorably. That is the way of progress.

To me the most attractive feature of our new home in town was the proximity of the railroad, only a block

away. There were only two trains a day, but that was enough to flatten all the pennies we could get. Eventually came the news that a rich man had bought our grass-grown Mason City and Fort Dodge road and was going to make it a part of the Great Western. Boyish resentment changed to pride when bigger and better trains began to come through. Some of the freights were pulled by locomotives with three drive wheels on each side. Hog engines we called them. For years I watched for one with eight drivers. But there was some consolation in the thought that the North Western used none larger.

One foggy night a Great Western freight crashed through the middle of a North Western stock train. Many hogs were killed and some ran away. The Great Western engine lay on its back at the bottom of the embankment, a crushed and useless mass of iron.

Perhaps I would not be an engineer after all.

J. E. B.