

Ghost Trains

I have lived in and around Appleton for most of my life. In my early childhood my family lived in Gasport and on Slayton Settlement Road near Wrights Corners, and as an adult I've lived in Newfane, Olcott, Lockport, and Houston, Texas. But the majority of my life has been spent in the greater Appleton area, and I consider it my hometown. In my boyhood of the 1970s it was a sleepy little has-been of a village: a cluster of houses, a small general store, a post office, a cold storage, and a railroad crossing.

I never thought about what Appleton might have once been like. But I did notice that here and there were remnants that hinted of an earlier, busier time: a vacant storefront, an empty railroad shed, the ruins of old industrial buildings. Only recently have I made an attempt to learn a little more about the history of the place.

It was brought to life in 1876 when a railroad was built and started sending trains through the Hess Road crossing. The U.S. Post Office dubbed it Hess Road Station, and as such it grew and began to prosper. Newspaper reports from the 1880s were promising:

“Hess Road Station is looming up among the villages and has already become a business center. Mr D. Wing and Brother are running a dry house north and not far from the depot, and use an average of 125 bushels of apples a day by employing about 15 or 16 hands. Mr Klock is operating a dry house south of the depot and employs about the same number of hands. Cobb & Cozzens have erected a good warehouse and have entered upon business.”

“W. H. Hoag has enlarged his store in the Hart Block at Hess Road Station, where he intends to put in a large stock of dry goods, and he doesn't mean to be undersold by any country store.”

“Business of all kinds is booming at Hess Road Station, but we need some sidewalks. Sweigert & Betzeler intend to give a fine masquerade at their rink in the Hart Block, second floor. They are proprietors of both the skating and dancing halls, where lovers of masques may enjoy themselves on Oct 23. McClellan & Knight are running their evaporator full blast and making very fine fruit.”

The Post Office, a fidgety bunch, renamed the village Appleton in 1895, thus ensuring that every resident of the little hamlet would henceforth endure a series of lame wisecracks:

“Appleton, huh? So, you grow apples by the ton there, right? Ha! Ha! Get it? Apples by the ton? Appleton? Ha! Ha! Ha! Get it?”

“Yes, I get it. And if I had an apple for every time I've heard that joke, I'd have a ton of apples by now and I'd dump them all on your head.”

Appleton did a bustling business in the early years of the 20th century, with daily freight and passenger trains passing through the station. Although the railroad started out as a branch of the Rome, Waterport & Ogdensburg Railroad (unofficially dubbed the “Rotten Wood & Old Rusty Rails”), and for most of its lifespan was a division of the New York Central Railroad, the entire line across northern New York State has from its earliest days been popularly known as the Hojack.

The origin of this nickname is a mystery. Several folk-tale theories have arisen over the years, but none of them are very plausible. One old timer defined a hojack simply as “two streaks of rust and the right-of-way.” It is generally believed that “hojack” was early railroad slang for a slow freight line, but even this is uncertain. The

New York Central did not approve of the nickname and issued an edict in 1906 forbidding employees to use it, but to no avail. The Hojack it remained, and still remains in the memories of those who knew it.

The name is not unfitting. The Hojack was always a bit of a rustic, ramshackle affair, shuffling lazily from one small rural town to another with its load of fruit and farm supplies.

The hoped-for sidewalks never arrived in Appleton, but the automobile did. As cars and trucks became the preferred methods of transportation, the industries that grew up around the railroad gradually died out; and the little town began its long decline. The passenger trains disappeared in the 1930s, and the local station closed in 1949. As the freight traffic dwindled to a mere trickle, the line fell into a state of neglect and disrepair.

By the time I arrived in Appleton in 1972, the Hojack was on its last legs. It had been reduced to a single weekly freight train, consisting of engine, caboose, and a handful of cars, slowly trundling its way along the old rails. The line was in such bad shape by now that about 8 mph was the top speed the train dared to attempt.

Although there was no freight business in Appleton anymore, sometimes the train would wheeze to a stop at the Hess Road crossing so the trainmen could saunter over to Strong's Store for a bite to eat and a bottle of soda pop. I once witnessed a train slow to a crawl just east of the crossing while the brakeman walked ahead and shooed Leroy's chickens off the line.

The Hojack train was slow enough that, upon hearing the whistle blow for the Hess Road crossing, I had plenty of time to grab a few pennies and run across the road and down our neighbor's lane to the tracks. I could set the pennies upon the rails and hide in the nearby bushes while the train was still dawdling away in Appleton. Or I would simply stand in the lane at a safe distance and wave innocently to the engineer, then go collect my flattened coins.

I'm not sure if the train always carried a caboose. I have a memory of a brakeman leaning out the back door of the caboose and shaking a scolding finger at me as I ran along the tracks behind the train. But I also remember chasing after the train and trying to touch the final boxcar that was creaking along at the tail end.

Caboose or no, the train itself was only an occasional attraction. I lived on the opposite side of the road, so I didn't see it very often. But the railroad line itself had its appeal. I would try and see how far I could walk heel to toe while balancing on a rail; and I often tugged at the spikes until I found a loose one to pull up and take home. From the number of local kids who spent their leisure hours pulling up spikes, it's a wonder the rails were still intact at all.

Sometimes I tried the old trick of putting my ear to the rail and listening for a train, but it never worked. The train could be a hundred yards away and closing fast, but I still couldn't hear a thing.

I once walked the tracks all the way home from school, a four mile hike from Barker to Appleton. Once was enough. The stone ballast on the rail-bed had settled, leaving deep gaps between the old wooden ties. They were very tiresome to walk on; you had to take either very short steps to land on each one, or awkwardly long steps to hit every other one.

