

Joseph's Railroad Dreams

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and the Chicago History Museum

Joseph loved trains, and in 1898, there was no better place to be a boy who loved trains than in Chicago. Joseph thought his city was the train capital of the world.

All day long, trains rolled into Chicago from the east, the west, the north, and the south. Some trains carried people. Some carried freight. Some carried animals headed for the city's giant stockyards.

All day long, trains rolled out of Chicago, heading in all directions. In addition to people, the trains carried useful things made in Chicago to places all over the country. Joseph liked to watch the trains from his favorite spot near the rail yard. From there, the rows and rows of tracks

seemed to split and connect in patterns that were hard to trace, even though Joseph tried.

Many trains came through Joseph's West Side neighborhood too. Some rumbled across the city streets. They made crossing the streets difficult, but Joseph could get a close look. Some were elevated trains that rode on a metal track high above Lake Street. They carried people to work and to shop downtown. When Joseph was born, the "L" train wasn't even there.

Joseph was only four years old the first time he rode an elevated train. It was the first "L" train in Chicago, and it carried people to the giant fair in 1893. Joseph's older sister Lily was a little scared to ride the elevated train the first time. But

Joseph wasn't. He thought it was the most exciting day of his life. When they got off, Lily said, "That was a long ride."

Joseph disagreed. "It wasn't long enough!" he said.

In 1895, when Joseph was six, the "L" train came to his neighborhood. Joseph watched them build the metal tracks. The first day they rode that train, Lily said, "That was a long ride."

Joseph disagreed, "It wasn't long enough!"

Two years later, the ride got longer. The Lake Street "L" joined the brand new Loop downtown. Lake Street riders could go from Joseph's neighborhood to the heart of downtown, circle around, and ride out again. When Joseph

and Lily rode the Loop for the first time, Lily said, "That was a really long ride."

Joseph said, "A longer ride is a better ride, that's what I say!"

Joseph loved riding the trains in his city, but he dreamed of even longer trips. More than a thousand trains a day went from Chicago to all over the country, to the mountains in the west and to big cities like New York in the east.

Joseph was nine years old, and he had loved trains since he was four. He was ready to take

the train someplace far away. He started to make plans.

Joseph told Lily about his idea. "That would be a long ride, Joseph," she said, shaking her head. She was thirteen, and she thought that her brother's interest in trains was odd. Joseph talked about trains all the time, and he always pestered her to take him on the "L" or to the rail yard to watch the machines rumble past.

Joseph wouldn't let the idea go. "But Lily, they have Pullman cars that are like hotels on wheels. We'd feel like a king and queen!" he said, his eyes sparkling.

Lily smiled and shrugged, "It would be a long ride, but it could be fun, I guess. Maybe someday."

Joseph told his grandfather about his plans. "Once, I rode the train halfway across the country," his grandfather chuckled. "It was many years ago, before those Pullman cars came along. It was an uncomfortable trip. The seats were hard as rocks. There was no food on the train. Overnight, we had to stay in hotels in small towns along the way—and some of them were not very nice!"

"But now it's different, Grandpa," Joseph explained. "There are dining cars and sleeping cars, and they don't cost much more than a

regular ticket. You even eat off china, like at a fancy restaurant.”

Joseph's grandfather smiled and shrugged. “A long ride would be an adventure.”

The next day, his grandfather gave Joseph an old book, Rand McNally's *Western Railway Guide*. It was a travel guide for planning trips west by train. On the front was a picture of a grand steam engine, with people waiting at a station to board.

Joseph couldn't put the book down. Even though it was old and out of date, it was perfect for planning his dream trip. It told everything you might want to know—where to go, what trains to

take, and what cities were best for making overnight stops.

Joseph spent days with his nose buried in its pages. Tucked inside the cover was a folded map. It showed how to go around the world by train and steamer boat, starting and ending in Chicago. What a trip that would be, Joseph imagined. “You're going to know more about the train lines than the conductors do!” Lily teased.

“Of course!” Joseph answered.

A few weeks later, Joseph came home from his usual afternoon activity—watching the

“L” train rumble past. His whole family was in the dining room, looking at a map stretched open on the table. Lily ran over and gave him a hug.

“We’re going, Joseph! We’re going!”

His mother smiled too. “We’re planning a trip, Joseph. We’re going to Omaha, Nebraska, to visit our cousins—by train.” Joseph couldn’t believe it. His persistence had paid off. He was finally getting his wish. Even Lily seemed excited!

The next few weeks flew by. The family was busy making plans and getting clothes packed and ready. Joseph’s parents had been saving a little bit of money every month so they could afford the trip. Now, they finally had enough. Grandpa took Joseph to the ticket office

on Clark Street to buy the family’s tickets. The windows of the office were covered with posters advertising everywhere you could go by train on that rail line—places like St. Paul, Minnesota; Sioux City, Iowa; and Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

When they bought the tickets, the clerk gave Joseph a schedule, a pamphlet of the route called “How to Go West,” and some postcards that advertised the train line and the places it stopped. Joseph memorized the schedule and traced the path between Chicago and Omaha on the map over and over again. He wondered what it would be like to go beyond Omaha, into the Plains and the Rocky Mountains. Every day, he chose one of the postcards and wrote a short

note to his cousin in Omaha about what he thought his first train trip would be like. "The train will be comfortable and it will be such an adventure!" he wrote. The family would leave Chicago in the morning from the Grand Passenger Station on Canal Street and would arrive in Omaha the next afternoon. They would spend the entire night on the train in a Pullman sleeper car. Joseph couldn't wait.

