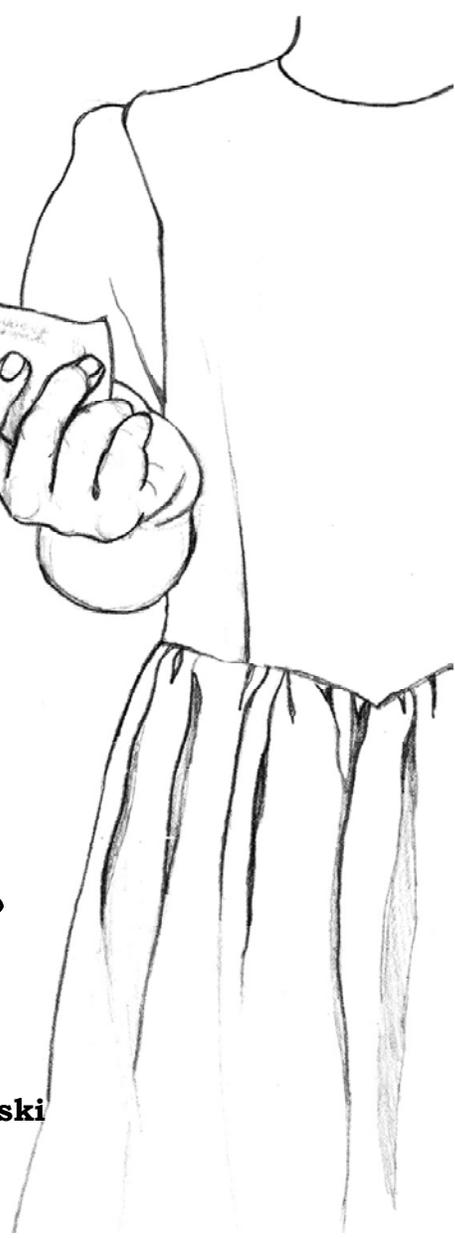


The Other Side

of the Tracks

The story of a 12 year-old
girl living in the old West who
visits the grand East

written by **Alissa Torzewski**

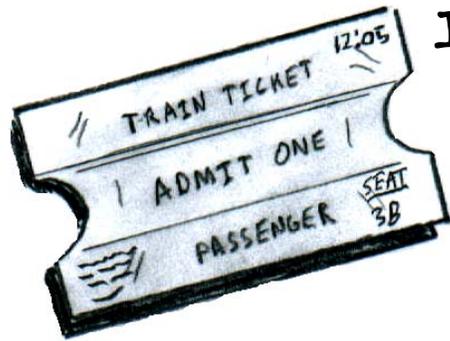


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Greenville, SC

I was excited about the trip -



I'd never been
on a train
before!

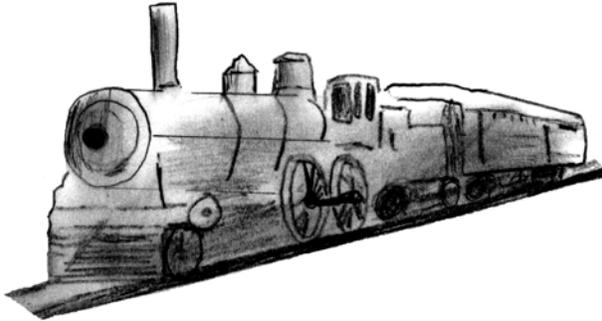
6 - The Train Trip

The train was crowded. I figured it would be, judging from the amount of people at the station. After the luggage car was loaded and everyone boarded, it took a long time to get settled due to people bustling around with bags and new passengers trying to see and take in every little feature on the train (myself included.)

Momma patted my seat. "Come and sit down, Sarah love."

"You know, we're going to be on this train for a week. You'll have plenty of time to explore," Pop added.

When the whistle blew, I felt the train
jolt forward.



I was still in shock. I was overflowing with so much excitement, I nearly screamed. I could tell that my mother was also excited, but she contained it much better than I did. I couldn't believe my parents had actually decided to take me to Philadelphia for the Centennial Exhibition. Never in my wildest dreams would I have thought I would really get to attend.