It was impossible to pedal a bicycle on the rail-bed; but I did ride on the back of a dirt bike a few times down the middle of the tracks, the tires jolting over the gap between each tie with a tooth-rattling thud.

Most of the Hojack right-of-way that ran parallel to West Somerset Road was lined with trees and brush, and when a couple of us local boys got together, we played a game of dare: we would hide ourselves in the bushes

beside the tracks until the locomotive passed by. Then we would belly-crawl up the rail-bed as far as our courage allowed us. Whoever got closest to the rails, while the freight cars creaked and swayed overhead, was the bravest.

Although we thought we hid ourselves well, I'm sure we were perfectly visible to the engineer. And one unforgettable day he let us know. We heard the train coming through Appleton and followed our usual routine. By the time it reached us we were in the thicket beside the tracks, ready to crawl up the embankment once the engine had passed.

It was thrilling and a little frightening to watch from ground level as the train approached, swishing through overhanging tree limbs, growing larger until the rumbling engine loomed up right on top of us. We were tense and trembling with excitement, crouching just a few yards from the big machine.

At that precise moment the engineer blew his horn.

Let me rephrase that: At that precise moment the engineer let loose with a long, full-throated, and utterly devastating blast of his air horn. The appalling explosion of sound hit us boys like a thunderbolt. Each of us leaped convulsively, shouting with shock and terror. Like panic-stricken squirrels we tried to run in all directions at once. The world was full of noise, confusion and heart-stopping fear.

For an instant I caught a glimpse of the engineer. In my state of mental turmoil he seemed to sprout horns and a devilish tail, and was leering at us out the window, cackling maniacally with unholy glee. Surely this was just a delusion, but in that frenzied moment it seemed all too real.

Sheer instinct then took over and, bumping into each other, tripping over old fence wire, we fled for our lives, pushing through the thicket into an adjacent hayfield. Completely stunned, we stared at each other with wide eyes, hearts pounding, chests heaving for breath. I'm positive our hair was standing on end.

Maybe over time the engineer had become exasperated with having to keep an eye out for us kids who were always fooling about on the tracks along this stretch; or maybe he just had a sadistic sense of humor. It was very likely a mixture of both: he was warning us to stay off the right-of-way, and at the same time having a bit of fun to relieve the monotony. I don't know how many nine year old boys have ever experienced sudden heart failure, but a couple of us came close that day.

We cowered in the hayfield, struggling to regain our composure, while the train chugged innocently on, as placid as an elderly milch cow ambling barn-wards on a summer's evening. But it seemed to me that, if trains could laugh, that train was definitely chuckling to itself as it receded into the distance.

My boyhood acquaintance with the Hojack line was brief. Its days were already numbered by the time I arrived on the scene. I don't know exactly when the last local train rattled forlornly down the tracks, but the line was officially closed and abandoned in March 1978. The rails were pulled up for scrap a year or so later. One hundred years of rural railroading had come to an end.

As a humorous aside, right about the time the trains stopped running the highway department or somebody went around painting "RR XING" in huge white letters on the road at each crossing. My school bus driver had to follow the rules and stop at the Hosmer Road crossing, even though she knew there was no chance of a train. Eventually another crew came out and sheepishly painted over the letters.

The abandoned rail-bed was quickly taken over by weeds, wild grape vines and scrub trees. And also by dirt bikes and snowmobiles, who found the straight and smooth route perfect for long cruises. I can remember counting as many as fifteen snowmobiles at once riding along the line on a winter's afternoon. I didn't often venture out to the Hojack myself anymore. I had other activities and interests, and the old railway no longer drew my attention as it once did.

There were practical jokers on West Somerset Road in those days. Every now and then some light-hearted act of mischief would be carried out by unseen hands in the night. One morning a white porcelain commode appeared on a neighbor's front lawn, a helpful sign advertising it as a "Public Rest Stop." I saw it from the school bus window and was utterly mystified. What did it mean? Why was it there? Eventually I got the joke.

And further down the road a suspiciously unofficial-looking "Historical Marker" sprouted overnight in front of a vacant house, declaring the derelict and weed-grown pile to be the "historic birth place" of a prominent member of the neighborhood. [Name withheld to protect the dignity of the perhaps-not-entirely-innocent.]

I never learned just who was behind these gags, but I suspect they were part of an ongoing series of good-natured jokes enacted upon each other by a pair of local wags. With the advent of the 1980s the pranks died out, which I thought a shame.

I don't remember that my father was much of a prankster himself; but he was amused by the neighborhood hijinks and must have found the jesting spirit infectious. One day, not long after the Hojack line was abandoned, he got a sudden inspiration.

He selected Dave Wilson, our neighbor from down the road, as his target for a bit of fun. I don't recall that he ever explained why; but I will guess it was simply because Dave was one of the friendliest men that we knew on the road.

Indeed I found him to be embarrassingly friendly at times. I cringed whenever I walked into the West Somerset Baptist Church on a Sunday morning, because I knew Dave would be lurking just inside the front door, waiting to pounce. He would grab my hand for an overly vigorous handshaking, and greet me with a much too hearty:

"Hullo, Hullo, Hullo, Doctor Scott!!! Good morning!!! Good morning!!! I'm glad to see you!!!"

Where the "Doctor Scott" came from, I haven't a clue.

And venturing out onto the road at the end of our driveway to get the newspaper was an enterprise fraught with peril. It seemed like Dave was always getting his paper at the same time. His house was a quarter mile away from ours: so if he spotted me, he would stand in the middle of the road, and wave his paper in wide sweeping gestures, like he was trying to flag down a passing airplane. And he wouldn't stop until I waved my own newspaper back at him in the same fashion.

