

Lashed to the top of their freight car and pelted by driving rain, the Kildahl brothers saw little of Bismarck and Mandan. Their train passed the Capitol City's unique Spanish-style depot, a landmark for Northern Plains train travelers after 1900.

— Drawing by Brian R. Austin

Riding Freights to Jamestown in 1936: A Brief Memoir

by Erling E. Kildahl

The carload of lumber in which I was nestled creaked ominously and woke me. I glanced at my brother, Harold, curled up a few feet away. No break in his breathing meant he was oblivious to the unusual sound. He had warned me when we climbed aboard the loaded flatcar that lumber could shift with little or no warning. Was this a warning? I waited, nervously. Should I shake him awake so we could jump off the train before the load injured us? I still hesitated. Nothing happened. "Huck" slept on. I must have trusted his instinct for survival because my fears subsided.

We had searched for an empty boxcar in the early evening dark, couldn't find one, and settled for the loaded flat. Dangerous, true, but time was precious. We had to go east as quickly as possible. Both of us were exhausted from a long day, the auto trip from Coeur d'Alene, somewhat gloomy good-byes, and nervous, impatient waiting for a suitable train. We had hopped a long freight on the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific main line in St. Maries, Idaho, located at the southern end of Lake Coeur d'Alene. And here we were on a stack of wood, comfortable enough if a rider can find a space his body can adjust to. (Old timers claimed, I'd heard, that lumber makes the best ride if you can sit or lie on the soft sides of the boards.) Glancing again at Huck, still sleeping, I realized that a creak is not a shift. I let him sleep and looked at the world around me.

From St. Maries the Milwaukee Road, as it was called, followed the course of the St. Joe River as far as feasible and then worked its way through the Bitterroot Range, a long chain of mountains that mark the Montana-Idaho border, down to Missoula. It was the last transcontinental railroad to cross the northern Rockies (completed in 1909) and was electrified through the mountains. By now, certainly, we were on the eastern slopes of the Bitterroots in Montana and not too far from Missoula. I guessed we had been riding for at least seven hours. The train, moving slowly like a ponderous snake, had been winding its way across ten high steel trestles, some more than 500 feet long, straddling deep gorges and ravines and through numerous tunnels up to the culminating St. Paul Pass Tunnel, 8,771 feet long, which marks the Idaho-Montana border and the high point of the Milwaukee Road through the range. Sometime during the night we had switched to electric engines (at Avery, Idaho) and very gently, too, because the change over had not awakened me. Black night and exhaustion denied me sight of these engineering wonders.

Early morning light revealed an enthralling scene. Spots and splashes of color, courtesy of a few deciduous

trees flaunting their early autumn foliage, intruded into the realm of peaks and evergreens. I was off to Jamestown College to enroll as a freshman if the North Dakota school would have me. I might never return to northern Idaho or western Montana. Northern Idaho had been home for three years and I had grown fond of the area, so different from Minneapolis where I had lived my first sixteen years. I drank in the landscape with great gulps as if storing it away should I never see it again. It was September 1936. I was young and, with all that splendor in my eyes, the smell of new lumber in my nostrils, train sounds in my ears, and a splinter or two in my posterior, I was off to seek a new, different life. After all, what's a sliver or two?

My thoughts turned to the family decision to send me to Jamestown College. George, my oldest brother, fourteen years my senior, was employed by F.W. Woolworth Company and had been transferred recently to Jamestown as store manager. He had written us about a fine liberal arts college there, stating that he could help me with my living expenses if I wanted to come. Yes, I wanted to go. But how could I get to North Dakota? We were in the depths of the Great Depression. My father's income was reduced severely and there was no money for train fare. That problem was solved by the arrival of Harold. Before his second year began as a seminarian in St. Paul, he had decided to make a quick visit to Coeur d'Alene. Years earlier he had departed the parental hearth to follow his wanderlust. He had to see the country for himself and he started early. Eight years older than I, Harold had been jumping freight trains since he was fourteen or fifteen and was always able to take care of himself. He was an old hand at riding the rails; he knew all the lore, tricks, techniques, and dangers of freight hopping. He was willing to escort me to Jamestown if I wanted to travel on the freights.

In 1934, I had been injured in an automobile accident that laid me up for a year, and that injury hampered my mobility. Me, on a freight train! I had mixed emotions at the prospect. I had no experience with freights. That was for my brothers, not me. Would it be too demanding for my weakened condition? The more I thought of Harold's offer and listened to his arguments, the more confident I became that I could do it. He would be with me all the way to Jamestown and would see me delivered safely to brother George. If I wanted to enroll for the fall semester I must go with him: I had no other choice. I was lucky to be in Harold's capable hands. And so the decision was made to make the journey. Clothes and my hard-earned \$35.00 were sent to George to hold until

my arrival and I arranged for my high school records to be sent to the college. I'm sure my wooden foot-locker and Harold's luggage, which he sent to St. Paul, had a more comfortable trip than did we.

Looking back to the day we left home, I know Mother and Dad felt diminished and shamed by our travel arrangements. They simply did not have enough money to send us off in style, but they were flexible and adapted to the tough economic times. They trusted that I, their youngest child, would be safe, protected by Huck on this adventure. They knew he was thoroughly experienced in riding the freights. He and Phillip (another brother, in age between Harold and me) had always returned safely from their trips west from Minneapolis. Nevertheless, it was with chagrin, worry, perhaps despair, that they had driven us in the Model A from Coeur d'Alene to St. Maries. If so, they showed little of their inner turmoil as they said their last good-byes and started home. I wonder now at their toughness and stoicism.

