

Railroad Memories by Rodney Hanson

We hadda a guy in our town who walked the tracks every day. I'd watch Otto stand on the corner by Fankhanel's Pool Hall, look at the Model "A" drive by, probably watch Ferdinand Manke pull into town with his team of horses, and then head down the half-block to the Soo Line Depot.

Some days he'd head south toward Dent, disappear for a couple hours and then reemerge alongside the S&F oil station and walk back up Main Street and past my Dad's hardware store.

The next day you'd see him again head down to the tracks, but take the north run up past the Theissen Pickle Factory and head toward Detroit Lakes. I don't think he went all the way to either of those towns because he'd always come back up Main Street and I might still be sitting on the porch in front of the "Little Raddison" Hotel taking in all the excitement of that one block main street.

What I remember is this was something we watched over the years, a couple times each day, a part of the everyday routine in a small town like ours (like Ernie Brooks walking down to the post office behind Peterson's Grocery for his mail every day, or Gust Dey coming down for his daily beer every morning).

People said that Otto had been gassed in the First World War twenty years earlier and it changed him forever.

It bothered me then, as just a young kid on Main Street, because I felt it was sad and unfair that he should be haunted by those memories. But I quit thinking about it as I grew up and must admit I quit wondering when he quit walking and where he eventually went. And that really bothers me now.

We hadda another guy in our town back then who also found the railroad tracks an escape from

the reality of Main Street Vergas. If you've ever tried to walk the railway, you'll remember how difficult it is to step from one tie to the next and keep a steady gait—it's either too short a step or too long a step.

But, on the other hand, if you try to balance on the steel rail itself it's awfully hard to stay on it unless you happen to have "tennies" that fit your feet.

The guy I'm recalling we knew as "Looney"—a common nickname then for anyone whose real name was Louis. He was somewhat of a blacksmith and came up with a bicycle he could ride on the tracks. It was quite a contraption.

Picture a couple of guides going down each side of the tires of the bike to keep it on the one rail, and then an arm reaching out to a third wheel on the opposite rail to maintain the balance.

He could go all the way to either Dent or Detroit Lakes without any worry about being hit because everyone knew the freight and mail schedules.

And there was no chance of getting lost. But I think the depot agent (old man Smith) must have squealed because the Soo Line officials made him quit using it.

I suppose they were concerned about how it could possibly affect their passenger service.