I tried to get away with one or two quick waves, but Dave was persistent. I suppose some days the setting sun was in his eyes; but often it seemed like I stood there in the road for a long time, waving that paper, feeling like a total fool. Eventually Dave would give me a final wave with both hands, a sort of all-clear signal, and allow me to escape back inside the house and out of sight.

I'm sorry and ashamed to admit that once or twice I made sure Dave didn't spot me in the first place. If I didn't quite dive out of sight into the deep ditch that ran alongside the road, I did possibly sidle behind a convenient

tree in our side yard that blocked me from his view until it was safe to creep out of hiding.

If I sometimes found Dave to be a little exasperating, he was still a good friend that I liked and respected. I know my father felt the same way; and that was probably reason enough for his choosing Dave as the beneficiary of his little prank.

My father owned a Merle Haggard album titled "*My Love Affair With Trains.*" A few of the songs opened with the sound of train whistles. On the day in question he made a cassette tape of these train sounds, and loaded it into a portable tape player. It had an attached loudspeaker that he used for hunting.

That night he gathered up the tape player and donned a miner's helmet-lamp, another piece of hunting gear. Thus armed, he walked across the fields and down to where the train tracks passed behind George Staples' house and barn. Then he turned on the tape player and the headlamp, and began walking the tracks west towards Appleton.

Meanwhile, my sister and I had been dispatched to Dave's house with orders to somehow lure him and his family out onto their front porch. This was probably accomplished by my sister, she being a much more frequent visitor than myself. I think I just lurked quietly on the outskirts. After a few minutes of nondescript conversation, Dave suddenly paused and held up a finger.

"Listen!"

Across the night air floated the distant sound of a train whistle.

"What is that? It sounds like a train, doesn't it?"

We all looked out over the road and fields to the dark line of the abandoned railroad. A single light moved slowly along the tracks. Again came the distant whistle. It was as though a ghost train had appeared out of the past to revisit its old haunts. It was an eerie moment. Everyone on the porch was transfixed. Even I, though I was in on the joke, got caught up in the mystery of it. Dave moved to the edge of the porch for a better view.

"What on earth could that be? It can't be a train!"

At this point my sister, who couldn't keep a secret to save her life, blurted out the truth: "That's my Dad with a tape recorder!" If anything this revelation caused even more astonishment. Dave was so impressed that he went out to the edge of the road and gave my father a round of applause, calling into the night "Good one, Ray!"

It occurs to me now that my father's little stunt may have been the very last time anyone heard the sound of a train on the old railway. His nighttime walk down the tracks was, in a manner of speaking, the last run of the Hojack line. Even, perhaps, the most fitting farewell to a century of slow trains chugging through quiet farmland and small country towns.

Dave and my father have both been gone for many years; but sometimes when I pull into the driveway of my mother's house on West Somerset Road, I half-expect to see my father out mowing the lawn, or working in the garage on one of his innumerable handy-man projects. And if I walk out to the paper box and look eastward to where my old neighbor used to live, I still feel a twinge of sadness at the sight of the empty road.

The Hojack railroad has been largely forgotten in Niagara County. There was some early talk of revitalizing it, or making it over into a recreational trail, but nothing ever happened. In some places the right-of-way was kept

relatively clear by ATV riders, while other sections reverted back to private ownership and were blocked off by fences and Posted signs. For the most part though, it simply faded away into the background, and became just a line of trees and brush at the back end of somebody's field.

But for those of us who lived near the tracks in the Appleton area, something big was already rising up over the horizon, even as the rails were being dismantled and hauled away; and within a few years the old Hojack would be transformed into a new era of railroading.

While writing this piece in the summer of 2017 I was disappointed that I couldn't find any vintage photos of the Hojack trains in action around the Newfane-Appleton-Barker area. But I did discover that a nearby stretch of the line is still intact. For some reason this section was left alone when the rails were pulled up. It remains just as it was when the last freight train vanished into the distance four decades ago.

Of course, it's hidden beneath forty years of neglect, and the rails are barely visible among the trees and heavy undergrowth. I went out one afternoon and braved the briars and clumps of burdock to reach it. It was an emotional moment when I ducked under the final tree branch and found myself standing on the Hojack line for the first time since the 1970s. Here were the same old wooden ties I had run along as a boy, the same rails I had placed pennies on.

I wondered how far it went, but the tracks were virtually blocked by thick brush. No reasonable person would attempt to force their way through this jungle just to look at a rusty train track. Unless, of course, they were a middle-aged man somewhat obsessed with the remnants of their lost boyhood. So I pushed and shoved, and even crawled my way over, under, and around tangled vines and bushes and fallen trees.

I was accompanied by hordes of mosquitoes, some of whom, judging by their voracity, must have been waiting the entire forty years for me to arrive. Along the way I stopped to explore a bridge that carried the tracks over a small stream. Imprinted in the concrete abutment was the year "1919."

The intact rails only extended 100 yards or so, with an overgrown ATV trail taking over the rail-bed from there. I cut out to a neighboring cornfield and made my way back to the starting point, spooking a couple of whitetail deer as I went.

For a brief moment I was struck with a wild impulse to bring the old railroad back to life: hack away the brush, cut down the trees, hammer in new spikes. I had a vision of myself standing outside my door on a quiet summer night, listening to the echoes of a faraway whistle; and knowing that some lonesome ghost train had seen the rails shining in the moonlight, and had found its way back to the Hojack.

But the moment passed, the vision faded, and I realized that perhaps it's best to leave it alone. Let it remain hidden away as a secret memorial to a vanished time, haunted now only by birds and woodchucks and memories.

I took one last look at the crumbling wooden ties and rusted rails. My own boyhood collection of railroad spikes and train-flattened coins had long since disappeared; so I tugged at the spikes, just as I had done long ago, and pulled up a couple of loose ones to keep as mementos.

