

Carroll Yesteryears
13 November 2022
Double Somnambulism on a Railroad Train
By Mary Ann Ashcraft

The following article, written by William Christopher for the *Carroll News* of January 21, 1893, will be reproduced here in two parts exactly as it originally appeared.

It was in the fall of 1857, when Iowa was inviting settlers upon her broad fertile prairies that John Switzer and wife, with a family of ten children, left Union Bridge, Carroll county, Maryland to follow the Star of empire westward. They intended to settle in Johnson county, Iowa, and got aboard the cars at Baltimore, November 6th, at eleven o'clock at night, to run to Pittsburg and then via Pittsburg, Fort Wayne and Chicago railroad to Chicago.

Uncle Joshua Switzer accompanied the family. "Now"—said mother Switzer to uncle Joshua, as they were comfortably seated in the coach—"My children are unused to such noise and confusion, and Abraham has at times been subject to spells of somnambulism at home; I wish you would please give him especial attention, for I fear that if he should fall asleep the noise and running of the train might bring a spell upon him."

"I will take care of him" said uncle Joshua. Uncle Joshua had no trouble that night. None slept. All eyes were wide awake, and the morning dawned at last, to find the children's sleepless eyes peering anxiously through the windows at the objects flitting by. It was a grand, glorious panorama to them. They had never been on a train before this, and it was late in the afternoon, following the first night on the train, before their eyes began to look heavy and weariness began to overcome them. Then they were on the Pittsburg, Fort Wayne and Chicago Express, and were flying along toward Chicago. Night again closed around them, obscuring the view, and now the weary eyes sought sleep. Uncle Joshua remembered the charge he had received. He placed the somnambulistic Abraham on a seat in front of him, where he could watch him, and seated himself by Jacob Carroll the next older boy of the family. All went well till midnight. Suddenly there was a plaintive cry that aroused all in the car. Abraham was in a perfect frenzy, imagined some one was going to kill him, and was retreating down the aisle. Uncle Joshua had been dozing, but at once awoke and saw the situation—Abraham had one of his spells—and hastily leaving his seat, caught the boy, pushed him into a vacant seat and sat down beside him to try to rouse him up and pacify him.

Just then there came another cry from a man in the car—"Don't let that boy go out at the door." "What boy?" said uncle Joshua. "Why that boy that you were sitting by, and just left in the seat yonder, has gone out at the door." "Impossible! He was fast asleep when I left him. 'John! John!'—calling to the boy's father—take care of this boy!" and retreating to where he had left Jacob sitting he found his seat vacant, sure enough. Thinking there might be some mistake about his going out at the door of the car, he called again to the man who had seen him going out, to know the certainty of it, who confidently affirmed that the boy was apparently frightened by the cry of the other boy, and as soon as uncle Joshua had left him, he arose from his seat, went to the end window of the car, looked out, and then opening the door went immediately out. Uncle

Joshua ran to the door, looked out on the platform, ran into the next car, looked through it, and not finding Jacob called to the conductor and told him that he feared a boy had fallen off the train. "Who? where?" said the conductor hastily.

The circumstances were rapidly repeated to him. He jerked the bell rope and the train stopped. "Now, where is the father of this boy?" "Here he is." "What is the matter with that boy there?" "He has a spell of somnambulism." "Well, you leave him in his mother's care and come with me," and they retreated to the rear end of the train. "Now hold this lantern down by the rail, and I will hold another over this rail. We will back the train slowly and when we find your boy we can pick him up. He will undoubtedly be found lying dead along the track." "Is it not possible that he might have gotten off without being killed," said the father, with a heavy heart? "Impossible. We were running thirty-five miles an hour, and you see we are in the midst of a dense forest, with stumps and piles of ties and cordwood all along the track. There he is now!—no, it is only a log of wood—and pang after pang went through the father's heart. "Where are we?" said Mr. Switzer. "We had passed Nevada station, and were about seven miles from Upper Sandusky when we stopped". The train went still slowly backward. Several times father's heart fluttered as they thought they were about to find the mangled boy, but it was only the glare of the lantern, or the shadow of the tall trees from the full moon rising in the east, that produced the illusion in every case. "Well, here we are," said the conductor,—“back to Nevada station, and now I have no more time to spare. If you want to hunt for your boy longer you will have to get off here,” and the family got off. "Now," said the conductor to the engineer, "let her fly! We must make up this lost time."

"Did we all get off here to attend a funeral?" said the somnambulist Abraham, who had by this time been roused up to consciousness. So it seemed—away up in the big woods of north-western Ohio, at midnight, on a cold frosty night. But there was a warm stove, and several warm sympathizing hearts at the hotel in Nevada—the train coming back had roused them up—and more in tears, they had to rehearse the strange story of a double somnambulism, "But oh, where is the other boy?" said mother. "Never fear"—said the great-hearted pioneers as they gathered in, one by one, and listened with wonder and watery eyes to the mysterious story—"We will find him for you. The moon is getting up over the tree tops, it is getting lighter, we will go out and find him for you."

But the night wore wearily on with no tidings of the lost boy. A hundred had joined in the search, but no tidings came; they had not found him—no marks, or prints, or blood; no tattered clothing—no mangled remains—no Jacob.

Part Two will appear in the November 27, 2022, issue of this paper.

Mary Ann Ashcraft is a volunteer at the Historical Society of Carroll County.



Image 1 – Courtesy of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad Museum. Caption: This locomotive, the William B. Mason, was built in the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad yard in 1857, the same year the Switzer Family boarded a train in Baltimore to settle in Iowa. Visitors to the B&O Museum can see the locomotive on display there.

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LAND AGENT, IOWA CITY, IOWA.
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Iowa City, Iowa, Dec. 27, 1855—n81.

Image 2 – Iowa Capital Reporter, 1855. Caption: In 1857, the Switzers joined thousands of others settling the new state of Iowa. They headed to Iowa City, the capital, located in Johnson County. In the 1850s, the population of the state tripled and land agents helped everyone acquire property.