

A TALE OF TWO TRAINS

by Fred Hobbs

The trains and the trips on them were distinctly different one from the other; even their whistles.

The railroad carrying the first train considered here was constructed in 1880. Its steam locomotive puffs along on narrow gauge tracks that thread and twist at five-figure elevations through pine and spruce tree-laden pathways amidst rocky cliffs. The line is the Cumbres and Toltec Railroad, named for the pass it must cross over and the gorge that lies below.

In its earliest days the Cumbres and Toltec hauled precious metals extracted from the series of mines at or near the border between Colorado and New Mexico. When these riches were “mined-out” the railroad ceased operations for several years, but during an oil boom in the 1950s, its cars carried oil, pipe and machinery in the territory around Farmington, New Mexico. And, then it died again only to be resurrected a second time in 1970 as the Cumbres and Toltec *Scenic* Railroad, operating between the tiny communities of Antonito, Colorado and Chama, New Mexico.

The states of Colorado and New Mexico entered into a joint pact to purchase the railroad and operate it as a tourist attraction, creating jobs and revenue to help boost the economy of the economically depressed area. As a TV news reporter, I was covering the Colorado legislature at the time that the two states approved the arrangement. Along with a videographer, I was dispatched to the area to cover the “re-rebirth” of the line.

It was a “hoot” riding the train filled with dignitaries from both states, and hearing the distinctive “toot toot” as the train inched forth, gathering steam and then began the climb up the pass.

The other memorable train was the one operating in the Cold War years in post-war Germany. In 1955, I was aboard the American military train headed from Frankfurt to Berlin to start my assignment at the American Forces Network radio station there. The train had to travel through Communist East Germany.

By treaty, the trip of 344 miles was required to start at 7 p.m. The train had to travel overnight at very low speed, not to arrive in Berlin until 7 a.m. the next day. By car, the journey could be completed in less than half of that time. This was a sample of the seemingly ridiculous diplomatic games being played in the standoff between the western Allies and the Russian-dominated East German government at the time.

Nonetheless, lying on the berth in my compartment with nothing but darkness out of the window and listening to that slightly mournful European train whistle that I had heard in spy movies, I felt like an adventurer traveling in a strange and somewhat dangerous land.

Then, just as I was nodding off to sleep, there came a loud knock on the compartment door. I opened it and standing there were an East German “vopo” —volkspollitzei (people’s police), a Russian officer and an American Army MP. Was I about to be arrested? What was up? The fierce looking trio wanted to see my identification and travel documents. Turned out to be a routine procedure at the border crossing. I felt relieved, but somehow also thrilled, imagining I was in some prequel to a James Bond movie entangled in a spy mission!