

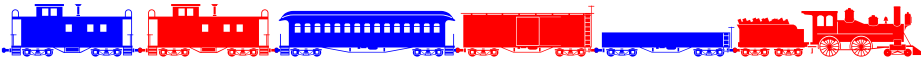
THE 4TH OF JULY TRAIN

JAMES W. SCHREIER



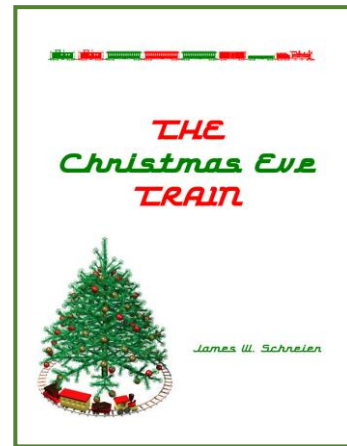
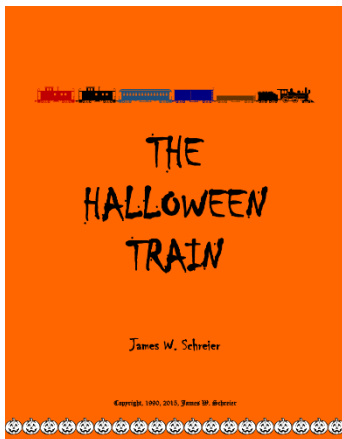
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James W. Schreier





*This story was written because of a love of trains, holidays, parents, grandparents, and children. The excitement that children feel about holidays is so special. The first story, **The Halloween Train**, was written when the real Erica, Andrew, and Dan were very young. Now wonderful, adults, it became time to share the story with them. For some reason, as time passes, and I reflect on these wonderful children, parents long gone, and life in general, other stories have appeared just like the trains in the stories.*

All of these stories are dedicated to three wonderful children, the grandparents (especially Gramps and Grandpa), and of course their mother.



James W. Schreier

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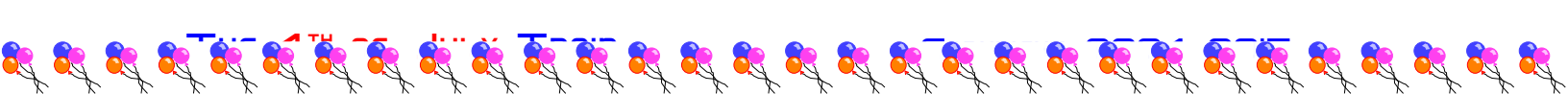


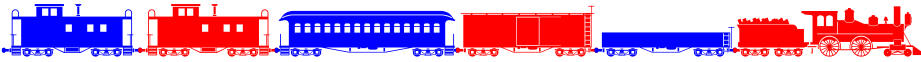


THE 4TH OF JULY TRAIN

After a Halloween experience the previous year that nobody involved could forget, but some were still hesitant to believe, Erica and AJ had tried to talk Dan into returning to the old train station a couple of times. Dan wasn't scared; he was just developing some youthful skepticism which would probably become a key characteristic of his already unique personality. But when the 4th of July rolled around, and presented the three children with a special problem, Erica went to A.J. and Dan and persuaded them to ride their bikes over to the station.

This particular 4th of July was in some ways like most that the children could remember, a walk to the nearby town square for the mid-morning parade, to be followed later in the day by an afternoon/evening picnic at Grandma and Grandpa's, a great place for cousins, barbecue, and fireworks because of the pool in the backyard. But it was different in some ways too, not just because of the unusual heat, but because the pool was being refinished and would not be ready on what everyone knew was going to be another record-setting hot day – the 10th in a row. What a year for preparation of the pool to be taking so long.





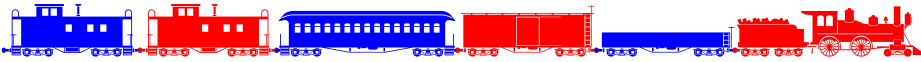
Most of the 4th of July was OK for Erica, A.J., and Dan – but they also knew that Dad could not be expected to be an active part of the day. Erica was the only one living at the time, and she was only 3 years old, but Dad’s father had passed away early one morning on a 4th of July. And, although the memory would fade when Erica grew older, these were the years when she still remembered “Gramps” and she did a pretty good job of telling stories about him to her younger brothers as they grew up. After spending the magical time with Gramps on the Halloween Train, Erica, A.J., and Dan were all convinced, even if they wouldn’t admit it even to each other, that they knew Gramps pretty well.



Dad was just a little quieter than usual on the 4th of July. He didn’t want to actively participate in the festivities, although in respect for the importance of the day, he made sure the flag was flying, he made sure the children got to the parade and the picnic – and he spend most of the day quietly reflecting on the memories of his father.

