

The Station Master's Ghost

A true(ish) tall story.

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When we were kids, we lived just a few hundred yards from the railway station at Otane.

Big steam engines and a few passenger trains set our time table for work and play.

The sounds of the railway were so ingrained within our lives that we would awaken, startled, on occasions when the Goods Train did not arrive at midnight, as it did every day, except Sunday.

In the frosty early morning hours of winter, when fog was thick in the air we could hear the explosion of detonators, which had been placed on the line so the engine driver, not being able to see the signals in the roiling mist, would know he was approaching the station,

In the early hours we would hear the long steam whistle of the Napier to Wellington Goods Train as it reached Opapa near Te Aute; that was our Dad's signal to be up and making porridge.

We would hear him moving quietly in the kitchen and half an hour later our Mum would be calling us for breakfast and to get ready for school.

We rode to school, four miles away in Waipawa, in the Guard's van on the 7.30am train. In the Winter the Guard would have his pot-belly stove in the van, red hot with coal. Canvas mail sacks were all piled into sections along one side of the van while the other side had sections for parcels and small freight.

Sometimes there were car axles wrapped in grease paper; or car mud guards, you could tell by the shape. Occasionally, we would see dogs in cages and sometimes chickens or guinea pigs in little boxes with chicken wire on the end. Once, there was a coffin on the floor and we all cowered at the far end of the carriage. No one spoke the entire journey.

The Guard's Van smelt like smoke, from the steam engine or the stove but it was toasty warm on frosty mornings. There were no seats. We would lay on the mail sacks or stand looking out the little window at the end. In summer the guard opened the big sliding door and we would all

stand on the edge looking out; the wind rushing into our faces and smoke and steam catching us unaware when the train slowed on a bend or the wind caught it just right.

The guard would warn us to stay away from the door when the train got up speed. Occasionally he would string a cord across the doorway as a sort of safety barrier but mostly he left it up to our common sense to not fall out onto the ballast below. Nobody ever did fall out as far as I know, but we did love to jump off the moving train as it slowly pulled out of the station and got to the first crossing about 100 yards away. We were meant to get off at the Waipawa station, but we'd just as soon wait to jump off at the level crossing by the Gas Works. The big children jumping first and then turning to grab the smaller ones as they jumped into their arms. Once, Annie Tu Whare's little sister Brenda was too scared to jump and stayed in the Guard's Van all the way to Waipukurau. She had to be put on the North bound train three hours later. The ladies in the Tea Rooms on the Railway Platform looked after her all that time. She had cakes to eat, hot Bournvita to drink. She arrived back at school in Waipawa with her school bag stuffed with meat pies.

During weekends and holidays, the railway played a big part in our adventures.

The stock yards were empty most of the time but when the Sale Day at Waipukurau or Stortford Lodge were due, the yards would be busy for a week or so. They would be filled with cattle or sheep and lambs. Then the stock crated carriages would be lined up and the lambs and sheep sorted and packed into the crates so tight the wool on their sides would poke out the gaps in the bars.

There were very few stock trucks in those days and mostly farmers or drovers would drive mobs of sheep or cattle to the railhead and load them into the yards themselves.

We lived on the Stock Route. We could hang on the fence watching two or three mobs a day come past our front gate. It was the job of the kids in each house to stand near their fence and yell and shout to keep the stock from coming too close to their fence. The cattle could easily knock our picket-fence over if they pushed against it. When sometimes they did break through our Dad would have to come home to prop the picket fence up before the next mob arrived. He kept long poles under our veranda to prop the fence with until he could get time to fix it properly.

As the stock were driven past there were lots of dogs and horses and the drovers would shout and whistle, the dogs were barking, the cows or sheep would be calling all the time. Sometimes the Drovers would stop their horses beside the fence and talk to Mum while they rolled a smoke.