And finally, before I said goodbye to the shadows of yesterday and headed back out into the sunlight, I placed a couple of bright new 2017 pennies on the rails. Just in case.

When I look back to the 1970s, I tend to view them in some aspects as the “quiet years” of my early life. There was less traffic, less noise, more open fields to play in, and more cows grazing in roadside pastures. The afternoons were drowsy, and the nights were silent, dark, and mysterious. I found the view to the northeast from my house especially attractive; there were no lights from nearby towns in that direction: nothing but a black horizon of trees and the wide expanse of starlit sky overhead.

One evening towards the end of 1979, as I was staring mindlessly at the TV, my father came down the hall from the living room and poked his head in the door.

“Come here and look at this. There’s something strange out the front window.”

I followed him back to the living room and peered out through our big picture window. In the darkness outside I could see two flames gleaming fitfully in the distance north of our house. They were just visible, and must have been near the lake shore a few miles away: across West Somerset Road and several fields and woodlots, then across Lake Road and a few orchards to the wooded bluffs overlooking Lake Ontario.

They certainly were a strange sight. They looked like two small fires burning in the tree tops. It was late in the year and most of the leaves had fallen from the trees, otherwise we’d never have seen them. After some speculation my father concluded that there might be a troop of Boy Scouts camping in the woods east of Keg Creek, and those flickering lights could be their campfires. It didn’t really seem all that likely, but it was pretty much the best explanation we could come up with.

That seemed to be that, so I shrugged my shoulders and returned to the TV. A few minutes later my father was back in the doorway.

“Okay, those lights just went straight up into the sky.”

I rushed to the window and, sure enough, the two “campfires” were now burning high above the trees. That was enough for me and my father. We needed to take a closer look. With a sister or two in tow, we hustled out to the car and drove down to the lake at the end of Hosmer Road. There were several cars already parked at the dead end of the road, and clusters of people standing around in the dark, watching the mysterious lights.

It was clear now that they were far out over the lake. And they were behaving most strangely. There were two or three of the flickering lights hovering just above the horizon. Now and then one of them would suddenly vanish, only to reappear hundreds of feet higher up above the water. This went on for some time: burning, vanishing, burning again at a higher altitude.

The little groups of spectators around us were subdued, discussing quietly among themselves about what the lights could possibly be. Maybe no one specifically mentioned UFOs, but the idea of a celestial visitation was definitely on our minds. A burly farmer stood next to me, huddled in his heavy winter coat, staring impassively out over the lake. He glanced around and muttered to nobody in particular:

“This sure ain’t no figment o’ *my* ‘magination.”

A few days later we learned that the lights were flares, attached to parachutes. A small plane had gone down in the lake over on the Canadian side and the flares were used to light up the search area. So that mystery was

solved, but there were other mysteries in the night during those years to kindle my own imagination.

I went raccoon hunting with my father a few times in the woods along the lake shore. We parked and unloaded our hounds at a barn on Hosmer Road where George Staples kept his grain dryer. As we crossed the big rolling fields I always noticed a mysterious object looming up away to my left. It was a tall cylindrical structure standing in the middle of the field. I never thought to ask my father what it was; but to me the object, a black silhouette against the night sky, looked exactly like one of the Martians out of the H. G. Wells story “The War of the Worlds.” *[See Note 1]

Back at home on West Somerset Road I sometimes saw the Northern Lights shimmering in the night sky, and I learned to keep an eye open for shooting stars and satellites passing overhead. On rare occasions, when cloud conditions were just right, I could even see the sweeping beam of the lighthouse at 30 Mile Point, nearly ten miles away.

Not far from the intersection of Hosmer Road and Lake Road stood a red and white metal tower with a glowing red light on top. I could see the light from my window at home. There was another tower over on the Godfrey Road in Newfane, taller and heftier than the Lake Road one, with its own blinking red light. I was told it was a microwave tower, whatever that may be; and I probably assumed that the smaller tower was the same, though it certainly looked altogether different.

But what its function was didn't matter to me. The important thing was the glowing red light on top. It didn't blink on and off like the Newfane tower. It was “quieter” than that. It dimmed and grew bright again in one smooth and slow pulsing action. It was somehow comforting. I could look out my window on dark nights and see it: bright and dim, bright and dim. Throughout my boyhood I regarded that light as, if not quite a friend, at least an ally, a sentinel keeping watch in the night. A strange but reassuring presence. *[See Note 2]

These and other nighttime mysteries from those quiet years have remained in my memory with great clarity through the passing decades. I have tried to describe them with care, because the stage they were enacted upon was transformed so radically. The “UFOs” we saw over Lake Ontario that night in 1979 marked the end of more than just another decade.

The turn of the 1980s brought an army of trucks and earth-moving equipment rumbling into our unassuming little corner of the world. Those nondescript fields and woods north of the Lake Road disappeared beneath layers of steel and concrete, mountains of ash and sludge. The “quiet years” were over.

Plans for a power generating plant at the north end of Hosmer Road go back to the 1950s. At first New York State Electric & Gas hankered to build a nuclear plant, but the community told them to just put that idea right out of their heads. A NYSEG official pointed out hopefully that there was already a nuclear plant being built over in Canada that could blow us all to Kingdom Come just as easily as one built on our front doorstep; but the voice of the people was clear: No nukes in the Town of Somerset.

So they settled for a coal-fired plant and spent the 1970s preparing for it. Environmental studies were conducted, landowners were bought out, and houses and cottages along the Lake, Hosmer, and Potter roads were either moved or demolished. An “Environmental Impact Statement” noted that 16 houses and about 30 residents would be displaced. I know of two families that picked up their houses and hauled them to new lots on nearby roads. I never learned where the rest of them went.

