

## The Christmas Troop Trains By Pat Hodapp

Old locomotives, steam powered giants pulling car load after car load of passenger cars and make-shift hospital cars made their way slowly through the snowy farmlands. World War II was at its height and injured soldiers were being sent to military hospitals all over the country.

Our farm was just outside of Galesburg, a small farming village. The main train line across Michigan, Detroit to Chicago, was at the end of our country farm road. The trains no longer rolled fast past our farm. No passenger cars at twilight with lighted windows and elegant passengers seated at tables with food and wine headed to Detroit or Chicago. Now the trains stopped at the end of our road to be put on a siding to go to Ft. Custer Veteran's Hospital.

Our dad usually plowed our road to the train tracks three times a week, letting the snow blow into drifts until he had to go out again. That December in 1944, snows were coming every day. Blizzards of biting snow would cut through a wool mackintosh and freeze tears to your face.

Starting that fall, there would be a knock at the front door and a soldier waiting quietly at the front door. Our old dog Sandy would sidle up to the soldier to be petted and nuzzle him until he did get petted. As we opened the door the soldiers always begged our pardon for disturbing us, but "The farm house so looked like home."

We had little to spare, but mother would ask my sister and me to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich on her homemade bread and get a glass of our fresh milk. The soldiers would sit quietly near our furnace register to get warm and drink glass after glass of fresh milk.

Mother would quietly ask if they had run into our brother Jack in any of their travels. It was a long shot but, mother had to ask. We had had no word from our brother in six months. Yet no mail or packages we had sent had come back to us.

With so many soldiers walking to the house, our Dad began pulling a sledge behind the old case tractor every day to make a path for the soldiers through the drifts. Soldier after soldier would manage to leap or crawl off the trains to trudge to our farm house. They would only leave when the MPs came down the lane to the house for them.

As Christmas drew near, my sister and I pulled out the old egg crates filled with Christmas lights and ornaments for our tree. Before we decorated the tree, Mother said, "Girls, let's put the tree in the dining room window this year, then even the soldiers on the trains can see the lights."

On December 26, the Feast Day of St. Stephen, an extra long train idled across our driveway. The engineer had to make two trips to Ft. Custer Hospital to get all of the train cars in to be unloaded. My sister and I were singing our favorite Christmas carol, "Good King Wenceslas went out, on the feast of Stephen, when the snow lay all about deep and crisp and even." When we heard a light knock at the front door, Mother opened it up. There stood a soldier

so bandaged around his head and shoulders and leaning so unsteadily on a crutch she was afraid he would fall over.

Over milk and sandwich, the soldier asked, "Is this Galesburg? I heard we were heading home." My mother caught her breath and replied, "Yes, this is Galesburg. My son is in Europe. Did you ever meet my son Jack, by chance?"

"Jack? Jack Conor? Hell, yes. Oh, excuse me for swearing, Ma'am. I mean yes, Ma'am. Jack and I played football in high school. I'm Dick Rundio. We met up in a hospital in France."

"How is he? Is he badly injured? France? This is the first we've heard about him in six months."

"Well, he's healing from a gunshot wound, but is about to die from homesickness. He has not heard from you for months. About the only thing keeping him going were the Galesburg Argus newspapers I'd get from my Mom and talking about Galesburg football games. He read every word over and over. He thought everyone had forgotten about him. That Argus that listed all the Galesburg soldiers did perk him up when he saw your salute to him from your whole family."

Mother cried out, "We wrote and wrote and sent packages" and began to cry.

Rundio said, "They just couldn't catch up with our being moved hospital to hospital."

We heard the train whistle and looked out to see two MPs trudging through the snow.

"Mrs. Conor, here is the last address I had in the hospital. If he has been moved, they will get your mail to him."

We quickly made sandwiches for the MPs. They apologized to our mother for bothering us, but "The soldiers would do about anything to get off the train when they see a friendly farm house."

An MP asked, "Don't you ever get tired of the unwanted visitors? They must be a hassle and trains blocking your road all the time."

"Oh, no it is no bother," my mother quickly replied. "That train out there is a true Christmas train and this young man just brought us the best present ever."

The farm continued to have soldiers visit from the hospital trains through the end of the war. My brother did get our mail thanks to that chance encounter with his high school buddy. And he came home in 1946.

My mother never called it chance. She knew it was St. Stephen who made it happen. Every year on December 26 she would light a candle and put it in the window facing the railway tracks to help guide anyone who needed help.