

A Backward Look

Commuting By Rail

In spite of the order of the Public Service Commission permitting the Pennsylvania Railroad to discontinue the Parkton Local, embattled commuters are still hoping something may yet be done to stay the hand of the destroyer. But should their plans fail and the Local go the way of all flesh it can then be said that the end came after a long and lingering illness. The first symptoms of the fatal disease, barely perceptible at the outset, appeared with the pioneer automobiles around the turn of the century.

Up until then Baltimore county civilization had been predicated upon the unchallenged supremacy of the steam railroad and the horse. Countians of modest means established themselves in settlements within walking distance of a railroad station. The more well to do went farther afield. For transportation between station and home they relied on the original station wagon, a horsedrawn vehicle with oblong seats facing each other and providing space for parents, children and friends come to spend the night.

The two arteries to the north and northwest that supplied the lifeblood were the main line of the Northern Central leading to York and Harrisburg, and the Green Spring Valley Branch, which took off to the west at the south end of Lake Roland. This important junction was dignified by Hollins Station, a distant early warning center equipped with the most effective electronics of the period to notify the train dispatcher of approaching trains on either branch, and give him time to decide the delicate matter of precedence and thereby prevent collisions. Of this complicated system the Parkton Local was destined to become the vestigial remainder. With the lake at its back and lofty heights on both sides Hollins Station was as isolated as a lighthouse, which by nature it greatly resembled. It served only a family or two of sturdy Alpine stock capable of getting up and down surrounding hills.

In this respect Hollins differed from other stations on the lines above and below, each of which was the throbbing center of a closely knit community. It was at the station that tickets were bought and trunks were checked. Here were deposited interesting foreign express such as crates of oranges from Florida, and miscellaneous goods imported from the city in the baggage car, including bundles amassed on shopping trips and choice cuts of meat and fish kept chill in tubs with cakes of ice.

Here were received and dispatched telegrams, commonly reserved for the announcement of serious illness or death. Here newspapers were dispensed and here commuters assembled in the morning to wait for the train to town, to gossip and, in cold weather, compare thermometer readings. The last man to report invariably boasted the lowest temperature. The station was kept at fever heat by a furnace in the cellar which blew hot air into a circulator radiator with a marble top that stood in the center of the room. The radiator, representing the highest esthetic achievement of Victorian art, was designed and made in Baltimore—a matter of great local pride.

Presiding over these complicated

activities was the station master, a god-like figure who took precedence even over the parson, the family doctor and the local lawyer. A man of great patience and infinite wisdom he disciplined the young, conveyed messages, acted as travel bureau for vacations, and solved every manner of domestic problem.

In this golden age there were trains to suit every convenience. Then, as up until the immediate present, three trains took the men to town in the morning and brought them home in the afternoon. The morning trains arrived in the city approximately at 7.30 A.M., 8.30 A.M. and 10 A.M., according to popular parlance serving respectively "the workers the clerks and the shirkers." Trains later in the day catered to the womenfolk.

There was a theater train in the evening that landed passengers in town in time for the first curtain, and a train to take them home after the show. The countians used to hang on the edge of their seats hoping to grasp the end of the plot before rushing for Calvert Station. The same train sometimes took them to receptions and dances. One indefatigable lady of fashion, finding the roads clogged with snow on the night of a great ball, is said to have got on a sled and coasted down the hill to her station.

On Sunday there was the church train to town. It returned shortly after noon, its baggage car bulging with freezers of ice cream for Sunday dessert. There was, too, a mysterious train that started the day by leaving town at 4 A.M. It was referred to as "the milk train" on the theory that it picked up milk in the cow country north of Cockeysville and transported it to York and Harrisburg (also cow country, incidentally).

Commuters had and still have their special measures of skill. A favorite one is to see how closely one could time his arrival at the station with that of the train. Breaking into a trot leads to disqualification.

The veteran commuter has always scorned the parvenu and the casual who turns up only in snowstorms or when his car is being repaired and takes whatever seat is vacant with not so much as a by-your-leave to its accustomed occupant. He sensed long ago that these boorish people with their fair weather automobiles were undermining a grand institution. It served them right when, in their ignorance, they tried to raise a car window.

No comment on the Parkton Local could be complete without a salute to the train crews, nature's noblemen, who knew their passengers and catered to their whims down to the recovery and return of the last forgotten umbrella. If the end comes may they find new runs worthy of them.

As automobiles grew in number and the passenger load declined the schedule was thinned down until it was a mere skeleton of its former self. And now the point is reached where it looks as though "the Parkton Local" is going the way of the Indians, and the buffalo. For the commuter who has shared its joys and sorrows life without it would never be the same. F.F.B.