I was in high school when construction of the plant began in 1981, so I was able to watch the early progress from the school bus. The first thing they did was dump a mountain of dirt in front of the site so we couldn't see

what they were up to. When they began building the massive 600 foot smoke stack, more than one local resident was convinced it was a missile silo.

“The large scale of the proposed station will create a marked visual and auditory impact” quoth the Environmental Impact Statement. In an attempt to lessen this, a buffer zone of trees and shrubs was planted around the property, and the completed facility itself was done up in a tasteful light brown paint scheme they called “desert frost.” I thought it looked kind of pretty.

Meanwhile, another major battle was raging. The plant required huge amounts of coal, more than a million tons a year, and NYSEG had already decided that delivery by trucks or lake freighters would be inadequate. They wanted to build a railroad. They announced this rather casually in 1979, and probably hoped nobody was really paying attention and would just give a “sure, go ahead” nod of assent.

But, of course, everybody was listening; and this announcement ignited four years of protests, debates, arguments, accusations, and general bad feelings all around. Signs lined the highways from Barker to Gasport, from Newfane to Lockport: “*Stop the Gasport Spur!*” and “*Save Our Farmland!*” Some people favored rebuilding the old Hojack line. After all, the right-of-way was already there, not doing much of anything.

“I know nobody really wants it,” said one farmer during a heated public meeting, “but it would seem to make more sense putting in a new one where people are already used to it.”

But NYSEG had their hearts set on a shiny new train track. Eventually, with the smoke of controversy still swirling around them, they selected the so-called Danielewicz route; and in 1982 began building the 16-mile Somerset Railroad. It ran from the Falls Road railway in Lockport north through the town of Newfane, then east through Appleton, and finally north again to the power plant. To their credit, they did try to use existing right-of-ways where possible: including a stretch of the long-defunct International Railway trolley line that once ran from Lockport to Olcott, and about three miles of the Hojack line.

By then I was working part time after school in the apple orchards adjacent to the old railroad, and was able to watch construction of the new one. Everything about the Somerset Railroad was bigger and tougher than the Hojack. Bulldozers and graders buried the remnants of the old line beneath tons of stone ballast and heavy wooden ties. Huge welding and grinding machines sent showers of sparks flying as they hammered into place the long lengths of new Bethlehem Steel rails.

A constant stream of dump trucks and other vehicles lumbered down the orchard lane, sending up clouds of dust. One day old Ed Staples stopped one of the truck drivers, and spun him a yarn about the layers of dust damaging the apple crop. It was the purest hogwash, but it worked. Within days the orchard was sporting a gleaming new crushed stone driveway.

Other landowners along the line adopted similar ploys for their own landscaping improvements, to the envy of all who lived on the opposite side of West Somerset Road. My father, after watching our neighbor commandeer a railroad bulldozer to tidy up his junk pile, wondered aloud if getting them to come across the street and push back the junk pile in our own yard might be asking too much.

The railroad construction crews were eager to please the local property owners, since they needed to cross their land to reach the railway. If the landowners maybe took a little advantage of this, the railroad had the last laugh in the end. Once the coal trains were up and running, they often pulled out to their full length along the tracks behind West Somerset Road, and then just stopped and sat there for interminable lengths of time. Many a farmer found himself stuck on the wrong side of the tracks, with no way to get around the mile-long train, and nothing

to do but stamp and fume while the precious hours ticked away.

Note 1

In the early 1990s I had a job driving tractors in the big fields west of the power plant, and finally got to see that “Martian” up close. It was a farmer’s water tank, perched upon a platform of wood and concrete. The whole thing was maybe 20 feet tall. Over the next two decades, when I occasionally walked the fields down to the lake, I kept an eye on it and noticed how rust and the passing years were taking their toll. The tank was leaning precariously when I took a picture of it in 2005, and I was not surprised to see recently that it has since fallen over and broken into pieces.

Note 2

While writing this piece in 2017 I finally learned the purpose of the red and white tower with its glowing red light that had fascinated me as a boy. It was a 200 foot tall meteorological tower, erected by NYSEG at the start of the 1970s to collect environmental data. The tower remained after the power plant was built, but it was dwarfed into insignificance by the sprawling backdrop of the facility and the 600 foot tall smokestack with its bright strobe lights.

I felt a little sorry for the tower, if one can feel sorry for a metal structure. Its soft red light continued glowing bravely throughout the 80s and 90s; and I made a point of pausing every now and then to look for it and appreciate its presence. But one night in the early 2000s I looked to the northeast from my parent’s house, and the red light was gone. The tower had been dismantled and taken away. I doubt if very many people noticed, and I’m sure I was the only one who mourned its passing.

The Somerset Railroad began running in the Autumn of 1983, and it was clear from the start that this was going to be no quaint old Hojack operation. The mile-long trains of black and yellow “gondola” cars, filled with gleaming black coal, thundered down the line every couple of days, blowing a mighty horn blast at every crossing and scaring the wits out of everybody. The trains ran day and night, and I felt a pang of sympathy for those folks who lived right next to the tracks and were jerked out of their slumber every time the thing went by at 3:00 a.m.

During my years as an orchard laborer, the arrival of a train was a welcome diversion from the monotony of work. The orchards were near the sharp turn the tracks made as they headed north to the plant, so the train glided past at a fairly slow speed. It was easy and fun to jump onto a coal car and take a joyride from one end of the orchard to the other.

The passing cars also made inviting targets for throwing things: apples and snowballs in season, or just rocks if nothing else was handy. It didn’t take a great deal of skill to whip an apple into the side of a coal car, which is probably why they were so enticing to me. I’ve always been a clumsy klutz, with no athletic ability whatsoever; but even I could hit the broadside of a train at fifteen yards.