Drovers never spoke too much. They'd say things like "G'day, Pat" to our mother and she would say something like "Big mob today Clarrie" and he'd say "Yeah" and then puff on his smoke for a moment before digging his heels into the flank of his horse and moving off. Sometimes he'd look back and say, "Good to catch up Pat, see yah next month".

Our adventures were many in the long summer days and they lasted well into the evenings after tea. We would roam everywhere together or alone and no-one worried where we were. Everybody in the village did keep an eye out so that if Mum rang Vera on the telephone exchange she could more or less track us down by ringing two or three other Mums on a party-line call. Someone would say, "Oh I saw the kids heading towards Curley's Farm around mid-day. Give Maire a ring they'll be down at Cox's Creek".

If we were near the Railway, the Station Master Mr Wilson, would usually have a good idea where we would be. He gave us all plenty of warnings about being safe but he also used his common-sense rule. "Have you got any common-sense at all?" "yes" was the required answer, "Then use it!" was his response.

The one thing he did get upset about was climbing up the water tower.

It was every kid's 'rite of passage' to conquer that water tower. Mr Wilson made it his mission to stop us but he knew it was going to happen and so he gave every group of kids his two-stage warning.

Climbing the Tower was an exciting prospect. Once a kid got it in their head to climb there was nothing that could stop them. One morning they would awaken with the firm idea implanted that today was the day to climb. Sometimes they would tell their friends, and all would gather at the bottom of the tower to encourage them. That was the sure way to get caught! Mr Wilson had plenty of warning systems. Mother's from the houses near the tracks would ring him. Any gathering of young boys around the Tower area was warning enough. Their excited shouts and laughter heralded the arrival of the Station Master as the rest of the climber's friends scattered quickly in all directions.

The first time he caught young kids near the ladder he would take them into the Railway Station and into the Station Master's Office.

It was a big and scary place for young kids. There was a big desk with lots of papers. On the walls were pictures of all the old Station Masters dating back to 1853. They all looked down at you. Mr Wilson had a smiley face, but he never smiled when he was giving kids the first warning.

His first warning was about ‘the kid who climbed to the top and fell off’. His second warning was the scary one about ‘the kid who climbed to the top and fell in!’

The water tower was about 25 feet high to the platform, then about 15 feet more to the top of the tank. The tower was painted the same dull, weathered red as the Goods-Shed and the Signal House further down the track. It was a great temptation. For generations kids would dare each other to climb to the platform and when bigger to climb the tank itself to stand on the top.

There was a ladder up the side of the tower which small kids could not reach.

The daring devised ways to jump up or to stand on someone’s shoulders to get to the first rung. When you pulled on the first rung it slid all the way down and you could climb the ladder to the platform stage. The tank ladder required you to move around the edge of the platform and then climb straight up the side of the tank on pieces of wood nailed to the side. The tank was made of vertical wooden planks and was narrower at the top and wider at the bottom.

Mr Wilson would stand at the bottom if he found you climbing up. When you came down he would take you by the shoulder and march you all the way along the railway line to the station and into his office.

Smaller kids were often crying by the time he got them there. He would make you stand in front of the pictures of all the Station Masters and give you his story.

He would begin by saying he was very disappointed that you had disobeyed the signs that said, ‘no climbing’. Then he would say he was telling you this story for your own good. “I won’t tell your parents this time if you promise to listen carefully to this true story and then you will see why I’m so concerned that you shouldn’t climb up the tower.”

Mr Wilson would begin slowly “Once, there was a family living just up the hill here, near your house. The little boy, just about your age, was warned many times not to climb the water tower. Three times the Station Master, (here he would point to the grimmest looking portrait on the wall) Mr Higgins had caught him and warned him about the danger. But one afternoon he managed to climb right to the top and was skylarking to all his friends below when he stumbled and fell backwards off the Tower, tumbling and turning until he hit the ground between the lines.”

The way he told it, you just knew the kid had died horribly broken on the hard ballast.

