

AFTER
THE END
OF THE LINE

RAILROAD HAUNTINGS IN
LITERATURE AND LORE

EDITED BY
TIM PRASIL

BROM NES BOOKS

After the End of the Line: Railroad Hauntings in Literature and Lore is the fifth volume of the Phantom Traditions Library series, published by Brom Bones Books. These anthologies feature “forgotten” genres or sub-genres of popular fiction—from supernatural and fantasy tales to detective mysteries and science fiction—written primarily during the 1800s and early 1900s. Edited by Tim Prasil, each volume has a well-researched introduction, helpful and interesting footnotes, and an appendix that spotlights a work or two of relevant non-fiction from the same period. Learn more about the Phantom Traditions Library at BromBonesBooks.com.

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INTRODUCTION

TIM PRASIL

It is currently understood that this is a hard headed, material, steam-engine and railroad age. All ghosts have fled, and all witches have been drowned.

The London Morning Chronicle, 1842¹

When the passage above was printed, the railroad seemed to be whisking humanity into a shiny, mechanical future, leaving ghosts in the darkening, superstitious past. The sentiment survived as late as 1858, when a narrative titled “My Only Adventure” appeared in newspapers across the United States. The narrator opens his tale by saying that he has no ghost story to share: “Railways have put haunted chambers out of fashion. . . . Ghosts lived in old [stage]coaching days, and dwelt in quaint wayside inns; and I was never lucky enough to have my bed curtains disturbed by invisible hands.” To be sure, the story is about that narrator surviving an invasion of completely *corporeal* criminals.² Why introduce it as decidedly *not* a ghost story? Did the author worry that, since *part* of the tale takes place at Christmas, readers might have expected it to end as a supernatural Yuletide yarn? The more likely answer is that the author simply wanted to affirm that ghosts had vanished in the smoke of the oncoming “steam-engine and railroad age.”

By their very nature, though, ghosts materialize where they’re least expected—they *refuse* to stay buried, especially in the past. Railroads and hauntings started to merge. One such case occurred in 1856, when several persons heard—but did not see—a phantom train pull into Staunton, Virginia. One report reads:

Between the hours of eleven and twelve o’clock at night, the approach of a train of cars has been heard, the shriek of the whistle and the rumbling of the train increasing in distinctness

until the cars reached the Staunton Depot. Persons have gone to the Depot to find out the cause of the arrival at so unusual an hour, and when they got there found no train. The [station] agents say that no train is on the road at that hour of night, and yet the approach of one is unmistakably heralded by the rumbling and its arrival announced by the whistle.

This report concludes by saying a very similar mystery has occurred on “a Northern Railroad.” In fact, heard-but-unseen trains became common enough to have been identified as a folklore motif,³ and ghost reports in newspapers often feel much more like folktale than fact.

A very different case occurred in 1860. The *Burlington Hawkeye*, a newspaper in Iowa, reported on an unnamed train engineer who had been speeding along to reach the next stop. Suddenly, he saw a female figure on the track not far ahead! And there was *no way to stop in time!*

The engineer remarked to the person on the engine, that that was the first person he had ever killed during his railroad experience. Arriving at the depot, he sent men with lights back to the spot where he saw the woman, but no sign or trace of anything was there. There was no body, no blood, no marks upon the track. Next morning the search was renewed with no success.

It’s not an especially gripping *ghost* story. In fact, it only *became* a ghost story when, as the report was reprinted elsewhere, some editor added this spooky—if not a bit snarky—lead-in: “It is said that spectres, vampires and goblins are seen at night on the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad.” With this editorial enhancement, the news report raced from Iowa to California one way and to England the other.⁴

Despite its simplicity, this story hints at two reasons why railroads and hauntings melded fairly quickly. First, while a remarkably convenient and efficient form of transportation, the iron horse was also a vehicle of death and destruction. Among many others catastrophes in the U.S., the Great Train Wreck of 1856 involved two trains colliding head-on in Pennsylvania, killing more than 50 and injuring more than 100. In 1863, around 75 passengers were killed when the weight of a train collapsed a badly-constructed bridge crossing Mississippi’s Chunky Creek, and in 1876, another

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faulty bridge sent a train plummeting into Ohio's Ashtabula River with between 90 and 100 dead. Individual train wrecks would continue to claim even more American lives as the decades advanced.

Meanwhile, deaths from railway disasters grew throughout the United Kingdom: 18 people died in 1853, when one train rear-ended another in Straffan, Ireland (then governed by the UK); 23 died eight years later, when a similar event happened in a train tunnel near Brighton, England; 33 died seven years after that in a collision in Abergele, Wales; and about 70 died in 1879, when Scotland's Tay Bridge succumbed to stormy weather while a train traversed it. Needless to say, as railways stretched around the world, terrible train wrecks inevitably haunted them.