Dad’s relationship with his father had been as good as any father-son relationship could ever be. Even the teenage and college years had been generally devoid of the rebellion and arguments that had plagued so many father-son relationships. By the time Gramps passed away at age 76, he and Dad were as much friends as father and son could be. Gramps had introduced Dad to his love of trains, now Dad was sharing his own love of trains with his collection and occasional stories of train travels. Gramps had often taken Dad to auto races when Dad was a boy. Then Dad took Gramps to the



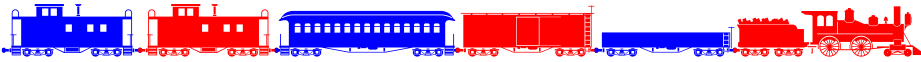


Indianapolis 500 several times. It would turn out to be one of those “tough days” of life every year on the 4th of July for Dad.

So this particular 4th of July started somewhat typical. The children made it through the parade with the usual fun of collecting candy tossed by parade participants. None of the children was into participating: maybe it was Dad’s mood that stopped them from decorating their bicycles for the parade. But by noon, the children were getting a little moody themselves, starting to be affected by the 95+ degree weather and the thought that there’d be no swimming that afternoon.

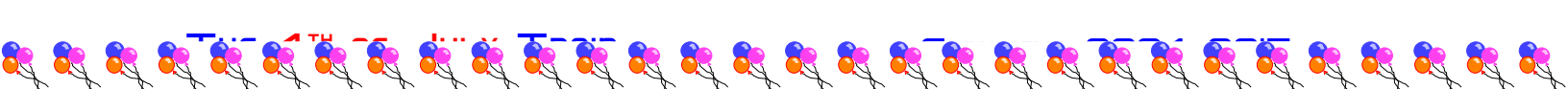
As it so often was (and is), Erica as the oldest instigated the plan. The previous summer, Mom and Dad had taken them to a new ‘water park’ about 90 miles away from their house. Water parks were relatively new at the time, the kids groaned the whole way wondering why they had to endure two hours in the van when they could just go over to Grandma’s pool. But that changed quickly when they discovered the pools, slides, and adventures of a water park. So Erica went to the boys and suggested that they ride their bikes over to the old train station, hoping that Gramps and the old train might be able to take them to the water park. Dad said “OK” to the first part, perhaps not paying much attention or perhaps because the children didn’t say anything about the second part.

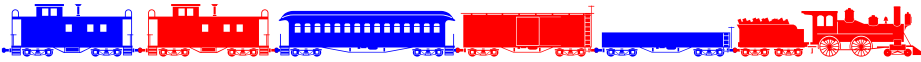




When Erica, AJ, and Dan got to the old train station, it was deserted as usual – in fact, it seemed even older and more dilapidated than their previous visit. It was pretty clear that the hot weather had done more damage to the station, the old engine, and the abandoned railroad cars that sat near the station. The children rode their bikes around the station a couple of times, then got off to peek inside the boarded-up station. There was nothing there. Dan spoke first, saying “I told you there’d be nothing here – if there ever was.” Erica didn’t want to agree but the station looked worse than their memories of the station at Halloween. She was ready to join the boys who were already on their bikes anxious to return home. As they were leaving, a very tall thin older man appeared from around the corner, calling their names and beckoning them to come back to the station. AJ and Dan weren’t sure who this was. He seemed to look like Abraham Lincoln, who filled Dad’s collection of Civil War material. Erica at first thought the same thing; then remembered that her great Uncle Joe not only looked a lot like the Abraham Lincoln, she knew from grade school history books but that her great Uncle Joe often dressed up as Lincoln for costume parties. What kind of a 4th of July was this going to turn out to be?

They all stopped and calmly walked over to Uncle Joe who asked: “What are you three doing here? It’s the 4th of July, you should be celebrating with your family. This is a very special day for families to remember how important our country is, how important freedom is – and how much fun you children can have because of those freedoms.”



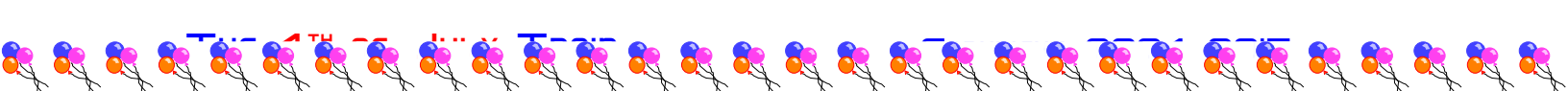


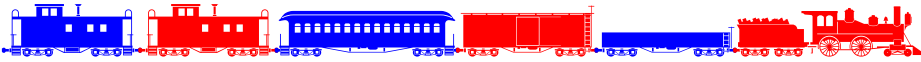
It was a little hot for the children to get really excited about patriotism – plus they weren't really old enough to understand the significance of the 4th of July. What they knew was that it was a holiday, there were parades and parties, and it was awfully hot.

