

Living on Train Time

Growing up on Long Island meant knowing the schedule for the LI Railroad by heart like mastering the multiplication tables in third grade. Everyone used “train time” before there were cellphone apps to help you along in life. Funny thing: it worked.

Back in the 50s the train came through Riverhead three times a day on the way to the end of the line in Greenport and the return route back to the west to New York City.

There was no need for a watch or clock, for when the whistle tooted two miles before the huge steam engine appeared at the Railroad Avenue station, it was time to go downstairs for breakfast before school, or at the end of the day, it was the signal to get peddling home on my bike for dinner with a couple minutes to spare.

Frankly, I don't remember too much about the noon time train as I was in school held captive by my teachers, although the tracks went right by the playground and even the older boys in sixth grade moved away from the chain link fence when the train went roaring by either starting back up or slowly down. For a few seconds the ground shook and shuddered and then you were back to yelling and climbing the monkey bars.

The engineer in his striped coveralls on the caboose would wave, and sometimes you would get a slight hand in the air from one of the navy-blue suited conductors standing outside the passenger car ready to hop off at the station.

My mother had a good ear and she claimed to hear the evening whistle more than five miles away in Calverton if the air was still. You see, my dad would be on that train coming from a business trip in the city, and she would be picking him up at the station. He had had a two-hour ride by then from Penn Station with a change in Jamaica. There were a group of regular commuters engaging in card games, and dad would join in. He was an outstanding player.

We lived two blocks away, and mom never wanted to get to the station too far ahead to wait around. She didn't like waiting around ever. I am exact opposite and always get to an airport early more for the people-watching than anything else.

It became a game with mom to turn off the pots on the stove, undo her apron and get my sister and me hustled in the car quickly racing down to a parking spot just as the huge locomotive would appear at the tracks. We would barely pull into an empty spot when the train would come to a halt and passengers started disembarking. My sister and I would get out of the car and run up to meet dad returning back arm- in - arm.

Once in a while the mom wouldn't make it in time and dad would be waiting at the station. He never minded. It was mom who was disappointed in herself for missing the mark. Off we would all go back home to a meal together all the while mom was analyzing her miscalculation in her head.

Of everybody in the family, I was the one who wanted to hear about dad's day in the city right down to the smallest detail. I claimed to smell the city aromas on his clothes, and it excited me thinking about the possibilities there. Well, sometimes in the summer dad would take me on the train with him and that was perfect.