

Ives Toys Make Happy Boys

By James D. Fuller

Forward by Rod Cornell

When I first purchased this boxed set I was aware that there were several pages of hand written text in the set box but I did not read the text for several months. The seller, a collector who had advertised for old toy trains, as many of us did, had mentioned to me that there was an interesting story written by the original owner. I wish I had read the story immediately so I could have met the author. As it turns out he passed away before I read it and could seek him out.

It is a story that brings to life the joy a little boy from the cold Midwest felt when he got his most memorable Christmas gift. The same joy many of us have felt when we got our first trains as youngsters. It's the same joy which keeps us devoted to our hobby of train collecting. But most of all, it is a Christmas Story.

Ives Toys Make Happy Boys

I had arrived home from school that afternoon, a few days before Christmas and found the door locked. Mama always left a key hanging in our secret place in the shed, if she had to go out and I knew where to look for it. I let myself in and had just changed from my school clothes into my play clothes (we never went out to play after school in our school clothes for fear of soiling or tearing them) when the rear door-bell rang. I answered it to find a delivery man with a huge box in his arms looking down at me.

“I have a package from Gimbels for Fuller”, he said.

“That's us”, I replied and turning led him through the hall into the kitchen. The box was too big for me to carry.

He laid it on the floor and with a “good bye” turned and left the house. After making sure the outside door was closed tight (you never left an outside door ajar when the weather was cold), I returned to the kitchen.

Looking down at the box, I puzzled over it. The printing said “tires” and included the name of tire company. That's strange, I thought, we don't have a car. My curiosity got the best of me and I untied the cord holding the cardboard in place. Moving the top piece of cardboard revealed a box with a picture on it. It was that of a boy playing with an electric train and I read the caption “Ives Toy Make Happy Boys.” My heart pounded and I was almost breathless as mentally I said, “it's a train I'm getting a train.”

I had tasted of forbidden fruit and realized that I should have never untied the cord or removed the cardboard covering. Now everything would be spoiled and I would get a scolding or licking. This was supposed to be a Christmas surprise! Carefully I restored the box covering and cord to its original condition, tying the cord just the way it had been.

“There now it's just the way it was and I'll not let anyone know I opened it or knew what was in it,” I thought. I slid the box into a corner of the kitchen, again determining that it had an undisturbed appearance. Mama would never know!

I put on my coat, hurriedly grabbed some of the home-made cookies in the cookie box and left the house, locking the door and putting the key back in our hiding place. I was flying high – head in the clouds – my heart fairly bursting with pure joy – I was getting a train, my train; just what I had wanted. I had even pointed out to Mama, that time we were in the department store, the kind of a train I'd like. A big one – not one of those other little ones – the kind you had to windup.

I wonder what kind it is; I thought; “I'll bet it's a big blue one. Kinda like the one we looked at.”

Later, playing with my friends, I didn't say anything about what I had seen. I didn't want anyone to know what I had learned . That might spoil the whole Christmas – and I kept the secret!

When I returned home, in time for supper, the box was nowhere to be seen in the kitchen. “Mama, the man from Gimbels left a package while you were gone”, I said. “I know, I put it away” she replied. And the subject was closed.

That Christmas was one of the most memorable that I could remember. It was 1927 and I was in the third grade. Boy, how I played with that train. Speeding it up, slowing it down, it even went in reverse. The soldiers rode on it and guarded the station and the tunnel. The only thing was .. on Christmas Day, with the train going around the tree which as usual was set up in our parlor, everyone else wanted to run it. My dad, my brother Harold and his friend Jerry Holtz. All were running it until I complained long and loud. It was my train and I wanted to run it.

Over the years, my train meant more to me than just a toy. There were times I would set it up and play with it by the hour. Then there were times when, stored away in its box, I never looked at it for months at a time. But it was always there – my gift from Mother.

Our family didn't know we were poor because we were like everyone else. We had little in material things but had such a wonderful family relationship. There was much love. There was much discipline. There was much reliance on one another. There was much respect. There was struggle.

The center of the family was mama. It seemed she did everything. Papa worked everyday at the Milwaukee Railroad. It felt as if he was always working – coming home dirty with his lunchbox in his coat pocket (it was a type which could be folded up flat when empty). He was a boiler-maker and almost always talked about his work at the roundhouse during our evening meal. Early in life I knew what a stay bolt was and a crown sheet and rivets and flues. Mama did work that people paid her for doing she would wash and stretch curtains for people and she put the curtain stretcher up in our parlor. Sometimes I would help her slip the curtain over the numberless sharp hooks on the stretcher. She would show me how to do it and she made stolen at Christmas time for people who ordered them. Sometimes she made them for the corner grocery man, Mr. Rink, who sold them to his customers.

I am sure my train was paid for with stolen and fruitcake and stretched curtains! All of the twelve or thirteen dollars it had cost. It was decided that each year I could have something to add to my train. So the next Christmas there was additional track. The Christmas following that, I was allowed to pick out whatever I wanted for it. I settled for a red coal car; a gondola, that is. I wanted a set of switches too, but was told they would have to wait. The switches would come next year.

The switches never came! Mama died only a few weeks after Christmas of 1929. It was pneumonia, they said. She was in bed, ill for two weeks and had passed “the crisis”. She would now get well, the doctor said. The next day, on a Sunday morning, she died. She was 39 years old. I was in the fifth grade at St. Thomas Aquinas School.

Please take good care of my train; it was purchased with stollen and fruitcake and stretched curtains!

James D. Fuller
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