On the big day, Joseph and Lily put on their best clothes for the trip. Lily chose her favorite pink dress printed with small flowers. It

had long sleeves that were puffy at the top but tight around her lower arms, with lacy trim and a striped belt. She buttoned her white boots around her ankles and brought her new striped red and white coat with the wide collar that covered her shoulders like a short cape.

Joseph felt very grown-up in his best tan-colored shirt and light brown suit with dark brown trim along the edges. Like Lily, he buttoned up his boots and brought his brown wool coat with a velvet collar. Their mother checked them over from head to toe and made sure the children hadn't forgotten anything. Joseph hugged his grandfather goodbye. "I'll send you a postcard

every day, Grandpa!" he promised as they headed to catch the train.

When the family arrived at the Grand Passenger Station, Joseph stared up at the enormous building. It was several stories tall, and had rows and rows of windows. The trains came in and out of a giant train shed behind the building. The street out front was crowded with people, luggage, and horse carts, and there was lots of noise. Joseph felt like there were more people than he'd ever seen, all coming and going. "Come on, Joseph!" Lily called back to him. He ran to catch up with his family as they went under the front awning and into the bustling station.

Joseph ran ahead to find the right car. "Over here!" he urged his family, hopping up and down eagerly. By the door, a man stood, dressed in a uniform with gleaming metal buttons, shiny shoes, and a round hat. A watch on a chain dangled from one pocket, and a crisp handkerchief peeked out of another. The man chuckled at Joseph's excitement. He was the porter on the family's train car, and his job was to make sure their trip was comfortable.

"I'm going to Omaha," Joseph told him. "It's my first time."

The porter smiled. "Get ready for a good ride!" The porter helped each member of the family step up into the train using a small wooden

stool. Joseph's stomach felt bubbly with happiness.

Inside the train car, Joseph looked around in awe. The ceiling was beautifully painted, and the wood trim was carved with fancy patterns. Some windows were made of stained glass. The seats were covered in soft velvet, perfect for a comfortable ride.

"You can sit next to the window," Lily told her brother. She always made fun of Joseph and his trains, but now that she was actually riding one, Lily couldn't believe how exciting it was. Joseph was right after all—she did feel like a queen.

They settled into their seats, clutching their tickets. The conductor came around and put holes in their tickets with a shiny metal punch. The punch had a picture of a train engraved on the front and kept a count inside of everyone on board. Joseph carefully put his ticket in his front pocket. He wanted to make sure he kept his first one as a souvenir.

Soon, the train slowly crept out of the station into the rail yard. Joseph caught a glimpse of his favorite spot for watching trains and smiled. It was hard to believe that this time

he was actually riding instead. Chicago's tall buildings became smaller and smaller as the train moved out of the city.

The porter came through the car handing out dinner menus. The menu included travel facts, photographs, and information for travelers—and it was a souvenir! Lily and Joseph looked at all the foods: ribs of beef, turkey with cranberry sauce, chicken pot pie, macaroni with cheese. They couldn't believe all the different kinds of meats and vegetables to choose. There was even more choice in the desserts! "I want apple pie," Lily decided.

"I'll try the pudding!" Joseph exclaimed.

When it was time to eat, they walked through the train cars into the luxurious dining car. They sat at a wooden table while waiters served them a delicious meal on fine china. Their mother spooned sugar into her tea from a silver bowl engraved with the rail line's name. While they ate, Joseph stared through the window at the scenes of life going by. They passed large towns and small towns that hardly looked big enough to have their own train stations. Farms dotted the rolling prairie.

The next time the porter came around, Joseph tugged on his arm. "Excuse me. Could you tell me what it's like to work on the train?"

The porter smiled and nodded. "You're interested in learning about jobs on the train? Well, there is a conductor, the engineer, and porters, like me. Being a porter is hard work, but you meet a lot of people and you always see a lot of faraway places." Joseph had more questions, about the uniform, the porter's duties, and where he called home. The porter told Joseph he had a son his age in Chicago, but they didn't see each other much because the porter was always working on the train.

"That must be hard," Joseph said. "I bet you miss each other." The porter nodded. Joseph had more questions, but the porter got called

away to help a passenger who was getting off at the next stop.

Joseph listened to the conversations of the other passengers. Some were going as far as San Francisco. Two gentlemen discussed the hunting trip they planned in the Rockies. Another family was heading to Salt Lake City, Utah. "We can go anywhere on this amazing train!" Joseph said. His world felt bigger somehow as he thought about all the places to see. But at the same time, the world felt smaller, because all it took to get there was a train ride.

The rolling prairie rose into bluffs, and Joseph and Lily watched outside the window in awe as they crossed over the Mississippi River.

The porter brought Joseph another postcard. This one showed the dining car of the train. Joseph wrote a short note to his grandfather and told him about the trip so far.

The day went by quickly, and soon, despite his excitement, Joseph felt tired. He asked the porter where they should sleep. "Right here!" the porter explained, and showed him how beds pulled down from the wall. The seats could become beds for the night too. The family could even close the curtains to give themselves some privacy while they slept.

"This train is an amazing invention!" Joseph exclaimed.

Joseph and Lily settled in for the night. The train rocked back and forth gently, and Joseph could hardly keep his eyes open as he rested on the Pullman sleeper's soft mattress covered with even softer sheets. He pulled the brightly striped blanket around him as he dozed off. All night long, Joseph dreamed of future faraway trips he could take by train. "A longer ride is a better ride, that's what I say!" he whispered as he fell asleep.