

AKRON BEACON - 76510

Train Lovers,

OCT 26 - 1969

There's Still Hope!

By BEN MAIDENBURG

Some of you old-timers will recall the song that went something like this: "I wandered today through the hills, Maggie, to view the scene below. The old rocking chair and the mill, Maggie, were just as they were years ago."

A few days ago, we went back to Marion, out in Indiana. And just to get into the proper mood, we even took our favorite train, the Erie-Lackawanna.

IT'S A SLOW ride in this jet age, but some of you who haven't been on a train for a long time — or never have — ought to give it a whirl. There's still nothing like the restful rattler if you're in no ungodly hurry. And while it is a real trick to drink the coffee as you rock along, having lunch aboard still is a pleasure.

In spite of what you may hear, the train (at least the Erie) is clean, and the conductors and others are perfect hosts.

What does gag you on the railroad is the stations. They are disreputable inside and out — paint peeling and all covered with pigeon-doo. And typically, at least in towns like Marion, O., and Galion and Lima, about the

ugliest parts of town are there by the stations. No one seems to give a good darn.

BUT THIS is true not only in Ohio and Indiana and Illinois — railroad stations are a mess everywhere. I was reading one of my most favorite columnists, Judd Arnett, of the Detroit Free Press and he related an incident in Toledo.

Judd wrote that a lady had complained to him about the condition of the depot in Toledo which, Arnett said, has long had a national reputation for crumminess.

One night, said Judd, the station was threatened by fire and hundreds of townspeople assembled to cheer the flames. Unfortunately, the fire department saved too much of the building.

I have a nasty feeling that there might be similar cheering at practically every station west of Akron.

WELL, anyway, as I said, we went back to Marion. It was the second time I'd been there since my Mom died. Once I really looked forward to visiting the old home town — which, like the song, is just as it was years ago. But Mom was there and that

made all the difference. With her passing, the desire to go back also has passed.

Marion and Mom were words that meant one and the same thing. And had for close to six decades. This is not to say that my brothers mean nothing, or my in-laws. Mrs. M's mother and father (though I can hardly ever have a political discussion with him that doesn't end in near-bloodshed) couldn't be nicer.

My mother-in-law even prepares salads for me — something that is seldom if ever seen in her house. She's of British birth and in England, apparently, salads are for rabbits and sons-in-law. Only.

GOING to Marion used to mean listening to Mom's philosophy, her admonitions about God and lectures about being good. (Some local psychologists, in the wake of my recent column on public sex education, say to me in letters that my mother left me a thwarted and frustrated person. But that is THEIR opinion).

Seeing Mom meant, also, the most interesting duels about eating — duels that began when I arrived and ended only when I fled town to avoid

picking up eight or ten pounds. In short, Marion was Mom and Mom was Marion. And now the only real tie I have with memory has been cut.

When I go past the last three houses our family occupied I cannot but shed a tear. The house on West Fourth st. for instance. I can still remember my father and mother asking one another . . . "But it cost nearly \$3,000 — how will we EVER pay for it?"

IT WAS there on West Fourth that we had the garden, and the barn where we stabled our noble horses, Prince and Charlie. They pulled my father's wagon five days a week, as he peddled from door to door. And on Sundays, they tugged the tassled buggy out to the park for picnics.

It was there that my father gave us such a delight when he brought home a puppy of multi-parentage. He had traded a piece of yard-goods for the animal. The dog, named Tony, probably in honor of some Hollywood lover of silent days with a mustache and greased-down hair,

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was part of our family for 15 years.

It was there that we graduated from stove-heat to a furnace. And of course this meant we had, for the first time, a basement (or as we called it, a cellar). What a blessing was the furnace and what a curse was the cellar.

Every time it rained, the thing got full of water. And every time it did, Mom and the kids had to pump it out by hand.

BY DINT of scraping and good fortune, my father finally paid off the \$3,000 and we moved into a larger home with sufficient bedrooms so that all the kids didn't have to sleep with one another.

On Fourth st. we still had an out-house for quite a while, and in the coldest weather, if one of us had the "call of nature" we'd just open the window a crack. If Mom had only known!

The new home was plenty big enough, and it was on a corner of Third st. where the streetcars turned and so our travel was eased considerably. The house was of brick and stucco and cost \$8,000. It was a veritable mansion to us.

IT WAS in this house that my father

died and Mom lived her final years. She talked at least 5,000 times of moving to something smaller. But she stayed there, alone and with her memories and a monster of a job keeping it neat and clean.

This house already has been sold to someone else — very nice people — but I resent them for being there. It is like desecration of a monument.

When I go past there all I can see is the huge porch, and Mom and my Dad sitting there on the swing, and talking with friends and drinking tea and eating cookies.

It is there, so far as I know, that our dog Tony lies buried in the back yard. The day Tony died, I heard Mom say she was going to have the trash man pick up the body. So I stole the corpse and dug a deep hole that night.

It was a bitter night. I caught an awful cold — maybe it was pneumonia, I was so sick for days. Or maybe I just kept weeping about Tony and thought it was sickness.

IT WAS from this house that I ran away early one Sunday morning, over 40 years ago — ran away because I had accepted a job with a newspaper in Des Moines. I had tried to convince Mom, but she would have nothing of "my Benny" leaving her.

It was in this house that Mom greeted her grandchildren and great-grandchildren. It was in this house that Mom cooked and baked and sewed right up to the last. No matter how tired or ill, if Mom could struggle down the stairs and to the kitchen, she was at the pots and pans. Bread and rolls were weekly pleasures, not chores for her.

Mom just loved cooking and serving food and the highest honor one could pay her was to be a meal-guest. I have a feeling that if we'd carve on her tombstone that she was a fine cook, she'd be more pleased than anything we could say.

SHE HATED restaurants. She sniffed at the cafe-cooking. Habit would not desert her. After a restaurant meal, Mom would automatically start gathering the dishes from the table. Admonished, she'd say only "I'm just helping the waitress."

Well, they're gone. Mom and Dad lie next to each other in the International Order of Odd Fellows cemetery in Marion — in company with veterans of the wars, Indians who died trying to keep their homes and the good and the bad of Marion.

The town's the same — but there's something missing.