Huck awoke. We exchanged "good mornings," then shared most of the food Mother had sent along. He stood up and I thought that was a good idea. Now to get my protesting body unfolded and upright. All those protruding lumber butts were getting to me. Between Huck and me we managed the task with some difficulty, but it was worth the effort. What a relief to work out some of the kinks and cramps while braced on the swaying, moving car! For the first time I saw the front end of the train. Quite a few freeloaders were riding flatcars, which indicated a lack of empty boxcars. Two engines were pulling the long, heavily loaded train at a fairly good clip.

We wanted to get off this perilous load of lumber as quickly as possible. Our chance was Missoula, where the Northern Pacific Railroad main line was just across the Clark Fork River from the Milwaukee tracks. If we were lucky, we would soon board an express, through freight train that would take us all the way to Jamestown, about 1000 miles east. If we were unlucky, we would be nabbed by railroad police, called "bulls" or "dicks" by all "stiffs" such as we. Our luck held. As the train slowed, Huck kept his eyes forward and told me to watch the

rear to see how other riders reacted to these yards. About ten cars back a few were getting ready to jump off, but there didn't seem to be any undue haste or panic motivating them. They were taking their time, gathering themselves for dismounting. Huck observed similar behavior ahead. Nobody was running. We relaxed and prepared ourselves for departure from our well-stacked load of lumber. Later on during the trip I'd wish I were back on that dangerously comfortable flatcar.

We waited until the train came to a full stop accompanied by much grinding, squealing, and screeching. We took our time climbing down, looking around the yards as we did so. No bulls in sight. They must have given up the endless struggle to keep people like us off the cars.

The railroad corporations were concerned about all the non-paying passengers they were carrying. Not only were we free-loaders, but some, a few, caused damage to or stole from cars. Also, once in a while a stiff would be killed by falling under the wheels, caught between the cars, or in boxcar fights, all which caused trouble for the companies. To keep trains from becoming too heavy with rail bums, the companies employed yard police stationed at division and sub-division points. Some of the bulls were mean. Not only did they remove riders from the trains, but they had other ways to make life miserable: delays, questionings, lectures, beatings, arrests, jailing, even killing in rare instances. Clearly, they were to be avoided.

Harold and I gave each other a thorough inspection when we were free of the marshalling yards. We had been on a clean train and were quite presentable. With confidence we shouldered our blanket rolls and started for the other side of the river, eating the last of the stale food. Huck was jaunty—feeling good about the situation, as I was. The trip had gone pretty well—his young brother was, so far, a minimal nuisance and still alive. Definitely, things were looking up, and now we were flexing our muscles, getting some much needed exercise. We were eager for information regarding an NPRR east-bound through freight.

After we had crossed the Clark Fork River, locally



With their father, Reverend H.B. Kildahl, Sr., brothers (l-r) George, Harold, Jr. ("Huck"), Phillip, and Erling were photographed at their home in St. Paul on October 5, 1938.

— Courtesy Erling E. Kildahl, Orlando, Florida

called the Missoula, and into NPRR territory. Huck asked a stiff we encountered about a train. He didn't know the answer. Huck told me to scrounge for paper while he would continue to seek information. Paper, I discovered, is the best kind of underwear; it shields the body from drafts and cold when wrapped around legs and torso. Huck learned that "our" train was due in Missoula soon, which suited our needs precisely. Our timing was proving impeccable. We intensified our search for paper and found enough for both of us, some of it not too clean from blowing about the streets and yards of Missoula. Now we were ready for the train, the paper folded and secured under our belts, available when needed.

We did not have long to wait. After the train pulled in, there was a great deal of shunting, backing, and coupling as cars were detached and others added. As the train was re-formed we watched our chances and soon spotted an empty near the middle of the long line of cars. When the train-men's attention was centered elsewhere, we ran for it and hastily climbed in. We found the boxcar already occupied by three riders who were keeping an eye out for dicks. Evidently figuring five were enough for one empty when plenty of others were available, one of them started to close the sliding door. Without speaking, Huck grabbed hold of it and helped. The other door was already closed except for about an inch used as a peep slit. Huck and the other man slid the door almost shut. Then, on some unseen signal, he crossed to the other while my brother stood by our entry door. Both remained motionless. I looked at the two other riders, one of whom quickly held his finger to his lips. I got the message and held my breath. Voices outside grew louder—were bulls intent on rousting us out? To our relief they passed our car, going about some other business—members of the train crew checking couplings, looking for hot boxes, getting the train ready to pull out. Their voices faded. We were not disturbed, and we soon relaxed as the train resumed its journey east.

It seemed very easy to me. Was this all there was to it? It was almost as if there was a conspiracy to help us reach our destinations as quickly as possible. If this car stayed with the train far enough, we could make excellent time. Harold thought we could be in Glendive, Montana, by evening of the next day and in Jamestown in about forty-eight hours, provided we could ride this freight all the way. But who knew when or if this car would be uncoupled and shunted to some siding in the middle of nowhere? We might be thrown off the train by some bulls along the way. I thought Huck was optimistic. We had come only about 200 miles and had about 1000 to go to reach Jamestown. It would be slow going not only until we reached the Continental Divide, just east of Butte, but until we were out of the Rockies near Bozeman.

When we boarded at Missoula, it must have been about 7:30 or 8:00 a.m. We were eight or nine hours from St. Maries—pretty slow going I thought, but of course a lot of those miles were uphill and torturous. Truly, though, the Milwaukee freight had made excellent time, Harold pointed out. If we could average twenty miles per hour for the whole trip, it would take about

sixty hours. We crawled through the mountains, but time was made up on the plains, where the NPRR was famous for its "highballing" speed. And we had an excellent chance of keeping this boxcar, he told me, because of its placement in the string of cars. If it was soon to be detached, it would be placed nearer either end, simply to save the brakeman steps. If we could stay in this car we would be in Glendive within forty hours.

