

The Railroad Series

By Allen Chapman

By David M. Baumann

Winter-Spring 2021

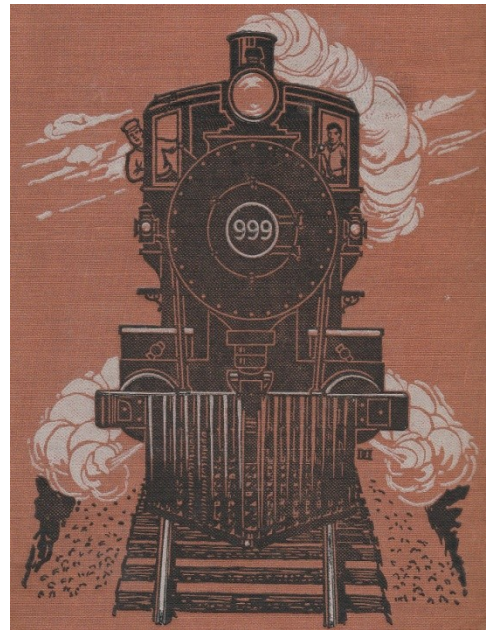
6,262 words

When I was a small boy, my grandfather took me to an attraction called Travel Town. It is a railway museum in the outskirts of greater Los Angeles in the southern edge of the San Fernando Valley where I grew up. Travel Town opened when I was four years old, and features attractions dedicated to railroading in southern California, focusing on the years 1880 into the time of the Great Depression. Its displays include several old fashioned locomotives, cabooses, and box cars of various kinds. I found it a place of wonder. For a time I was fascinated with electric trains (HO scale was my preferred size), and the sound of a train's horn in the quiet dark of night could lift me into another world.

Sixty-five years later, The Railroad Series would renew the heady excitement I knew as a child when I played with toy trains or visited Travel Town and could stand where a train engineer had stood two generations earlier: "There was something fascinating in the breathless rush, the superb power and steadiness of the crack machine, so easy of control that she was a marvel of mechanical genius and perfection." (chapter one, *Ralph on the Overland Express*)

As I grew older, my interests changed. Fascination with railroading faded, but never disappeared altogether. So when I learned about The Railroad Series, I was intrigued. It is an old series, the oldest I have collected; the first volume was published in 1906. The series was brought to my attention by a friend and fellow collector, Mark Gibbons, whom I have praised and thanked in several previous articles for introducing me to one fine series after another. As he has done many times, he sent me a sample volume; it sat on my shelves untouched for a couple of years, but almost daily I saw it and wondered what its story was. One day Mark sent me several more volumes; I glanced over them, and was hooked.

Edward Stratemeyer founded the Stratemeyer Syndicate in 1905. In issue #38 of The Review, published in July 2005, my article on the Wynn and Lonnie series appeared; that was the Syndicate's last series. I think it beyond doubt that The Railroad Series was the first the Syndicate produced, i.e. with Stratemeyer writing outlines for stories and contracting with a ghostwriter to create the text, who was paid a single fee and received no royalties. "Allen Chapman" was the house name chosen for the author of The Railroad Series. The ghostwriter of the first five books in The



Railroad Series was Weldon James Cobb (July 3, 1849 – July 1, 1922); he also wrote several dozen thriller novels under his own name.

Although the official name of this offering is “The Railroad Series”, it might be better known as Ralph of the Railroad. Its star is Ralph Fairbanks, a most admirable, upstanding chap who, in the course of the books, has a great number of exciting adventures, fights a number of despicable foes, and proves to be a friend of the outcast, downtrodden, and unfortunate. The author had a gift for creating names for some of his characters that suggest the moral stature of each. The name “Fairbanks” strongly indicates that its possessor is the right kind of person; we are also introduced to a man with the last name Slump, and another whose first name is Gaspar (often spelled Gasper). One fellow whose initial behaviors are not consistent and whose motives are unclear is named Fogg. The names are not quite caricatures nor are they trite, but they leave no doubt about the kind of person you’re dealing with.