Mr Wilson would pause for a moment and then bring some small relief to you by adding “It so happens that they had just put new ballast on the track that week and it had not settled in at all

so his landing was quite soft really. A couple of broken bones and some cuts and grazes perhaps.”

A sense of relief would flood over the listener realising, this was not a horror story; perhaps you could get away with it –a fall might only result in a couple of breaks.

Mr Wilson would take a deep breath and go on; “Sadly”, he would pause again here, “the rather dazed child was just sitting up and looking around, probably thanking his lucky stars he had survived, when he was hit from behind by the Wellington Gisborne Freight train.

All they really found was a smear on the sleepers and his tennis shoes, still white and clean from his game on that fateful Saturday morning.”

The horrified child in front of him would be completely shaken by this story but Mr Wilson had not yet finished.

“Of course,” he would add after another dramatic pause, “both his poor parents went mad with grief and died soon after. His brother and three sisters are to this day still in the looney -bin down south, driven crazy by the sound of train whistles ringing in their ears”.

The poor child, really any of us who had been caught over the years, would then be released. The implication of Mr Wilson’s story was ‘to go, and to sin no more’. The kids would be greatly relieved and traumatised at the same time. Children would wake in the night screaming after Mr Wilson’s first warning. Slowly, they would feel they could share their unique experience with someone else. They might start perhaps with an elder sibling but more often with their gang of friends. Someone would always laugh then say how they had heard the same story and so had their sister or brother. It was just a scary story to stop you climbing. The more you shared the more it became apparent it was a story. It was a myth and a briefly effective warning. By the end of the year, or when you rose slightly in status in your gang, the temptation, the dares of older kids would return and inevitably you would succumb and attempt the climb again.

So, it happened for me.

During the summer holidays when I was twelve, I began to have a period of restless dreams. I would awake in the early hours of the morning with a strange feeling that someone was calling my name. When I turned the light on, there was no one there. Mum and dad were asleep. The house quiet.

I would go back to sleep and dream about standing on the top of the Water Tower. In my dream I was excited but also a bit frightened. I could hear my mother crying but I could also hear another voice, more quietly but insistent, urging me to step closer to the edge of the tank. Again, I would wake and find myself in a cold sweat, shivering and scared.

This happened four or five nights in a row and it wasn't until I had slept through an entire night without dreams or waking that I realised that the dreams always had a long rumbling noise in the background. It was the sound of the midnight Goods Train. That was what was waking me!

The more it happened, the more I knew that the way to stop the dreams was to climb the Tower. I planned it well.

I knew if I told anyone, chances of my getting caught would increase. So, I planned it by myself. I took a rope and I got my best rubber-soled shoes. I thought about doing the climb early in the morning but decided instead to wait until just before dark, when everyone would be at home having their meal. No one would be watching.

On the day of the climb I told my parents that I would be staying at my friend's house. I only told my friends that afternoon and asked them to gather in a paddock up the hill, where they could see the Tower but where they would not attract attention. The idea was to reach the top and flash them the light from my torch before climbing down again.

On my first attempt at climbing two years before, I'd only been half way up the tower frame when my sister got scared and her yelling attracted Mr Wilson's attention. I was ten years old that first time.

I had nearly reached the top of the tank when I got caught the second time. Some kids had been caught the week before in the afternoon. I had waited until nearly dark. I thought the Station Master would be home having his tea by then but somehow, he found out. He was watching and arrived with Mr Stallard the St John Ambulance man with him.

Together they talked me down the long ladder. As it was now darker than I had anticipated I was pretty concerned about slipping. Mr Stallard climbed up the tower ladder and helped me come down so that if I fell he would catch me.

When I reached the ground they both seemed worried that I was alright and in a much kindlier manner than I recall from the previous encounter, they escorted me to the Station Master's office.

I was a bit ashamed, at being caught. I was twelve now and felt that I was to be made a scapegoat for all the other climbers. I expected a pretty severe punishment. My parents were going to find out this time for sure.

The reality of what to come was much worse than I imagined.

