

Echoes of Earlville

When someone first revealed to me that I lived in Earlville, Illinois, I had no inkling there was ever any other place to live. Show me another town where trains would wail from creek to crossover, glissando-ing like slide trombones.

I remember winter nights in bed when long steam-engine whistle toots would bring about deep slumbering--reliable as lullabies. Soon progress dared to usher in the brassy, strident dissonance of diesel horns, "long-long-short-long," which set the window panes a-buzz.

Percussion also spread through town from near the Farmer's Elevator--during harvest rush, staccato pops from John Deeres lined up near the scales sent complex polyrhythms further east than the Legion Hall.

Earlville was small, so most knew most--for everybody's good, it seemed. Few homes were listed, bought, or sold without a buzz of estimates proceeding through the telephones. Transgression stories relayed at the noisy downtown coffee shop made patrons want just one more cup--and filled the owner's till enough to pay the waitress and the cook.

In Earlville, peaceful though it was, occasional embarrassments were held quite close to home and hearth. Shrewd townfolk having secrets knew the power that perfect silence has, so that even at the coffee shop no mortal ever was the wiser.

I wonder whether Earlville now is still the way it used to be. Are the same things happening today except to different residents? Do trains still pound those west-end switches, filling town with jazzy rhythms? Do policemen cruise the streets at night and watch for tavern stragglers who think booze helps their driving skills?

The Leader prints the deaths of friends I used to work and joke beside, their laughter now a memory. Obituaries fail to tell the grief and joy these townfolk knew. If Roman Catholic, they find eternal rest on holy ground off Union Street just east of town. For Protestants and "faith unknown" the Precinct is the plot of choice, out by the blacktop south of town. I'll join my townsmen there someday when hidden forces that I trust decide it's time I go back home.

Although I can't be sure I'll hear those trains at night from where I rest, the living folks will surely hear them on and off between their dreams. As each nocturnal freight train bawls through town, then fades out west or east, light-sleeping heirs to Earlville's past will pull their covers up a bit, turn over, and go back to sleep.