THE SIDE TRACK
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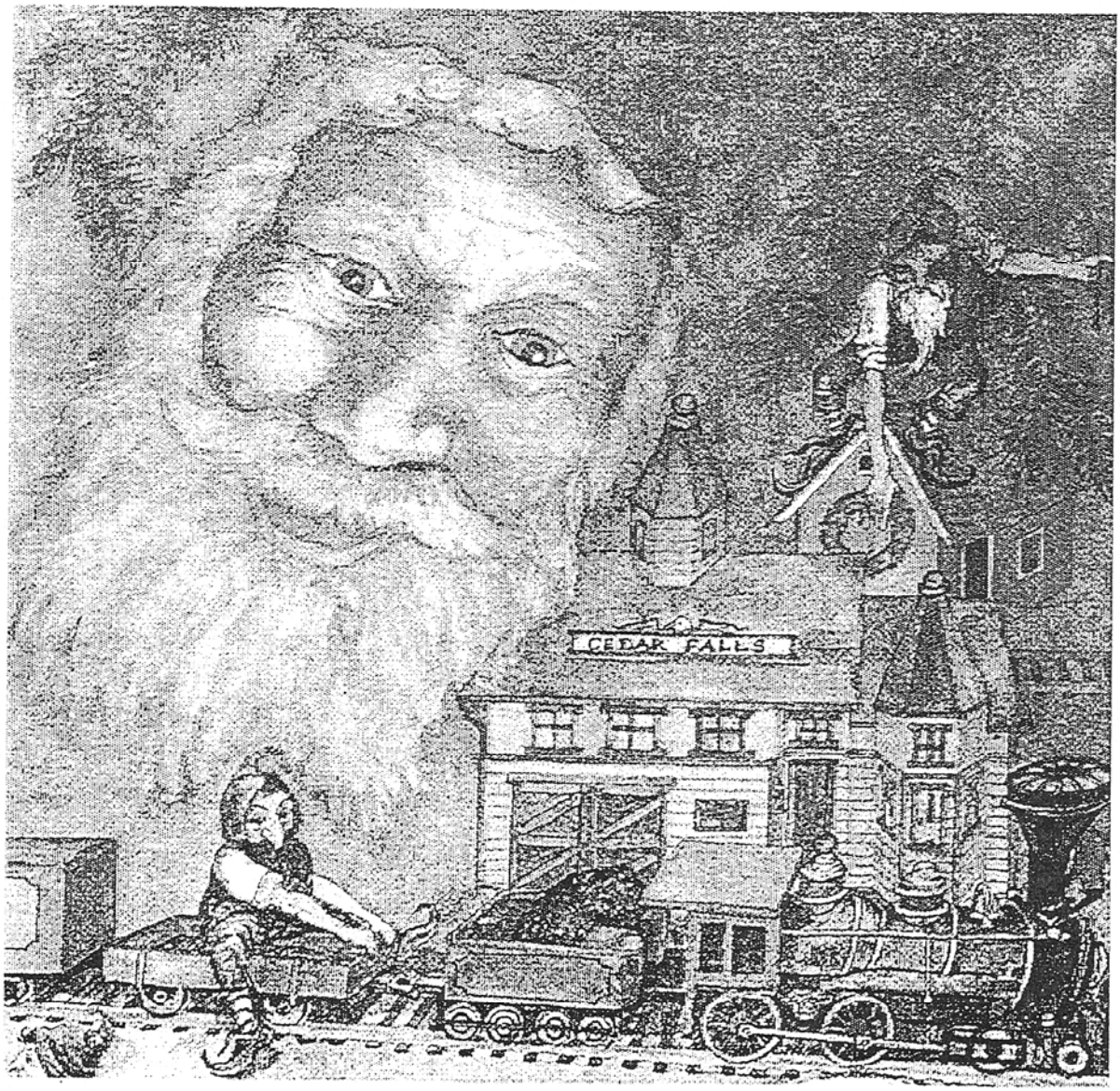
A Train for Christmas



The iron horse is a holiday icon...but why?

A Train for Christmas

By John P. Hankey

The time of year has arrived during which, as in years past, hobby shops and toy retailers will sell millions of dollars' worth of electric trains to boys (mostly) of all ages. Many of those trains will be set up underneath Christmas trees in a holiday ritual a century old. Millions of Christmas cards bearing quaint images of steam locomotives will clog the mails; images from old Currier and Ives lithographs of 19th-century trains and cozy station scenes reappear on everything from place mats to wrapping paper.

