

THE EPIC OF TAMPA UNION STATION

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I

Silvery-sleek, on sun-bleached tracks
With barrel-chested engines, Dolomite black
Those were the trains of yesterday!
But where might smoke and thunder stay?
Where might great metro-liners rest,
As they rumble 'cross-the-country with their
smoke-filled crests?
Grand Central Station NYC
was home to them, continuously
As was the town of William Penn
where 30th Street Station welcomed them
And the nation's capitol quite primordial
Built for its trains a great cathedral,
As did Los Angeles, a gathering-hall
Where great steam-engines came to call!

II

Yet, as for us, in the tropical climes
of Tampa, foremost on our minds
was a railroad temple doubtless cast
in the Antebellum of our Past. . .
In Greco-Roman Renaissance,
With granite-pillared elegance!

III

So, Henry Plant began to dream
A vision stoked by sparks and steam
Of a local wonder as enchanting
as the news of Janus' landing!
Something grand, that might compete
With the Plant Hotel's magnificent sweep!
A Taj Mahal for all to view,
at the corner of Nebraska Avenue
and Twiggs Street, like an Eastern Star
For noble travelers, near and far!

IV

Three railroad families with good name,
Consented to build for Northbound trains
and Southbound trains such as would come,
A haven in this hamlet of cigars and guns!
Said Atlantic Coastline, Seaboard Air
And the Tampa Northern, with great flare,
“We’ll pool railroad resources and
then come up with a master plan!”
And they did, May 15, 1912,
with a cost that startled even themselves. . .
Two hundred fifty-thousand dollars
Did they spend without a bother
Nor a question who could spare
For a thirteen thousand four hundred foot square
Commuter-train mansion of red brick,
White granite pillars and a roof well-pitched
Like the Parthenon roof of distant Rome!
Yet, Tampa was this Parthenon’s home!

And railroad buffs from 'round the nation
Lauded Tampa Union Station
A landmark, three-score, fifteen years,
That would witness countless smiles and tears!

V

So, come, Good Friend! I'll show you 'round
These ornate balconies, wide and sound
These vaulted ceilings, great green doors,
Magnificent terrazzo floors
And skylights placed to soften the gloom
in an otherwise dark and noisy room.
As a matter of record, not till the days
Of World War Two did the skylight blaze
get blunted when we painted them black,
In fear of a Nazi sneak attack!

VI

But watch my words and walk with me
As I show you how things used to be
With a regiment of sharp Redcaps
Smart-dressed and ready, at a snap!
With Pullman porters waiting to please
Tired travelers, in such days as these
Who made tired sleepers feel at home
Despite cramped beds and rattling bones!
But at Tampa Union Station, you
Could wait 'till the Sliver Palm pulled through,
Or catch the Silver Meteor
or the Orange Blossom
Special, with its diesel roar!
For, Tampa Union Station was
A doorway beckoning without pause,
To places one had never seen
Except in a travelogue magazine
Or a radio barker's quick-clept brogue
“To Kooka-munga, up the road!”

VII

And the rafters of this venerable hall
Of crowds and destination calls
Has absorbed the echoes through the years
Of somber whispers, yells and cheers
Of New York Yankees filled with glee
Of Mickey Mantle with his million dollar knee,/ and
The time he ran off, just for sport
Through Tampa Union Station in his jockey shorts!
For, quite indeed, it could have been,
The City of Mudville they were in. . . ,
That place, which a poet talked about
Where Mighty Casey was struck out.
But Tampa Union's always been
A stop-off place for baseball men
Where Reds and Yankees from St. Pete
Waited for their trains and the world to beat!
Hank Bower sat here. . . Satchel Paige
And countless names from a golden age
Of professional sports called this their home

As they bragged in groups, or brooded alone!
And Gary Cooper of Hollywood fame
Was overheard to call the name
Of Lupe Velez, a cinema queen
Who was making a movie in Sulphur Springs
In the Union Station, they embraced,
As if the world knew neither face!
A kaleidoscope of images we
Shall stand here, in this place and see!
We'll sing Bob Dylan's best folk songs
And chant Flower-Power with our hair worn long
In prayerful discipline, we will wait
For the Northbound train, to stamp out hate
As we join America's daughters and sons
To attend the March on Washington
But now, we wait, here Black and White
In the segregated section by the black skylights!
Wait here, with me and watch a pretty
Black young woman from a Northern city
Enter and sit primly down

In the White-folks section, where she'll be found
By her fiancée who feels he should
Apologize, if he knows what's good!
This great brick house has heard it all
From Civil Rights to Pro-Baseball
From Espanol to Parle Francais
From shoes of gold to feet of clay
And it documented what it heard
Committing to memory, sight and word!