They told their Uncle Joe that they were hoping to ride the old train to a water park. At first, he looked at them and at the old dilapidated train equipment with a very puzzled look on his face. Then he looked at the three children and suggested that they go around to the back of the train station and see what might be there – especially since there was now some music obviously coming from that area.

On the other side of the station, not much had changed. An old speaker hanging above the back door of the station was the obvious source of some music that the children immediately recognized as some of “Dad’s music.” It was folk music and the children quickly recognized some of the songs they would probably deny ever hearing when they got older. There were also a few bags of red, white, and blue decorations. Uncle Joe suggested: “Maybe you three need to get in the spirit of the 4th of July...” Silently he was thinking, “or maybe if they spend some time decorating their bikes, they won't be thinking so much about the heat and the closed pool.”

A.J. was willing to go along with this part of the game. He was already showing some signs of artistic interest, drawing more than the usual pictures and trying to create some cartoons. So he quickly got into looking for streamers, crepe paper, flag stickers,



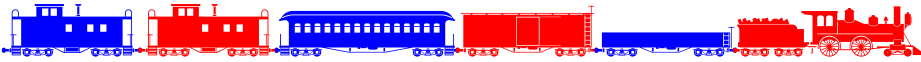


and other things to start decorating his bike. Erica didn't do as much but she got into enough to make her bike worthy of the parade they'd skipped earlier in the day. And both Erica and AJ then helped Dan finish his bike. When they finished decorating their bikes, they looked around for Uncle Joe but he was gone. And the music had stopped. Dan said, with a hint of both sarcasm and disappointment, "Let's go home. We just wasted an hour decorating our bikes for nothing." But in whatever reality this was, nothing was further from the truth.

Erica, A.J., and Dan got on their bikes, and started riding around from the back of the station, heading for the bike path that would take them back home. They figured it would be pretty easy to explain their absence. They'd just tell mom and dad that they stopped at their cousin's house and decided to decorate their bikes – it was something to do in the hot weather. However...

As they came around to the front of the station, what they saw caused them to "hit the brakes," skid their bikes, jump off, and run toward a train that was just as beautiful as the Halloween Train they'd ridden on just a few months ago. There, sitting on the tracks, was a beautiful steam engine making a lot noise and powerful white smoke coming from the smoke stack. And behind the engine was a glorious collection of brightly decorated railroad cards, all decked out in bright silver with more red, white, and blue than all of this morning's parade.





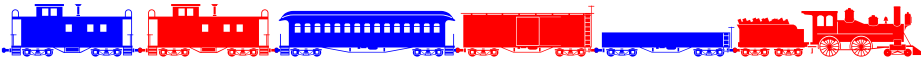
And if there was any doubt in children’s minds about what happened last November, it disappeared when they turned back to look at the station and saw dozens of people filing out of the train station. They were dressed, at least according to Erica, A.J., and Dan, in some very strange clothes. Although anyone who’s familiar with “The Music Man” could see this was an old-fashioned (1910’s) 4th of July party – and this group of people was heading for the picnic, the park, and the lake. But more importantly, leading the entire group of people, which included a variety of younger and older people, were two people that this time Erica, AJ, and Dan all recognized immediately. “Gramps!” shouted Erica. “Grandpa!” hollered A.J. and Dan at the same time.

Gramps just knelt down and waited for the three children to come over and give him a hug. It was even more emotional that a few months ago because this time, the three children all knew Gramps and they all knew, especially A.J. because he knew he had been born just a few weeks after Gramps had died, how special this day was. It didn’t take Gramps long to tell the children: “Somehow, I just knew you’d be here today. It is so hot and your Grandpa told me the pool wasn’t ready. But let’s hurry, we want to have plenty of time for swimming – and still get back for the fireworks tonight.”

Outside by the train, Grandpa was directing people to the different cars of the train.

“C’mon you three,” he shouted, “you’ll be in this car with us. I want to thank you for

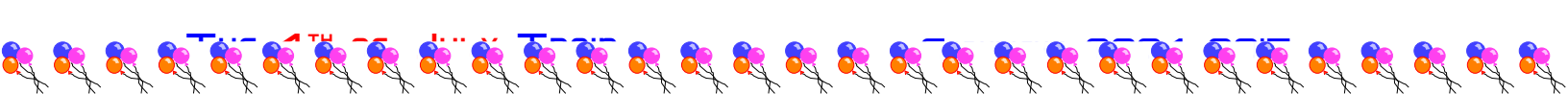




coming today. I wish there was something I could have done to help get the pool ready for today. But...”