The second issue arising from that well-traveled report about the trainman and the insubstantial woman on the tracks is in what the incident suggests about the engineer. Since he seems to have been alone in seeing the figure, it's fair to ask if he had experienced an optical illusion, one brought on by the conditions under which train engineers work. These conditions are explained in an 1882 article titled "Superstitious Engineers." The anonymous writer states bluntly: "Like sailors, engineers are very superstitious." However, they have cause to be so:

With only a fireman [controlling the steam] as a companion they are out in all kinds of weather, and I can tell you it is no pleasant thing for a man to ride at full speed on a dark night, peering out of a little window into a blackness made more black by the bright glare of the headlight. On all sides is darkness, and the little speck of monotonous track ahead is all that he can see. Certain engines, like certain ships, get bad reputations, and the men hate to run them. They consider them unlucky and believe they are bound to kill somebody, and so will refuse to drive them at top speed.⁵

Of course, believing some trains are unlucky is different from believing spirits can return to the mortal realm unsummoned.

However, the stereotype of engineers being superstitious also encompassed a belief in ghosts. This is illustrated in an 1894 issue of *Railway World*, a journal aimed at railroad professionals. "Important operations have been suspended by the vague report of a spectre," explains the unnamed writer, adding that managers should debunk these reports among their employees with a careful

hand. “It does no good to ridicule superstition” or to “compel men to do what they dread. . . . What is wanted is to convince a frightened man that [a ghostly danger] is imaginary.” For instance, one New Jersey apparition was exposed to be a white pig. Elsewhere, an eerie figure, which “rested in a gloomy attitude upon a graveyard gate,” turned out to be a turkey. “The rumor that an apparition had been seen by one man,” says the writer, “might lead others to abandon their work, and might render it difficult to get any labor performed after nightfall.”⁶ Railroad phantoms, then, could scare away profits.

The writer advising how to manage ghost sightings might have been pleased to read J.L.B. Sunderlin’s “Railroad Superstitions,” a 1912 reminiscence of times gone by. He opens by saying that “the railroad man of a decade ago, even, was a different man from the railroad man of today; for, as he has become educated he has shed many of his superstitious ideas.” Sunderlin goes on to recount beliefs such as accidents coming in threes, the importance of nailing a horseshoe to the caboose or locomotive, and certain trainmen being gifted with the ability to “foretell dire and wondrous happenings.” Included is a tale of “the wraith of an old trackwalker” running as fast as the train itself along the spot where he was killed. Neither a pig nor a turkey, however, this ghost story is explained by the shadow of a maple leaf clinging to the headlight.⁷

If all ghosts had truly “fled” before 1842—and if train engineers had truly ceased to be superstitious by 1912—then the mid-1800s to the early 1900s might be roughly marked as the first era of railroad hauntings. Luckily for us, engineers during those seventy years shared their ghostly tales, sometimes with news-hungry journalists. These reporters were joined by some of the era’s ghost-story collectors. At the same time, this distinctive development in ghostlore was also inspiring fiction writers and poets. This, then, provides a timeframe for the variety of pieces collected in this anthology.

While gathering material, I noticed that motifs in the non-fiction narratives carried through to the literary works. This led me to organize the contents into three sections. I call the first “Warning Signals from Beyond,” and you’ll find that these warnings are communicated in a variety of ways. It might be an irresistible feeling—a compelling hunch—strong enough to induce an engineer to stop a train. It’s a somewhat more traditional ghost in Charles Dickens’ famous story “The Signal-Man,” but the figure gives the focal character hard-to-decipher clues of future events. In Bret Harte’s poem “The Ghost that Jim Saw,” it’s a vision of a house and

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a drunken man stumbling along the tracks. Newspaper accounts indicate that phantom locomotives soaring across the sky or even oddly moving lights could be interpreted as portents of tragedy.

Of course, the history of prognostication probably extends back even further than when Oedipus was prophesized to kill his dad and marry his mom. For centuries, it was said that dreams sometimes conveyed future events, and this idea still held interest in the 1800s. For instance, Catherine Crowe devotes an entire chapter to warnings gleaned through dreams in her 1848 book *The Night Side of Nature*, a remarkable compendium of “true” reports about otherworldly experiences. On the other hand, precognitive warnings experienced while fully awake come closer to what Victorians would refer to as “second sight.” Crowe discusses this in her “Miscellaneous Phenomena” chapter, introducing it by saying that finding supporting evidence is a challenge because, “when the seers are of the humbler classes, they are called impostors and not believed; and when they are of the higher, they do not make the subject a matter of conversation, nor choose to expose themselves to the ridicule of the foolish.” Being intimidated by skepticism certainly shows up in the pieces chosen for this anthology’s first section, and they fit best with wide-awake “second sight.”