Sometimes the train stopped next to the orchard for a while; then it was a matter of course to toss apples into the cars. I wondered if any power plant employees ever noticed some of their incoming coal cars were garnished with a liberal sprinkling of green apples.

Just west of my parent’s house was where the outgoing trains heading through Appleton really picked up speed.

If I heard a train coming from the plant I had just enough time to run from the house down the road to the end of our neighbor's pasture, across old Floyd Jesson's hay field, and over the ditch for a final scramble up the railroad embankment.

I liked to stand in the very shadow of the empty cars racing by, and feel the rush of wind hitting my face. It was an amusement-ride kind of thrill as every ear-splitting squeal and rattle made my heart leap with a jolt of fear and excitement.

The passing cars themselves were really not very loud, just making a metallic drone and "*whish*" sound from the wheels on the rails. But each train always had a few "clunkers," wheels with flat spots on them that rolled by with a rhythmic clunk and thud. The clunkers were loud, and it was exciting when they clattered past me at nearly 50 miles an hour. I once tried to describe the sound to a friend:

"They go wish wish clunk clunk CLUNK CLUNK clunk clunk wish wish."

I never got tired of watching the train. It didn't matter if I was at home or at work on the farm or just stopped at a road crossing. When I was at my parent's house, watching the train from our living room window, I was often joined by some of the crowd of little kids that my mother was forever babysitting. I did my best to educate these tykes:

"That there's the punkin train. All them cars is full a' punkins. They take 'em down to the power plant and dump 'em into the big chimby and fill it up. And when the chimby is all full, they climb in and jump up and down on the punkins and mash 'em all up. Then they cook 'em in cookie dough, and that's how they make punkin pie."

The little kids always nodded, wide-eyed and solemn, at my attempts to enlighten them. I would like to think that one or two of them actually believed me.

Near the end of 1983 the Department of Motor Vehicles saw fit to suspend my driver's license for six months. This was the second time they had taken me to task for my somewhat casual attitude toward the state speed limit. I wondered if they really had nothing better to do with their time than suspend my license every year. I imagined a couple of bored DMV guys sitting around the office:

Guy 1: "Whaddya wanna do today?"

Guy 2: "I dunno yet. I see that long-haired punk up in Appleton got another speeding ticket."

Guy 1: "No! Did he really?"

Guy 2: "Sure did. We oughta take his license away."

Guy 1: "Didn't we do that once already?"

Guy 2: "Sure did. We oughta do it again."

Guy 1: "Now you're talking! We'll fix him good this time."

Guy 2: "I'll fill in the form. You grab an envelope and lick a stamp."

Being banished from the roads for six months, I bought an old Honda three-wheeler and used that to go back and forth between home and work at the farm. The new railway came in handy then. I could ride across the road and down my neighbor's lane, and then just zip along the tracks to the orchards.

This worked fine until the day some railroad officials, riding the rails in a modified SUV, caught me red-handed. They gave me a stern warning to stay off railroad property, so I had to change my route a little. Now I went along the edge of Bill Wilson's hay field, then across the road to the lane behind George Staples' house, and

finally a quick dash along the tracks, trusting to luck that I wouldn't get caught again.

This brings me to the Great ATV Crash of 1984. I was racing along behind George's house, heading back to the orchards after a lunch break at home, and had completely forgotten about a drainage ditch hidden among the weeds. I hit that ditch at full speed and was catapulted skyward over the handlebars.

Everything seemed to happen in slow-motion then. It seemed like I was soaring through the air a long time, while far below me the three-wheeler tumbled end over end. I would have been happy to float among the clouds indefinitely, but mother earth was calling. I hit the ground so hard it knocked me right out cold. I was probably unconscious only a few seconds, and no serious damage was suffered by either man or machine; but the dazed "where am I?" sensation took a while to wear off.

The power plant and the coal trains formed a backdrop to my life throughout the 80s and 90s. The towering smokestack with its billowing cloud of steam was a landmark visible for miles. Even after I left West Somerset Road, I never moved so far away that I couldn't see the stack or hear the train whistle off in the distance.

In February 1985 I drove to Houston, Texas, to visit my sister and experience life in the big city. After a month among the bright lights I was out of money and had to head for home. Being nineteen and foolish, I drove straight through, all the way from Houston to good old Appleton, stopping only to put gas in my 1974 Chevy Nova (and to receive a speeding ticket in Ohio.)

It was a 30 hour drive, and by the time I crossed the state line into New York I was feeling the fatigue and struggling to keep my eyes open. At my final fuel stop south of Buffalo I wondered if I should pull over for a while and rest. Then I looked to the north, and far away saw the steam from the distant power plant rising high into the clear winter sky, like a Biblical pillar of cloud guiding me home. I knew that I could make it. (I did.)

And once, while driving through Ohio on another occasion and keeping an eye out for the Highway Patrol, I was surprised to see the Somerset coal train racing along beside me on a track parallel to the highway.

But for the most part, my memories of the power plant and the Somerset Railroad are associated with Appleton and the time I spent working in the orchards. Various scenes rise before me now and take me back through the years:

I remember driving tractors up and down the long rows of trees, mowing and spraying; windrowing brush and picking up wood in the early spring; long hot summer days when all I wanted to do was sit in the shade with a jug of cold water, and cold winter days trimming trees with frozen hands and feet.

I remember the busy activity of harvest time, loading trucks and picking apples with the cheerful and hard-working Mexicans: Rafael, Salvador, Guadalupe and the rest; and years earlier with the more laid-back southern guys Freddie and Chester. And even earlier than that, when I rode a bicycle to the orchards after school to pick up drop apples, while veteran migrant workers John and Mary, and others whose names I never learned, awed me with their patient skill and years of experience.

