Eine Eisenbahnfahrt in Texas

Theodor Kirchoff

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In the year 1867 a German traveller by the name of Theodor Kirchhoff embarked on a memorable once-in-a-lifetime journey through the Great American West. At the conclusion of his journey, which eventually covered two continents, he wrote his life story, which was published as Reisbilder und Skizzen aus Amerika in 1875. After travelling fifteen hundred miles by stagecoach from Solomon, Kansas, to the gold fields of Idaho, Kirchhoff veered southeastward through Texas on his way to Nicaragua. His first impressions of Texas were gained from a steamboat ride down the Red River. Eventually arriving at Marshall, Texas, he chose to take the railroad from Marshall to Shreveport, Louisiana. In a chapter entitled “Eine Eisenbahlfahrt in Texas,” Kirchhoff recorded an unforgettable forty mile journey, which is translated from German to English in the following paragraphs.

In early times the railroad which connects the towns of Shreveport, Louisiana, and Marshall, Texas, the so-called “Southern Pacific Railroad,” was the worst in the world. As this somewhat daring sounding declaration of opinion comes close to the truth, it will surely enlighten the reader of the following description of a journey which I placed behind me on this Texas Model Train in the year 1867. As a land in which I have found hospitable asylum for years, I would not for the world give it a worse name than it unfortunately but not unjustly has. I will now add that that railroad in earlier times, if not as good as that between Cologne and Minden, as a link in the new Texas Pacific Railroad, is as good as most of the American railroads are.

It was on a frosty March day when I, after travelling one hundred English miles in a private ride in seven days under innumerable difficulties, at last with joy saw the friendly little city of Marshall in north Texas before me, because I believed in that place I had reached the end of the hardship of my journey, as I had the thought in mind to ride the railway from there to Shreveport in the state of Louisiana. The reports of the unbelievable slowness of that railway, which I had often heard, I held as exaggerated and hoped to place behind me the short stretch of just forty English (approximately nine German) miles in a half day.

Robert H. Thonhoff is an educator and community leader of Fashing, Texas. Margarethe Schulze Balser is a native of Industry, Texas, oldest German settlement in the state.
About six o'clock the next morning we arrived at the place "where the depot should be" and proceeded into the railroad coach—this rail­way had just one coach; the other ones were mostly open ones; in our case they were freight cars loaded with cotton bales. Luckily we had a small iron stove in our coach which was stuffed full of pine wood and was red hot. As the coach was made after American style, it was provided with a long open aisle between the seats, and travellers of both sexes, children, and negroes so crowded the space that it lessened the polluted atmosphere of the crowded place, which was perfumed by the constantly evaporating tobacco juice on the smoking stove. All was very cozy.

After we waited in the coach for almost an hour after the scheduled departure time, the locomotive "Ben Johnson" announced itself with a cowhorn-like howl and hooked itself in front of the train. In a nearby tavern the engineer and fireman poured another swallow of whiskey behind the tie and lit their short clay pipes. Finally, the train carefully moved forward.

The first half hour, in which time we placed almost one German mile behind us, passed by without any particular incident. I already thought that all the dreadful reports about this railway were miserable false accusations when all of a sudden the train came to an abrupt standstill. They said that the "Ben Johnson" had no more firewood and one faucet was stopped up. In an hour and a half the faucet was running again, and one half cord of wood had been taken aboard. The train conductors passed their time in a nearby tavern playing a game of cards, "Seven-up," with a party, and the negroes who were told to do the handyman jobs and repair the damage were obviously in no hurry.

Making itself howl, the locomotive was on its way again. The coach rocked on farther down the uneven tracks like a ship on the stormy sea, but after only one half hour it stopped again. The water in the boiler was exhausted, so they said. The locomotive left us in a swamp, which on this wintery day looked doubly dreary, and journeyed to the nearest water tank, which was three English miles away, to supply itself with the essential moist element, and did not return until two hours later.

During all this, a genuine Texas snow storm broke out—rain, hail, sheet ice, and all sorts of frozen and half-melted snow, thunder, lightning, and icy cold wind gusts—everything mixed up—horrible weather. In the coach the whiskey bottles made the rounds, and the negroes could hardly be forced away from the stove and be brought to work.
At last the "Ben Johnson" was there again and ready to march. The train began to jolt very lively over the rails on account of the faster locomotion. The passengers fell into joyful excitement—when suddenly an ominous crash sounded beneath us and the coach. After a few vigorous jumps the coach came to a stop, which mixed up passengers, trunks, valises, threw several sleeping Africans on the hot stove, and caused a funny mix-up. Thank God no one was hurt; we all escaped with just the scare. After three hours work in the snow storm, whereby some passengers helped, the coach was back on the tracks again, and the untiring "Ben Johnson" again slowly trotted on.

It was afternoon. The passengers, after drinking whiskey, made offensive remarks about the conductor and other officials of the renowned "Southern Pacific Railroad"—when we came to a log cabin in the forest, and all the passengers began to shout: "Whoa! Here we are at the grocery!"—and the train stopped again.