Despite claiming she lacks abundant evidence, Crowe does offer a handful of accounts illustrating second sight. There’s the houseguest who cut short his stay, claiming that “during dinner he had seen a female figure with her throat cut, standing behind Lady T.’s chair.” Lady T. herself was then kept ignorant of this grisly vision—which might have been a terrible mistake—because, later that night, it was discovered that *she* had cut her own throat. Another of Crowe’s examples concerns a man who saw “a dreadful face at one corner of the room. He described it as a bruised, battered, crushed, discoloured face, with the two eyes protruding frightfully from their sockets.” The visionary face is so mangled that the man did not recognize it as *his own* after suffering a horrible accident the next day. Even a friend of Crowe’s had a story to tell. Working in the medical field, he encountered a patient with “inflammation of the brain,” a condition resulting from having seen her “Uncle John drowned in his boat under the fifth arch of Rochester Bridge!” Sadly, the niece died of her ailment. Worse yet, the following night, the uncle drowned “exactly as she had foretold.”⁸ In each of these cases, as happens with Oedipus, even the *foretold* calamity was not averted. I won’t tell you if the same holds true for those you’ll meet in the “Warning Signals from Beyond”

section.

As suggested by the warning appearing in the form of a spectral train crossing the clouds, there is some overlap between the motifs. Nonetheless, the second section of this anthology, “Phantom Locomotives,” spotlights a phenomena that doesn’t predict the future. Instead, the trains here—like the one mentioned above as arriving at Stauton Depot—only mystify those in the present, even if they do so by reenacting the past.

In a sense, phantom trains are a modernization of earlier supernatural modes of transportation, especially phantom coaches and phantom ships. Since I hate to delay the start of your trip for *too* long, let’s just take a glance at only those coaches. Several haunt England, but one of the most famous appears annually at Blickling Hall, once the residence of Anne Boleyn. Her ghost is said to be carried by coachmen and horses that are, in deference to the decapitated queen, also headless. Similar phantoms appear in Ireland, but they bring sad news. John O’Hanlon explains, “Headless apparitions of horses and coachmen are often seen driving from or towards grave-yards, during the dead hour of midnight. Such appearances, where found passing round a particular house, are regarded as ominous of some approaching disaster, and generally indicate a death warning to some member of the family.” A few phantom coaches have traveled to the U.S., too. Henry S. Olcott notes one that had materialized in Vermont:

On a cold winter night, just before bed-time, the [Eddy] family were gathered in the sitting-room, when they heard the noise of a carriage coming rapidly along the road from the northward. The circumstance was so strange, the ground being covered with snow which would prevent the sound of wheels being heard, that all went to the front windows to look. . . .

There, the family distinctly saw a woman in Scottish apparel along with a driver atop an elegant coach. Speechless, they then noticed that the fence “and other objects, previously concealed behind the opaque bodies of the carriage and horses, began to show through, and in a moment the whole thing vanished into air, leaving the spectators lost in amazement.”⁹ In the end, this apparition proves to be an import of the Celtic harbinger of death that O’Hanlon mentions.

Such narratives, updated for the railroad age, *might* have been subtly reinforced by real events. At least as early as 1878, railroads

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in the U.S. were accused of running what were called “ghost trains,” meaning freight was transported off-the-books with the profits pocketed by local management rather than passed on to company heads or investors. Does this explain the noiseless, smokeless train that a night tower attendant saw arrive, stop, and depart Watseka, Illinois, in March of 1907? Another tower attendant three miles south saw it come and go, too—but after telegraphing their despatchers, both men were told there was no such train. Perhaps not surprisingly, railroad officials denied the practice existed, but even rumors of goods being hauled on the sly might have inspired visions of trains that both were—and *weren't*—there. With more certainty, a new passenger train running between Boston and New York was announced in 1891. Its cars were painted a creamy white on the outside, and the appearance of this pale, giant snake—especially as it neared its final destination at 9:00 p.m.—led to it quickly being dubbed “the Ghost Train.”¹⁰ (Glance at the front cover of this book, and you’ll see an illustration of it.) In other words, readers in the late 1800s were being told that *some “ghost trains” were real!*

Meanwhile, ghosts themselves were also appearing along the tracks. This brings us to the anthology’s third section: “Wraiths on the Rails.” Here, you’ll meet a phantom hovering around a West Virginia railway tunnel. There’s an engine that resonates with and echoes the suffering of those it has killed. There’s a headless ghost seen by the crew of the midnight train while passing the spot where a conductor was decapitated while on duty. And these are what was being reported in newspapers—*not* what was being imagined by writers of fiction! Are they simply tall tales, perhaps told by railroaders with a twinkle in their eye? Are they better understood as railroad legend and lore? Or did they really happen? In a way, the uncertainty clouding the truthfulness of the articles in this section makes them more unsettling than the pieces of outright fiction there.

