First Train Trip

I must have been about eight when I made my first train trip. I think I was in second grade at that time. It was midsummer, hot and wet in central Kansas, and time for my aunt Winnie's annual vacation from the store, where she worked as a clerk six days a week. She invited me to join her on a trip to Pittsburgh, fifty miles away, to see her sister, my aunt Alice. "Sally, would you like to go there by train or by car?" aunt Winnie asked. "Oh, please, by train, aunt Winnie, dear! We've been there by car three times already!"

Alice was one of my favourite relatives and I was delighted to be invited to her house. As I was the youngest niece in Mother's big family, the aunties all tended to spoil me and Alice was no exception. She kept a boarding house for college students, a two-storey, brown brick building with comfortable, nicely decorated rooms at the corner of 1200 Kearney Avenue. She was also a world-class cook, which kept her boarding house full of young people. It seemed to me that their life was so exciting and joyful.

Since I'd never ridden a train before, I became more and more excited as the magic day drew near. I kept questioning Mother about train travel, but she just said, "Wait. You'll see." For an eight-year-old, waiting was really difficult, but finally the big day arrived. Mother had helped me pack the night before, and my little suitcase was full with summer sundresses, shorts and blouses, underwear and pyjamas. I was reading Billy Whiskers, a fantastic story about a goat that once made a train trip to New York, and I had put that in as well. It was almost midnight when I could go to bed at last.

We arrived at the station early, purchased our tickets and found our car. I was fascinated by the face-to-face seats so some passengers could ride backwards. Why would anyone, I thought, want to see where they'd been? I only wanted to see what lay ahead for me.

Finally, the conductor shouted, 'All aboard!' to the people on the platform. They climbed into the cars, the engineer blew the whistle and clanged the bell, and we pulled out of the station.

This train stopped at every town between my home in Solomon and Pittsburgh. It was known as the "milk train" because at one time it had delivered goods as well as passengers to these villages. I looked eagerly at the signs at each station. I'd been through all these towns by car, but this was different. The shaky ride of the coaches, the soft brown plush seats, the smells of the engine drifting back down the track and in through the open windows made this trip far more exotic.

The conductor, with his black uniform and shiny hat, the twinkling signals that told the engineer when to stop and go, thrilled me. To an adult, the trip must have seemed painfully slow, but I enjoyed every minute.

Aunt Winnie had packed a lunch for us to eat along the way as there was no dining car in the train. I was dying to know just what was in that big shopping bag she carried, but she, too, said, "Wait. You'll see." Midway, Aunt Winnie pulled down her shopping bag from the luggage rack above our seats. My eyes widened as she opened it and began to take out its contents. I had expected lunch- meat sandwiches, but instead there was a container of fried chicken, two hardboiled eggs, bread and butter wrapped in waxed paper, crisp radishes and slim green onions from Winnie's garden, as well as rosy sliced tomatoes. She had brought paper plates, paper cups and some of the 'everyday' silverware. A large bottle of cold tea was well wrapped in a dishtowel; the ice had melted, but it was still chilly. I cautiously balanced my plate on my knees and ate, wiping my lips and fingers with a large paper napkin. This was living!

When we had cleaned our plates, Aunt Winnie looked into the bag one more time. The best treat of all appeared — homemade chocolate cakes! Another cup of cold tea washed these down and then we carefully returned the remains of the food and silverware to the bag, which Aunt Winnie put into the corner by her feet.

"Almost there," said my aunt, looking out of the window at the scenery passing by. And sure enough, as we pulled into the Pittsburgh station we immediately caught sight of aunt Alice, waiting for us, a smile like the sun lighting up her face, arms wide open. We got off the train and she led us past the taxi rank and the bus stop to her car that was parked near the station. And all the way to her home she was asking about my impressions of my first train trip and I could hardly find the words to express all the thrill and excitement that filled me.

Aunt Alice made her living by...

1. ...working as a cook.
2. ...keeping a boarding house.
3. ...decorating houses.
4. ...working as a teacher at college.