The train car was narrow with wood paneling and burgundy, carpet-like upholstery on the seats. I noticed that some cars had rows of two seats that faced forward on either side of the aisle, but ours was a little different. We had sections of two seats that faced each other. Momma and Pop were able to sit directly across from me, and I had an open seat to my right.

The train whistle blew, and we were off. Within a day or so, we passed a big lake called the Great Salt

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Lake. We stopped at a station in Salt Lake City to switch trains.

Pop took a deep breath when we stepped off of the train and said, "Salt Lake City...it's been years."

"You've been here before?" I asked.

"I sure have. Your mother and I actually lived here for a short while before we moved on to Nevada."

We gathered our luggage and sat in the depot for a little while, waiting to board the next train. The station wasn't very crowded, but maybe it was just a slow time of day. We sat on a bench against the wall with our luggage at our feet.

"How long did you live here?" I asked.

"About six months I'd say." Pop said, looking over at Momma for verification. She nodded. He looked through the window behind us. "I never thought it would get so big."

I looked out of a window in the station and saw various buildings and houses. The train station was set on a large dirt road, lined with buildings and shops. I could see the tops of buildings lining other streets in the distance.

Salt Lake City was certainly larger than Carson City. "This town is the 'Crossroads of the West,'" Pop explained as I took in the view. He then told me all about how companies are using the new railroads to ship their goods further and faster.

"Salt Lake City is right in the middle of it, at least out here in the West," Pop said. "The railroad has turned this small town into a booming metropolis."



The Mormons settled

Salt Lake City
first.

More people came
later after a big
gold rush.

"Do you know anyone who still lives here?" I asked, looking at both of my parents.

"Not sure," Pop replied. "I bet there are some folks still around after fifteen years. We did have some good friends in this city, mostly Mormons."

"Mormons?" I asked, almost as a quick reaction rather than an actual question. How in the world did Mormons find their way all of they way out here?

"That's right," Pop said, smiling. "Salt Lake City was founded by Mormons years before we arrived. The Mormons came first. Then, after the gold rush, more people came."

"Oh yes..." Momma said, remembering. "Remember Buck and Liesel?"

Pop nodded and told me, "We had two good friends, Buck and Liesel, who moved to Salt Lake City

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shortly before we left. They came to Salt Lake City from the East because they heard there was gold in the Rocky Mountains." Pop smiled and looked at the ceiling. "I haven't thought about them in years."

"Did they ever find the gold?" I asked.

"No. No gold. From what I hear, they were able to stumble upon a large deposit of silver at the base of the Rockies. But that was after we had already moved to Carson City."

Just then we heard a man outside shout, "All aboard!" We took our luggage and boarded the train.

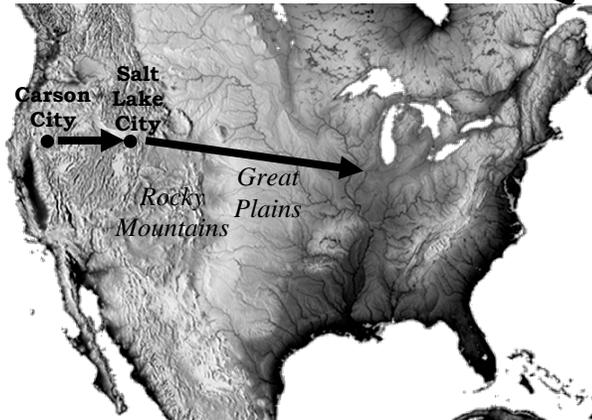
That same day, we reached the Rocky Mountains. I was amazed that anyone could ever build a railroad on that terrain. The mountains were big, and the train tracks had to curve and wind around them. Sometimes the train went right through them! I was confused when everything went pitch black in the middle of the day, and was relieved when I found out that we just went through a tunnel carved out of the mountain.

On the fourth day, I looked out of the train window and noticed that the land was completely flat. It occurred to me that the rolling feeling of going through the mountains had been gone for at least a day. I looked out the window to see a lot of grass and bushes and open sky.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"I believe we are going through the Great Plains in the center of the country," Pop said, looking out of

The geography changed as we traveled across the country.



the window with me. "The Great American Desert," he said to himself.