The Era of the Railroad

The teaser on the inside front flap describes the series very well: “In this line of books there is revealed the whole workings of the great railroad system. There are adventures in abundance—railroad wrecks, dashes through forest fires, the pursuit of a ‘wildcat’ locomotive, the disappearance of a pay car with a large sum of money on board—but there is much more than this—the intense rivalry among railroads and railroad men, the working out of running schedules, the getting through ‘on time’ in spite of all obstacles, and the manipulation of railroad securities by evil men who wish to rule or ruin.”

I remember the 1950s so it is easy for me to imagine the world that Ken Holt and Rick Brant moved in. But the first decade of the 1900s is a little harder for me to click with; it is history and



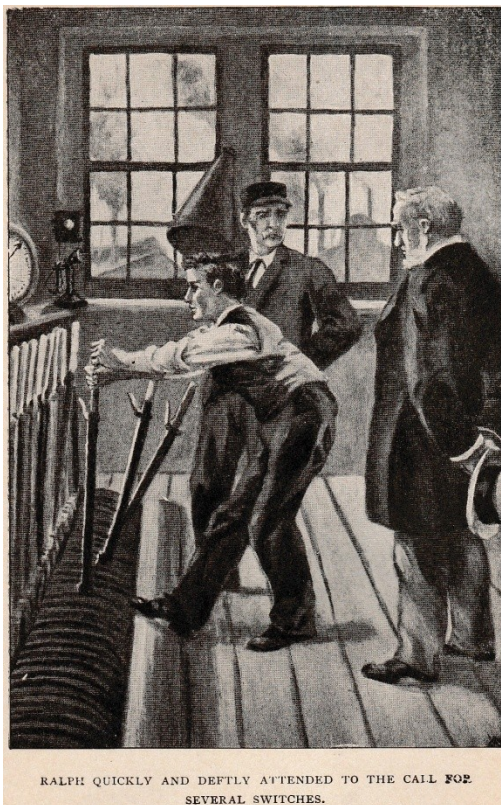
not memory. Getting into it requires something different from thinking, “Oh yeah, I remember that.” But this series brings the reader into its time with the feel that its world is just over the fence. These books are far better than the

contemporary original Tom Swifts. The stories are set in the age before radio. Communication between distant points, when it can be done at all, is by telegraph or telegram. Often it is achieved only by someone who leaps onto a train and speeds from one destination to another. Cars are rarely mentioned in the series; most travel that is not by train is by horse and wagon. More than once, characters simply have to walk, sometimes for miles, to get from one place to another.

Although the internal illustrations are unique to each story, the cover is identical for all ten books. It shows an old-fashioned locomotive with coal car just behind, pulling boxcars on a mountainous route.

The Books

There are ten books in this old-time but worthy series. Each is about 240 pages long, and sometimes as long as 280. Let's take a brief look at each of them.



Ralph of the Roundhouse (1906)

In the first book we meet the aforementioned Ralph, the only son of a recently widowed mother. They live in a town called Stanley Junction, noted for its railroad endeavors. Just coming out of high school, Ralph is eager to work on the railroad as his late father had done, and intends to start at the bottom and work up. He is squeakily clean, honest, courageous, and humble, and with all those virtues, he presents as a very attractive young man. He and his mother live in a small, mortgaged home and are obliged to make payments to Gaspar Farrington. Farrington is described as, among other things, a "capitalist" and a "magnate", but is clearly a miserly, dishonest grubber of money no matter how made. Ralph's father left his family nearly penniless, much to their surprise since they had the impression that he had some good investments, which now appear to be missing.

A strange boy rides the rails from a nearby settlement with an envelope addressed to Ralph's father, but it is rendered unreadable through a soaking, and the boy suffers a head injury and cannot talk. Ralph's mother

takes him into the house to care for him. Ralph acts heroically in a couple of instances in the course of working on the trains, which earns him the respect of railroad personnel. His nemesis is another young fellow in the hire of the railroad named Ike Slump. In the course of this book, Ralph works on three different mysteries. It is a well written, appealing initial offering of The Railroad Series. At the conclusion of the story, Ralph has earned the notice and the respect of the authorities of the Great Northern, and is promoted.

Ralph in the Switch Tower (1907)

On the first page of this story, Ralph's new nemesis, Mort Bemis, is described as a "meddlesome, malicious reprobate!" And he is, too! With a couple of other repulsive characters, he appears in several incidents of this volume, each an attempt to ruin Ralph's reputation, compromise his effectiveness as a railroad worker, and even threaten his life. Through a series of well-told adventures, Ralph moves through this second entry fighting his enemies and acting with heroic and courageous virtue to ensure that justice prevails for the victims of the powerful who believe that their wealth and influence put them above the law.

