



The long arm of coincidence, a clipping - yellow with age -- from an old scrap book, and a one-hundred year old story worth the re-telling. That's for this week.

Today we deplore the passing of the railroads. Especially since the energy crisis, we remember the trains that rattled at least twice a day between Boston and the Cape.

The idea that automobile travel could, someday, be as obsolete as train travel is now, seems preposterous.

As recently as thirty years ago, no one dreamed the railroads might go out of business. The gleaming tracks and chuffing engines were as much a part of life as cars are today.

Going back to days before trains were common, we're surprised to discover people offered the same resistance to the new-fangled steam engines we'd feel today for a substitute for the automobile.

When track-laying was first proposed, towns destined to receive the new mode of transportation objected strenuously to its coming.

The advent of the railroad was regarded by a good many New Englanders as a calamity. As late as 1842, a Boston suburb voted in town meeting to reject the service because "a railroad will be of incalculable evil to the town generally, in addition to the immense sacrifice of private property...."

"A great portion of the road will lead through thickly settled and populous parts of the town, crossing and running continuous to public highways, and thereby making a permanent obstruction to a free intercourse of our citizens, and creating great and enduring danger and hazard to all travel upon the common roads."

In the days when the lyrics of a popular song "All the way around the Cape's the only way to Boston," were sung by people along the south shore of Cape Cod, rail transportation was viewed as uncertain, hazardous, and a threat to life and limb.

In spite of the song, the Cape Cod Railroad (later to become the Old Colony) was opened from Plymouth to Provincetown in August 1873. The Old Colony to Plymouth began service as early as 1845.

Why, we wonder today, was the coming of the railroad considered such a disaster? As long as we can remember, the railroad provided safe, usually certain transportation; its demise is regretted by all who recall the trains coming into West Barnstable, Yarmouth and Hyannis almost as dependably as the sun rises and sets.

From the old scrapbook comes the story which may help explain people's reluctance to accept the newest modern convenience, the railroad.

The winter of 1867, like many winters in the good old days, was snowy, blowy, icy and generally disagreeable. Then, as now, Cape weather was milder than that in the Boston area.

One winter's day, that year, the Cape train huffed, puffed and clattered its way up-Cape, carrying seventy-seven passengers and hauling towards Boston a baggage car of mail and freight.

On that particular trip, the train never got as far as Middleboro.

The deep snow drifts and high winds got worse and worse as the train made its way up the line.

In those days, the station at Rock was the first south of Middleboro on the Cape division of the Old Colony. Just north from Rock Village crossing, there's a long heavy grade.

Conductor Nathaniel Sears of Hyannis and Fairhaven was worried. Would the engine succeed in making that grade?

It did not. Slowly the train dug its cowcatcher into the drifts, sluggishly it churned forward a few more feet, and stopped. Steam and coal smoke poured from the engine's funnel. No further would it go.

Men passengers jumped out into the cold and the snow. A group gathered and conferred. Clearly the train was stalled, stuck good and proper, and until assistance came or the snow melted, there it would stay.

The cars provided protection from the winds; the stoves could be fueled to keep people from freezing. Where, however, would food be found for what might prove to be quite a long wait until help arrived?

In the baggage car the trainmen and male passengers found a barrel of split eels and another of smoked pickerel. Folks wouldn't starve immediately, but it looked like short rations.

At nearby Rock Village Israel Smith kept a small grocery. Young men floundered there through the drifts and brought food back to the beleaguered people waiting in the cars.

The day passed and the night. The weather moderated a bit and word of the passengers' plight spread across the countryside to the farms of the tiny community of Rock.

Neighborly people came to their relief with food, water and warm blankets.

Ichabod Atwood, then in his mid-forties, contributed large quantities of beef and pork. Atwood, a native of Fall Brook, Middleboro, had been born on March 13, 1820; he'd attended the district school and Pierce Academy, and when about fifteen years of age was engaged as a teacher.

He followed this profession for thirty years before becoming so interested in the mills of Fall Brook and Rock, he gave up teaching and, in 1866, together with his son Charles Nelson Atwood, started Rock's only industry, the Atwood Lumber and Box Mill.

At the height of its activity, the mill employed as many as seventy-five men, but was just getting started at the time of this story.

During his lifetime, Mr. Atwood served his community well. He was justice of the peace for more than 45 years; surveyor for 40 years, selectman and overseer for the poor for three years, and a member of the school committee for several years. It was natural for a man so concerned with the well-being of his fellow-citizens to offer aid in an emergency.

Without his help, the passengers aboard the train on this ill-fated trip might well have suffered more than general discomfort, for it was many long hours before, on the fourth day, three engines from Hyannis finally got through and tugged the train from the snowbank.

The Boston-bound passengers, anxious now only to return to their Cape Cod homes, were hauled back to Hyannis.

Thinking about this accident, it's apparent rail travel in the early days wasn't as dependable as we nostalgically remember.

Memory is slow to admit of such dangers as being snow-bound for four days between Hyannis and Boston. Being marooned in this fashion for four days and nights with little heat, and dependent for food upon the goodness of strangers in the small village of Rock, Massachusetts, was enough to give any sensible person pause.

A happy note -- and here's where the coincidence come in -- is that the grandson of the hapless travelers' benefactor, Ichabod F. Atwood, son of Charles Nelson Atwood, now maintains a home in Wianno.

Over a century ago his grandfather proved equal to meeting the need of those seventy-seven cold and hungry Cape Codders, and now Mr. Atwood, a graduate of M.I.T. and retired from the presidency of the Chelsea Savings Bank, spends his summers among us, perhaps among some of the decendants of those same people who were stranded in the snow.