"Great American Desert? But it's not a desert."

"You are very right, little bird. It was given the name a long time ago by explorers, who *thought* it was a big desert."

I stared at the plains, thinking about the mountains I had seen just a few days ago. "I had no idea the land was so different all over America."

"Oh, it's *very* different. Your mother and I traveled across all sorts of terrain on our way out West." Pop took off his glasses to inspect the cleanliness of the lenses.

"What was it like?"

"The trail?" he asked. I nodded. He looked at Momma and back at me. "Tough. We traveled with a

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group of people – several other families and a guide. With us was a man named Harold. He and I went way back. He had a wife Catherine and three children...”

“Little Tom, Marynell, and Margaret. Cute as buttons, those kids,” Momma added.

Pop continued, “About half way through the Plains, Catherine became sick. Terribly sick. She passed away about a week later.”

“How sad,” I said.

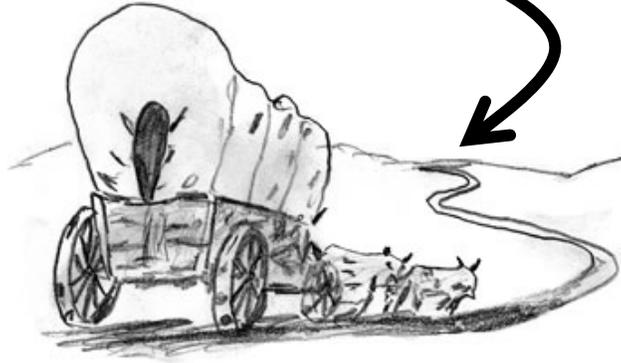
“Harold was torn up about his wife’s death, and became horribly depressed. Poor guy. It was hard for him to keep focused. And when you’re traveling through that rough terrain, you *have* to keep focused.”

Pop stopped a moment, and I could tell that a lot of memories were coming back to him. He continued, “After that, it seemed like everything that could go wrong went wrong. Harold’s wagon tipped when we crossed the Colorado river, and he lost half his food supply. Luckily, your mother and I had enough to share. I think a few days after that, one of his daughters fell and broke her arm.”

“Why would anyone ever want to take such a dangerous trip?” I asked. To me, it sounded worse than working in the mines!

“That is a great question. There was plenty of danger, indeed. If it wasn’t illness, then it was torrential rains or wild animals. But, many believed – and I think they’re right – that the West is the future of this country. It’s full of wide-open land, bursting with

Momma and Pop came out West on the
Oregon Trail.



opportunity." Pop looked over at Momma and smiled. She was quietly napping with her head tilted back.

"You didn't need to go west to be a telegrapher, though," I pointed out.

"You're right. I didn't go west to be a telegrapher. Your mother and I headed west because of the Comstock Lode in Virginia City." Pop took off his glasses and wiped them with his handkerchief that Momma embroidered for him years ago.

"Really?" I turned towards Pop, in awe with interest. I had never heard this story before.

He nodded. "I tried my hand at the mine for a while, at least until you were born. Made a good bit of profit - can't complain about that. But I gave up on the pursuit of gold and silver, because I realized something."

"What?"

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“I didn’t come west for the mines or the money. I came West for something much more valuable than that. You have the freedom to choose your own path out here. Sure, I could’ve been a telegraph clerk in a city in the East. But I was able to use that skill to make a life for myself in the West. That means a lot to me.”

Pop and I stared at the landscape in silence as the sun slipped below the horizon.

I woke on the fifth day to voices and commotion. I noticed the train had stopped. Everyone was crowded along one side of the train car. Apparently, a herd of buffalo was loitering nearby. That can be dangerous because they can tear up train tracks if they stampede. We had to wait until a rifleman could shoot them all down.

The train started moving again, and all of the passengers looked out of the windows at the passing landscape, littered with buffalo carcasses. I had a feeling that, of everything I had seen on this trip, that might be the one that sticks with me the longest.

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