VIII

And you will hear young children shriek
As they scamper, playing hide-and-seek
'round bulky luggage that is strewn
throughout this raucous, spacious room,
Where pilgrims in their Sunday best
Sit anxiously and try to rest
On hardwood seats that leave them numb
While waiting for their trains to come!
Observe them as they sit just so
Cross-legged, with papers, reading slowly,

Watching everything that moves,
Like a circus without horns or hooves!

IX

Then follow me through a second door
To a somber room with a dustier floor
Whose patrons wait and make pretend
Their counterparts consider them men
And women with an equal smile,
That makes their sacrifice worthwhile!
They wait their turn to catch a train
As passengers in all, but name
For, water fountains and the like
Are clearly labeled “Black” and “White!”
Come sit with me and I will show
Where Tampa Union met Jim Crow!

X

A breeze will blow that chills our bones
As kaleidoscope images drop like stone
Then you and I shall encounter the night
That shuttered Tampa Union's lights
A red sunset of gasoline
And a twilight for commuter-trains!
A fist of salt poured on the tail
Of what was once a flight-of-rail!
But instead of coaches, folks would take
Their families on the Interstate
Or better still, without despair
of time, most folks took to the air.
For, the glorious days of smoke and coal
And the hiss of steam grew slow and old,
Replaced by diesel and the spark
Of electricity, clean and smart!

XI

As for the station we once knew,
It became a place where pigeons flew
And nestled safely out of sight,
To escape marauding hawks, at night.
But the Station's vacant, blistered walls
No longer listened to the call
Of children or the booming voice
of the Station-Master's baritone voice.
Though passenger trains still offered rides
Their customers waited in line, outside
Or in a ticket office where
Accommodations were thread-bare.

XII

So, a once magnificent giant slept
While the City of Tampa fairly leapt
With progress, and there was a fear
That the Station's final days were near!
As well they would, had it not been
That the railroad legacy had great kin. . .

Grandparents told grandchildren how
Great trains, no longer running now,
Would make old Tampa Union hum
Like a hive of bees or a marching drum!

XIII

So, the grandchildren waited 'til they were grown,
And decided to discover, on their own
The truth of the place Ol' Grandpop said
Once hosted the Yankees and the Reds!
Once sent young soldiers off to war. . .
Perhaps, heard Elvis Presley snore
And maybe, echoed guitar strings
Of the great Blues singer B.B. King!

XIV

So, our city was petitioned/
Once again to share a vision
With a generation who
Had hopes to see its Past renewed!
AMTRAK, Hillsborough County Commission,
The National Trust for Preservation,
Nations Bank, WFLA,
Florida Transportation, by the way
The Tampa Tribune and other friends
Agreed t'was time to make amends
For the negligence of a glorious past.
So, they brought Tampa Union back to last
the new Millennium as a part
of Downtown Tampa's renewed heart!

XV

And well-dressed travelers came, once more
To marvel at terrazzo floors,
And vaulted ceilings of a place,
Which welcomed them once more, with grace!
And children's eyes went wild with glee
As the Silver Palm backed regally
To a standstill, there to rest, no doubt,
By the side of an example of a reborn South
Mindful, yet, unmindful of
A Past without equality and love!

XVI

And once again, with great regard,
The conductor's riveting "All Aboard"
Has become an anthem AMTRAK sings
As the ears of excited travelers ring
With genuine excitement when
The great majestic trains roll in,
To curtsy at their red-brick host
Who teems with memories and ghosts!

XVII

For, the days of William Howard Taft

as president have long-since passed.

And the Hillsboro Hotel with its soaring
height has long-since closed its doors!

A new day glistens on the bright
horizon that outflanks the night.

And a modern wisdom now defends

Good memories of what has been,

To save and deliver them from the plough

That they might live again, somehow!

Those mighty bisons of the rail

With smoke-stack horns and pewter trails

Have been replaced by swifter steeds,

Who do not smolder when they breathe.

Yet, when they come to Tampa, we

Embrace them with our history.

For, the Tampa Union Station, born

One early twentieth century morn,

Survives today, for all to see,

In the early twenty-first century!

XVIII

So, Station Master, please once more,
Unlock your station's big green doors
To let sunlight and passengers in
As the Age of the Iron Horse lives, again!

XIX

And we shall thrill to hear the sound
Of the Silver Meteor coming down
the tracks while the Station Master sings
“Your train is here! Take all your things!”

XX

And Mickey Mantle with his knees
Will wait for his connection, in times like these
While the train conductor, self-assured,
Will crow like a rooster,
“ALL-ABOARRRRD!!!”
And Gary Cooper shall be seen
Once more, to kiss his ghostly queen!

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