

The following paragraphs are from Place: Canfield, a memoir of my growing up in the town of Canfield, Ohio during the 1950's and 60's. This particular section describes the daily afternoon passage of the Lisbon Branch local in the early 1960's, as heard from the confines of Canfield High School study hall.

Erie Local

Room 220 Study Hall was in the high school section, up on the second floor. Opposite the hall entrance were several tall windows stretching to the high ceiling and looking out the backside of the school, over the slide, teeter-totters, and swings of the grade school playground, across the football field and past the open bleachers to the houses along Edwards Avenue. On sunny fall days, the lower windows were tilted open to keep the room cool. And a light rush of breeze carried in the afternoon noise of the town—the creaking of metal swings in the soft breeze, insistent chatter of robins in the maples along the edge of the playground, and occasional growling semis leaving the village, heading west on Route 224, their flatbeds heavy with thick slabs and coil steel from the mills around Youngstown.

Study hall was just that—a room to study--no talking permitted. The teacher's desk stood up front on a raised wooden platform, about a foot above the floor. From there the teacher had a commanding view to ensure students kept eyes trained where they belonged—down into textbooks. So each 5th period I sat in 220 and focused my vision where I was supposed to. But while my eyes were aimed at Biology and Algebra, my 5th period ears were tuned elsewhere, to the sounds drifting in through the windows from past the playground, over the football field, and beyond the houses on Edwards. And somewhere into the hour, I'd jerk when I heard the train whistle.

By 9th grade, I knew that whistle was the Erie freight working his way south. He had left Niles about an hour earlier and was heading down the Lisbon Branch with a short train. From the tone of the horn, I knew two old Alco diesel engines were lugging the train--a handful of boxcars and gondolas on the head end, followed by about fifteen empty coal hoppers and a tired red caboose. This was the lone train on the branch that dropped south from the Erie mainline at Niles, served Canfield, worked into the farms and low hills south of town, crossed the busy mainline of the Pennsylvania Railroad ten miles south at Leetonia, and then wandered deep into the hills of Columbiana County to the coal tipple at Lisbon.

From first grade onward, each afternoon at school I heard the Erie blow for the crossing at 224, followed by low rumblings that diminished as the train crossed the highway and pulled alongside the wood frame station and stopped. I knew the

agent would walk out onto the station platform, the train crew would climb down from the locomotive, and the conductor might walk forward from the caboose. They would nod hello's, sort through a few waybills of the day's business, discuss the B&O boxcar of dimensional lumber to be placed at the shed in the lumber yard, the Rock Island boxcar of burlap-bagged seed corn to be spotted at Delf's & Sons, and the Lackawanna coal hopper to be shoved up onto the trestle for unloading. Then the trainmen would return to the engine, and the crew would work the sidings, pulling and pushing the freight cars into place. I knew in about twenty minutes, the work done, the local would resume the trip south. It was a slow operation, never much more than 15 or 20 miles an hour.

So when I heard that whistle come floating through the study hall windows, a kind of metallic bleating, I knew the train had crossed Herbert Road about five minutes earlier and the engineer was now approaching the flashing lights at Route 224, a little beyond those houses on Edwards Avenue.

For years I had listened from inside the school to the daily arrival of that train. But until freshman year, I had never been in a classroom where I might see it. I was always enclosed in the front of the school, or down on the first floor, or my classroom had no windows opening to the west. So when I landed in 220 early afternoons freshman year, I was optimistic. Maybe, finally, I could catch some glimpse of that train ... maybe the top of a boxcar just over the roof of one of those white houses on Edwards, or some dark movement of rusty freight cars through the clump of trees beyond the football goal posts. Or if I looked just right, maybe I could spot the roof of the engine cab as it came to a stop near the station, at the top of the rise.

So that semester I studied my narrow band of landscape out the windows to the west. Each week I became more adept at disguising my gazing beyond Edwards as merely a brief, casual glance. It wasn't hard—it just required a cautious, gradual approach. I didn't get caught—the teacher never asked what I was looking at or told me to get back to work.

But I failed. Try as I might, no matter how thoroughly I scanned the roofs and the treetops, or which gap between the houses I considered, or how intently I peered through blowing branches and leaves, I never spotted that train. As the semester wore on, I finally brought myself to concede the railroad was too far away, hidden from my daily view. No matter how clearly the local freight called, the train was tucked just over the horizon.

Sitting in study hall, I could only listen as the engineer, his work in town now done, would slowly notch up the throttle, the diesels would churn and strain against the

freight cars, and the Erie would begin moving south again, blowing first for the crossing on Lisbon Street. The string of empty hoppers would slow click-clack ... click-clack over worn rail as the train resumed its labored march. The caboose would rock and lean as it ground slowly past the station, picking up the pace, leaving Delf's behind. Shortly he'd blow again for the bypass near the fairgrounds, moving in a rhythmic clanking and swaying, now a steady gait on his way out of town. Off again southbound, following his daily rounds ... Over the next few minutes the clacking and clanking of the distant freight would gradually soften, the rumblings slowly taper off, and the sounds of the train would blend back into the light rush of breeze through open window, the creaking of playground swings, the tranquility of the quiet afternoon, and be lost.

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