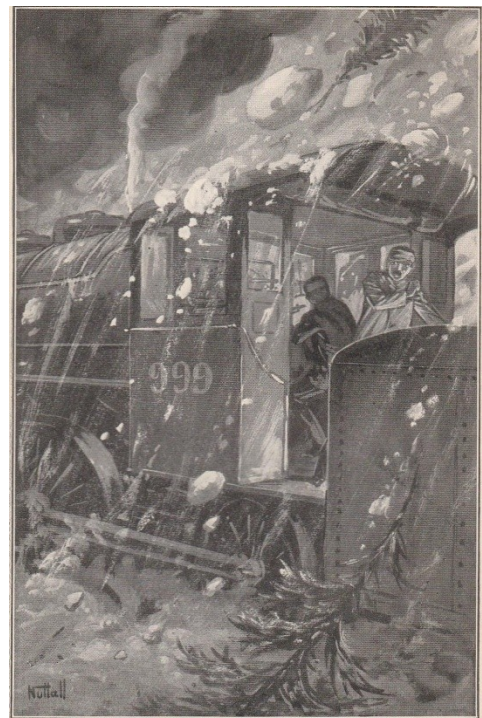
The working of the switch tower is attractively described. The towermen are responsible for receiving messages from dispatchers and rail coordinators, and pulling the switches that arrange the rails in the switchyard so that incoming, departing, and "through" trains go to the right place at the right time. Done properly, things go smoothly; miss one, though, and disastrous collisions can occur. This is not a job that permits one's mind to wander! An escaped circus tiger and nighttime sabotage make Ralph's job, um, interesting.

An interesting character in this story is good old Stiggs, a former railroad man of about fifty who was injured on the job and was pensioned off at \$16 a month, and lives comfortably on that. That would be about \$500 a month in today's money—still shockingly little. He and his wife have enough to live on, but he has to beg his tobacco. This is one of many windows into the life and time of more than a century ago.

Ralph on the Engine (1909)

Adventures continue apace in this third entry of the series, in which Ralph has earned another promotion. The upright, courageous, humble, and effective Ralph deals with thefts of railroad goods, a strike by part of the union manipulated secretly by a hidden malefactor, a kidnapping, a long lost shipment of diamonds, a drunkard who puts a train in a precarious position, and several attacks by despicable enemies we have seen before. A couple of impoverished and abused boys are set on good paths, hard work is rewarded, and, in the end, justice is served. Now, in this book and some of the others, occasionally Ralph's courage verges into foolhardiness and his humility presents itself as an unconscious messianic complex; I did not find this to be a fault, but rather a true-to-life, and therefore believable, phenomenon. Mostly, it added a welcome and impressive depth to the challenges that Ralph faced.

One interesting character is Zeph Dallas, described throughout the series as "eccentric" or "an oddity". There are several series that include a foil of some kind to provide a mixture of humor and assistance; Chet Morton and Chow Winkler come to mind. Zeph Dallas is most likely the first such character in a classic



"AN AVALANCHE!" DECLARED FOGG. "DODGE—SOMETHING'S COMING!"

series. He is a young man about the same age as Ralph who is eager to prove himself as a detective. In his first appearances he is laughably naïve and foolish, but he tries hard. In the ongoing volumes he shows himself to be courageous, reliable, and ever more effective. He becomes an important secondary character as the Railroad series progresses. Dallas is taken on by Mr. Bob Adair, another major secondary character, who is the extremely competent railroad detective.

In this story, there were a few unlikely coincidences, and Ralph's path appeared to be almost as outright jinxed as Joe Btfsplk's since he faced trials and troubles wherever he turned, but the writing was exceptionally fine. The reader is drawn into the ongoing tale of adventure in small railroad towns, woods, and swamps. In this creditable volume, several storylines that lasted over all three volumes were brought to a satisfactory close—and Ralph's reputation with all is shining, and he earns yet another promotion.

