

Train in the Distance

All I wanted for Christmas was a Super Chief model train set

by John Stark Sunday, December 15, 2013



The year was 1959, and I was 12 years old. I knew exactly what train I wanted. As the holidays approached, I pointed it out to my parents at our local hobby shop. It was an HO-gauge replica of the Santa Fe Super Chief, which ran between Los Angeles and Chicago from 1936 to 1971. Billed as a "grand hotel on rails," it's considered to be the sleekest, most beautiful passenger

train ever built in America. Because of its glamorous Hollywood clientele, it was dubbed “the train of the stars.”

My father, a traveling salesman, was between jobs, so there wasn't much money to spend on gifts that year. He sat me down a few weeks before Christmas. “We know how much you want that model train,” he said, “but we just can't afford it.”

I was told to come up with some other options. “A pea coat,” I said, reluctantly.

One reason I was in love with that model train is because I had been a passenger on the real thing. The year was 1953, and I was five years old. The journey east across America — over painted deserts and green farmland — took 39 and 3/4 hours each way. Ours was a one-way trip. We were on our way to Detroit to pick up a new car — a two-door Plymouth coupe. In those days, you could watch your car being assembled at the factory, then drive it home, pre-interstate. This was our summer vacation.

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I have pictures of my family at L.A.'s Union Station, waiting to board the Super Chief. My mother is in a flower-patterned sundress and open-toed shoes. My father is wearing a sports coat, slacks and tie. A Panama hat sits atop his head.

Despite my young age, I have vivid memories of that magical ride. Although the diesel-powered train had streamlined sleeper cars, we slept in our seats, which reclined. Still, it was a deluxe experience, even for us blue-collar mortals. The train had air conditioning, a dining car with tables and linens, a barbershop and the Pleasure Dome lounge car, which provided a Cinerama-like view of the passing scenery.

My favorite part of the Super Chief was the rear observation car with the rounded end. That's due to the elderly black porter who sat at the very back of it. While our parents smoked, read or socialized, he'd entertain us kids with a sly game.

He'd tell us to watch the arms of the mechanical semaphore signals that lined the tracks, and were visible from the train's back window. They'd go from an up position to a down position after the train had passed them. He told us it was our job to help the engineer drive the train by operating them. That was done, he told us, by pushing the lever atop a black and chrome standing ashtray — the lever that makes the cigarette butt fall into the container. The porter would tell us, “Push now!” after the train had passed a signal. As we did, its arm would suddenly drop. It happened every time.

When, as a 12-year-old, I looked under our aluminum tree on Christmas morning, I saw a large rectangular box with my name on it. Dare I dream? Was it my train set? I glanced at my parents, who were beaming as they drank their morning coffee. They'd come through after all. They made the financial sacrifice so I could have what I truly wanted.

When I unwrapped the present, I did indeed find a train set waiting for me. And it was an HO gauge, just like I had hoped for.

It just wasn't the Super Chief.

Its engine wasn't silver. The name "Santa Fe" wasn't written across its blunt, red and yellow nose. This engine was industrial black with a coal car attached to it. Instead of a sleeper, lounge and diner car, there was a boxcar, a flatbed car and a stock car for taking model cows to slaughter.

"We were going to get you the Super Chief," my father explained, "but the man at the hobby shop said passenger trains aren't for boys. Boys get freight trains."

I felt as if an oncoming express had hit me.

Like it or not, it was also an awakening. There were rules back then.

I really should have insisted on the pea coat.