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### **An Immigrant and His Son, Working on the Railroad 1878 - 1921**

There are millions of immigrant stories woven into the fabric of American history. Most people want to know about their immigrant ancestors, where they came from and what it was like for them upon arrival here. I wanted to know those things in 1977, and so I interviewed my grandfather, asking: What did he and his father do for a living? Where did they live? What was their life like? Years after my grandfather died in 1989, I realized there were many gaps in his story because I hadn't asked him enough questions. What is a brakeman? What is a section gang? What was it like to live in a boarding house back then? The research for this paper attempts to answer those questions and many more that I had about life at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when my great-grandfather and grandfather worked on the railroad.

Great-grandfather George Hansen left Copenhagen, Denmark at age 18 sometime between 1878 and 1885 (we don't know his birth date) to avoid military conscription. He could have left for reasons common to other Europeans: shrinking farmlands, increased population density, and a shortage of jobs. If he left in the peak migration year 1882 for Scandinavians (Henretta and Brody 474), he would have been in the company of 88,131 other Danes heading for America, of which one-fifth were also from Copenhagen (Levinson and Ember 219).

Danish immigrants settled all over the United States, but according to Levinson and Ember, many initially resided in cities such as New York, Perth Amboy, Chicago, and Omaha (219). Living conditions for recent immigrants in New York were abysmal, especially in the high-density poorly-built tenement districts. Social reformer and journalist Jacob Riis, also a Danish immigrant, described twenty-five-cent lodging-houses where young unattached men stayed while looking for work when they first arrived (71). After reading Riis's view of the Bowery, an environment that bred hopelessness and desperation, it wasn't hard for me to understand why many, if they could, would attempt escape from conditions worse than those they left behind in Europe. I don't know how long George stayed in the city where he stepped ashore, but he did eventually move west.

George Hansen was part of the mass migration of Danish to the Midwest between 1870 and 1895 (Levinson and Ember 219). Frederick Jackson Turner, commenting on the impact of railroads and steamships, said "a high-water mark of American immigration came in the early eighties." He expanded on that with: "Germans and Scandinavians were rushed by emigrant trains out to the prairies, to fill the remaining spaces in the older States of the Middle West" (146).

Rural areas in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas, and the Dakotas attracted most Danes in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Levinson and Ember 219), but if George followed that crowd -- he didn't stay with them long. Instead, George settled in the small village of Hillsdale, Illinois, population 100. Although he could probably read and write because of the compulsory Danish education system (Levinson and Ember 219), George found manual labor work. He joined thousands of other young non-English speaking immigrant bachelors who were recruited for railroad jobs during the 1880s and 1890s in the Mid West (Reinhardt 218).

George was hired as a brakeman for the Chicago Burlington & Quincy Railroad. All railroad jobs were dangerous then, but brakemen --also called trainmen-- were especially prone to accidents leading to injury or death. Many fell from the tops of 14-foot tall moving freight cars while struggling to turn brake wheels. If that wasn't risky enough, brakemen also "had to step between cars to insert a pin into either end of the link that connected them. Uncoupling meant standing between the cars to remove one or both pins... all while the cars were being shifted to make up or break up a train" (White). The Interstate Commerce Commission reported in 1890: "There were a total of 2,451 fatalities and 22,396 injuries severe enough to be reported. Of these, about 369 fatalities and 4,750 injuries resulted from coupling cars. About 59 percent of all casualties occurred to trainmen although they comprised but one-fifth of total railroad employment" (qtd. in Aldrich 103).