Ralph on the Overland Express (1910)

The persistent enemies who had been troubling Ralph have been shut down; in this story, Ralph has been promoted to the position of engineer and has charge of a new engine making an experimental run. Another window into life over a century ago is given us when one of Ralph's companions, the aforementioned Zeph Dallas, announces that he has found a good restaurant in which "wheat cakes with honey, prime country sausages, and Mocha" are served "all for twenty cents."

In the course of this story, a fascinating ethical problem is set forth. A railroad worker, who had been one of the strikers in the previous story, in his disgruntlement sets out to sabotage Ralph's first assignment, and is successful—up to a point. An innocent man is accused for the near-disaster and is slated to be fired, which would cause him and his family severe hardship. In the meantime, the guilty person has reformed and shown himself to be a supporter of Ralph. Ralph alone discovers where the blame for the sabotage really lies, and the guilty party does not know that an innocent man has been accused of what he had done. Ralph finds himself in an intriguing and complex moral dilemma: what should he do with the facts he has uncovered to ensure that neither an innocent man nor a reformed man suffers?

Well, it resolves satisfactorily. The rest of the tale is a series of adventures involving mysterious personages engaged in baffling doings, life-saving heroics by young Fairbanks, and a couple of vitally important and determined special nighttimes run through vicious and dangerous winter weather. Ralph sees that all is properly done, and earns even more praise from the authorities—as well as yet another promotion.

Ralph the Train Dispatcher (1911)

Great Northern, the railroad that Ralph works for, has achieved some excellence in efficiency and reputation which has garnered some lucrative contracts, and another railroad company of lesser stature and lower ethical standards hires agents to infiltrate the Great Northern's system of dispatchers. They are ordered to cause problems with scheduling, mess up communications, and even cause wrecks in order to bring the Great Northern down. There is a lot of description of telegraphic systems and customs whose detail seemed to be just a bit more tiresome than helpful,

but the reader has the impression that the writer knows the railroad industry very well, down to the daily workings of engines, switchyards, and machine shops.

There are some excellent plot elements such as a conscientious young man who is taking care of his grandfather who is apparently suffering from dementia but who was once a master telegrapher; a train wreck which results in an explosion of chickens released from their railroad cars in the collision; and an attempt by a conscienceless lowlife to defraud the brother of a good friend of Ralph, which Ralph ingeniously overturns. There are excursions in the dark of night to discover and neutralize the false agents inside the Great Northern; and of course gripping train maneuvers in adverse weather. Secondary characters are, as always, attractive and well developed, with conversational styles that entertain while carrying the plot forward.

This final entry by Weldon James Cobbs is eminently readable and engaging. I can't find out the name(s) of the ghostwriters of the subsequent volumes, but let's see how good they are.

Ralph on the Army Train (1918)

Seven years have passed since the publication of the last book, and the first World War has begun. Within the first couple of pages of this volume, employees of the Great Northern are divided into "American patriots" and German nationals, and they get into a shouting argument. This sets the tone for the rest of the book. We also learn for the first time that there is a "German town" section of Stanley Junction, which is suspected of being a hotbed of probable spy work and potential sabotage, now that the country is at war and troop trains and supplies are almost taking over the train system on the orders of an entity reverently referred to as "the Government", with a capital G. Moreover, we learn for the first time that the environs are infested with Germans; there are German sheriffs, German shopkeepers, German businessmen, German farmers, and even German employees of the Great Northern—known throughout this book, inexplicably, as "the G. N." There are frequent references to "Huns" and "Heinies".

I was quickly reminded of five Tom Slade books that were written and published during World War I. (These were volumes four through eight; see my article on this fine series published in *The Review* #33, Spring 2000.) The second World War was almost completely ignored by series books, but the first World War was a major subject for the genre. Such books provide a fascinating window into the culture and daily life of the times. They are not political editorials or essays, historical scholarship, or any other work written by professionals; these are stories written by and for ordinary people. In many ways, the common folk give us a more reliable, and certainly a more interesting, view into another time than any professionals can.

In this sixth entry of the Railroad Series, Ralph deals with a large number of Germans, including those who work for the G. N. Are they spies, are they loyal Americans, or are they simple folk who just need work and are trying to keep a low profile? Somebody is doing some sabotage, but who is it? The story seeks to discover the guilty parties while treating possible suspects fairly. There are those in the story who want to lay hands on anyone with a German, or even a foreign-sounding, name, but Ralph does his best to be fair without being gullible. This attitude I found surprising and impressive, for it goes against the unquestioned über-patriotism (joke intended) of other series books of the time.

