

The Roll

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A MERTON CONNECTION AND THE OLD ERIE RAILROAD

Jim Gerofsky, Jan. 2000

How do we find God? Perhaps better said, how can we help God find us? The usual formulas involve prayer, study, good works, meditation, liturgical ceremony, etc. But sometimes the mundane agents of our daily life turn out to be chariots of fire carrying God's love. Our job is to open our eyes and recognize them as such, usually after the fact.

In my home town in the suburbs of Northern New Jersey, we did not have any chariots running around. But we did have railroad tracks and trains. The Erie Railroad maintained an old wooden station there with a name plate reading "Carlton Hill." There was a parking lot across the way that had benches and a platform for waiting passengers. On hot July and August evenings in the late 50s and 60s, my father and mother would walk my brother and me up the street after dinner to watch the trains go by.

The station lot had just enough railroad and street movement to keep two young boys occupied, but room enough to avoid danger. There was a river bridge nearby that opened with deep steam whistle blasts. There were red and green train signals, clanging gates, and the trains themselves with their chugging diesels and loud horns and grinding brakes. It was a comfortable place where I always felt loved and cared for, and yet occupied and entertained.

After a few years we found other summer diversions. Also, most of the Erie trains stopped running on that line in 1963. But in my early years I became interested in railroads once again. I started going down by the tracks and talked with railroad men. During my college years, I worked for the railroad and planned to make a career as a railroad man.

That was not to be. Over time, I realized that I was looking for something along the line that was no longer there: namely, the love and protection that I felt as a young boy at the Carlton Hill station. Railroads had been a finger pointing to the moon, and not the moon itself. But that enlightenment reminded me that there once had been a moon, i.e. the caring that my parents had given me. It made me realize just how sacred that seemingly mundane experience had really been.



Enter Merton

Recently, while reading Monica Furlong's biography of Thomas Merton, I noticed her comment about Merton learning the Breviary during his train rides from New York to St. Bonaventure's College in Olean, NY. As a former railroad employee and train enthusiast, it occurred to me that there were two lines from New York to Olean, and one of them passed through old Carlton Hill station. Could it be that Thomas Merton was once a regular passenger over the railroad that I walked and played beside as a child, and where I worked as a young adult? And furthermore, did that railroad have any role

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in Merton's spiritual growth? I pulled my copy of *The Seven Storey Mountain* off the shelf. My earlier reading of it had been spotty; I needed to brush up on the 1938-1941 period. It didn't take long to find the answer to the first question. In describing his first trip up to the Lax summer house, Merton wrote of the beautiful scenery and peaceful towns that were enhanced by "long slanting rays of the sinking sun after we had passed Elmira." Merton was riding on Erie Railroad train number 1, the *Erie Limited*. That run left Jersey City (across the Hudson River from Manhattan) in mid-morning, passed through my home town of Carlton Hill soon thereafter, and wound its way around the hills and rivers of Pennsylvania and New York State on its way to Chicago, arriving in Olean in early evening. All of the other four references in *Seven Storey Mountain* to Olean travel indicate an Erie routing. There is no indication that Merton ever took the other passenger route to Olean, the Pennsylvania Railroad line through Philadelphia and Harrisburg. If he did, it obviously wasn't important enough to mention.

On first glance, this is somewhat surprising. A look at 1940 rail schedules indicates that both the Pennsylvania and the Erie took about nine and one-half hours to get to Olean. But the Pennsylvania offered an important convenience to travelers from New York City: their trains departed directly from mid-town Manhattan, avoiding the transfer to Jersey City by ferry boat, bus, or the "Hudson Tubes." Furthermore, from 1938 on, the Pennsylvania trains were pulled by electric engines as far as Harrisburg, avoiding four hours of smoky running. Erie trains ran with coal-burning engines all the way and crossed several mountain ridges where an engine would work hard and slow, pelting the cars behind it with cinders and smoke. Given Merton's physical sensitivities and the more convenient connections he would have had from Pennsylvania Station in Manhattan, why did he seem to favor the Erie trains?

In 1938, a ride on the Erie Railroad had much in common with a day in the country, whereas a ride on the Pennsylvania was a trip with urban travellers along an industrialized route. My guess is that the twenty-three year old Merton had seen enough of the world and was developing a preference for bucolic simplicity. The Breviary scene in *The Seven Storey Mountain* is an interesting prelude to Merton's upcoming life of prayer in the hills of Kentucky. He writes:

"This business of saying the Office on the Erie train, going up through the Delaware valley, was to become a familiar experience in the year that was ahead...I would be saying the Little Hours around ten o'clock in the morning when the train had passed Port Jervis and was traveling at the base of the steep wooded hills that hemmed in the river on either side. If I looked up from the pages of the book, I would see sun blazing on the trees and moist rocks, and flashing on the surface of the shallow river and playing in the forest foliage along the line. And all of this was very much like what the book was singing to me, so that everything lifted up my heart to God."

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I would like to think that railroads meant something to Thomas Merton. There is some evidence of this, e.g. John Howard Griffin's photographs of Merton along the Louisville & Nashville tracks near Gethsemani Abbey, Merton's own railroad photographs, and his remembrances of train sounds in the distance in *The Sign of Jonas*. Perhaps it was meaningful to Merton that his abbot and mentor, Dom Frederic Dunne, died on a night train (Merton notes this in the *Jonas* book).

I would also like to think that Merton had a special place in his heart for the Erie Railroad. In that regard I will return once more to *Seven Storey Mountain*. Merton's Holy Week, 1941, visit to Gethsemani started via Erie train 15, the westbound *Midlander*. This train stopped at Olean early in the morning after an overnight run from Jersey City, and proceeded west into Ohio. He got off around midday in Galion, Ohio, where he transferred to a New York Central train to Cincinnati. After an overnight stay, he took the L&N to Louisville, and in the evening got on a local run up the branch line that passed Gethsemani. This last train was an unpleasant memory for Merton because of its Jim Crow arrangement of separating blacks and whites.

In December, on his fateful trip to Gethsemani to become a Trappist, Merton took a different routing, one that was faster and avoided a hotel stay en route. The only part that the Erie Railroad would play on this trip would be a little bump in the night on the run from Buffalo to Cincinnati, when the train would cross the Erie tracks at grade in Galion. And yet that little bump was important enough to break sleep and cause him to invoke the Blessed Virgin for:

"I asked God to wake me up at Galion, Ohio. ...In the middle of the night, I woke up and we were just pulling out of Galion. I began to say the rosary where our tracks crossed the Erie line... then I went back to sleep, rocked by the joyous music of the wheels."

Today, some parts of the line from Jersey City to Olean and Galion are gone, taken up and covered by buildings or weeds. The tracks through my home town are unused and rusty. Another portion is still an important route for transcontinental freight trains, but only an 80-mile stretch in New Jersey and southern New York still sees passenger trains. And yet, many people fondly remember the Erie despite its demise in 1976. Railroading had a part in my own life and spiritual development, and I'm happy to have discovered that it played a similar role for Father Louis. Perhaps Merton never experienced the degree of family caring that I knew at Carlton Hill, but God seemed to make it up to him further up the line.

Speaking of Merton and the Abbey of Gethsemani....

Brother Paul Quenon, currently Master of Juniors at the Abbey and a former novice under Father Louis (Thomas Merton), sends us the following haunting set of verses. They commemorate the visit of the Gethsemani monks with the Tibet-