Trains do not so prominently figure in holiday traditions in the rest of the Western world. Ask a European whether he or she associates railroading with Christmas as we Americans do. Most of them think we are a bit daffy.

Even most Americans are at a loss to explain why nostalgic images of a basic industry like railroading should so pervade what is nominally a religious festival. Why should a picture of an antique locomotive bounding through snow help define what we know as the "holiday season?" Why should a religious observance be the proximate cause for so many men and boys (and perhaps girls, although very few women) to take up the pursuit of model railroading? Why hang likenesses of trains on a pine tree inside the home? And for that matter, why is the pine tree there in the first place?

There are no firm answers, of course, and many possibilities. Folklorists and anthropologists describe how America in general and individual groups in particular observe Christmas. Historians describe the industrialization of the United States and its effects on people. Students of society and popular culture have their hands full trying to explain everything from the perceived decline of Western civilization to the symbolic meaning of Monday night football. Scholarship has yet to find the time to investigate why we as a country seem inordinately fascinated with trains, and why they figure so prominently at Christmas. Perhaps the process by which we take bits and pieces of our own experiences and fashion them into a distinctive American culture explains at least a few of these quirky traditions.

That tendency to innovate defines us as a people: America as a country, and Americans as a nation, created a wholly new society out of the cultures of the Old and New worlds. Sometimes that process was self-conscious. We took the "melting pot" metaphor quite seriously, and placed great stock in being assimilated as Americans. The very newness, bigness and rate of change here brought forth traditions cobbled from seemingly incompatible sources. Such was the case around the turn of the 20th century.

We had been celebrating Christmas since the founding of the first European colonies in the New World. Early American Christmases closely followed the individual customs of the European settlers—Dutch, English, Spanish, Swedish and French. The Christmas tree, for example, was primarily a Northern European tradition with origins even before the birth of Christ. An evergreen tree in Nordic and Teutonic mythology somehow became associated with marking the holiday. Decorating the tree did not necessarily have deeper significance. It was simply human nature to want to brighten things up.

Christmas trees only became widespread in America after the Revolution; we didn't even adopt the term until the 1830s. The practice spread throughout the country to the point that after the Civil War, even families of Spanish, French or African origin—none of whom had a history of erecting highly stylized trees in their houses and exchanging gifts—were versed in this evolving American custom.

Borrowing from religious customs from many countries, we often created Nativity scenes beneath the Christmas trees. This was a solemn and highly symbolic gesture of faith, and for many became a source of pride. A family might hand down its handcrafted crèche through generations, each one refining the figures and adding to the scene. The holiday tree and Nativity scene thrilled children and brightened what could be a grim, cold existence. At least some people saw no reason to limit this creative outlet to a single subject.

Somewhere in the German-speaking parts of Europe there originated the custom of creating a small

