

When it comes to decorating for the Christmas holidays, many pull boxes and totes out of storage where nativity sets, little Christmas trees, ornaments and decorations are carefully placed to be used for the next Christmas season. And some of those boxes in storage contain little houses and shops made of plaster or ceramic that belong to a Christmas village that seems to grow each year, with new additions to the miniature streets that straddle the carefully placed train tracks that lead through the little town. The nostalgia! of the little toy trains that wind their way through town, under towering evergreens and over stone bridges, past skating rinks and a crowd of carolers holding tiny books, their mouths open in song.

My grandfather shared stories of when the train came through their town, to deliver the freshly cut Christmas trees that were stacked vertically against the wall of the rail car. During the holiday season many took to travelling by train to visit loved ones in neighboring communities, or the big cities further away, such as Brandon or Winnipeg. In those days, pretty much every town had a train station, and it was often the center of community activity, in every season!

*As the train approaches and the whistle sounds, people gather. Who might be on this train arriving in their small town? Who is waiting to climb on the train to travel for a visit or a doctor's appointment? What freight has arrived? Are the BC apples in? Maybe the Christmas presents have arrived that were ordered weeks ago from the Eaton's catalog!*

*People congregate slowly on the platform beside the tracks and in the station waiting room. The mail-carrier arrives with his locked mail sacks, the editor with his notebook to record departures and arrivals, the commercial traveler, with the collar of his winter coat pulled up around his ears as he steps down the metal steps.*

*A citizen, late with her Christmas letters, dashes to the station and thrusts them into the mail carrier's hand for late posting. The train slows to a stop with a chchch and a loud tsshhh as air is released from under the belly of the beast. The conductor swings down to the platform as the giant engine hisses and puffs, belching smoke and steam from underneath and above.*

*The passengers carefully step down the grated steps and scan the crowd for familiar faces, then*

*flash a smile at someone waving from the station doorway. Departing travelers give their last hugs goodbye to their family members and climb up the steps to make their way to their bench seats in the passenger car, hoping to sit by the window to wave at those who are watching from the platform. Younger children, yet unfamiliar with the wide world, aren't sure where those tracks lead, but are nevertheless sure they want to go wherever the shiny engine is going.*

*The conductor announces "all aboard" one last time as late comers dash up the steps. The doors close, securely, and the engine prepares to leave .... chugging slowly as it edges away from the train station ....*

Yes, 'train time' was the occasion of the day, and the station was always busy!

There, the grain buyers of the elevator companies received telegrams advising them of the daily grain prices. There, the farmers came to collect their freight and express parcels. There, the draymen loaded the boxes and parcels for delivery to the local merchants.

Along with regularly scheduled service, another feature of improved rail service involved special excursions. The railways were eager to capitalize on special events such as fairs, sporting events, and educational presentations. Organizations, clubs and even schools chartered trains for their events.

In 1912 an Agricultural College special train came to the region with three coaches for lectures on dairy, garden and field crops, and a boxcar complete with livestock for demonstration work. Ladies were instructed in the care of the sick, and home nursing.

School Field Days began in the first decade of the 20th Century, and for many years they were held at Killarney, with trains carrying students from both east and west. The first Field Day in Deloraine was held in 1916, with excursion trains bringing 1,250 young people from as far away as Cartwright, and other trains bringing those from the Napinka line and the Lyleton branch.

Yes, trains were a vital artery of transportation between our towns for many, many reasons and for many, many years. So, the next time you see a miniature Christmas village set up under the

Christmas tree or on a display table, imagine yourself skating on a nearby pond and waving to the conductor and all the passengers smiling at you through the passing windows of the train.

And you might even get the engineer to sound his whistle!

**Christmas Trains** was taken from *Vantage Points 5*. *Vantage Points* is a 6-book series that shares local history from across the southwest corner of Manitoba. All stories have been researched, compiled and printed through the Turtle Mountain Souris Plains Heritage Association. Check out more of their wealth of history stories by visiting their website at [www.vantagepoints.ca](http://www.vantagepoints.ca).

On behalf of the Turtle Mountain Souris Plains Heritage Association, I'm Betty Sawatzky.

Merry Christmas!