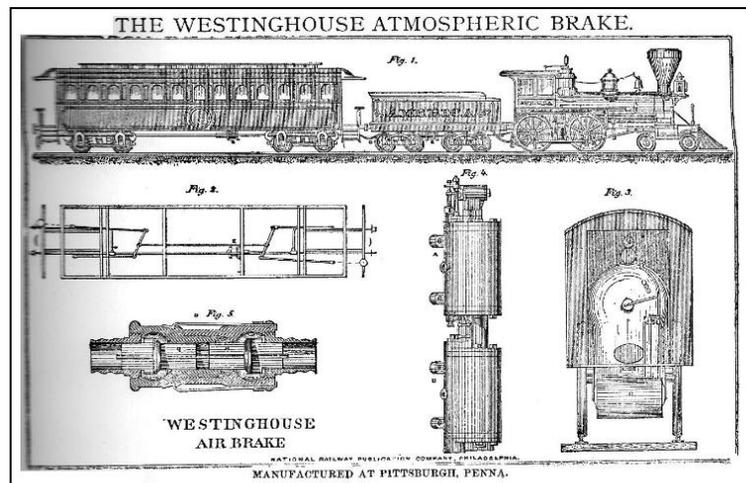


The crude and deadly link-and-pin system for connecting cars.  
(Chesapeake and Ohio Railway)

(White)

Over the years, many methods of automatically coupling train cars had been developed and patented, but freight cars were not all the same track-to-coupling height and did not stay within the control of an owning company. In 1887, respected railway civil engineer Arthur Mellen Wellington wrote that the main reason for not installing such automatic couplers was that "owing to the continuous interchange of cars no real benefit would be derived from such a coupler until it had come into almost universal use" (qtd. in Aldrich).

A safe and efficient braking system, the electric-powered air brake, was perfected by George Westinghouse, Jr. in 1887 "so that a train of fifty cars could be stopped safely in two seconds". This system could eliminate the need for a manual braking wheel and provided a way to take brakeman off the tops of freight cars. Railroad companies did not rush to implement this new technology, however, because of the expense. It was easier to maintain the status quo; "the lives and limbs of railroad men were cheap" (Reinhardt 103-104).



(Reed 147)

Hand brakes and link-and-pin couplings were not outlawed by the Railway Safety Appliance Act until 1893 (Reinhardt 104). Those safety improvements were forced on the railroad companies too late to benefit George, but he was luckier than most brakemen; he only lost two fingers when a glove froze to a coupling. Even though accidents like that were so common in 1900 that the Order of Railroad Conductors said they "have never been considered serious by the trainmen" (qtd. in Aldrich 104), George did take his injury seriously and got off the trains to take a job on the ground with a section gang.

Section gangs maintained *sections* of the railroad. In some ways, section gangs could be compared to modern-day highway construction crews. As Richard Reinhardt tells it, they toiled

along a five or ten-mile stretch “weeding, spraying, burning, resurfacing, reballasting, repairing the ravages of frost and rain” (209). Repair work also included replenishment of gravel on the road bed and the replacement of damaged wood ties and steel rails. It was hard physical work with hand tools, for low pay ranging from 90 cents to a dollar and a half for a 10-hour day depending upon the location. Most of these workers were transient, hiring on for a season and then moving to a different territory along the track to seek adventure or better opportunities (Reinhardt 210).

Single young men working for the railroad needed a place to sleep and a way to get meals that didn’t require them to do their own cooking. The most common solution, if working near a town, was to rent a room at a boarding house. Families often took boarders to supplement their income. It was such a popular and mutually beneficial arrangement that 44,000 American families said they were providing rooms and meals to boarders in 1890 (Schlereth 104).

George stayed at a boarding house that catered to section gangs while he was learning English and becoming accustomed to the American life, including American food. The common mid-west diet of Americans near the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century consisted of “meat in relatively large quantities, with beef predominating and pork second in popularity; potatoes, cabbage, onions, and other fresh vegetables in season and moderate amounts; a variety of fresh fruits in summer but chiefly apples in winter; white bread and rolls, cakes and pies; butter, eggs, milk for baking and relatively moderate or small amounts for drinking” (Gabaccia 62).

Even though staying in one place for very long was not common among section gang workers, George did stay in Hillsdale and was soon promoted to section foreman. He married one of the boarding house daughters in 1888, shortly before the birth of their first son. When Nettie Dillon’s parents and siblings died or moved away, she continued running the boarding house herself – a big job for one person. Taking boarders meant preparing more food, cleaning more dishes, changing more beds, and doing more laundry, but it also allowed a mother to stay home with her children (Reinhardt 104).