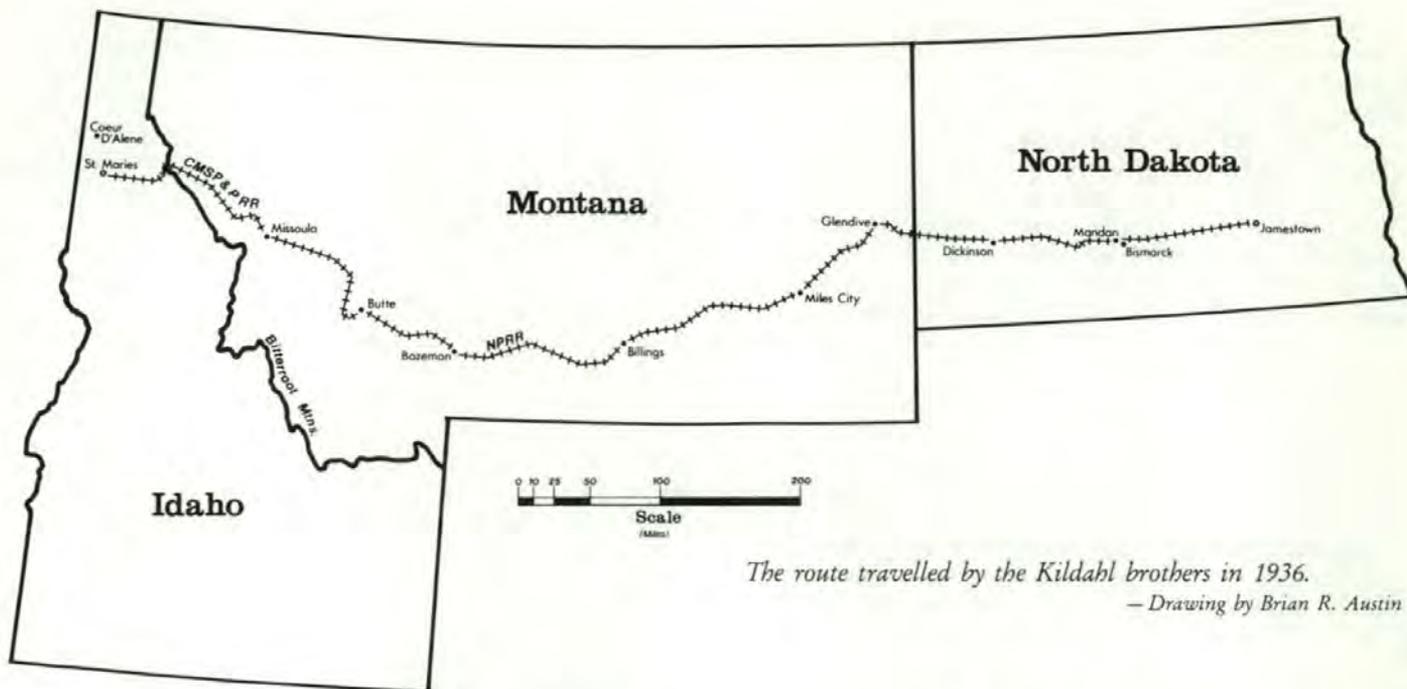
The three men at the other end of the boxcar paid little heed to us, and we to them. I remember little about them. They were simply three nondescript, unemployed men among many searching for work, any kind of work, without luck. One of the trio was given to whistling between his teeth when he wasn't talking. Once I heard a little of the refrain of "I'm Sitting on Top of the World," a popular tune of the late '20's. Incongruous, but he seemed to be cheerful enough. Occasionally they argued, a voice would get loud but nothing more. When we approached a town of any size, we would all quiet down, taking no chances. We had to be careful about our smoking when the train stopped in daylight, but in the dark it made little difference as long as we guarded against the flares of matches.

Sitting on our blanket rolls, we leaned against the sides or end of the car, changing positions as often as we wished, a luxury denied us on the load of lumber we had abandoned. The floor of the boxcar was comparatively clean—we wouldn't have to dig through rubbish to lie down to rest or sleep.

During that day our only entertainment was occasional conversation and viewing scenery as we climbed to and passed the divide. The colors of autumn, the endless pines, and the peaks of the Rockies claimed my attention.

In the afternoon, we reached Butte, where our three companions left us, hoping to find work in the copper mines or refinery. Their departure attracted no attention to our boxcar by train crew or police. Harold, seizing the opportunity, decided it was a good chance to look for food and drink. Harold told me to stay put, good advice because my lack of agility would only hamper his search. I didn't like it, but sensibly agreed. He left on his hunt and I watched for bulls.

I don't remember details very clearly, but from what I saw of Butte it seemed to be wholly devoted to the mining, extraction, refining, and shipping of copper. There was a copperish haze in the air and copper dust everywhere I looked. The Anaconda Copper Mine near Butte evidently dominated the town and the environs. I don't remember if I worried about Huck getting back to the train before it left Butte, but being a born worrier I probably did. No need to, though. During prolonged shunting and backing he suddenly appeared with some bread and a bottle of water. He had worked some kind of magic, I thought, but no—he had located a marked house near the yards, mooched food and drink, and had not been disappointed. Houses in any town where vagrants would be given a hand-out were well known by the stiff fraternity and were marked. An "x" or other sign made by clay or chalk on the steps, porch, or fence told all who recognized it that the housewife would not turn anyone away empty-handed. Kind women helped many wayward travelers stay alive during the Depression.



The route travelled by the Kildahl brothers in 1936.

— Drawing by Brian R. Austin

Again, we were not disturbed. Looking back over fifty years I still wonder at the forbearance of the railroad police in Butte, Bozeman, and Billings on that trip. But considering the great number of free riders on the train, their discretion may have been the better part of valor. Faced with overwhelming odds, they prudently looked the other way and left the rousting to others farther along the line.

