

The History of Chip Irwin and his Lifelong Passion for the Railroad

Chip Irwin

1951-2013

As Chip's older sister, I witnessed the birth of his interest in the railroad. Before I go into the details, I want to quote from a book, "Adventure in Enterprise" published by the Irwin Paper Company in Quincy Illinois, on the 60th Anniversary in 1947, which is a biography of our late great grandfather, Leaton Irwin, the founder of the company and a host of other companies and foundations. On page 24 there is a quote describing our great grandfather ; " The Quincy, Omaha and Kansas City Railroad was built by Quincy men and had a short but interesting history. We quote from a newspaper article written by Mr. Irwin, which reflects his keen interest in communications of that day and how they affected his business and community: ' When it was run down at the heel badly, merely a streak of dust between here and Milan, the western terminus, and losing money, the board was induced to retire and old gentleman who was not enterprising and put in John Savin, as president, and Frank Evatt, as general passenger agent. As soon as this was accomplished, I sent an order for two cars of paper to a manufacturer at Ann Arbor, Michigan, with the instructions to ship via the Santa Fe at Chicago, care of the Q.O.& K.C. at Hurdland. After some delay, the manufacturer advised us that the Michigan Central refused to accept the shipment with that routing. After telegraphic communications with the freight traffic manager, the general freight agent and the president of the Michigan Central, I took the matter up with the Interstate Commerce Commission at Washington, which directed the Michigan Central to route our freight as we desired and it came in by Q.O.& K.C., but, when it arrived at Quincy, the C.B.&Q.

refused to have it switched over their tracks into position for unloading. I took then took it up with the Illinois Railroad and Warehouse Commission, which directed the C.B.&Q. to switch our cars. After they came in, I walked the streets of Quincy with Savin and Evatt, until we had thirty of the largest manufacturers shipping their freight in and out by the O.K. and, in the course of time, it was laying new track, building new depots, putting in new rolling stock, and John M. Savin had a private car, which he repeatedly offered to me with a pass entitling me and my family to travel all over the United States.

Businessmen of Quincy accepted the bluff of the 'Q' that it owned Quincy until I helped organize the Quincy Freight Bureau and personally battled the general freight agent for the C.B.&Q. to give in. The Milwaukee & Northwestern freight agents helped me force the C.B.&Q. to give the paper company East St. Louis rates years before the freight bureau secured the same rates for the rest of Quincy.”

Chip's love of the railroad, as we discover, was not a childhood hobby, but a lifelong interest and pursuit fueled by an inherited motivation and curiosity. He was born in Quincy, Illinois in 1951, at a time when the railroad reigned supreme across the U.S. As a toddler he rode his first trains to Chicago and St. Louis on board the famed Burlington Zephyrs from Quincy to Chicago (the Twin Cities Zephyr) and the Mark Twain Zephyr from Quincy to St. Louis. Chip moved from Quincy with our family when he was three, but because of most of our relatives were living in the midwest, we continued to take the train from Phoenix to Chicago called the Golden State. The vista-domes of these trains became our traveling playrooms, and I remember us coloring with our crayons as we passed along the rails to the various destinations. Chip's interest in the train itself came early, and whenever we rode, he would wander up and down closely examining all the

mechanical details of the cars. We had the privilege of sleeping in the pullman cars and eating in the dining cars experiencing this lost American culture of the white tablecloths, jovial white gloved waiters, the tasty breakfasts and the famous chicken fricassee. As I was examining the contents of his home, I discovered menus and all kinds of documents pertaining to dining cars which were one of his favorite subjects. I recall his great scorn and dismay when Amtrack was on the rise and the train lines began to eliminate this historic piece of true American culture from the railroad.

My brother loved the sounds of the train and had in his early years a total obsession, playing a 33 record of nothing but train sounds over and over in his room. He did have a magnificent collection of multiple gaged electric trains,(which I thoroughly enjoyed) but eventually abandoned this collection for the real thing.

I recall, when we were growing up in Aspen, Colorado, that once a week a freight train of sorts would come into the town and move around in the train yard. Chip would ride his bicycle and would be promptly waiting there for its arrival, and because he quickly acquainted himself with the engineer, was able to ride around in the locomotive and the caboose. Then as his passion grew, and before he had his driver's license, I was recruited into driving him from Aspen to Glenwood Springs every week for him to await the arrival of the California Zephyr. I remember him totally inspecting every car and the locomotive until he was satisfied.

Around the age of 13 or 14 years of age, I remember him collecting all his allowance in order to ride on the train, and he would leave us to go on long excursions by himself. In one year, I remember him boasting to me that he had ridden over 50,000 miles in one year. He crossed the United States and Canada, and rode every train he could find from

east to west and on both coasts from North to South. On these rides he came to be well acquainted with the engineers, the porters, and the other workers of the railroad, and even some of the staff, who knew him well, relied on him to make inspections to help them in their maintenance. This all took place before he was even 16 years old.

According to my meager recollections, I remember the two of us and our parents riding on the following trains: The Golden State from Phoenix to Chicago several times, the C.B.&Q. Zephyrs from Quincy to Chicago and St. Louis, the California Zephyr, The California Daylight (which he and I would await to put pennies on the tracks when it went by while we were staying at a Santa Barbara resort), the steam locomotive in McNary Arizona, the Durango-Silverton line in Colorado, and in Europe, the Mistral from Paris to Cannes, the Mary Queen of Scots from London to Edinburgh, the steam alpine locomotive in Wolfgang am see in Austria, and a line from Kitzbuel through the mountains carrying our car. Other trains that I am aware of that he rode himself alone were the 20th Century Limited, the Hiawatha, the Super Chief, and all the lines which existed at the time he did his 50,000 mile marathon.(1965?) This includes the Canadian line which went from coast to coast through the Canadian Rockies on a train named something different than today which may have been called the Rocky Mountain Express. Other trains he rode were with his Uncle Bill Rutherford from Wichita, Kansas, a sculptor who at one point in his career also created many train motif pieces.

Chip's love of the railroad was no passing serendipity, and it was my great joy, that after he passed away on November 11, 2013, I discovered a very well rounded collection of timetables through the years, periodicals, commemorative pins of historic final journeys, books , hundred's of photos he took himself of trains which were most likely on their

final historic journeys, hats, jackets, plates, brochures and letters. I donated his collection on the day of his burial in the Golden Cemetery (close to the historical Georgetown Loop) to the Colorado Railroad Museum not far from where he is buried in Golden, Colorado.

Many members of the Rocky Mountain Railroad Club, having known Chip personally will have their own anecdotes to share, in which I will be personally interested to add to this history. My plan is to set up a Facebook page where we can all contribute to the history of this amazing railroad personality.