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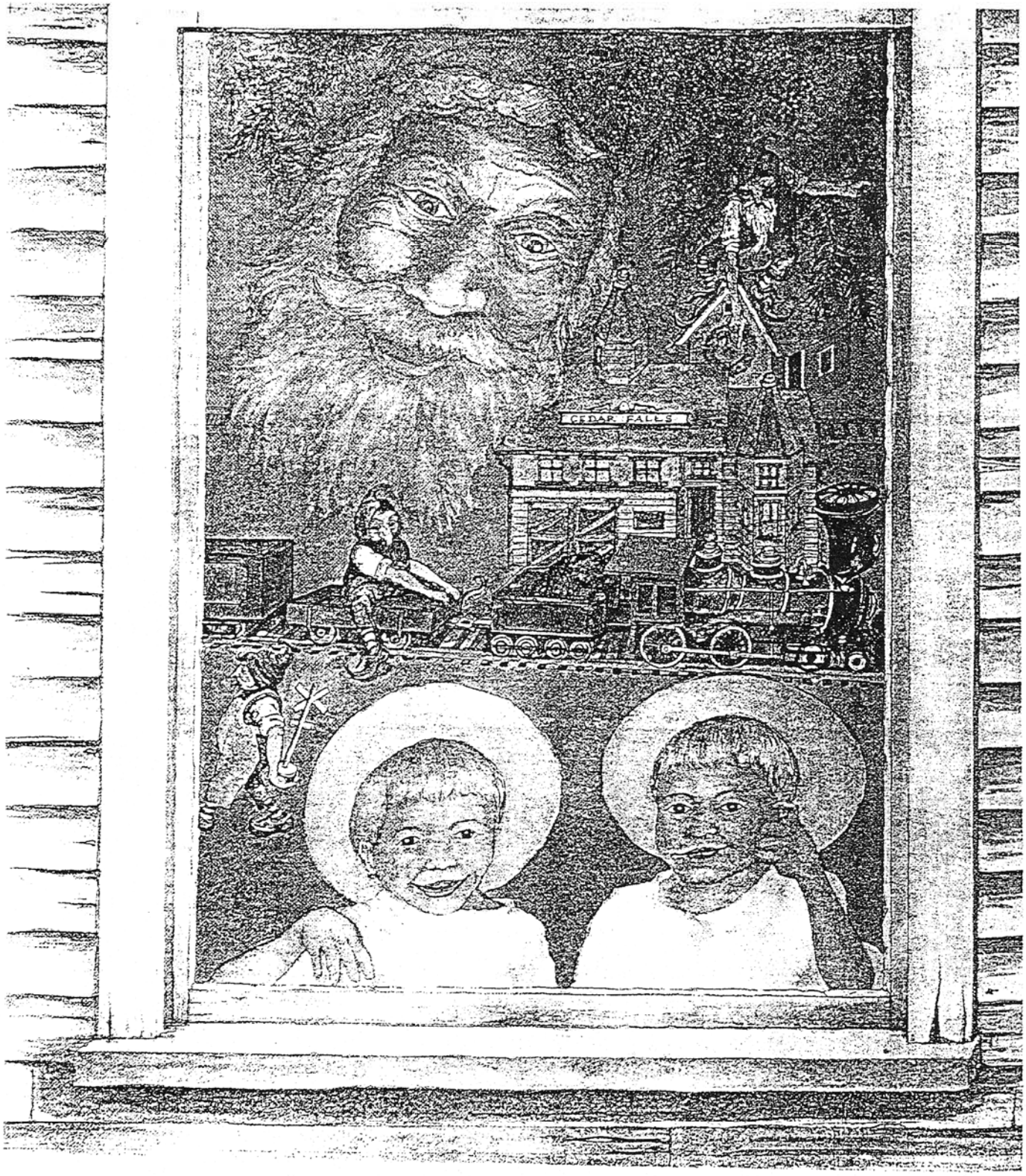

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representation of one's home village beneath the Christmas tree. Perhaps there was some symbolism involved in placing a crèche in the context of one's hometown. In any case, in the late 19th century, these *putzes* came to America and became "Christmas gardens." Children and adults crafted elaborately and fancifully detailed houses, shops, street scenes and farms beneath the tree. Sometimes they covered the dining-room table. As more sophisticated and cheaper toys appeared in the 1870s and 1880s, some people also added mechanical gizmos and clockwork automata.

At the same time, Americans' fascination with railroading grew unabated. Boys wanted to grow up to be locomotive engineers as well as soldiers and presidents. Just as little girls regularly received dolls as presents, from the 1850s on boys played with toy trains. Some were homemade. Many were mass-produced in the rapidly expanding consumer economy of the Reconstruction, when the average American began to have both disposable income and access to well-stocked stores. Even the way we treated children changed. They were no longer sent into the fields or factories at age seven to earn their keep.

Many attended school, and some even had time to play.

These early toy trains were of painted wood, cast iron or lithographed tinplate. "Floor trains" had wheels and could be pulled about with a string. Later trains had crude flanged wheels and ran on tracks, like the real thing. Europe was far ahead of the United States in producing and marketing toy trains for both children and adults, and European firms sold extensively to U.S. markets. By the 1880s, one could purchase live steam toy locomotives that actually burned fuel and operated like the full-size ones. Wind-up clockwork and electric trains were increasingly common by 1905.

By that time, Christmas had taken on its modern outlines in America. Christmas trees were widely accepted as the prevailing symbol of the season, and the rise of mass merchandising made this holiday the primary gift-giving occasion. Thousands of factories across the country produced a range of inexpensive products unimaginable just 50 years before.