There is a lot of technical train jargon in this story whose meaning I, for one, could only guess at, but that didn't affect an engaging and driving story which was mostly mystery. Who are the bad guys, really? Who's the mastermind behind numerous sabotage events, some successful and some not? Will the G. N. get its Government trains with troops, supplies, and munitions to their destinations safely and on time?

Ralph on the Midnight Flyer (1923)

Five more years have passed. The Great War is over and Prohibition has begun. The ubiquitous Germans of the previous tale are never mentioned again. In this fine tale, the Great Northern has brought in an efficiency expert named Barton Hopkins. He has saved the railroad a lot of money but has alienated a lot of the working men. He is emotionally vacant and comes across as "a cold fish". He has no concern whatever for the people he has caused to be let go, even if they had families to take care of. He is dedicated to profit, and nothing else; his utter heartlessness, disregard of anything that doesn't affect him personally, and contempt for just about everyone make him one of the most angrifying, hate-inspiring people in series bookdom. The authorities like the results he gets, but are uneasy about the long-term effects of what he's doing. Unrest among former and current employees is growing strong and deep, and a strike-monger named Andy McCarrey is known to be stoking fires in secret; McCarrey was apparently harmed by Hopkins in an earlier encounter to the point that he has followed him to the Great Northern to seek revenge.



THE FIRE WAS SWEEPING CLOSER AND CLOSER.
Ralph on the Midnight Flyer. Page 209

Ralph is not immediately affected personally, and at first sympathizes with both sides and is anxious about what is developing. That there is a powder keg waiting to explode is obvious. More than that, for the first time a girl appears in the ongoing story of Ralph and the Great Northern. Mr. Hopkins' daughter Cherry is a beauty, and Ralph is taken with her—and she with him. As things escalate, Ralph's anger is slow to build but in mid-book he takes his stand against Hopkins. When that happens, the reader wants to cheer. One line sums it up: "Ralph had never before so wanted to hit a man and refrained from doing it!"

From that point on, the hostility among the parties accelerates through a series of events that bring the reader to the edge of his chair. I've read dozens of reviews of books in which someone says, tritely, "I couldn't put it down," but this is the first time I can say that myself. The resolution is believable and satisfying.

The story is supremely well-written, and by someone who knew the workings of the railroads of a century ago; whatever the reader's opinion of the story, "ho hum" is the least likely response. I tend to be fairly generous in my opinions of series books, but I give very few books a ten. *Ralph on the Midnight Flyer* deserves an unqualified 10!

Ralph and the Missing Mail Pouch (1924)

To use the slang of a century ago when this tale was written, this is a cracking good story! It is a mystery, well written and complex. Even though the main suspect is identified very early and the evidence mounts against him through the pages until it is overwhelming, there is always just a bit of a doubt.

The Great Northern wants to gain some of the contracts with the Postal Service for carrying its mail. To show that it is worthy of the contract, it must get a trial run through on time. The trial run includes a mail pouch containing \$200,000 in negotiable bonds. As one can guess from the title of the book, the mail pouch is stolen in spite of its being carefully guarded. The theft is put over in an ingenious fashion.

The story unfolds with growing tension as the investigation of the matter becomes ever more dangerous for Ralph, who is threatened with personal harm more than once by persons unknown. Once he is struck and knocked out by a brick thrown from a dark alley, and later he is accused of masterminding the theft himself by another shadowy figure, with evidence of his guilt just convincing enough to cause doubt among most of the major characters. The dialogue is repeatedly entertaining; railroad detective Mr. Adair promises to put the “the brains of the affair in a place where the dogs won’t bite him.”

The story suffers a bit from a couple of contrived events, but they are only mildly irritating. Another weak element is the intrusion of Ralph’s messianic complex when he convinces Mr. Adair to let him try his hand on his own to track down Zeph Dallas, who had been captured while on the ‘phone to Ralph. The final few chapters are riveting.

One might add here that Barton Hopkins, introduced in the previous story, has pretty much learned his lesson and in this story has lightened up considerably. And his daughter Cherry and Ralph have, um, grown close.