From Butte to Bozeman is not far as a bird flies, but a train or car must cross the Continental Divide near Butte. The train made slow progress through the mountains and passes, the latter about 6000 feet high in that area. At that altitude in mid-September we began to feel the chill. It was time to don our deluxe underclothing. We wrapped paper around our chests and torsos. Our shirts, trousers, and belts held it firmly in place. Next, rolling up our pant legs, we wrapped our thighs and calves, tucking the calf tubes into our sock tops to secure them. The arrangement worked out very well.

I don't remember if there was a sign marking the Divide. No doubt there was a marker, but I missed it. Darkness was falling (fast in mountain country) and I was tired. I don't know what we would have done without paper—it was a very chilly night in that boxcar. Cold and uncomfortable, I tossed and fretted, unlike the night before. Sleeping rough on a boxcar floor is no picnic. It wasn't the Ritz—there were drafts accompanying the vibrations, swaying, and cacophony of sounds. I was unhappy with myself that I was unable to adjust to discomfort; but I noticed Huck had trouble too and I felt better. It was only later in the morning that I snatched a little sleep.

Huck must have scrounged more food in Billings, early as it was. I've always suspected he had a little money with him because finding handouts early in the morning has always struck me as improbable. My first real memory of that day was a stop in the barren countryside, somewhere east of Billings. There was no town, not even

a ranch in sight. The train was stopped on a curve so we had a clear view from the left side of the train of what was transpiring up ahead. Men in western hats and gear were removing horses from a flatcar. We had no idea how long they had been on the train, but obviously it had made a special stop to accommodate them. Like something out of a Western movie, once the horses were on *terra firma*, the men mounted and the train moved on.

We were in some rolling hills and the train moved at a more rapid rate. It was downhill all the way to the Mississippi, or so the saying went. As we rolled, Huck added to my freight-riding education—although we agreed that too much knowledge of the subject could be *prima facie* evidence of wasted time or a wasted life. However, we rationalized that this ride was necessary, an exception to our rule.

I learned why freight riders call themselves "stiffs" and only occasionally "bums" and almost never "hobos" or "tramps." Stiffs, generally, were seeking work, men who were unfortunate and unemployed, caught by circumstances, temporary vagrants. "Stiff" or "stiffs" has a great many meanings, but in freighting parlance it derives from "railroad stiff" or "jungle stiff," terms that go back to the 19th Century. "Bums" preferred not to work. They were men who chose to "panhandle" (beg) and "shoot snipe" (look for partially smoked cigars and cigarettes in gutters or on sidewalks.) Bums (and stiffs, too) who craved alcohol drank lemon extract, bay rum, or wood alcohol (strained through bread to "purify" it) found in Sterno, a popular brand of "canned heat" intended for quick cooking. They were true "moochers," and were generally found in cities with large enough populations to sustain them. "Hobo" or "tramp" is closer to the romantic "vagabond" of story and poetry. They are usually pictured in unkempt, torn (but clean) clothes with a colorful neckerchief containing their belongings knotted to the end of a stick carried over the shoulder. This image was seldom, if ever, seen

in real life.

I was initiated into the mysteries of "riding the rods," the most dangerous ride of all on a freight car, but one fading as the old cars built with steel rods slung under the floor, creating a kind of hammock, are removed from service. Another travel mode is "riding the blinds," denoting the space between the coal car and the first baggage car on passenger trains, out of sight of the engine crew, where the rider is forced to stand the entire trip holding onto or tied to a handrail. "Riding the reefers" means traveling in refrigerator cars which are easy to enter but difficult to exit; there were instances of sleeping or drunk stiffs freezing to death in reefers loaded with perishables. Huck warned me to avoid these dangerous rides. Since I never intended to ride the freights again, I happily agreed to follow his advice.

A short distance east of Bozeman, the Northern Pacific rails met and followed the Yellowstone River. The Yellowstone conjured many memories. Our father's young brother, Nils, born in 1871, had run away from home at the age of fifteen to become a cowboy with the American Cattle Company. Not only did he hate farming, but he had read Ned Buntline's dime novels and succumbed to the lure of the west. After a colorful and varied youth, during which he originated the first "rope corral" (fashioned from discarded Sharps rifle barrels and lariats), he settled down on his own ranch on the Yellowstone near Horton, just west of Miles City, Montana. On the land he acquired was a weathered log cabin with built-in gun slits to enable the residents to fight off marauders. When I had visited Uncle Nils and Aunt Anna in 1924 and 1933, the slits were still preserved (although the house had been enlarged), stark evidence of a savage and fairly recent frontier.

The railroad tracks cut across Nils' property, close to the river, and as we went past the ranch house we both waved, more to our memories than to anyone who might notice. Nothing seemed to have changed much, but Nils now owned or controlled eighteen sections of land with water rights and raised great numbers of sheep. He died in 1948. I never saw him, Aunt Anna, or his spread again.

Miles City gave us no problems. Once more the dicks were lax and we were lucky. We remained there for a comparatively short time and again we rolled, headed now for Glendive, a small Montana city that remains large in my memory. The trip had gone unbelievably well so far; we were making good time and were not too far from Jamestown. But first there was Glendive. As the train slowed, entering the yards, the riders began jumping from the train. There must have been fifty or more who quickly hit the ground while the train was moving and took off for the jungles. We got the message they were sending: get off before the bulls grab you. But we could not respond fast enough.

The trouble lay in my comparative immobility. The Glendive officers must have had fearsome reputations with the stiffs! And there they were, two of them brandishing clubs. Their voices, behavior, and armament spelled big trouble for Huck and me.

