

The Cornwall Chronicles
Number 7 in a Series
“CN” Tower - Cornwall
By Robert McCue

“CN” Tower - Cornwall: Two storied; a wooden stairwell was the access to the open space upstairs where towerman worked night and day to set the switches and signals that gave trains the safe go ahead. They and the tower lights are familiar beacons in the night. Pick one off the shelf of what the inside of the tower smelled like on any given day: lead paint, nicotine, lantern kerosene, and that musty smell that came up from the storage space below the bare and well-worn oak floorboards. On this snowy Christmas eve add in the smell of coal smoke from the pot-bellied stove that fends off the cold river air, but just barely. The wind blows snow through the cracks in the window sills.

Like a ghost in the night a headlight appears. Faint at first, growing ever larger as the chuffing cylinders, and smokestack bark of “Teakettle” 227 approaches the tower. Her form appears out of the snow and catches the tower lights. Behind her the signal lights turn red, glowing through the snow as a warning to any train following our passage. A long freight slowly rumbles by on the West Shore line. Whistle cutting through the night.

227’s three sets of drivers and siderod action crawl along the snowy rails as the towerman, a shadow in the storm, hoops up the orders to the fireman hanging on the engine’s ladder, who catches the hoop on his arm. On the end of a mail, baggage, and two coach cars, a brakeman gets the second hoop. The towerman and tower disappear behind them in the snow, the metal hoops dropped along the track.

A lone mail clerk was in charge of the only bag of mail aboard on this trip. A handful of drowsy passengers are aboard, one of them a young soldier surprising his family with a Christmas arrival. The snow falls on our train outside. Inside the lights in the old and creaking, wooden coaches are bright. The ancient coal stove at the end of the car fends the chill off enough. The seats vibrate with the movement of the steel wheels and bumps of the track below. The engine’s cadence tells of the uphill climb.

No one notices the ancient highway bridge we pass under. The rumble of the Idlewild creek bridge comes and goes in the night. Green signals through the snow give the safe ok. Somewhere around the curve Firthcliffe station and its spire are a passing figure. A lone platform light passes by the snow covered coach windows. Upstairs in the station, the stationmaster’s daughter sleeps through our train’s coming and going. Her dreams are of what awaits her under the tree at the top of the winding stairs come christmas morning. The tree lights glowing through one of the Queen Anne style windows.

The flashing lights of the Mill Street crossing, The long rumble of the Orrs Mills trestle. Somewhere on the other side of this snowstorm is the massive Middletown station. Its upstairs lights are dark, with the office staff home for the holiday. But the platform and waiting room lights burn warm and bright. The glow of lights from a Christmas tree in the waiting room gives the snowy platform a red and green glow.

Many a-curve in the track lays between Orrs Mills and Middletown. Our soldier counts off every familiar click in the tracks that tell him home is getting ever closer. He has spent many a night in a cold, snow covered foxhole, dreaming of this moment. 227’s bell and three-chime whistle cuts through the dark and snow, echoing off the hills of Cornwall; the void below the Orrs Mills trestle, the crossing of the Wallkill river; and a hello to the figure of the ancient Campbell Hall station, its operator keeping the lights burning bright.

At Middletown the platform is empty, save for a handful of half frozen trainmen who have to work this holiday.

Our soldier has at long last come home. Brought back to the friends and family he loves via the Ontario and Western rails. They call her the “Old and Weary”. But there was nothing old or weary about her to a young man coming home on this most holy of nights.

Our soldier and Owen W. wish everyone a Merry Christmas and a peaceful and prosperous new year! With many a happy adventure awaiting around the next curve in the rails.