Mr Wilson was to tell me the truth about the Water Tower!

“Son,” he said sitting me down in front of his desk, “the last time you were in here I told you a story that I thought might scare you off doing it again.”

Mr Stallard then said, “you are old enough now to know the truth about why we are all so concerned about kids climbing that tower. It’s a story that is so old that most people don’t remember when it happened. But happen it did. Mr Wilson here has been looking up the Otane station records and it’s there in black and white! More than that, the truth is known by all the mothers who have lived around here since this thing first occurred. They know because they are the ones who have heard the calls over the years. Ask your own mother if you like, it’s happened for her and its happened to every mother who has lived within the sound of the midnight goods train.”

I was really worried now. Mum had never told me anything about whatever they were talking about. I was very aware however, of her strong pleas not to climb the water tower.

Mr Stallard thought quietly for a moment and then sighed, “you know I thought it was just a story myself until the proof of what happened came out a few years ago”.

Mr Wilson took up the story in his kindly voice. He had a sad smile on his face as he looked at me. “It happened in 1923, between the wars. A kid, about your age, climbed to the top of the water tower and fell in. The roof on the Tower was made of tiles in those day and there was only one place which was reinforced that you should step on. He stepped off the marked way and simply broke through.

The boy wasn’t seen again, at least not for twenty-five years.

That kid had simply gone missing one day. No one knew what he had in mind so no one looked at the tower. No one apart from the Railwaymen who worked on it had ever climbed it before but since then the missing boy has been calling to kids every generation since. Luring them to a certain death.”

I must have looked a bit doubtful because he went on quite strongly; “Oh you can be sceptical, lots of people were. They put it down to hi-jinx and youthful daring-do. The Railways did all

they could to keep children away from the tower but every year more and more of them try. You are the third this month and it's my job to stop you kids from disappearing. Whatever you think about it I know he's been calling to you all over the years. He has been daring you to dare each other. He has been calling to your mother's too. That's the sad part. All those poor women over the years, thinking they are the only ones who were hearing his call, when really, they all were hearing his voice."

"I don't know anything about this" I stammered.

"And nor you do son, nor you do!" Mr Stallard nodded sadly.

"The Police and all the village people started a search when the kid didn't come home that night", Mr Wilson went on. "There were searches along all the creek banks and as far away as the Patangata river. They searched hay barns and empty sheds throughout the district. As a young man I was involved, twice walking the lines between here and Opapa. I was looking for signs of his body in case he'd been hit by a train on the tracks. The official search ended after a whole month but his family never gave up. They continued to search for the next twelve years until it all got too much for his mother and the family moved her to Wellington where she could get proper care for her mental condition. You see she insisted that every night at mid-night she could hear her boy calling to her. Every night except on Sundays and on Christmas Day. She would hear his voice, plaintive she said, crying out her name in a long drawn out call as if he were calling quietly and getting louder and louder before slowly fading away. It was always around midnight. Never exactly, sometimes a bit before, occasionally well after midnight.

After the first month of hearing voices the mother bothered the authorities so much that they re-searched the railway lines and someone climbed the tower and looked in. They probed the bottom just in case and came up with the rubber sole of a sandal just like the boy had been wearing. They emptied the water but still found nothing more. Nothing, except the rest of the leather straps from the sandal. There was no saying if it was the missing boy's sandal or not. Most people thought it was.

The boy was never seen again. There were no reports, no sightings, only mystery.

No one ever put two and two together. No one seemed to think about the Midnight Freight train that thunders through Otane every night except Sunday's.

Later when the truth was discovered a few women spoke up and said they heard the calls too. Once the discovery was made many more women came forward and it seems that all the mothers within whistle call of the station had heard something at some time.

The women said it sounded like a child's voice, calling for help, calling for his mother. It made them worry for their own children. Some were unaccountably afraid of the Water Tower. Many of them described an irrational fear of being near it. Some even walked to the shops a longer way, just to avoid walking past the Water Tower.

