An Era Was Past

STUART PALMER

There sat the old station, all boarded up, and looking very much like a thing of the past. It had changed a lot in five years. It had changed from a place of activity, of hasty farewells and hearty receptions, to a dingy old building that nobody noticed now. Someday soon someone would come along and tear it down for the wood in it, and thus would end one of the most significant and colorful epics that the little town of Richfield Springs had ever witnessed.

Slowly I walked up the old brick path that led to the ancient structure, and after a minute's hesitation, I sat down on the old bench that was rusting away on the weed-choked platform in front of the station. I recalled the days past when there had been two shining rails in place of the tall weeds before me, rails that had stretched as far as the eye could see. Beyond that lay the land of adventure and enchantment, the greener pastures that people were always looking for. Many were the times I had watched a train run down that track, growing smaller and smaller until it finally disappeared on the horizon, leaving only a puff of smoke. It had been a simple thing, and yet I had never tired of seeing it.

And then there was good old Joe Smith, the ticket agent at Richfield Springs. As a young lad I had come here often to see Joe, because Joe liked little boys and he always had something to tell them about the railroad. I'd stop in on my way home from school, and there Joe would be at his desk adding up a long column of figures, or else maybe he'd be in the waiting-room sweeping out the dirt, and all the time the telegraph set would keep up its incessant clatter. I marveled that Joe ever understood what it was saying.

In the winter time Joe kept a hot fire in the big pot-bellied stove, and the bottom of it would become so hot that it glowed with a bright reddish cast. It was a cheerful station, then.

At five-thirty, the last train of the day would come up from the big city, forty miles to the south, bringing with it the evening mail and a handful of passengers. Joe and I would go outside and watch for the headlight; and if the evening was still we could hear the train whistle far down the valley, high and shrill as it pierced the cool evening air. Soon a white speck which grew larger with amazing speed would appear down the track, until we were aware of an ominous roar as the monstrous locomotive bore down upon us. The brakes went on with a hiss, the train ground to a stop, and out flew the mail bags. The passengers hurried down the steps; and all the time the locomotive was panting and puffing, impatient to roll its big wheels onward. The conductor swung his lantern in a half-circle; ran up the steps; slammed the door shut; and the train was off, disappearing just as fast as it had come on into the night as far as the rails stretched and as fast as the wheels would turn.

As for Joe — Joe would bank the fire, lock the station door, swing the mail bags over his shoulder, and walk with me as far as the cross-roads, where I would turn to the right for home, and Joe would go straight ahead on to the post office. Joe and I were good pals, we were.

I remember the day when Joe finished his work early and sat down and told me the story of how this railroad had come to be and how it had been the best railroad that anyone knew how to build, with new
brightly painted wooden coaches, and a small locomotive that shone like a new silver dollar with all its brass trim and its big oil headlight. Richfield Springs was just a country store and three or four houses then, and everyone of its dozen or so population turned out to see the first train come puffing up the valley, loaded to capacity with big officials and rejoicing passengers. It was a great day; the railroad had come to town!

And with it came lots of new people: lawyers, bankers, doctors, workmen; new citizens to swell the growing population. Richfield Springs changed from a hamlet of two dozen inhabitants to a thriving town of two thousand; and now there were several stores, and even the carnival came to Richfield Springs every fall.

What was the main factor in this sudden growth? The railroad, of course. It was the life blood of the community. It brought to the citizens their food, their clothing, their mail, their visitors, and even their Sears & Roebuck mail orders.

But the railroad had done more than that; it had saved their lives once. It was during the winter of 1896, around the middle of January, when the worst blizzard in years struck that part of the country. After two days of howling winds and blinding snows, all lines of communication with the outside world were cut off. It was nature gone off on a furious rampage, and the people were awed by its unearthly violence. Three days of snow and wind resulted in drifts that touched the roofs of many houses, and the people of Richfield Springs dropped their work to do what they could to fight the ravages of storm.