It was only natural that he would want to follow the other travelers to safety, but my gimpy leg prevented rapid flight and the bulls spotted us. We were ordered off the train. Harold jumped off and helped me down.

We began the march to their office, prodded along by their nightsticks, their barked commands in our ears. I felt guilty that I had been the cause of this debacle and was not helped by the fact that the police were in the right, that we had been caught trespassing on railroad property, and that we had been riding illegally on the train.

Different from me in temperament, Huck immediately launched an argument: we were not habitual stiffs; we had definite destinations to achieve definite purposes; circumstances forced us to ride freights for transportation; we were truly honorable young men caught up in difficult times, etc., etc. All his persuasiveness seemed to fall on deaf ears. The dicks single-mindedly escorted us to their quarters. Huck must have believed that the best defense is a strong offense because he never let up. He was still going at it, with my occasional reinforcement, when we reached the office.

Inside, there was a lot of loud, tough talk by the two officers. They took turns lecturing us and threatened us with dire consequences for our transgressions on NPRR property. They manhandled us a little, not roughly, because by then they were beginning to realize, I think, that we were what we claimed to be.

In the near distance we heard the familiar sounds of a train in the yards — smashing of couplings locking together, wheels grinding and shrieking, whistles hooting, and men shouting. The train crew was detaching cars, adding others, rearranging our world. And time was fleeting. If we missed that train we would have to wait twenty-four hours for another fast freight, and waiting that long or trying to hitchhike, dirty as we were, was not appealing. The only alternative would be to ride slow-moving locals or milk trains, not a happy prospect. We did not want that delay, late as we were already for school enrollment, with about 375 miles to go to reach Jamestown. We knew that when the reassuring sounds coming from the train yard ceased we would be in real trouble.

Huck and I never let up. I joined him in fervent pleas for leniency. We really worked on those two bulls. I think they got sick and tired of our yammering. They were now willing to let us go provided we went out to U.S. Highway 10 and thumbed our way east. Huck wouldn't hear of it. He wanted their permission to get back on that freight. He actually grew a little indignant (or pretended to) at their effrontery in taking us off the train in the first place. Somehow we put them on the defensive. The obvious leader kept an eye on the train even as he was exhorting us to get out to the highway. The freight wasn't quite assembled as he opened the door and pointed to U.S. 10. There must have been a conscious acknowledgement on his part that we were right — weren't dressed properly and were too dirty for anyone to pick us up on the highway. I think he finally believed us — we were heading east to go to school. Urgency had made us persuasive and convincing. We spoke only the truth, and the truth came through.

The leading officer said "hit the highway" once more, turned, and closed the door. Both dicks knew we wouldn't. They knew we would get back to that train as quickly as we could, and we understood, somehow,

that they would not prevent us from doing so. They just turned their eyes from us and let us go our way. I like to think they had a spot of softness in their hearts, and perhaps they did, but more likely they were delighted to free themselves from two relentless yappers.

We made a few tentative steps toward the highway and then turned back to the rail yards where the train, rearranged and reassembled, was about to depart. Time to board it was getting very short. The train began to move while we were still a short distance from it. We had no time to be choosy — we had to get on it and search later for an empty boxcar. Running alongside, Huck grabbed the vertical handrail, swung up onto the ladder bars, keeping the lowest one free and turned to me. Running as fast as I could, I lunged for the rung. I missed. My awkward gait and inability to run fast enough almost cost me a leg and possibly my life. I lost my grip on the handrail and fell under the train. Luckily, I sprawled clumsily and my legs did not go under far enough to be sliced by the wheels. Picking myself up as quickly as I could, I started to run again. I was close to panic. How could I get onto that car? Huck was about to get off, to give it up as a bad job.

Inexplicably the train, rather than picking up speed, perceptibly slowed as I limped alongside the car. Huck reached out again and shouted some encouraging words, and I lunged again for that elusive handrail. This time I grasped it more firmly with my left hand. Huck reached down, grabbed my right, and between the two of us I managed to get my good right leg onto the bottom rung of the ladder. After catching my breath I pulled myself

up and planted my left foot securely on the rung. I'd made it! The train immediately increased its speed. With Harold ahead of me, we climbed to the top of the car and onto the catwalk.

Looking back, I can't yet quite believe I accomplished that feat with that bad left leg. Why should the train have slowed at the moment of truth? As I recall there was no grade that would cause loss of speed. I can only believe that the fireman in the engine cab saw my fall and told the engineer, who obligingly stopped accelerating for a minute or so. If that was the case, I give him a belated salute and my heartfelt thanks.

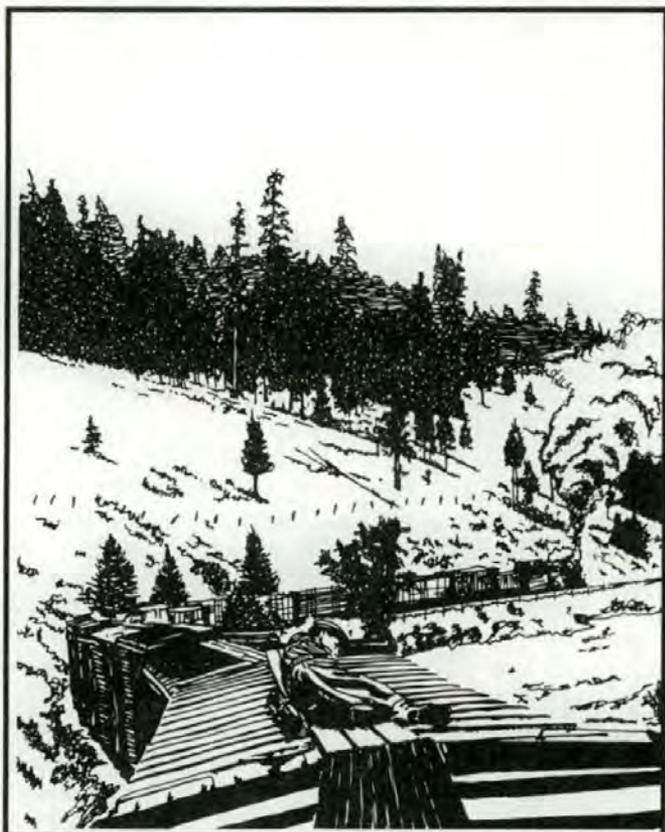
We found ourselves on a car about a third of the way back from the engine. That, too, proved fortunate chance. Back along the top of the train, we saw other stiffs riding as we were, but none ahead. If we had been closer to the engine, life on the walkway would have been very difficult, if not impossible, for any length of time. The great Baldwin locomotive gave off smoke, soot, and cinders that would have driven us off. We were just far enough to its rear to avoid much and tolerate the rest.

