

# THE PALIMPSEST

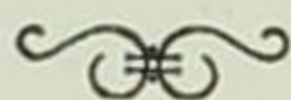
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## Iowa Boyhood

There is much to be said for putting one's self in the proper setting. It is only fitting then, in assembling material for the life-story of America's last famous writer of railroad short stories, Harry Bedwell, that I visit his Iowa birthplace by train. Furthermore, Bedwell started railroading on the very line I elected to ride.

My odyssey into the "Harry Bedwell Country" began the moment I alighted from the Rock Island's *Twin Star Rocket* at Chariton, Iowa. Going over to the Burlington's station, I found the 5 a.m. mixed train for Kellerton would be very late on account of heavy soybean movements. When the belated train did leave, at 11:45 a.m., I was aboard. Although it was the fall of 1957 and the newspaper headlines were full of Russia's first Sputnik, launched a few days earlier, this branch line retained much of the leisurely pace of Bedwell's day. In wending its unhurried course through the rolling countryside, the local freight is close to nature. Thanks to Conductor L. E. Al-



lan, I was permitted to enjoy the bright autumnal foliage from the cupola high up in the caboose. The line and depots, and even the little red caboose, have changed but little during the half century that has passed since the slim, tow-headed youth from Kellerton "pounded brass" as a telegraph operator.

Humeston, the first major stop, retains the original wooden station of Bedwell's day. Likewise, the bisecting branch running east to the Mississippi below Keokuk is still intact. But its western segment across southern Iowa to Shenandoah is only a memory. Gone, too, are the puffing branch line locals which made Humeston such a busy place at train-time. After our LCL freight was unloaded, waybills checked, and cars set out in the traditional manner, we "highballed" south.

Two stations down the line is Leon, once a throbbing junction, where Bedwell worked as relief operator. In the wooded, hilly region he had one of his most thrilling experiences, which will be mentioned later.

Our train whistled for Davis City, formerly a division point, now identified by the crumbling remains of a roundhouse. The freight sharply reduced speed as the engines climbed to the plateau. At Giles, where there is a sign and a phone-box, the line diverges. One section goes west to Mount Ayr, the other continues south to St. Joseph, Missouri. Here the caboose and much of



the train is set out so as to lighten the load for the long, steep grade to Mount Ayr.

After all hands get aboard the two 1000-h.p. diesels, coupled cab-to-cab Siamese fashion, the bobtailed train starts westward. At Lamoni the engines came to a halt adjacent to the campus of Graceland College. Because of the needs of this school of the Reorganized Church of the Latter Day Saints, the sidings are crowded with box cars. It is nearly dusk when the switching is done and the train gets rolling again through the fields and pasture lands of southwest Iowa.

"We haven't any work to do at Kellerton," observes Allan, "so we'll stop just long enough to let you off."

Presently the engineer shuts off the throttle and the little train slows down for the unattended box-car depot. This is Kellerton (population 483), birthplace and boyhood home of Bedwell.

Harry Chester Bedwell was born on a farm about five miles southwest of Kellerton on January 8, 1888. He was the younger of Chester and Flora (Crow) Bedwell's two children. Harry, along with his older brother, Howard, spent his early childhood on the farm. He helped with the many chores in the farmhouse and showed a great fondness for animals. His love for pets never left him, and to the end of his days there was always a dog or two in the household.



The family later moved into town, which was then a thriving cattle-shipping point. While he was still in school his parents were separated, and it fell to Flora Bedwell's lot to bring up the children. It also meant Harry had to do odd jobs to help his mother meet expenses. Some of the older townsfolk recall the lanky, smiling boy delivering milk from the family cows or taking mail from depot to post office. Of special pride was his Indian-Shetland pony, "Daisy," on which he sometimes rode to school. With that little bay animal Harry was the envy of every kid in the neighborhood.

From contemporary accounts he was a friendly, happy-go-lucky youngster. Whether it was participating in "kick the stick" (a game similar to "hide and seek"), hunting, or playing the alto horn in the Kellerton band, Harry was much in evidence. It is also said he was the youngest of his group to smoke buggy whip, weeds and corn-silk. In short, he was a normal, wholesome young man. The only incident which ever got him into any serious trouble was the firing of his 32-caliber pistol too freely one Halloween. He easily outran the aged town marshall but nevertheless was fined \$7.85 next day for carrying concealed firearms.

"Little Blue," as Harry was nicknamed, was an avid reader. Like many of his chums, he read Terry Alcott, Frank Merriwell, and other five-cent



Westerns. He was also a devotee of the old *Youth's Companion*, considered by some as the finest young people's magazine of all time. In school he learned quickly and generally stood at the head of his class. When the examination came around on Friday it was a safe bet Harry was the first one through — and out of school for the weekend.

Fired with adventure from relatively wide reading for a farm boy, and being of a restless nature with an inquiring mind, Harry wanted to go places and see things. No, farming was not for him. In a day before the general use of the automobile, when radio and TV were unheard of, living in a rural community could be singularly provincial. But there was one aspect of town life which spelled romance, far-off places, and the great beyond. That was the arrival and departure of passenger trains. Kellerton was situated on a loop diverging from the Chariton-St. Joseph Branch at Giles (then called Togo) and returning to it at Albany, Missouri. Possibly due to the predominance of cattle on the circuitous route, it was called the "Dirty Side." The shorter line by way of Bethany, Missouri, was referred to as the "Straight Side."

