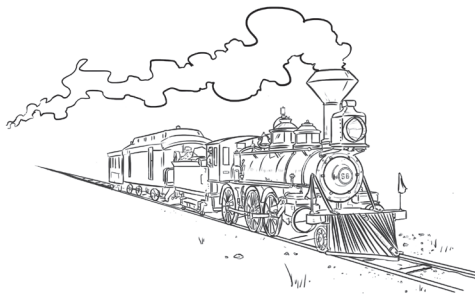


Adventures on the American Frontier

Men on Iron Horses

Revised Edition



Edith McCall

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This book has been substantially edited, revised, and updated to retain the spirit of the original work but with a modern understanding of historical events and a more sensitive awareness of human equity.

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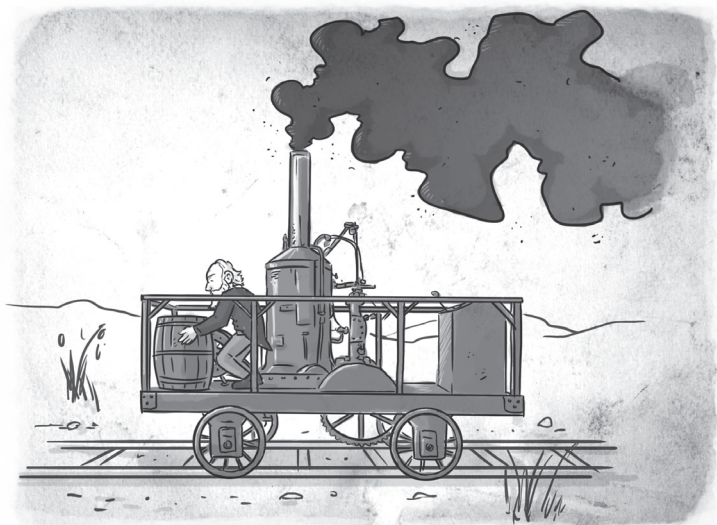
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Peter Cooper's Horse and a Half

“Mr. Cooper, you need a horse!”

The call came to Mr. Cooper from the open window of a horse-drawn railroad car. The driver of the horsecar had pulled his horse to a stop alongside Mr. Cooper's strange-looking train.

The people in the horsecar were surprised at what they saw. Where a horse should be, there was an open platform on wheels. On the platform, with Mr. Cooper, was a strange machine.



Peter Cooper, dressed as a gentleman in that year of 1830, was too busy to answer. He was dipping water from a barrel into a round boiler that stood on end over a firebox. He checked the workings of the little locomotive that he had built himself. It had iron connecting arms, pipes that had once been gun barrels, a long leather belt, and other odds and ends, which all worked together to make the small locomotive's wheels turn.

Peter put another shovelful of coal into the firebox. The calls that came from the horsecar didn't bother him at all. Until then, people in the United States had ridden in something that was pulled by an animal. They would have to be shown what a clanking steam machine could do.

Peter stood up and wiped the dirt from his hands on an old piece of cloth. He had been getting the *Tom Thumb*, which is what he had named his little one-and-a-half-horsepower locomotive, ready for the thirteen-mile trip back to Baltimore, Maryland. His locomotive had just proved, to the men in the open car behind it, that a steam locomotive could be used on the tracks where the horsecar ran from Baltimore to Ellicott's Mills. If a little engine like his could do the work, then surely people could see how much better a larger locomotive would be. He put down the cloth, brushed a bit of coal from his coat sleeve, and looked toward the laughing men in the horse-drawn car.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," he said. He took off his tall hat and bowed. "I have an iron horse here—a horse and a half, you might say—ready to take my friends back to Baltimore. We're going to match your speed or better it."

The driver of the horsecar pulled on the reins to hold back his fine gray horse. “We’ll wait until you’re ready, Mr. Cooper,” he said. “Then we shall see which is faster: my live horse or your iron one. Our passengers will see which should be running on these rails!”

That started all the men talking at once.

One in the horsecar yelled, “Hooray for old Dobbin! Who ever heard of steam pulling a car uphill?”

A man in Peter’s open car snorted. “Horses are eating up all the money the railroad makes. You don’t have to buy oats for an iron horse!”

Peter, waiting for the water in the boiler to get hot enough to make plenty of steam, said nothing. He knew that the new railroad, which had been built for horse-drawn cars, was losing money. Something had to be done, or it would soon close. He had a feeling that steam power instead of horse power was the answer. Steam locomotives had been tried in England, and one, the *Stourbridge Lion*, had been brought from there to the United States.