Traveling at sixty miles per hour while hanging onto a freight car catwalk with no windbreak or shelter except a blanket roll is not fun. It is dangerous. Our first business was to secure ourselves. Huck removed his belt and told me to do likewise. We had to strap our thighs to the walkway. It seemed we should have come better prepared for this emergency, but we were traveling light. Even the vital blanket roll was considered an impediment by some; this was September in Montana, and yet I had seen stiffs in shirts, no jacket, no blanket, no hat, nothing. I supposed they found warmth at night around a fire in a jungle, but that was traveling too light for my greenhorn taste.

It was late afternoon. We were hastening the coming of dark by speeding east, but twilights are long on the northern plains. Even this late in the year, the gloaming lingered. Still, inevitably, night was coming and with it safety and protection. There were bound to be stops in North Dakota at Dickinson and surely at Mandan, a division point. Would we be pulled off the train again? We would soon reach Dickinson, we were traveling in the open with no place to hide, and the train crew knew we and other illegal riders were aboard. Our only protection was the coming darkness.

We had seen, far to the east, some heavy clouds. We might run into rain, but I couldn't worry about that. I had to hang onto that catwalk come what may. I hoped my strong, stout belt would hold because the engineer was "rambling" the train (opening up the throttle). Incredibly, I dozed. The rocking of the train, the grinding of the wheels, the distant sound of the engine and its whistles for grade crossings lulled me to oblivion. It had been an exhausting, nerve-wracking day, but all that and my present discomfort disappeared for about a half hour.

The absence of familiar sounds woke me. We were on a siding between Dickinson and Mandan, Huck misinformed me. In the eastern distance, above the remote idling of our own engine, I heard a train whistle and then a growing thunder. The westbound North Coast Limited, the NPRR's crack train, rushed by at about seventy miles an hour in all its majesty. Its passage was enhanced by



The freight wound through the mountains, providing a wonderful and frightening view to riders atop the swaying cars.

— Drawing by Brian R. Austin

the Doppler effect of its imposing whistle, which always makes a train seem faster than it really is. How I envied those passengers, secure and snug in compartments, reclining chairs, or lounge, protected from the elements, even coddled by the considerate and competent care of a skilled train crew. I almost wept with envy.

A receding roar and distant whistle ended the Limited's rapid passage and we were free to proceed. With all the grunts, groans, and shrieks of a mythological monster we got under way. That had been a scheduled, necessary stop; nevertheless, I think that trainmen hated them. Now they had to get up steam and speed again, costing time and much labor on a coal-driven engine. It also caused a lot of black, heavy smoke that did nothing to improve our appearances or lungs. But there was precious little we could do about it. In addition to the smoke, our discomfort, and distress, we were hungry and thirsty and there was little we could do about that, either. We had to be stoics until we got to Jamestown, now only about 125 to 150 miles down the track. If we could hold on against the filth, the discomfort, and the elements we would be home free.

In about ten minutes we were up to speed again, pouring through the night. We were fortunate again in Dickinson, where the train stopped only briefly. Our last danger point lay ahead in Mandan. If we were to be removed from the train before we reached Jamestown, it would happen there.

Earlier in the day we had seen heavy clouds in the east. They were moving across the state from the northwest. We had hoped the belt of clouds, dark and foreboding, would have dissipated before we reached them, but for once our luck failed us. Our position, exposed and uncomfortable, became a living nightmare. Clothes and blankets quickly became soaked. The rain captured soot and smoke and dumped the mess on us. In the dark we could barely see each other or anything else through slitted lids. The rain and wind combined to make me wish I had never begun this mad trip. Even foregoing a college education seemed little enough price to pay to have escaped this torture.

But, "Ill blows the wind that profits nobody." The weather conditions guaranteed our passage through Mandan. When we arrived in that city's train yards, the rain was still pelting with no sign of a letup. The crews, only human too, hurriedly replaced the engine with another and removed or added a few cars, all in record time. No bulls threatened us. They were intelligent men not about to arrest a couple of forlorn stiffs on top of a freight car in a driving rainstorm. Wisely, they stayed in their snug office, drinking coffee, no doubt, and chatting agreeably with each other. If we crossed their minds at all, they probably thought it served us right; anything they could do to us was as nothing compared to the punishment we were receiving from the cruel elements. We saw occasional flashes from the brakeman's lantern, heard the sounds of couplings, wheels, and whistles, and felt accompanying jerks and tremors, but no one came near us, no one intruded upon our isolated misery.

The train soon started on our last lap, but not very fast. Bismarck, just across the Missouri River from Mandan, is practically a twin city, and there was no point

in gaining great speed until the state capital was behind. All this slow movement was scheduled, of course, but we wished the engineer would get a move on — time was passing very slowly, it seemed to us. Finally, clearing Bismarck, the train gained speed.

