

My Grandfather and A Train Journey

Willard Losinger

I.

Most of my grandparents died before I was born. My mother's father, Gustaf George Nordlund, died when I was a toddler. I have no memory of him.

II.

People used to rely on trains for transportation in the United States. In Northern Michigan, most of the tracks have been removed, and many have been converted into bicycle paths. Old train stations have been turned into museums and restaurants. If you watch old movies, people are often getting onto trains. My attic has some trunks that are much older than I am, and that date from the age of train travel. Some look like pirate chests.

III.

My grandfather, Gustaf, moved from Sweden to the United States early in the twentieth century.

IV.

When I was a college student in Europe, a Eurail pass allowed me to travel freely, first class, through the non-Communist portion of the continent.

V.

My grandmother Alexandra Graan, known as Sandra, left Sweden to marry Gustaf a few years after Gustaf had arrived. She was ten years younger than he was, and what one might call a "mail-order bride", fairly common in the day. As in the movie *Sweet Land* (2005).

VI.

Trains in Europe are very reliable. I was a student at the University of Caen, in Normandy, and would often take the train into Paris on the weekend, to see the sights. Including the famous Notre Dame Cathedral.

VII.

My mother was born in Hartford, Connecticut, on August 13, 1913. Looking over some records, she had to have been conceived before the wedding. A stark contrast to my mother's attitudes towards sex.

VIII.

Over the Christmas break, I traveled by train from Caen, France, to visit my mother's cousin and his family in Karlstad, Sweden.

IX.

My grandparents moved to Chicago, by train, to look for work. My mother's first language was Swedish, and she attended a Swedish Augustana Lutheran church, in Chicago.

X.

First-class train journeys across Europe are quite luxurious. They have sleeping berths. Going from Denmark to Sweden involved riding a ferry. I rode a train from Malmö to Stockholm, and then switched to another train to Karlstad.

XI.

My grandfather had a son, Arnold. Arnold died when he was very young, after being run over by an automobile. It made my mother and grandparents very sad.

XII.

I arrived at the train station in Karlstad. I called my relatives' number. Linnea, the wife of my mother's cousin, answered the phone. She could not speak English. I had studied Swedish at the University of Caen, and asked "Tala ni Engelska?" She handed the phone to Sune, her husband. He spoke English very well, and taught English in an elementary school.

XIII.

During the Great Depression, Gustaf did not work. His wife, Sandra, and my mother, Astrid, worked. Sandra in a fish factory. Astrid, as a secretary for the Defense Department, when the war was getting started.

XIV.

Sune picked me up at the train station, and brought me to his apartment. We had a very pleasant visit. We played Yatsy several times, and they gave me a game set as a parting gift.

XV.

Gustaf built a small house in Brookfield, a Chicago suburb, and moved there, with Astrid, after Sandra died of cancer.

XVI.

I rode the trains back to France.

XVII.

My mother would ride the commuter train, from Brookfield to Chicago's Union Station, each day for her government job, until she married my father. He moved in with them. Gustaf died in his eighties. I have no memory of him.