An ox wagon was stopped at the side of the road. It was loaded with cotton which was to be transported by the train. The cotton had been loaded in Marshall where it had vainly waited for the train for two months. The driver of the ox wagon made the friendly offer to the conductor to let him hitch his oxen to the train, and they would get to Shreveport quicker. The conductor took it as an insult and took off his coat at once and challenged the ox driver to a duel. The driver, who was a true Texas backwoodsman and who would have walked a couple of miles for the pleasure of a good fight, gladly accepted the challenge. Several passengers hurried out of the coach regardless of the weather and formed a ring in which the conductor and the ox driver came to blows.

With drawn revolvers, the spectators of the heroic fight stood in a circle, each one swearing that he would shoot down the first one who would help one of the fighters, while the conductor and the ox driver, like a pair of fighting dogs, rolled around in the swamp of the half-melted snow that covered the ground. First one was down and then the other. Fists, boots, and teeth did their utmost to defeat the opponent, while spectators, most of whom were for the ox driver, let their animal-like cheering echo through the forest. Finally the ox driver managed to get a hold on the nose of his opponent with his teeth, and in Texas fashion gouged his eyes with his thumb, after which the conductor hollered that he had enough.

The fight was ended, the spectators put their pistols back under their coat tails, and with Indian war whoops, the victor challenged everyone who was a friend of the conductor or the railway to a duel. Since no one felt like accepting the challenge, the passengers, in a
happy mood over the amusing intermezzo, proceeded back to the coach. The "Ben Johnson" hitched itself anew to the train, and slowly it went forward.

By nightfall, we rode about five German miles in the aforementioned manner—then the locomotive, which was out of water as well as wood, would not pull anymore. The conductor, who was still angry over his defeat, got drunk and told the passengers that he would not go on until the next morning.

The native Texans, strong and bold-looking fellows, were accustomed to camping out and soon had a big bonfire burning, around which they laid in picturesque groups. The flames, blown by the storm-like wind, reached up to the moss-covered, knotty forest giants and made fantastic pictures in the half-lighted forest darkness, while the falling snowflakes sizzled in the fire. Although it was romantic, I soon went back into the coach, because lying on the wet ground in the cold north wind had little comfort.

I spent a miserable night. I made several futile attempts to roll up and go to sleep in one of the seats. An African who sat behind me was modulating bass songs, and he stretched his legs over the back of my seat and right under my nose; another one who was snoring on the floor laid his odorous wool head trustingly in my lap. Drunken Irishmen sang heart-breaking songs. One minute the stove was red hot; the next minute it was ice cold, and it smoked like a chimney. My blood circulation stopped in my cramped joints. To sum it all up I had to do without any sleep.

Finally, there was the break of a new day—bleak, norther howling, and without coffee. At seven o'clock they were to make an attempt to go on. They said a new locomotive called the "Jay Bird" was nearby and would push while the "Ben Johnson" pulled. But both locomotives were frozen tight. One attempt to push the iron horses to the nearest water tank failed. We passengers heated water at the campfire in tin kettles and carried it sixty steps to the locomotives, which we thawed out while negro workers threw snowballs. With neither preaching nor threatening could we induce them to help.

At two o'clock in the afternoon the "Ben Johnson" and the "Jay Bird" were ready to march, and after three cheers from the passengers, the train was set in motion. After four attempts we reached a height. Merrily it went down the other side, a levelling incline, and through a canyon, which was so narrow that the sides of the car nearly touched the walls. Here the train ran off the track and broke in the middle—a mile and a half from the place where we had spent the night. The passenger car with the "Jay Bird" was in the back; the "Ben Johnson"
with the freight car was in the front; and an almost bottomless, rain-soaked clay mass that would run into your boot tops when you stepped in it filled the narrow pass.

Now the conductor suggested to the passengers that they ride the remaining thirteen English miles to Shreveport on the open cotton car, which was not a very inviting prospect. But to spend another night in the coach or in camp was out of the question. So, we carried our baggage from the passenger coach through the foot-deep mud and half-melted snow to the cotton freight car.

The change was completed, and after shivering from the cold and waiting another hour for the return of the "Ben Johnson," which had gone ahead to scout, we were on our way again by nightfall. With reinforced fury, the wind whistled around our ears, and hail, snow, and rain rattled down on us as we cowered close together on top of the cotton bales. As we raced toward our destination, the car swayed and jolted in short jumps on the uneven tracks so that it took real skill to keep from falling from the high, towering, cotton bales.

At nine o'clock at night we reached Shreveport, where a railroad depot counts the unknown great. We had to get off in the open street, half frozen and hungry as hyenas, for on our forty-hour trip we had lived on nothing but cheese and bread crumbs, the leftovers from our breakfast in Marshall. We made forty English miles in exactly forty hours. I was happy when I could sit down at the princely set table in the warm cabin salon of the proud Red River steamboat "Alabama" and could restore my body and soul, and I promised myself solemnly that this railroad trip on the "Southern Pacific Railroad" should be my first and last one in this Texas Model Train.