(Taking America to Lunch)

Nettie converted the boarding house to a restaurant in 1896 after the birth of their third son. She still served the section gangs, however, by providing them with coffee and lunches packed in dinner pails. A typical lunch for a railroad worker or any laborer of that time could include meat, pie, carrots, pickles, apples, hard-boiled eggs, or other whole piece food items (“Taking America to Lunch”).

In 1901, George was promoted to foreman of a steel gang working on a major track upgrade. His hobo gang was one of many crews converting the Quincy to Galesburg line from single-track to double tracks. This change helped to reduce the number of fatal train accidents caused by traffic density and human error. “On single-track lines, disaster in the form of a head-on collision ... lurked when watches were off or train orders incorrect, or forgotten, or misread” (Aldrich 90).

Although they did reduce likelihood of collisions, track conversion projects were mainly initiated by the Chicago Burlington & Quincy (CB&Q) to speed up the running time of trains in competition with other railroad companies. An 1899 special edition of the *Galesburg Republican Register* mentioned that “the fast mails and expresses ... occasioned directly a need for the Improvement of the road bed.” There was more to those road bed projects than simply laying new ties and rails; the same newspaper article describes changes such as reducing steepness of grades

by moving thousands of cubic yards of earth, building steel bridge trestles, and taking out “sinuous” curves (column 3).

In another part of the above-mentioned “Our Railroads” special edition, subtitled “The Company’s Officers,” the CB&Q names every man at almost every level of the organization along with his division, his length of time with the company, and previous positions held on his way up the hierarchy. After describing all the upper to mid-management superintendents and chiefs, the list names all of the “principal foremen and sub-superintendents of departments” of the machine shop, boiler shop, copper shop, car department, repair yard, wood machine shop, paint shop, round house, blacksmith shop, storekeeper, bridge department, T-rail shop, building department, water department, and civil engineer. At the very end of this exhaustive 32 column-inch piece, three road masters are named. I believe one of those road masters must have been George Hansen’s boss. Common road laborers working under the road masters were not named, probably because most were so transient. George’s position as foreman over those section workers put him just one rung shy of being on the published list.

George’s 1901 promotion to steel gang foreman is probably what precipitated moving his family from Hillsdale to Bushnell, the year before. One railroad historian writing about the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe line discusses the frequent moves of railroad workers: “Trackmen moved for much the same reasons as operators and agents. Once promoted to section foreman, they had no way to advance without moving...Similarly, trainmen and enginemen often moved to be promoted a grade in service or to get a preferred run” (Ducker 13,14). George moved his family two more times, to Moline in 1902 and to Abingdon in 1906, before finally going to Galesburg in 1908. Sparse and inconsistent family records do not mention any more promotions for George but that doesn’t mean there were none. Whether or not he was promoted again, perhaps the other three moves positioned him closer to job sites along the rail line or gave the family access to amenities found only in larger towns.

The youngest son, my grandfather William (Bill) Garnett Hansen, remembered Bushnell as the place where he had a pony. There was a garden too, which probably had vegetables and fruit trees rather than ornamental plants (Schlereth 137). In Moline, his mother did laundry for a music teacher, who, in exchange, began giving piano lessons to Bill when he was seven. If the family owned a piano, they were aspiring to fit in with current Victorian middle class culture: “Everyone knew that the great composers used it [a piano] and that it served as the accompaniment for outstanding singers; moreover, almost all published sheet music was written for voice and piano” (Schlereth 211).

When they moved to Abingdon in 1906, Bill’s 15-year old brother Claude became part owner of a three-lane bowling alley. He hired Bill, age 10, to help as a pin setter. Working at such a young age was common in the early 1900s. Most working-class families could not be supported by just the husband’s wage; one in five children under the age of sixteen worked outside the home (Henretta and Brody 508). The bowling alley business closed the next year, in 1907, when the third nationwide banking panic in 17 years caused another economic depression.