Then twenty-five years later the NZ Railways were replacing a steam engine boiler in their Hillside workshops in Dunedin.

When they were breaking down the boiler they found bones inside. When they checked, the bones were confirmed to be human, probably from a young male!

No one could work out how the bones got to be there. Some thought a person may have been sealed inside accidentally when the engine was being built.

Finally, an engineer who had been working on the railway in Napier at the time remembered the child who went missing in Otane in 1923 and they began to piece things together.

When he heard about it, my boss in Napier asked me to drain the Water Tower for a second time. You might even remember it, about five years ago?

It took a day and a half to empty through a smaller hose. We had the fire truck parked underneath filtering the water through canvas in case something came out.

I had to climb into the tank myself. It is horrible in there. Dark and covered with years of mouldy growth on the bottom and sides. We took some big torches and searched the whole bottom again. We used rakes to make sure we missed nothing. We had to be lowered in on ropes. It was when I was being pulled up, in a sling, to the top I noticed some marks on the side, about two thirds the way up the wall.”

Mr Wilson stopped again, as if he were thinking about what he'd seen.

“What were the marks?” I asked.

“When I scraped away the growth and mould I could clearly see the boy's initials. MCW carved into the wall with a sharp point.”

I let out a little gasp. The initials were the same as mine!

“What was his name?” I whispered quietly.

“Mark Christopher Watson”, Mr Wilson recalled readily.

And you are Martin Campbell Wishart.

Murray Clive Walmsley was the boy I got down from the Tower this week.

Do you begin to see why I am so concerned son?"

Mr Wilson said "We put the whole thing together after a good deal of thinking.

We worked out he'd fallen in through the viewing hole at the top. He must have been swimming around at the top for a long time. Maybe floating on his back for a while. There is nothing to hold onto in there. He had been floating for enough time to be thinking about writing his name on the wall. He had taken off one sandal, used the buckle to scratch his initials in deep. I reckon he thought he could float until the morning and someone would hear him calling.

If he was still alive when the midnight goods train came through, we will never know, but if he didn't panic he may still have been floating on his back.

When the engine pulled up close to fill it's half empty boiler the young man must have been shouting and calling at the top of his voice in the vain hope he would be heard by the train driver or the boiler-man.

The noise of a big K-Class engine huffing and chuffing and the fact the kid was inside the wooden water tank meant no one could possibly hear him.

Those big boilers take up to 800 gallons at a time. The force generated by the water dropping through the wide canvas chute would have sucked him straight into the engines boiler tank"

Mr Wilson paused again and sighing went on:

'It was a boiler. It was boiling" he said.

The child must have died at once. Who knows how many miles down the track before his flesh turned to soup! Of course, his boiled down bones lay at the bottom of the boiler for the next twenty-five years while the engine passed by the same water tank daily, at midnight, every night except Christmas and Easter, for all those years.

The mothers knew of course. Somewhere in their hearts, somewhere in their minds that haunting call was heard. Although we think it strange that no one really shared it, they knew enough to warn their children over and over about the dangers of the tower.

And I know too. So many of the boys I've caught going up there all with the same initials and if the initials weren't the same it was because their older brothers or their friends with those initials had urged them to do it.

The two men stood and helped me to my feet.

"There's one more thing Martin," Mt Stallard said.

He walked me to the Station Masters pictures on the wall.

"1843, The first station Master, Marius Carlos Winslet. was the Station Master for only eleven months. In his first ten months he was given the task of building the Water Tower. He did so in record time. Hiring the builders and supervising the work closely. It was his own design, different from all the previous towers the railways were using at the time.

On the day it was officially opened, a month after completion, the Station Master climbed to the top to celebrate his achievement.

While he was waving to the crowd he slipped and fell to his death" Mr Stallard paused and scratched his head under his cap, "I reckon that's how it all started."

I never again heard a steam engine whistle it's long, lonely call without a shiver running down my spine.

And I never climbed the Tower again!