Ralph on the Mountain Division (1927)

The Great Northern has recently opened up a new division, i.e. station with its accompanying right-of-way to facilitate its freight business. The center of the new division is a small town in the mountains named Red Moose, about three hours’ travel time by train from where Ralph lives. He’s been put in charge of the new division to ensure that all goes well.

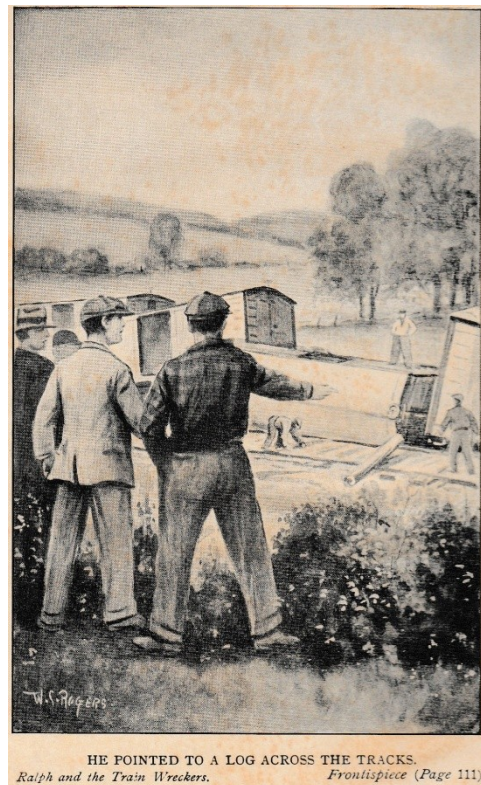
The problem is, it’s not going well. All indications (but no proof) are that a rival railroad, the Y. & C. (for the Yellowstone and Columbia Railroad), is threatened by the Great Northern’s new division, and has set out to squash it. Apparently they have hired some troublemakers who start out with no-holds-barred violence. Numerous messages threatening to kill anyone from the Great Northern who shows up in Red Moose are sent to a variety of people. And when Bob Adair and his men appear, gunfire erupts. Ralph’s mother and the lovely Cherry Hopkins plead to Ralph and the reformed and now respected Bart Hopkins not to go Red Moose. Of course, threatening the higher-ups of the Great Northern only makes them dig in, and the two honorable men are committed to doing their duty.

The atmosphere of the book is grim and tense, yet underneath it all there is also a subtle but confident and even uplifting tenor. When Ralph sets out at sunrise to make his first official visit to Red Moose, knowing that he may be walking into life-threatening brutality, he hears “the impatient neighing of the milkman’s horse”, and “Strangely, he found that he had a desire to laugh, and he did so, loudly and freely.” The beauty of dawn and the pleasantness of ordinary life mark his foray into the zone of marked hostility.

Midway through the book, however, the story drops from the series’ customary high quality. There are a couple of fistfights in which one of Ralph’s two new friends, residents of Red Moose, tells jokes while bashing the bad guys, and later says that he’d “rather fight than eat!” The good guys make a succession of illogical and outright foolish decisions that put them under the power of the gang, whose leader is described as “insane”. The last few chapters are filled with one ghastly danger after another, escapes dependent upon fortuitous chance, and melodramatic dialogue with lots of exclamation points. There is some good writing, but the storyline itself peters out and becomes more disappointing than convincing.

Ralph and the Train Wreckers (1928)

This tale begins with a grand and classy picnic for as many employees of the Great Northern who can come, but the gaiety is dampened when it is learned that a former enemy of the railroad has escaped prison and is surely out to wreak vengeance on Ralph and others who were responsible for his being locked up. For the first half of the book, however, he is presented as more of a shadowy threat than doing any real harm. In fact, he is rarely seen, and when he is, it is only a glimpse in the dark, and even that is none too certain. Yet threatening notes and suspected midnight scurryings where the good folks work and live set and maintain a good level of tension.



The story gets going when Mr. Bart Hopkins’ wife inherits a diamond and pearl necklace from her sister, worth \$40,000—or about \$600,000 in today’s money. Careless overconfidence leads to the necklace’s being stolen. At the same time, Ralph is asked to take over a position as a railroad detective on a temporary basis, and finding both the prison escapee and the necklace are his first priorities. Assisted by Zeph Dallas and the two friends who were introduced in the previous volume, Ralph sets out to make good on his charge.