The snow ceased falling on the fifth day, but the howling wind gave no hint of letting up its biting fury. The food supply had grown dangerously low, and the town was still tightly snow-bound.

On the night of the sixth day, during a moment when the wind had abated slightly, there came through the air the far-distant, shrill sound of a locomotive whistle. Soon everyone in the town was outside, listening, praying, and silently rejoicing. Twelve of the sturdiest men started out down the railroad track, following it only by the telegraph poles that extended above the snow. The rest of the people went to bed that night with hope in their hearts.

For four hours the men trudged southward. Weary and half frozen, they reached the steaming locomotive and its band of hard working men. Just behind the locomotive and plow was a supply train, stocked with food and clothing. The railroad knew that it would be the first to get through. All night long the plow inched its way up the valley. The engine would back up and then rush forward at its top speed, plowing into the drift with an action that was thrilling to watch. Again and again the locomotive pitted its strength against the great mass of white that loomed before it, fighting through one drift only to encounter another a little farther on. Once the plow hit a rock and was derailed. The men strained their already aching muscles in getting the wheels back on the track. And occasionally, through the night, the people of Richfield Springs could hear the whistle, each time it was a little closer.

At ten o'clock on the morning of the seventh day, the snow plow and supply train reached the little station at Richfield Springs. Food was handed out to everybody. Dreary men went home to bed. The battle was fought and won.

Joe took great delight in relating this incident and several others to me. He loved the railroad more than anything else in his life. He was part of the railroad, and the railroad was a part of him. He was a faithful servant to both the community and the railroad.

And then, after I had moved away, the
Woods in Winter by John Bundy

John Herron Art Museum
trains stopped running up the valley, and
Joe had to close up his station. Joe was
old, so he retired and moved away, and
nobody seems to know where he went.
What was it that caused this once import-
ant, once busy, once beautiful railroad line
to fade away into nothing? It was the de-
pression. Railroads were one of the indus-
tries hardest hit by the depression, and
business dropped to the extent that it did
not pay to operate many of the branch lines.
Thus they were abandoned; and thus it was
with the railroad that ran up the valley
from the big city.
As I got up from the rusty bench and
walked slowly away, I was saddened by the
thought that never again could I watch the
five-thirty express come thundering down
those ribbons of steel, or hear the lowly
freight wail mournfully in the dark night, or
see the glad faces of people home from a
long journey. An era was past; the rail-
road was no more.

Shortages And Priorities
GEORGE ZAINEY

The day is soon to come when the
shortage of men will become so acute that
our feminine sex is going to have to have a
priority rating to get a date. This of
course will be a great blow to our beauti-
ful, energetic, and studious co-eds when
they will have to tear a little coupon from
their book, push it in the face of a “soon
to be rare” man, and yell with anxiety and
a gleam in their eyes, “You’re mine tonight
—oh boy!” It will be an equally tragic
situation if the precious men should choose
to ration their time and do their utmost to
spend at least an hour or so an evening
and thus thrill perhaps two or three in one
evening. This may provide a solution.
It will certainly be hard to get a
priority for a man to go dancing. If a large
enough male attendance could be achieved,
the situation could be coped with by again
issuing ration books entitling the bearer to
cut in and dance with her companion. In
this way, the women would get to enjoy
the company of the men to a greater extent.
To receive a priority rating, you must
be between the ages of sixteen and twenty-
eight; blonds, brunettes, or red heads will
be acceptable; you must be of average
height and weight, and, most of all, appeal-
ing. Those who do not possess the above
qualifications will be advised to join the
WAVES or the WAACS where our precious
men are not such a great influence. Mar-
rried or single, it makes no difference; if
you are ruled eligible by the priority board,
which of course will be composed of men
with sound minds and good eyes, and if
you pass their “rigid” examination, you
will be one of those who will receive a
priority on men. It must be understooed
that if you have to wait for a while, be
patient and wait your turn, and if im-
patience overcomes you, just blame it on
the war.