This isn’t to say that the fictional wraiths on the rails aren’t creepy, too. On one end of the spectral spectrum, there are demonic and vengeful ghosts. On the other extreme, there’s a murdered railroad employee who manages to stick around long enough to thwart his killers’ terrible train robbery. Somewhere in the middle, there are restless spirits “dragging the chains” of guilt due to their unsolved crimes. And I’m particularly a fan of Granny Whittaker’s ghost cow.

Within these three sections, the individual pieces are arranged

chronologically, meaning that the journey bounces between newspaper reports and short stories—with stops for memoir, travelogue, poetry, and a selection from a collection of “true” ghost stories. To make sure my reader knows what’s what, I introduce each piece with a footnote stating the genre before the biographical data. I then did some mild editing to each work so that new readers will enjoy them without the little “distractions” of written language from the 1800s and early 1900s. In other words, I modernized once-hyphenated words, such as “to-night,” while also dividing sentences and paragraphs that now feel unnecessarily long. Nonetheless, I worked to retain the charm of good, old-fashioned ghost-story telling.

But there’s the engineer’s whistle, and the conductor is calling out the first station. I depart here, so it looks like you’ll have the compartment all to yourself. Enjoy your journey, and try not to think about what happened in this very compartment exactly one year ago today.

Oh, you haven’t heard about that?

Well . . . I have to go now.

¹ Quoted in *The Madisonian*, Dec. 9, 1842, p. 2.

² “My Only Adventure,” *Evening Star*, Feb. 13, 1858, p. 1. Along with this Washington D.C. journal, the tale appeared in South Carolina’s *The Independent Press*, March 26, 1858, p. 1; Ohio’s *Holmes County Republican*, July 15, 1858, p. 1; the *Saint Paul Weekly Minnesotan*, Aug. 14, 1858, p. 1, and others.

³ *Lynchburg Daily Virginian*, June 28, 1856, p. 1. Ernest W. Baughman lists such auditory trains under E535.4(b) in his *Type and Motif-Index of the Folktales of England and North America* (Mouton & Co., 1966) p. 190.

⁴ Quoted in *Daily National Democrat*, Dec. 29, 1860, p. 3. Along with this Marysville, California, journal, the report was reprinted in the English newspaper *Hereford Times*, Dec. 15, 1860, p. 11.

⁵ “Superstitious Engineers,” *Railway Age Monthly and Railway Service Magazine*, 3.4 [April, 1882] p. 249.

⁶ “Superstition Among Railway Employés,” *Railway World* 20.34 [Aug. 25, 1894] p. 669.

⁷ J.L.B. Sunderlin, “Railroad Superstitions,” *Railroad Association Magazine* 2.1 [Nov. 15, 1912] pp. 11-12.

⁸ Catherine Crowe, *The Night Side of Nature; or, Ghosts and Ghost Seers* (T.C. Newby, 1848) Vol. 2: pp. 329-31.

⁹ T.F. Thiselton-Dyer summarizes the Blickling Hall haunting and similar legends in the “Headless Ghosts” chapter of his book *The Ghost World* (Ward & Downey, 1893) pp. 147-51; John O’Hanlon, *Legend Lays of Ireland* (John Mullany, 1870) p. 90; Henry S. Olcott, *People from the Other World* (American Publishing, 1875) pp. 80-83. One of the best-loved and often-anthologized works of fiction

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related to this topic is Amelia Edwards' "The Phantom Coach," *All the Year Round*, Christmas issue [1864] pp. 35-48.

¹⁰"Ghost Trains," *Truth* 5.114 [March 6, 1878] p. 296; "Train Leaves No Sign," *Evening Statesman* [Walla Walla, Washington], March 4, 1907, p. 8; "McHenry's Ghost Trains," *The Indianapolis Journal*, Feb. 13, 1884, p. 7; "A Notable New Pullman Passenger Train," *Scientific American* 64.797 [April 11, 1891] p. 229.