Within a short time, it becomes clear that there is a gang of four that is dedicated to causing wrecks of freight trains, throwing logs under the wheels after the engine has passed, thereby causing a mild derailment of cars mid-train. After three of these wrecks, a pattern emerges that the gang is after old cars Zeph calls “blue dog houses” for their color and shape. After each

wreck, a blue car is smashed open, quickly searched, and abandoned. Ralph's discernment of the pattern and its most likely motivation is well drawn out, and he devises a good plan to anticipate the next wreck and capture the gang.

But at this point the plot stumbles; the reader wants to throw up his hands when Ralph goes alone to enact the plan he has devised but needlessly kept to himself, and stupidly makes no preparations such as telling anyone what he's doing, taking any weapons, or even getting easily available help when he is on a train that is wrecked, just as he expected it would be. He finds the gang of four breaking into a blue boxcar, and jumps them all by himself. The reader is not surprised, although Ralph may have been, when our hero is bested in the fight and escapes with his life on the merest luck.

Later in the book, Ralph seems to have forgotten what his proper guess had been about the motivation behind the train wrecks, as he and his comrades stand around scratching their heads about what's going on and what it all means, when by this time it is so obvious that the reader grinds his teeth over everyone's empty-headedness.

An even worse moment comes when, after he and his mother and his girlfriend have received notes threatening him, and after several attempts on his life have already been made, he decides to take Cherry to the movies. Afterwards he drops her off at her house and walks home alone late at night through the bad side of town. He is jumped by two men out of a dark alley, who, after a fight in which they knock him out, douse him with gasoline and then throw a lighted match at him and run. Fortunately the match misses the soaked unconscious Ralph, who a moment later wakes up and sniffs gasoline. His first inclination is to light a match to see what's happened. (Really. Yes, this is really what happens.) But prudently he has second thoughts. So he takes off his gasoline-soaked coat and *then* lights the match. He's smart enough, however, to hold the match at arm's length.

At one level, we grimace that Ralph can show himself repeatedly to be a blooming idiot, but at another level, we sadly conclude that in this book and its predecessor, the writing, good as it can be in things like dialogue and setting a scene, is seriously deficient when it comes to carrying out a plot. When the reader gets to the end of this story and it resolves just as any ten-year-old could have surmised a hundred pages earlier, he can sigh with relief and breathe, "I'm glad *that's* over!"

Well. Overall it's mostly a fine decade of stories. The last two books are the weakest of the ten. Their plots were feeble and the storylines ridiculously unconvincing, but even at that, there were some high points. In all the books the characterizations were well drawn, the dialogue was engaging, and the descriptions of scenery and setting were skillfully depicted. The stories are full of adventure, and, among their several attractions, they feature one appeal of singular effectiveness. That appeal deserves to have its own section in this article.

The Singular Appeal

I've related many times that Ralph Fairbanks is a young man of virtue. In an early volume, we are told that "Ralph... showed how manly resolve, and being right and doing right, enabled him to overcome his enemies." (chapter one, *Ralph on the Overland Express*) I am stirred to write a

bit about that, for his unwavering commitment to virtue is an essential part of the compelling attractiveness of The Railroad Series.

As I search out and read aloud relatively contemporary stories to my small children, I have been irritated to see many grammatical errors that apparently neither author nor editor caught; perhaps they did not even recognize them as errors. But more bothersome than that, many of the tales present bad behavior as common, normal, or even admirable for children of today—behaviors like disobeying even good parents under the guise of “becoming independent”, following one’s impulses without regard for consequences, or finding satisfaction in possessions or in being “better” than your playmates. Thankfully, there are many fine children’s stories that do not follow this direction, but the number that do is uncomfortably large.

The vintage books that we collect do not present this kind of world view. At the series book conference in La Crosse, Wisconsin in 1984, Hal Goodwin, for example, described Rick Brant and Scotty as being “honorable young men”. I’ve read a couple of commentaries recently on the Hardy Boys and other vintage series books that make fun of the characters’ innocence and virtue as if today’s world is more “mature”, more “true to life”, etc. I think such opinions are disturbingly wrong. The authors have confused innocence with naiveté, not knowing the difference themselves and thereby showing themselves to be the ones who are naïve.