We estimated we had been perched on that unforgettable roof top for six or seven hours, which made it around nine or ten o'clock, local time. We should arrive in Jamestown no later than midnight if there were no more stops or delays. At the moment we were moving pretty fast — that fresh monster of an engine was not to be held in check, and that was all right with us — the sooner we arrived, the quicker our reprieve from our punishment. Meanwhile, we hung on and endured, half prone and half crouched on that catwalk, catching the full brunt of the slip-stream.

Our patience was rewarded. About thirty miles east of Bismarck we ran out of the rain. The clouds must have passed to the southeast. One less torment, but we were thoroughly soaked and sodden. We couldn't discuss this blessed phenomenon. There had been very little conversation since Glendive — shouting was exhausting and, besides, we had little need, desire, or strength to do so. We simply toughed it out. The end of the tunnel, so to speak, couldn't come soon enough for either of us.

As I have said, our brother George was new to Jamestown, settling into his job and seeking suitable quarters for his family, still in Iowa City. Meanwhile, he was batching it in housekeeping rooms in the Pulsher Hotel. How to find the place would present a small problem, but I couldn't think about that now — I had enough on my mind.

Although we still had soot and wind to cope with, the rain was gone, the sky was clearing, and conditions were improving. Emerging from the storm seemed an auspicious sign of things to come. We felt a bit more comfortable even if our clothes were ruined and the wind still biting, knowing our ordeal was soon to end. Jamestown was just ahead where, Harold assured me, the train had to stop.

We felt the train slowing and saw the glow of Jamestown's lights. It wasn't long before we entered the yards, lost speed, barely moved, and finally came to a grinding halt. Immediately we unbuckled our heavy, sodden belts, and then slowly, with grunts and groans, we got into kneeling positions and restored them to our waists. Now to get off that hateful car top. Huck groped for the top rung of the car ladder by slithering on his belly, while I held onto his legs, until he found it. He swung down onto the ladder and then guided my legs to it. When I was securely on the rungs, he went down and off the car. I dropped our blanket rolls to him and slowly climbed down and off our rapid but very uncomfortable train. The movement was painful. We were both stiff and cramped from our long confinement, but we had little time for thinking about it. We were congratulating each other for reaching Jamestown in record time when we heard voices. We were still trespassing on railroad property, and we had to get out of the yards. We walked at an angle toward distant street lights away from the voices and were finally free of the tracks. Now we were just two exhausted and sodden citizens. When we looked at each other near a street light



In 1940, four years after he commenced his college career at Jamestown College, author Erling E. Kildahl provided this photo for the college annual.
— Courtesy Erling E. Kildahl, Orlando, Florida

we were jolted at each other's appearance. Black and grimy, worse than any chimney sweep, two more frightening apparitions probably had not been seen in Jamestown since its founding. Truly shocking specimens of humanity, we were fortunate that it was almost midnight and very few people were on the sidewalks.

Now my little worry became a problem. Where was the Pulsher Hotel? How would we inquire without making people flee in fright? After inspecting each other, we agreed it would be wise to avoid the police, or we might spend the night jailed for vagrancy. We were immobilized by indecision. We had to do something, but what? While we were standing in shadows, a pedestrian or two passed us. We decided we had to ask someone to save needless, pointless wandering.

A young man, about my age, probably returning home after a date with his girl friend, came toward us. We decided he was the one to ask our question and stepped out to meet him. His pace slowed just a bit, but he kept coming. He had courage. As he neared us, Huck asked him very politely where the hotel was located. The young fellow looked at us, decided we weren't going to beat and rob him, and told us what we wanted to know. As it happened, we were not far from the Pulsher Hotel. Thanking him and walking as fast as we could, we reached the hotel, which was located on a side street just off Main and had only one light to illuminate the lobby.

There was no clerk in sight. There was a night bell, but we thought it best to ignore it. We knew the number of the suite George occupied, went directly to it, knocked, waited, knocked again more loudly, and waited. I was about to rap on the door again when the door was unlocked and opened a few inches; there was our brother, ready to go to bed.

Before he had a chance to close it again, we greeted him, and the door swung open. Later on George maintained he knew us at first glance, but I don't believe he did until we spoke. I couldn't hold that against him because not only did we look like wrecks but we must have reeked, too.

The first thing Huck and I did was shed our filthy clothes amidst much catching-up talk. George discarded them or had them burned, along with our blankets, all beyond redemption. Huck and I took turns in the tub, enjoying renewing, refreshing, long yearned-for, and much needed scrubbing and began to look and feel ourselves again. It would take another bath or two to remove all traces of grime, but at least we were acceptable. By now it was about 1:30 and after stuffing ourselves with whatever George gave us to eat, we all went to bed, one of us with George and the other on the sofa. Oh! What comfort, what luxury! I fell instantly to sleep — the talk could wait.

When I awakened, I was alone. Ravenous again, I raided the larder and made a small meal. After another luxurious bath, I opened my homemade chest, found some clothes, and dressed, but wondered if it was worth the effort — I could have slept another twelve hours with very little encouragement. Huck was gone, but George would be back after business hours, and I could find out what had been happening.

When he returned in the late afternoon, he caught me up on the day's developments. Huck had slept until late morning, had been awakened by George who lent or gave him some fresh clothes, took him to the NPRR depot, got him a ticket, and saw him off on the east bound Limited. My guide, escort, and companion was gone, and I wouldn't see him again for at least a year.

The next morning I got my \$35.00 from George who pointed me in the direction of Jamestown College. The campus is sited on a hill in the northeast part of the city, quite a little distance from the Pulsher hotel. As I reached the top of the long flight of steps leading to the campus, I was struck by the absence of mature trees on that windswept height although there were many slim saplings. The buildings stood stark against the horizon. I felt a touch of loneliness.

