

Chicago by Train

By Liz Gibbons

My father had a month off between summer school and the fall semester so our family usually took a month long vacation to different parts of the United States and Canada. During World War II when gasoline rationing was in effect vacations were shorter and we visited places closer to home. At least two of those vacations were spent exploring Chicago and its surrounding area. My dad bought a bicycle to ride to and from his office so that he could save gas rationing coupons to use to drive us to Gary, Indiana, where we boarded a train on the Lake Shore Line to take us into the heart of Chicago. We got around Chicago by walking, using buses and the elevated rail system, which is often referred to as the "L".

The first elevated rail in Chicago was built in 1892. The city was growing rapidly, and the downtown area was congested from horses, carriages, and carts. A better form of transportation was needed. The system initially consisted of a steam powered train on an elevated track. Third rail electric power was introduced at the Colombian Exhibition in 1893, and from then on the elevated rail system used third rail electric power. It was nice to ride on, but when we walked along the streets under the elevated lines I always felt an uneasiness. I believe it was the impact of the noise of the trains above and the noise and honking of horns of the cars and trucks snaking their way through the streets alongside the supporting steel beams of the rail system. It was as if my senses were being overwhelmed by too much input.

Among our activities on these vacations we visited the various museums in Chicago. The Museum of Science and Industry stands out in my memory for its Coal Mine. We ascended a stairway to get to the open rattling cage elevator that the guide, who had been a real miner, told us was taking us 600 feet down into the coal mine. Actually it took us only to the basement of the museum. There we disembarked and were instructed in mine safety. At one point the guide talked about the dangers of methane gas and startled me when he created a loud explosion to punctuate his talk. We then boarded a little work train that took us through the coal mine which was dark and claustrophobic in places. We first passed through an area where miners demonstrated mining the coal using various hand tools, and then traveled through the rest of the mine seeing huge drilling machines and other mining machinery in action. It was a wonderful exhibit that I became totally immersed in and was an effective way to learn.

I marvel at how transportation has changed during my lifetime. The first car I remember my family having was a Ford coupe with a rumble seat that was replaced by a Chevrolet sedan sometime after my brother was born. I have taken many train trips and later often used planes for travel. And I have watched in awe the lift off of the various space shuttles. In earlier times, and in some remote areas of the world today, people often never ventured more than 20 mile or so from where they were born. Most of us have been fortunate to be able to see much of this beautiful world because of the development of many forms of transportation. It is indeed a wonderful time in which we are living.