

THE LAST TIME WE LOOKED FOR TRAINS

Last week I heard the early morning wail of a train. Though trains are commonplace in our city, fleeting years and evolving circumstances have diminished their importance to me, and I seldom notice them anymore.

Our son was 19 months old when we moved here, and for a brief but pleasant span of years trains played a significant role in our family life.

Living no more than a half-mile from the tracks, we heard trains throughout both day and night. But the great thrill lay in getting close enough to the locomotives lumbering through town to embrace their mystique.

Our nightly route to the Conway Human Development Center traversed the Union Pacific tracks. And with each crossing we endeavored to decipher the signal light a quarter-mile distant while straining our ears for the faint sound of an approaching train.

With its clanging bells and flashing lights, the crossing signals at Tyler and Donaghey held special attraction. Their audio-visual fireworks would begin just before the long, striped arms lowered to halt oncoming traffic. That process, of course, instigated synchronized sounds and movements from a little boy mimicking all that he was seeing. "Ding-ding-ding-ding-ding!" rang the shouts as he slowly lowered his own stiffened arms from vertical to horizontal.

Then as the train itself rumbled by, other sound effects competed with the blaring horn. "Choo-choo-choo-choo! W-o-o-o-o-o! W-o-o-o-o-o!" All the steam trains in his picture books made those kinds of noises.

If no train were near the crossing, a three-way chorus of "Let's go find a train" would send us hunting. Moving stealthily westward where Tyler parallels the track, we would roll down the windows, the better to hear. Muscles tensed, an instant turn north into one of the neighborhoods bordering the railway berm would place us in view of one of the giant iron beasts should one materialize. The lack of signal arms never seemed to alter the clamor emanating from the car.

Trains wormed their way into bedtime stories, too. Great and memorable train sightings, complete with sound effects, lived on night by night.

Sadly, last times have a way of slowly slipping out of our lives. I can remember the last time we looked from trains no better than the last time we lay in bed reading--again--the tattered Picture Bible, the last walk with old Smiley, the last gallop on the mechanical horse at the old Safeway store.

On the other hand, I well remember the last time I saw our daughter; I just didn't realize it would be the last time.

There's truth in this proverb: "Know well the condition of your flocks, and pay attention to your herds. For riches are not forever, nor does a crown endure to all generations." And the spontaneous moments when childhood adventures thrust themselves upon adults quickly fade as well.

The morning whistle instantly thumbed my memory to pages bookmarked by trains. But the wail slowly faded into the distance, irretrievable, much like the last two decades they poignantly signify.