

Jeff Around Town – September 6th, 2024

Otis: And go around town. Hey, Jeff.

Jeff: That's a new word, beautifler.

Otis: Beautifler.

Jeff: That's good.

Otis: Bigly.

Jeff: You know, Otis, I know you're a fan of train travel in Europe.

Otis: Yes, I am a big train fan. Huge. Huge.

Jeff: When you were a kid, did you ever go train spotting?

Otis: Well, yes and no. I mean, I wasn't like a big fan. I loved to ride them though. I loved the utilitarian, the use. When I went to Creighton, you could catch a train down at the station here and head down to Union Station in Kansas City. I think it was the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroad. Passenger train, obviously.

Jeff: Passenger train.

Otis: Now, well past its glory years. But you could ride. And as a student, you know, I want to go home for the weekend. Seven dollars. Four and a half hours. I was home.

Jeff: Can we bring that back?

Otis: I think we should. Definitely.

Jeff: Well, as you know, there's such a romance to trains and especially those passenger trains. And well, you know, we don't have as many anymore, obviously, in the U.S. like they do in Europe. When Czech composer Antonín Dvořák was nine years old, he lived across from a train station, and he became transfixed with trains. And then from then on, when he would go on tour, he would always visit railway stations and talk with the engineers. When he lived for a time in the U.S., he often took trains and went train spotting. And of course, when he came to Iowa from New York for a while, he took the train, of course. And he went to Iowa because he felt nostalgic for home. And someone had told him that Iowa looked a lot like the bohemian countryside. So anyhow, it turns out that I also live near a train station. I live down by the Durham, which is no longer actually in use as a train station. And I often hear trains. So, the other day on Monday, I heard the most unusual train whistle. And I knew right away that it wasn't your ordinary modern train horn. I'd somehow missed the news that the Union Pacific's big boy steam locomotive was to make a brief stop at the Durham. But apparently hundreds, if not thousands of others knew all about it.

Otis: There are a lot of big boy fans. And that distinctive sound of a steam engine horn, a whistle, if you will.

Jeff: You are so right. There's an app for it. You can follow the big boy on an app. So, the big boy was built in 1941, retired in 1961, although, of course, it would eventually make a comeback. And it was so joyful, Otis, to see all the kids and adults there gathered around to watch the train just as I was. We were all huddled together. And that's when I met Shelley Taylor. Now, Shelley, it turns out, works for the Union Pacific. Her job is to move empty cars to where they need to be for the next customer.

Otis: Or tell them where to. She doesn't personally.

Jeff: She doesn't. Not that I know of. But she tells them. Yes, exactly.

Otis: Because that would be cool.

Jeff: That would be. Well, she's also she also listens to KVNO. So, I asked her if she's a fan of trains. She said she's more of a birder, loves to watch migrating birds. Which, of course, have been an inspiration to many composers, just like trains. Anyhow, back to Big Boy. It turns out, after leaving Omaha, somewhere maybe in Council Bluffs to Denison, Iowa, Jay Leno rode along in the cab the other day of the engine. And the famed locomotive would eventually head off to Carroll, Iowa, which is really only a few hours away from Spillville, where Dvorak lived so many years ago.

Otis: Where he composed his American Quartet.

Jeff: He did, indeed. It's a long way back to the days of Dvorak. But if you were at the Durham on Monday, you know how joyful it was to be doing a little train spotting, just like that famed composer. And if steam engines aren't enough to inspire you, how about Shelley Taylor, that UP employee that I met? She's worked for UP, Otis, for 45 years. What's more, exactly today she's retiring. So, congrats to you, Shelley, and anyone else who's retiring today or in the near future. Otis?

Otis: Give me a train ride.

Jeff: That's another Jeff Around Town.

Otis: Ah, yes. Thank you, Jeff.

Jeff: Thank you.

Otis: I've got an old colleague, Steve Sleeper, used to do radio with him. He's a train spotter.

Jeff: Steve Sleeper.

Otis: He will wander around with his camera. Me, I have healthier pursuits.