I found my way to the Bursar's office in Taber Hall, a classroom building that also housed the administrative offices. There, at the counter, I was approached by a small, gray, self-contained man who identified himself as Prof. Fulton, the college Bursar. Plunking down \$25.00 in cold cash, I asked to be admitted as a freshman, even though, I acknowledged, I was two weeks late for the fall semester. He looked at me briefly, not at all *non-plussed*, and said "yes." Assured my high school credentials were acceptable, I completed the necessary forms and promissory notes and thereby was an enrolled student in Jamestown College. Prof. Fulton turned me over to Prof. W.B. Thomas, Registrar, who

completed matters by assigning me to classes, enjoining me to secure the necessary books and informing me that my attendance would begin the next day. My journey to Jamestown was completed.

* * * * *

It is fitting that I came to Jamestown to seek a college degree. In the fall of 1880 my father's family came to Grand Forks from Northfield, Minnesota, when Dad was fifteen. The following Spring, they moved to land near the present town of Oslo, Minnesota, but three successive spring floods of the Red River forced them to move again. Andrew, father's older brother, found, with the aid of Mr. Church, flood-free land north of Churchs Ferry near Lake Irvine, staked it out, and "squatted" on three quarter-sections. When the government land became legally available, members of the family secured land in the same area by means of the Pre-Emption law, the tree-planting claim law, and homesteading. In 1883, my father broke virgin prairie soil with his oxen and plow on his father's land and when he turned 21 in 1886 took a pre-emption and tree claim of his own. My grandparents lived out their lives on their homestead and are interred in the old Antiochia churchyard, eight miles south of Churchs Ferry. Uncle Andrew and two aunts settled in the same area near Maza.

Looking back, I realize now that I was completing a circle. I had returned to the land of my father's early struggles and opportunities. For five years he and his family had had a difficult time in Northfield, highlighted by the excitement of Jesse James' bank raid, and found opportunity and encouragement in North Dakota. They found a better, richer life. And I, by coming to the scene of my father's early, territorial days, had returned to my roots.

Epilogue: The Kildahl Boys

George O. Kildahl remained with F.W. Woolworth Co. during his career. Following several years as manager of the Jamestown store, he managed stores in Wisconsin, Iowa, South Dakota, and finally in Thief River Falls, Minnesota. He retired from Woolworth in 1965. When he was a child his heart was weakened by debilitating illnesses, and he found, toward the end of his working life, the duties of management too taxing. Despite his illness, he refused to remain inactive and, loving retailing, worked as a salesman for a local clothier. His heart finally betrayed him in 1978, when he was 75.

Phillip A. Kildahl, mentioned briefly in this story, served as combat infantryman in George A. Patton's Third Army during World War II, graduated from Augsburg College in Minneapolis, and earned a Ph. D. at the University of Minnesota. An educator, he recently retired from the English Department at Wartburg College (Waverly, Iowa) and resides in that city.

Harold B. Kildahl, Jr., (Huck) went on to complete his ministerial training at Luther Theological Seminary at St. Paul, Minnesota. Called and ordained into the Lutheran Pastoral ministry, he later pursued graduate studies at New York University and earned a Master of Social Science degree. Later in life he was the recipient of an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree from Pacific Lutheran University. Harold served congregations in



Harold B. Kildahl, Jr., ("Huck" of this memoir) helped his brother "learn the ropes" about riding freights. The picture was taken about 1935.

— Courtesy Erling E. Kildahl, Orlando, Florida

Wisconsin, Minnesota, and North Dakota. While Senior Pastor of First Lutheran Church in Minot (1954-72), he was instrumental in establishing Trinity Medical Center and was a member of the State Health Planning Committee. In addition to his pastoral duties and community services, Harold served for twelve years as Devotional Editor for *The Lutheran Herald*, the official publication of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. During his tenure he wrote daily devotions and weekly sermons and had two books published by Augsburg Publishing House in Minneapolis. Harold retired from active ministry in 1972, but has continued to serve pulpits in both Florida and North Carolina. His principal residence is in Orlando, Florida, but he lives in western North Carolina during summers.

As for myself, I completed undergraduate studies at Jamestown College in 1940, moved to St. Paul, and was employed by various companies until 1943. Denied military service due to my injured leg and torso, I had an opportunity to go to Bristol Bay, western Alaska, during the summers of 1943 and 1944 to work the salmon fishing seasons for Nakat Packing Corporation. While an undergraduate, I participated in plays under Professor Marion Jackson's direction and was inspired to make a career in theatre. In the fall of 1944, accompanied by my bride, I went to California and enrolled in the Pasadena Playhouse School of the

Theatre. Awarded a Master of Theatre Arts degree in 1946, I directed and taught at the Playhouse until 1948 when I was offered a position at Purdue University. During thirty-three years as a Purdue faculty member, I taught courses in speech, theatre and drama, and oral interpretation of literature. I designed and instituted advanced courses, helped establish professional curricula in theatre on undergraduate and graduate levels, and for many years was Publicity Director of Theatre. As a director and actor, I staged or performed in well over 100 plays, specializing in classic drama and comedy, and

was a founder/member of The Interpreters, a professional group of readers. In 1964, I was appointed by President Lyndon B. Johnson to the National Shakespeare Quadricentennial Committee as one of two members from Indiana and the following year was made Professor of Theatre and Senior Director. In late 1965, I co-starred with Frances Farmer in "The Visit" and in 1970 played the title role in Shakespeare's "King Lear." I now reside in Florida, but spend the summer months in North Carolina.



The Voorhees Chapel and Music Department is among the landmarks on the campus of Jamestown College. Built in 1917, the building is presently listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

— State Historical Society of North Dakota Collection

