

HAWARDEN.....HOW IT ALL BEGAN

The Forgotten Culture of the Railroad

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Chapter 14

So, what did it mean to be a “railroad town”? From the sound of train whistles, the sight of steam engines, to the glowing evening campfires of the hobos, much of what it takes to answer that question has faded away. However, Hawarden was built on the framework of that disappearing culture.

Round houses – another word from the past. Familiar in the early 1900’s and rarely spoken of in the 21st century, at least not in reference to railroads. The round house at Hawarden had the distinction of being one of the oldest and largest in Iowa, making it a historic treasure of the past, and possibly the single largest reason for Hawarden’s existence.

The round house in Hawarden was one of the main hubs for major railroad repair work in this area. Rail cars, passenger cars and engines were hauled here on a daily basis for maintenance and repairs. The cement foundation of the round house can still be found south of the present railroad tracks east of Highway 12.

With the number of trains passing through Hawarden each day, railroad accidents were frequent and often had devastating results.

The Hawarden Centennial Book tells of an accident in 1903 at Six Mile Creek, which runs east of Hawarden. Due to a washout of the tracks, the engine of a passenger train headed east fell into the swollen creek. Fireman Thomas Fisher was thrown from the engine and disappeared from sight in the swirling muddy waters. Miraculously, he was able to save himself. The injured engineer and fortunate fireman were put safely in the last passenger car to rest until help arrived. A SOS was sent to Hawarden and a rescue train was immediately dispatched. The ending of the story tells that the engineer of the rescue train got up such a “head of steam,” that when he reached the stranded train, he was unable to stop. The rescue train then crashed into the stalled passenger cars, injuring many of the passengers, and killing the fireman who had just escaped from drowning.

Trains often had to share their tracks with animals both domestic and wild. In October 1907, an unfortunate mishap occurred when a cow decided to take a stroll down the Milwaukee tracks north of Hawarden. Unfortunately, a Milwaukee train was also claiming right of way on the tracks, and the resulting collision was deadly for the cow as well as to a young man from Nebraska, who unknown to the railroad employees was “bumming” a ride on the train.

“Bumming” a ride on the train brings up another colorful aspect of the romance of the railroads. A new, sometimes unwelcome visitor to town called the hobo.

Hobos started riding trains as early as the Civil War, and continued into the 1940’s. They were said to be America’s first migrant workers. Wherever the trains would go, and there was work available, these men (and sometimes women and children) would wait for their opportunity to hop on a freight train and illegally ride from one destination to another.

The life of a hobo in the early days was dangerous. The railroads hired men called “bulls” to keep the hobos off the trains, often beating them when they were caught. The romanticized image of the hobo peaked during the 1930’s. Because of the depression, there was a period of tolerance towards the hobo. Some railroads would attach an empty box car to the freight trains to accommodate the large number of hobos and to keep them from entering the sealed cars.

As the hobo culture grew, they created a lifestyle of their own. They designated symbols to inform each other where they were welcome and where they were not. They used lumps of coal found along the tracks to mark fence posts, rails or trees with these symbols showing who would give them food, work or chase them away.

The true hobos were a proud group and shared a kinship with each other. They gathered together at hobo camps along the tracks, usually close to a railroad water tower. They built campfires, told stories, sang songs and became an American legend. Hobos would emphatically tell you that they were NOT tramps and NOT bums. In hobo definitions, a hobo works and wanders. A tramp dreams and wanders, and a bum drinks and wanders.

The nearly total replacement of the steam engines by diesels in the 1950’s contributed to the decline of the hobos. Steam engines had to make regular stops to take on water and this allowed the hobos to get on or get off the trains at these stops.

So, next time you see a train, take the time to remember what the railroad meant to the demise of Calliope, and the excitement that the arrival of trains, their passengers and workers brought to the new town of Hawarden.

