

## ENGINE #77

You could see old #77 for miles as she made her way across the prairie, thick black smoke billowing out her stack. Even when Clover Mountain hid her approach, some of the local youngsters in Harpersville could put their ears to the rails and tell you exactly when she would be arriving. Engine #77 always pulled twelve passenger cars, never more, never less. By the time she reached Harpersville, three-quarters of her seats usually held riders. After leaving that prairie town, she had two more stops in the flatlands before she headed back into the western mountains with nary an empty seat.

One fine spring day, an extra fancy coach pulled into Harpersville via the Overland Express Trail. Despite its travel over dusty prairie roads, the coach's exterior shine gave ample witness to the wealth of its owner. Four magnificent white stallions pulled it so effortlessly that it appeared to be floating on air. The coach driver sat up in such a rigid posture that one might have thought he had too much starch in his shirt. The driver's white leather gloves gripped the polished reins with

minimal exertion. With the arrival of such a wondrous sight, a crowd soon gathered around the luxurious vehicle. Why even Seth Adams, the official photographer of the Harpersville Gazette, showed up with his camera. When the door of the coach opened, the crowd gasped at the fine-looking clothes worn by the man stepping out.

As they soon found out, the wealthy man came from back east, near Boston way. When all the hoopla died down and everybody went back to their business, the young man took a stroll around town. At four o'clock in the afternoon, he was over by the train station when old #77 pulled in to pick up a load of passengers. The young man noted that no passengers disembarked from the cars for Harpersville. Fascinated by the massive locomotive and its load, he went inside the train station to inquire about ticket availability.

“We don't sell tickets here for that particular train,” stated the man behind the counter. “I would suggest that you talk to the conductor about that. I'm not trying to discourage you, but from what I've heard, the tickets are mighty expensive and really hard to come by.”

“Thank you for the information, sir. I believe I can manage the cost without a problem.”

As the young man left the depot office, he pulled out a little black book from an inside pocket of his magnificent jacket. Flipping through the pages, he noted that his current bank balance stood at \$4,382,611.42. He had grown up in one of Boston’s finest society families, so he had little concern about qualifying for a ticket.

Walking over to the conductor with full confidence, he came up to the man and asked, “Tell me, good sir, what must I do to get a ticket for this train?”

“We don’t let just anybody ride this train, mister,” answered the conductor. “Only a select few can get aboard.”

“I’ve been a law-abiding citizen all my life, and I come from a family with the finest societal connections,” said the young man.

“Furthermore,” continued the conductor. “The ticket for this train is very expensive.”

“My good fellow,” replied the young man. “I’m a wealthy man. How much does the ticket cost?”

“The cost for the ticket is \$4,382,611.21.”

“But that’s . . . that’s . . . all the money I have. How did you know exactly how much money I have? You want me to give you all that money for a single ride on that train?”

“No, I don’t want you to give it to me,” said the conductor. “I want you to go up to the Indian village and give it to them. They’ve had a couple of rough winters.”

The cost of the ticket proved a little too much for the wealthy young man. He left the train station and walked back to his fine coach. As the four white stallions headed east with the magnificent vehicle, the young man, all alone in the coach, leaned out the window and looked back to see old Engine #77 against the fading light of an orange sun. Thick black smoke poured out of her stack as she headed west across the prairie toward the awaiting mountains. He could hear the faint sound of joyous song coming from the cars of the

departing train until the distance between his magnificent coach and the train became too great.

*The years have produced many an opinion as to the destination of that old train. A qualified witness does not exist, as all who leave do not return. One oddity that remains is the price of the ticket. Never the same, the ticket price always works out to be everything the ticketholder possesses. Yet, the train line never takes a penny of the ticket price. That might lead one to believe that the cost to operate the train is being heavily subsidized by someone else, and anything the ticketholder has is merely excess baggage of no use to anyone at the train's ultimate destination.*

*Engine #77 has been replaced today by a sleek new diesel-powered machine, but everything else remains the same. It is my opinion that it shall be a fixture on the prairies of tomorrow for the course of time as we know it. The ride aboard that particular train seems to transcend everything but the sole entity of the ticketholder, or perhaps we should say the soul entity of the ticketholder.*