Four years after the 1908 move to Galesburg, 16-year old Bill dropped out of high school to take a job at a silent movie house. It was called a nickelodeon, meaning it cost five cents for admission. He played ragtime piano while three reels of film were shown, and accompanied an “illustrated song” between reels. Illustrated songs were the forerunners of current music videos; images

representing verses of a song were projected on the movie screen from hand-painted glass slides. The audience was encouraged to sing along with the singer and the piano player. This popular feature promoted the sales of sheet music (Ripley 4). The whole nickelodeon program lasted one hour and there were many showings each day. Bill earned \$12.50 a week for something he loved to do.

Bill's piano playing kept him employed for several years. In 1913 he played in a vaudeville house at Fort Madison, Iowa. Two years later, he worked at the Rock Island House Cabaret, which was about 30 miles from Galesburg. Although Henry Ford's Model-T automobile had been available since 1908, Bill could have commuted those 30 miles more cheaply to work by electric street car (Schlereth 24). The Rock Island Southern Railway Company was notable for their thriving interurban alternating current electric freight car service. Their line could move heavier cars faster than most other electric trolleys that were running on direct current. George could have ridden on one of their few passenger cars serving Monmouth and Galesburg (Hilton and Due).

Bill's next piano and music job, in 1916, required a lot of traveling and it couldn't have been done all on trains. He might have purchased or shared the use of a Model-T Ford to get around because by then, the price had gone down to \$360 and cars of all kinds were more plentiful. U.S. automobile companies produced more than 1.7 million cars that year (Schlereth 25).

From 1916 to 1917, Bill was the music director of a 12-member tabloid vaudeville troupe called the Kentucky Belles. (His fellow entertainers called him "Doc" Hansen.) The Kentucky Belles advertised themselves as a musical comedy company offering "Classy Dancing, Refined Musical



(Kentucky Belles)

Comedy and special Vaudeville for Ladies and Children." Their shows fit the typical pattern of the period by including singers, dancers, ethnic humor, skits, and sketches with constantly changing themes, to attract middle class Victorian-era families. Judging from the prices of admission: 10, 15, and 20 cents, this was "a small time show" (Schlereth 231). According to playbills and an article in *Billboard*, the troupe traveled a circuit covering towns in the southern areas of Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio.

The Vaudeville life ended for Bill when he turned 21; it was time to return home to Galesburg and register for the draft.

Because he was 5'11" but weighed only 121 pounds, he was classified for limited service and not immediately inducted. He stayed in Galesburg to work for the railroad while waiting for things to change, but by the time he gained enough weight to qualify for service, the world-wide flu epidemic was in full force and World War I had ended.

What could a really skinny guy do on the railroad? Keep records. Bill was hired by the CB&Q as a timekeeper to keep track of job hours and pay records for four section gangs, his father's steel gang, and the tie plant employees. Since favoritism and nepotism were common

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(Kentucky Belles)

then, it's a good bet that George Hansen had some influence on getting his son hired for this job (Ducker 25). On payday, Bill made sure the work gangs lined up for their pay in pay-record sequence. He also issued "time checks" for transient workers not likely to be present on the regular pay day. The workers were paid in cash by a Paymaster who arrived at the yard in a luxurious railroad pay car. Bill described it as a hotel room on wheels, complete with a cook and servant. Bill quit this time keeping job in 1920, but his father was still working for the railroad a year later when he died of "galloping pneumonia" [probably a heart attack] (Hansen).

Sometimes you can't learn much about a person's reputation until they die. During the 1977 interview with my grandfather, nothing was said about the personality or character of George Hansen. Later, I found an obituary-related item in the family papers revealing that George Hansen had been a member of one of the small unions for railroad workers that provided insurance coverage for accidents or death (Aldrich 161). The United Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees and Railway Shop Laborers, Lodge 798, published a Resolution that eulogized George, saying he was "...one who was steadfastly loyal to the sublime principles of our Brotherhood, who faithfully executed every trust imposed upon him throughout life, whose guide in all his dealings was the Golden Rule, one who firmly believed in meeting exact justice to all and expected others to accord like treatment to himself." I would like to believe that this sentiment was true, and not just something commonly written about every lodge brother. It makes a fitting end to this story of a hard-working immigrant who made a new life in America.

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