I remember that time a kid named Steve hotrodded his pickup truck down the orchard lane, only to misjudge a turn and slide sideways into an apple tree. And the neighborhood girls, who picked up drops after school and kept me amused with the constant volley of insults they hurled at each other.

I remember that summer day when I watched a pair of coyotes chase an old hound dog across the tracks and past the very tree I was standing in; and the thrill I felt when the coyotes lifted their noses just a few yards from

me and howled with the joy of the chase.

I remember one memorable spring morning when I watched a migration of hawks sail by overhead, dozens of the great birds slowly wheeling and soaring their way northward.

And always in the background was the railroad: the remnants of the Hojack in the very early days, but mostly the long lines of black and yellow coal cars, and the big blue Conrail engines. The soundtrack to those years was the rattle and bang of the cars being shunted around the sidings down at the power plant, and the crashing of couplers along the length of the train when they were jerked into motion.

Even after I left the orchards, I returned at times to walk around, pick an apple or two, and watch a train go by. I never gave it much thought, but I probably assumed that they would always be there: the orchards and the trains, blossom time and harvest time, the shining rails, and the quiet rows of trees.

In 1993 I wrote a song about my boyhood in Appleton that includes the lyric:

*The tracks were built over
The trains go to the coal plant now
The rails aren't as fun to walk on
But I still remember how*

If I were to update that song today, I'd have to ask the question: Where are those trains now? Do they still go to the coal plant?

NYSEG had a 30 year operating plan for the Somerset plant, but they didn't quite make it that far. In 1999, after decades of planning and preparation, but only fifteen years of operation, the novelty apparently wore off. NYSEG shuffled their feet, looked embarrassed, and admitted that they didn't really want the power plant anymore.

It was sold to a company called AES, the first of a string of owners who all struggled to keep the place going in the face of financial woes and a changing culture. Coal-burning plants had fallen out of favor, and the environmentalists and politicians were applying steady pressure to shut them down.

AES went bankrupt in 2011, and the Somerset plant was destined for the auction block, when a group of optimistic share-holders formed Upstate New York Power Producers to buy the facility in 2012. Alas, their optimism was short-lived; they turned around and sold it again in 2016 to Heorot Power, a subsidiary or division or something of Beowulf Energy.

The plant currently sits idle for most of the year. It operates on an "at need" basis, and apparently the need is seldom. I walked along the perimeter of the grounds recently, and was struck by how deathly still and silent the place was. The constant industrial hum that formed the soundtrack to three decades of activity had now vanished.

I still see a handful of employees pull into the entrance every morning, but I don't know what they do all day. I've noticed that they still drive like maniacs, just like they did 30 years ago when there were a hundred of them all racing each other to the main gate. I can't imagine what their hurry is anymore, but they are a dedicated lot, and I will give them that credit.

And I will note that on the rare occasions when the plant is up and running, the white clouds of steam coming from the stack are the cleanest I've ever seen. Gone is the sickly yellow sulfurous haze that used to spread out for miles downwind of the plant back in the '80s and '90s. Now the steam dissipates and leaves behind nothing but clear sky. It's a shame there is virtually no need for the facility anymore.

The Somerset Railroad has followed the power plant into a semi-moribund state. The long coal trains that used to rumble by every couple of days dwindled to once a week, then once a month, and now hardly at all. Conrail, who had supplied the locomotive power since 1983, was broken up in 1998. CSX took over engine duties, and the trains began to look distinctly shabby.

The smart-looking lines of black and yellow SR gondolas devolved into a hodge-podge of grimy and aging CSX and SR cars in a variety of fading off-color paint schemes. Apparently they ran out of yellow paint somewhere around 2002. As I write these words, the empty cars have been sitting on a siding all summer, rusting and waiting for an engine that never arrives.

But aside from all this, the truth is I miss the coal trains. I miss the columns of steam billowing from the smoke stack. I saw them as something that remained constant in a world that was forever changing on me. I suppose I took it for granted that the plant would always hum along and the trains would always roll; and this little corner of the world would always be here for me: a familiar place to escape to when everything outside became too cold and I began to feel too homeless.

But I fear that within a few years the plant and the railroad will be shut down forever, and another era will end. And then, once again, there will be only ghosts.

As mentioned, the railroad is closely connected with the apple orchards in my mind and memory. I worked in the orchards on and off for about 17 years. I say "on and off" because I never considered farming as a career or even a permanent job. To me it was merely something to fall back on if other things didn't work out.

Those "other things" had a tendency to not work out, and I returned to the farm several times, to work for a few years or a few months; only to leave again whenever a new opportunity arose. I feel guilty now to think how inconsiderate I was towards my employers. They were running a business just like any other, and they needed steady and dependable help. I was neither steady nor dependable.

I was no farmer either. I did my best, but I didn't have the practical mind-set or the mechanical aptitude. I was an absent-minded daydreamer. I could handle orchard work and basic field tractor work; but any task requiring a real knowledge of machinery or the science of farming soon revealed my limitations. I could spend an entire day plowing a field, but if my boss asked me about the moisture content in the soil, I was baffled.

I could tell him about how white the seagulls looked against the dark earth when they swooped down to snap up grubs overturned by the plow; or about the coyote that trotted along in the furrows behind me, competing with a hovering hawk for the occasional field mouse. If I was working ground on the school farm, I could tell him how the girls' field hockey team was shaping up, and whether I thought their skirts really were getting shorter every year.

But when it came to useful observations like moisture content in the soil, the best I could do was something like:

"Moisture content? Well, I dunno . . . it was pretty wet, I suppose. But not too wet, not like *really* wet.

Maybe just a *little* bit wet . . . *sort* of wet . . . I guess.”

I imagine they breathed a great sigh of relief when I finally left for good in 1995.