Be that as it may, the little locals meant a lot to Kellerton, particularly the early morning train, which originated at Mount Ayr and went up to the state capital via Leon and Osceola. Its arrival



from Des Moines around supper time was a big event in the town. The other trains, one in either direction, called at Kellerton on their 164-mile run between Chariton and St. Joe.

What brought the railroad even closer to home was the happy coincidence that Dan Cadagan, the local agent, boarded at the Bedwell's. The family by this time had moved to a frame house at the north end of Decatur Street, two blocks from the depot. Besides the romance of belching trains, with passengers from strange and distant points, there was the telegraph. When it came to timely news the railroad telegraph operator was the best posted man in town. Having firsthand knowledge from the cryptic Morse, he was in a position to swagger a bit, being looked up to by the boys and the admiration of many a girl.

It was then that Harry decided railroading was the only form of work worth a grown man's time. He already had the "contract" for delivering mail to the post office at \$8.00 a month. A few more hours at the depot, before and after school, and with Dan's help he could learn to be a real railroader. Carrying coal for the potbellied stove, sweeping the floor, and lending a hand in station accounting would be small pay for lessons in telegraphy. Under Dan's tutelage, with a dummy telegraph set at home, Harry soon got the knack of "sending" and "receiving."

One day when the traveling auditor came for



a periodical check of the agent's books, he asked Dan's protege if he would like to have a station of his own. Harry answered in the affirmative although with misgivings as to his fitness. The delighted youth was forthwith hired and sent to his first assignment on September 7, 1905. It was at Andover, Missouri, a tiny depot three miles below the Iowa state line on the "Straight Side." For a time he worked in dread of the dispatcher, who delighted in frightening "ham" operators. It is related that whenever his call sounded on the wire he would have to go outside and walk around the station to quiet his nerves.

From Andover he was sent to Leon, Iowa, a station of considerable importance. Called "Noel" (Leon spelt backward) in his autobiographical *American Magazine* article, it was the junction of a now-abandoned branch to Des Moines. Two miles south of the town was a register and telephone at a point called Koyle. This marked the junction of another branch, now also retired, running due south to the coal-mining village of Cainsville, Missouri. As converging trains, along with those of the Chariton-St. Joe line proper, were under the jurisdiction of the operator at Leon, it was a busy station.

Sunday, however, there were only two passenger trains, and the chance of seeing a freight was remote. So when the day assistant suggested to Harry that they go down to the next town, he was



willing. His colleague knew a couple of young ladies there, and both men welcomed the break in routine. Using their switch key to unlock a chained handcar, they were soon pumping their way to Davis City. Upon arrival the youthful railroaders were startled to see a headlight with two small white lamps, signifying an extra. Lifting the handcar off the track they cautiously went up to the depot.

Their second surprise came on hearing the dispatcher sending an order for the crewmen of the "extra" to pick up five loads of time-freight at Leon. Then Harry remembered the five waybills he should have left outside the station. If the conductor did not get these bills, the dispatcher would hear about it and there would be a new relief man on the St. Joe Division. There was only one thing to do: get back to Leon before the extra without being seen. But how? Again the day man had an inspiration. Why not hook the handcar onto the freight? In a few minutes (and still without being seen in the dark) they had the handcar back on the rails and were pumping with vigor until the vehicle was switched to the back of the train. They chained and locked the handcar to the caboose in a matter of seconds.

Then the train started with a jerk, dashing their lamp to the ground. Next the handlebars began bobbing up and down faster with each turn of the wheel. To keep from being hit the two lay flat on



their stomachs with heads over one end and feet over the other. When the train took in slack going down the first hill the car buckled and jumped. On the next down-grade the handcar's handles broke off when they rammed the back of the caboose.

Chilled by weather and fright, the two put their hands against the drawbar to keep from running under the caboose. There was no turning back. They were padlocked to their destiny.

Finally the train reached Leon with the handcar still on the track. When the freight stopped they cut off the car and dumped it down an embankment. Then they ran to the depot and put the waybills and register into the box before the conductor arrived. After the train left they lit the lamp and took stock. Both had lost their hats and Harry had a bump on his head. But they came out of the ordeal without losing their jobs or their lives.

Being a relief operator suited Harry's roving disposition, for he was required to "fill in" at many points on the St. Joseph Division. Often this meant closing a station at the end of the day and riding all night on a freight train to his next assignment. (Something of this arduous undertaking, although not without its amenities, was experienced by the writer in leaving Kellerton for St. Joseph. Because of heavy tonnage, engine trouble and a hot box, we did not arrive at the latter point until 2 a.m. But having fresh coffee with the crew



in the snug caboose at midnight had its compensations. And if the site where the Andover depot once stood was scarcely discernible in a driving rain, the frame station at Union Star, also where Bedwell worked, showed up clear and radiant under a full moon.)

Before leaving the Burlington Line in 1906 Bedwell had issued train orders at such other Iowa locals as Shambaugh, on the Nodaway Valley Branch, and Bartlett, on the main line along the Missouri River. Indeed, he "worked" the latter route at many points between Kansas City and Omaha. He had made good in the prairie country. Now he would try the mountains.

FRANK P. DONOVAN, JR.