The overstimulated, oversated, overfed easily-persuaded followers of the vapid fads and trends of today find their world boring, and saturate it with shallow sex, exaggerated violence, invented causes, and fake news. And then they still find themselves undirected and suffering from ennui and a desire for a new thrill or a new made-up cause. They look back on what generations ago found exciting and proper, and laugh at it with a smug, cynical, sneering sense of pseudo-self-superiority built on a foundation of shallowness and ignorance.

Writing about these ten books of The Railroad Series turned out to be a genuinely uplifting exercise for me; it helped me think through what I collect, what I read, and why. Clearly, most of the books we collect and enjoy are far from modern and were originally targeted for children of decades ago who were better educated than most children are today. If I enjoy these books, I am in good company. C. S. Lewis, creator of the Chronicles of Narnia in the early 1950s, wrote once about the value of reading old books. He said that a good book is one that you will read more than once; and that a good children’s book is one that a child will enjoy and then set aside when he becomes older, but which as an adult he will grow into being able to read again and enjoy and learn from in a new way. The vintage series books we collect and enjoy are living proof of Lewis’ wise assertion.

These books are inherently pure, teach right from wrong, and show right prevailing and wrong being overcome or punished or rendered powerless. In the fifth volume of The Railroad Series, we read, “Ralph had his enemies. From time to time along his brisk railroad career they had bobbed up at inopportune junctures, but never to his final disaster, for they were in the wrong, and right always prevails in the end.” (chapter one) Of course, real life isn’t like that every time, but I don’t think the point of the book’s message was to try to convince readers that it was so, but rather to teach a worthy moral truth.

The advertisements on the dust jackets of these books written for generations who lived a hundred or more years ago often appealed to parents with the assurance that the book would teach good morals to their children and entertain them in the right way. I think that many novels produced today take immoral behavior of many kinds, even among children and teenagers, as an unquestioned new standard; present as normative the futility of respecting what is good, just, and right; and teach that what previous generations held as virtue is boring, unreal, and unconvincing.

Unlike any other culture in human history, ours has abandoned the conviction that there is a reliable moral standard. As a result, our culture is in a disquieting downward spiral, for such a point of view is completely false and surely can have no lasting power. Even my three-year-old told me recently, “It’s fun to be good.” The Railroad Series books, and just about all of the vintage books I’ve written about in the Review, were popular in their day because they presented an exciting battle of good against evil in which good won, and upheld virtue and justice. I think that’s what most people believe; I am convinced that that’s what most people *want*, whether they actually believe it or not. I, for one, believe that these things are true, and choose the books that I read and collect by that conviction.

My house is filled with books published over the last 125 years that shout that life can be marked by adventure, delight, and virtue, and my children already love to look at them. From these books I have learned that the world is filled with wonder, how to think and reason logically, to distrust popular fads and trends, that joy conquers despair, that previous generations knew some really important stuff that our own age has dismissed as “hokey”, that it truly is “fun to be good”, that virtue really is its own reward, that heroism and sacrifice are among the best of human traits, and that having the ability and responsibility to make good decisions is what makes it possible for us to serve others. All of this speaks vital truth, and in books like these, that truth is all around us for the finding. Ralph Fairbanks in The Railroad Series presents these qualities in a marked way that is compelling and exciting, and hopefully even convincing.

I have no doubt that I have been shaped and made a better person by reading the vintage children’s series books featured in the Review, and several other collectors have told me the same thing.

Conclusion

So. These are the ten books of The Railroad Series. Most can be found today, sometimes as reprints, but originals can be found without extravagant effort at acceptable prices even in dust jacket. I don’t know why this would be so unless they were popular in their day, sold well, and many of their purchasers cared for the books and held onto them (as did their heirs) until a century later they would become available to collectors and connoisseurs like us.

There is an old-timey feel to them, which I found magnetic for drawing me into the stories, but there is a timeless quality to them as well. More than that, in a subtle way they drew me back to the time when I had a grandfather who had grown up in the era depicted in the books and who had taken me to Travel Town where, in a way, I could take my child’s imagination and slip into the exciting, picturesque world of Ralph Fairbanks.