During the time I worked on the farm, and for some years afterwards, I often stopped by in the evenings to walk through the orchards just for the enjoyment of it. There was an attractive sense of tranquility in the rows of trees and the solemn groups of mourning doves perched on the power lines above the railway.

But eventually I drifted away and discovered other places to wander, and the orchards became something I drove past on my way to somewhere else. When I began writing this “ghost trains” piece in August 2017, I decided to stop and take a look at the old place again. I hadn’t set foot on the property in fourteen years, and I wondered what memories might be stirred.

It was a depressing visit. The apple trees were long gone, taken out years ago and replaced by field crops. I already knew that, having driven by often enough, and I accepted it as part of the natural cycle of farming. I knew there had been field crops here before the orchards were planted in the 1960s, and perhaps some day there will be fruit trees again. Though I hadn’t expected the place to remain frozen in time, I was still unprepared for how drastically it had changed, and how empty and lost it would make me feel.

There was virtually nothing left that I knew. Where the long rows of apple trees once stood, there were now open fields of cabbage and squash. The brush piles and stacks of apple boxes were gone. The bunkhouses were gone, and the yard where the Mexican migrant workers had played volleyball every evening was rank with weeds.

Still standing was the ancient barn where boxes and orchard tractors were stored, but it had been gutted and reduced to a mere shed: three walls and a roof to shelter field equipment that I didn’t recognize. The grainery room, the loft with its collection of antique equipment, the multi-colored stacks of plastic “lugs” used for picking up drop apples: all gone. I snooped around and saw a slab of cement with the date “1994” etched in it. I remembered when that cement was poured; it didn’t seem that long ago.

But now it all looked so bleak and barren to me, an alien landscape. I didn’t know this place anymore. I sadly turned away from the fields and walked down to the railroad; but even here I was disappointed. It too looked deserted and forgotten: broken twigs and tree limbs were scattered across the rail-bed, and the rails were dull with rust.

I walked the tracks east and stopped behind the house where George Staples used to live. He had retired from farming many years ago and moved out of state. His old barn had collapsed and was now just a pile of weathered boards steadily vanishing beneath a tangle of wild grape vines. The place wasn’t entirely deserted: there was a man on a tractor nearby, bush-hogging an overgrown field where corn once grew, but he was a stranger to me.

I was standing at a crossroad of memories. Here was where I tumbled my three-wheeler in 1984. And here was where my father began his “ghost train” walk in 1978. A little further on was the spot where a couple of mischievous boys got the fright of their lives by an equally mischievous train engineer back in 1974.

I looked down the long straight where the railroad passed through Appleton and beyond towards Newfane; and I almost fancied I could see the distant headlight of a train through the shimmering heat waves. Maybe it was a coal train emerging from the glory days of the Somerset Railroad, or the ghost of a slow freight out of the old Hojack years; maybe even a phantom steam engine from the far distant past pulling into the long-vanished Hess

Road Station.

But there was no train, and the illusion faded. What I longed for was a living train to come along and blow away the air of desolation I could feel all around me. But the tracks remained silent and empty.

There was nothing left to look at, so I returned slowly to my car. Along the way I heard two voices bickering over an auto repair job in one of the back yards along West Somerset Road: two more strangers.

Back at the farm a couple of kids on ATVs were zooming up and down the fields and lanes. They must have noticed my vehicle parked behind the tracks and were curious about whoever was wandering around. I guessed they were a couple of the Mason kids; but they wouldn't know who I was, so I lurked in the shadows of the trees beside the railway until they disappeared at the far end of the cabbage field.

I felt increasingly uneasy and out-of-place; and I suddenly realised that I had the situation backwards. I didn't know any of these people I had seen today, but they weren't the strangers here. I was. I was the intruder, the trespasser. I wasn't a part of this world anymore. It belonged to those kids on their ATVs now. My time was over and gone, and it was their turn to make their own memories here. I had become a spectre from the past. I had joined the ghost trains.

A wave of sadness washed over me. This was a dangerous business, trying to revisit yesteryear. Sometimes there was nothing left to revisit. And it seemed now that there was nothing left for me to do but go home, try to put my memories into words, and move on. Night was falling when I drove across the tracks and out to the highway. My tires crunched on the gravel drive one last time; and I knew I would never come back here again.

A few nights later, in an attempt to dispel the cloud of gloom that had settled upon me, I went walking through one of my current prowling grounds: a patchwork of orchards and fields somewhere along the Lake Road. I had no history with this property, and I wasn't even sure who owned it, but it felt like I was on familiar ground again. Maybe it was because this place was not burdened with the weight of memories. There were no ghosts here.

I stole through the rows of apple trees down to a quiet place where a bluff overlooks Lake Ontario. Around me I could hear the dry buzzing insect sounds of late summer. The stars shone crisp and clear in the sky above.

It grieved me that such a large part of my past had disappeared. It made the world seem smaller, emptier. For a moment a jumble of images crowded in on me: tractors and trains, apple trees and coal cars. I glimpsed the faces of old friends from Appleton and West Somerset Road. I thought I heard the echo of a train whistle drifting across the night air. And far away in time I saw a young boy run down a country lane in the bright afternoon sun, a couple of flattened pennies clutched in his hand.

These visions flashed briefly before my eyes; and then passed away, and haunted me no more. Maybe they were gone from the world now, but I would never forget them. They would remain alive in my memory, and I could visit them again.

If the trains ever roll through Appleton again, I hope I can be trackside to see them. But now it was time to finish what I started: to put my memories into words, and to move on. There was still much in the world to explore and discover. Maybe the rails won't be as fun to walk on, but I can still remember how.

I tossed a green apple into the water below and looked out over the lake into the expanse of night sky; and I found that it still offered plenty of scope for figments o' my 'magination.