The new availability of parcel post led to the rise of a tremendous mail-order retail industry in the 1890s, making Christmas available to anyone anywhere in the country. Santa Claus in his various incarnations was ubiquitous. As in business and politics, we adopted bribery and collusion as the season's governing principles: Only good girls and boys received presents on Christmas morning, arbitrated by an omniscient Santa and facilitated by Mom, Pop, Sears and Roebuck, and Montgomery Ward.

The threads of our story begin to converge early in this century with the introduction of American-produced clockwork and electric trains. They were costly, but they were still within reach of the growing middle class. Lionel, Ives, Marx, American Flyer and dozens of smaller manufacturers competed intensely for the Christmas toy-train market. Finding a train set under the tree on Christmas morning became a rite of passage for American youth. Baseball, bicycles and electric trains characterized the ideal childhood. Putting the train set together the night before introduced adults to electric trains and sowed the seeds of today's hobby of model railroading.

Through that wonderful process of assimilation and reinvention, the Christmas *putz* of 1880 became the Christmas garden of 1915, which became the Christmas train set of 1925. Families at first added wind-up or electric trains to their village and Nativity scenes. Their real life was held together one way or another by the railroads that crisscrossed the country, so it was not surprising that they should have trains in these Christmas gardens. Electric trains rapidly became more popular, less expensive, colorful and well-detailed. Soon the tail began wagging the dog: Trains became the centerpiece of the display around the tree.

Throughout this same period, the United States was likewise reinventing its popular culture. In the late 19th century, this included vaudeville and music halls; dime novels; ragtime dance; and such forms of artistic endeavor as Currier and Ives lithographs, Christmas cards, advertising and magazine-cover art. Railroading figured prominently in all of it, just as automobiles dominate today's popular culture.

The principal centers for the creation and distribution of this emerging mass culture were in the north, where snow is common and Christmas traditions evolved from Northern European ones are particularly strong. Although the idea of a "white Christmas" was patently absurd for much of the country, New York, Boston and Philadelphia generated millions of words and images describing colorful steam trains chugging through snow carrying travelers home for the holidays. Sleighs were relatively rare in Georgia or Texas or California, but almost everyone could relate to trains.

Travel itself became an important American holiday tradition. Before the Civil War, few people traveled except to do business or resettle. But after the war, the completely new pastime of leisure travel boomed.

In that same period, increasing numbers of students attended colleges away from home. Thousands of workers followed their crafts or careers around the country, while millions of immigrants spread out from enclaves in the big cities. All these people had reason to travel for the Christmas holidays, and travel they did—by rail. The congestion that we now experience in airports between Thanksgiving and Christmas used to take place in train stations.

By 1900, the locomotive had become something of an icon in America. It was the fastest thing on land, and even early airplanes could not beat an engine such as New York Central Railroad's No. 999 at 112 miles per hour. Steam and steel, as epitomized by trains, defined the industrial revolution that had made the United States a world power. As the railroad industry itself matured around the turn of the century, it capitalized on its central role in American economic life with lavish advertising and a splendid public relations job. This truly was the golden age of railroading.

Perhaps, then, our association of trains with Christmas is just an example of how we create traditions in America: through curiosity, convenience and a way to make a buck. With so many people from so many places shaping life in America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there was room in our popular culture for a little industrial whimsy. At the same time that the nature of Christmas changed from a rather private religious observance to a universally celebrated retail bonanza, railroading peaked in importance and prestige.

No one singlehandedly decided that electric trains were an appropriate complement to the decorated tree; it just happened. There certainly was no deep significance in choosing a cute train in the snow to convey holiday greetings—but people bought it.

We retain warm feelings for these symbols and images and traditions even if we never directly experienced the originals. In this age of facsimile, when our reality is so often digitized, fast-frozen, prerecorded or otherwise "enhanced," I find it reassuring that something so elemental as a steam train in the snow can still sell Christmas cards.

Perhaps we unselfconsciously associate Lionel or scale HO or toy trains with the season because we enjoy that reminder of comprehensible technology and simply use Christmas as an excuse. For whatever reason, trains remain as much an idiosyncratic American Christmas tradition as holly berries and Bing Crosby. It's a wonderful life.

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