The three children were so excited that they just rushed to board the train, only momentarily wondering where they were going. For the next hour or so, the train rumbled through the countryside, passing dozens of brightly decorated towns and cities, some with parades in full swing just as the train passed though, others with picnic and partying activities just getting started. For most of the trip, everyone on the train, including the children joined in singing. The children recognized every song; they’d heard Dad playing them all the time. But today they were glad they’d heard them so often and they did the best they could joining in on “This Land Is Your Land,” “There’s a Meetin’ Here Tonight,” “Michael,” “Puff, the Magic Dragon,” and others.

Then everyone stopped singing, the train slowed to a stop, and the children found themselves at a park that matched some of their memories of Disney World. It was a huge water park, festively decorated for the 4th of July. Even the pools were special for the 4th. One of the wave pools was much “bluer” than usual and the lazy river which let people float around park in inner tubes, seemed filled with bright red water. The lazy river was very popular with the Gramps and Grandpa but even all of the young children took at least one turn of the park.





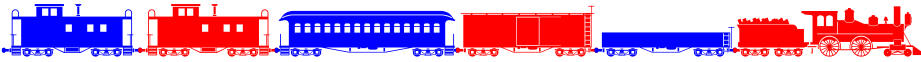
Erica, A.J. and Dan found plenty to do – and plenty of food. Even the food was 4th of July colors. The ice cream choices were almost always red, white, or blue. There was red or blue ketchup for the hot dogs and french fries. The M&M Candies were only available in red, white, and blue. It was goofy – and fun!

The children spent most of their time frolicking in the various pools, racing down the water slides, and having a wonderful, cooling, time in the hot afternoon. They roamed the park, running from pool to pool, from slide to slide. But at every pool, they noticed that Gramps, or Grandpa, or Uncle Joe was watching to make sure they were safe.

After what seemed like the whole day, but must have been just a few hours, Grandpa came up to them as they exited one of the pools and told them it was time to head home. He told them: “Grandma will be worried if you don’t show up for the fireworks on time. I suspect your mom and dad are already trying to explain while they’re late for the barbecue.” (Back home, mom and dad were originally worried until they remembered that the children had gone to the train station. Now they were parked by the train station, watching the children’s decorated bikes, waiting for the children to return, hoping to see the train that would bring them back, knowing they probably wouldn’t see it).

While Erica, A.J. and Dan were sad to leave the water park, they were honestly a little tired, and anxious to get home. They had an awful lot to tell mom and dad – if they’d





believe it. They re-boarded the beautiful red, white, and blue train, heard the music and singing start again – and promptly fell asleep

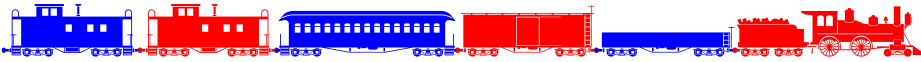
The next thing the children remember is walking out of the train station, seeing their bikes and both mom and dad waiting by the family’s van. When mom asked about where they’d been, all three children said “later.” and headed back home on their bikes. “We’ll tell you at Grandma’s. What time do the fireworks start?”

Mom was skeptical about the story she heard later from Erica, A.J. and Dan. But she had ended up believing the story of the pumpkins when Dad came back from the train station with all the pumpkins. This time, she could tell that the children had been outside, and swimming, most of the day. And she knew her own father, Grandpa, well enough to know that some of the things he told the children that afternoon could only have come from him.



Dad wasn’t skeptical at all – he was really beginning to think about what other mysterious train rides the children might experience in the future. But later that night, while the family enjoyed the fireworks, Dad sat quietly thinking about his children’s opportunity to spend a few hours with his dad. He wondered what stories he told them. A few minutes later, A.J. came over to talk to Dad. He told Dad that he didn’t know that he had had a chance to ride on a freight engine at his dad’s work, when he was just





a little older than A.J. It was true and something Dad would never forget. Then, Dan came over and asked why there were only three different kinds of ice cream when Dad was a boy – particularly when they visited a town up north on vacation, the town with the old train engine in the middle of the park. Dad knew that one was definitely true, he could clearly remember how his dad loved strawberry ice cream, or peach, when it was the only other choice than chocolate or vanilla. And Dad could take his own children to that town up north with the train engine still right downtown where it's been for decades.

But when Erica came over at the end of the night, already worrying a little bit about her father, but tired from a long, somewhat unexplainable, day, the reality of the children's journey really hit Dad's heart. Erica asked Dad what it was like to take a long train ride, alone, out to Iowa to visit his cousins. Dad had done that when he was 12 years old. He spent a week with his cousins on the farm, then drove back home with them. Dad remembered a lot of the details of that trip.

And this particular 4th of July ended like no other.

All board!



Illustration by Andrew J. Schreier