It was too bad that the tracks that the *Stourbridge Lion* had been placed on were too weak for it. The heavy locomotive had torn up the tracks. But it had worked—it had pulled along at ten miles per hour.

John Stevens, over in New Jersey, had made a small locomotive for his own use, and it had worked, too.

Peter knew that his little iron horse wasn’t strong or powerful, but people had to be shown that even a small steam locomotive was as good as a live horse, and a strong locomotive would be much better!

“How about it, Peter?” his passengers were calling. “How about a race with the horse?”

Peter smiled and said, “We’ll see what the *Tom Thumb* can do.” He was glad that the uphill pull from Baltimore was over. The little locomotive had shown that it could pull a load of passengers uphill, but it had been hard work. The trip back to Baltimore was downhill. It would be easy.

The men sitting in the little open car felt the hot August sun beating down on them and envied the men in the roofed-over horsecar. Peter had a good idea, they were sure, but the heat coming from the fire and from the boiler full of hot water didn’t make them any more comfortable.

“Are we ready?” one of them called.

Peter tested the steam pressure. He nodded and waved to the driver of the horsecar. “Ready!” he called. “Go!”

The driver gave his reins a quick shake, and the gray horse leaped ahead, pulling his car smoothly along one of the two sets of side-by-side tracks. The tracks were long pieces of cedar wood, six inches square, topped with a two-inch ribbon of iron to hold the car wheels in place.

“See you later!” the men in the horsecar called back. One put his head out the window to yell, “We’ll come back for you!”

The live horse got off to a much faster start than the iron horse. The little locomotive had to get the machinery moving. Starting the train was slow, hard work. The men in the open car felt the jerk of the first push of steam against the piston that turned the *Tom Thumb*’s wheels. They leaned

forward in their eagerness to help the little iron horse get moving.

Sparks and cinders flew as the locomotive picked up speed. But the horsecar was far ahead.



“Come on, *Tom Thumb!*” called one of the men. “Show us what you can do!” But he had to quiet down, for the smoke made him cough.

Faster and faster the piston moved. The wheels turned easily, and the *Tom Thumb* picked up speed.

The horsecar swayed as it made a turn in the track.

With each turn of the wheels, the *Tom Thumb* was pulling nearer to the gray horse. The next curve found the iron horse right behind the live one. The *Tom Thumb* rounded the curve easily. In another minute the locomotive was alongside the horse.

The horse tried to leap away from the puffing, clanking monster beside it. It didn't need the driver's whip to do its best.

Side by side, the two cars went down the tracks. Both had to slow down for some of the sharp turns around rocky hillsides.

On and on they went. When they got to a long, straight stretch, Peter shoveled more coal into the firebox. He had the steam engine wide open. Now was the chance to get ahead of the horse. But he had to be careful not to build up so much steam that his homemade boiler with its gun-barrel pipes would burst.

The horse was not used to making the thirteen-mile trip at a full gallop. He began to tire. No matter how sharply the driver cracked his whip or how loudly the fearful iron monster next to him clanked and hissed and puffed, the horse could not keep up the speed at which he had been running.

The *Tom Thumb* pulled ahead by inches, by feet, by yards. There was a full train length between the racers, and then several. The men in the open car held onto their tall beaver hats and waved back at the horsecar. The *Tom Thumb* had proved it could outrun a horse.

Then, suddenly, there was a slapping sound, and the engine sighed and stopped.

"What's wrong, Peter?" the men in the open car called.

Peter's face showed his disappointment. "The blower belt slipped off the wheel," he called. "I'll have it fixed soon, but I'm afraid we've lost the race."

Peter jumped off the platform to put the belt back into place. He was still working at it when the horsecar passed him.

“Did your iron horse break a leg?” someone from the horsecar yelled.



The wild cheers of the men in the horsecar drowned out all other sounds. But as he put the belt back into place, Peter was thinking of a way to fix it so that it could not happen again.

Then, before he had even worked out the problem, he thought, “Really, there’s no need for me to make the *Tom Thumb* better.” He climbed back onto the platform. “I have

proved my point. I should leave it to the locomotive makers to build better ones. I'm a businessman first of all, not an inventor."

The men in the train car were quiet as once more the *Tom Thumb* began to move along the tracks. Far ahead, they could see the swaying horsecar and the waving handkerchiefs and hats of the men who rode in it.

"The race is lost, gentlemen," Peter said, "but steam has won. The iron horse will work for less money and do more work than any four-legged horse alive."

