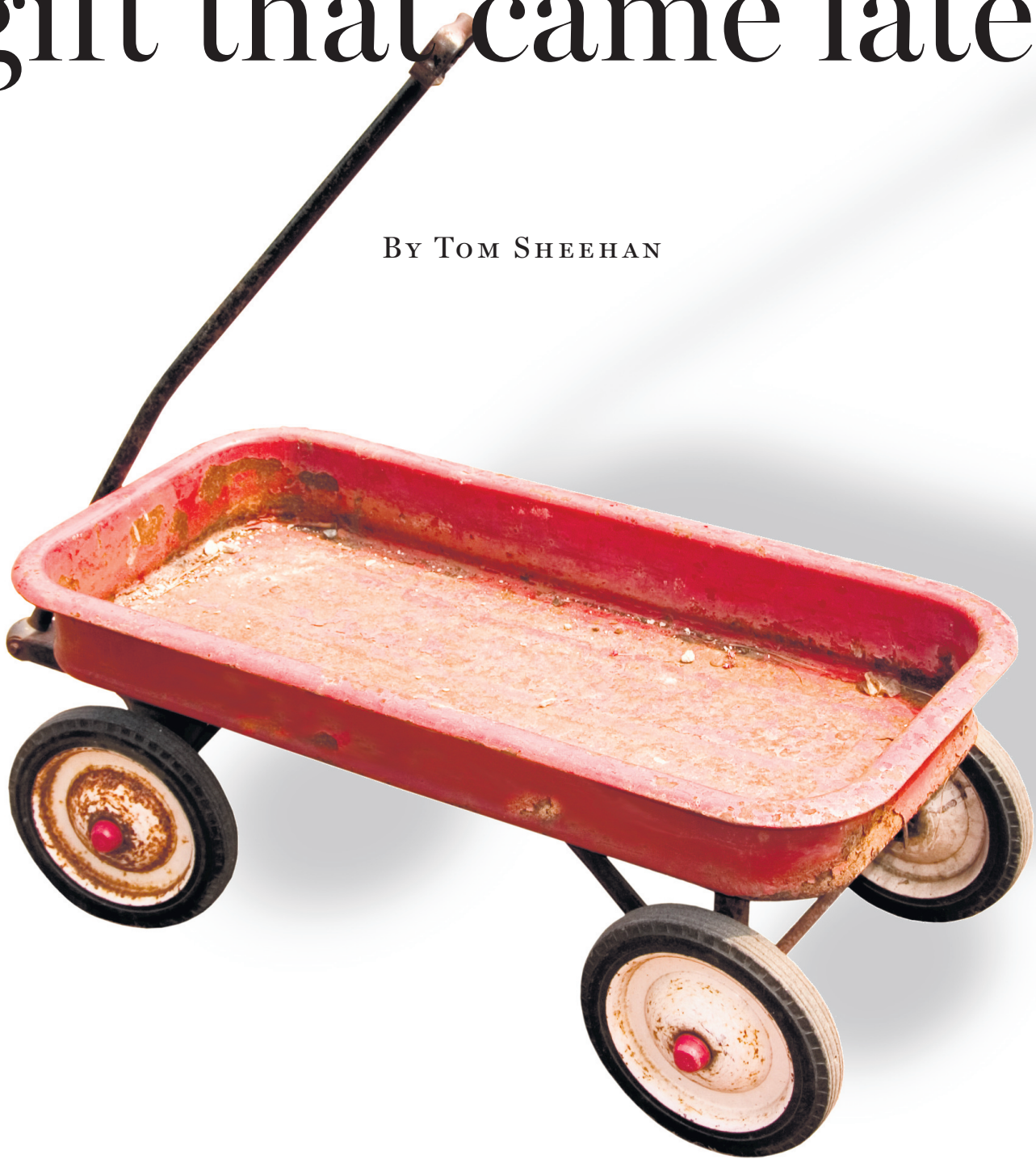


A secondhand wagon for Christmas, and a gift that came later

By Tom Sheehan



One Christmas many years ago, there was one present for me from my parents: a little done-over red wagon with a long hauling handle and slatted sides for extra cargo — for overload! The name of the wagon has not stuck with me — Radio Flyer, perhaps? — but after three quarters of a century, names seem insignificant.

Beside the Christmas tree, the wagon was a lone figure, an outcast, apart from the small clutter of presents for my five sisters — a doll for each, a set of play dishes, worn dresses, sweaters, and outer clothes for girls. For me, a chuck under my chin from my father who said, in honest approbation, “You understand,” as I did, the lone boy. The wounded wagon had been touched up, repainted, two wheels replaced. The early and mid-1930s had made impressions on an 8-year-old.

I was the family hunter for coal chunks fallen from Boston & Maine Railroad tenders, and that wagon began to accompany me on my scrounging adventures along the tracks. I headed out when the coal box beside the kitchen stove of our third-floor apartment was near empty, chills in the air. I learned you had to fight for survival head-on.

I was on the male side of things. The kitchen stove, though my mother’s domain, was in my precinct. Its needs were mine — morning match, kindling wood to start the burn, coal to keep it going. We lived in a cold-water flat looking over Clifftondale Square, over the roof of Hanson’s Garage, our lives centered on the stove. We cooked on it, made toast directly on its cast-iron lids, the smell of beans simmering on the top, great breads in its oven. When necessary for warmth in the sock of winter, we huddled around it, sharing blankets and old overcoats. The stove was an incubator for us half dozen wee eggs.

Disposal from First National Store, Economy Market, Braid’s Market, and Walkey’s Market were my scavenging grounds. I’d fight for castoffs: wood from apple boxes, peach baskets, thin slats of orange crates. All were mine — fuel for the stove — all part of my scrounging precinct, my due!

And fallen chunks of coal, tumbling from B&M tenders, for the grabbing along tracks from School Street to Laurel Street, were mine, too! That was Satur-

day and Sunday work. Other days were for delivering newspapers or circulars from the stores or games after school with friends Charlie Flynn and Johnny O’Neil and Buddy Tottingham and Ralphie Sullo and Billy Callahan. Or for a late skate at frozen Anna Parker Playground, lit up at night, girls whizzing by on white figure skates, dazzling in their own way.

That wagon brought me contact with a man I hadn’t seen before, would never

toward Saugus Center, determining where the balance of a load might be found. A half-loaded wagon was not fit to haul home.

Then, ground trembling, a freighter came puffing around the far bend, a tornado of black smoke swirling from it. The engine slowed, crossing Essex Street. Again, it slowed, finally stopping beside me, dwarfing me, a pulsing giant of iron and steamy breath, an unforgettable smell broadcast on the air. Like an iron

sharing, shifting a load so common for the times.

Oh, I can remember the lines of his face, hair of his head, shift of his eyes. Like the gandy dancers I watched doing their itinerant work on sections of the rail bed, he was novel, he was compelling. Coal dusted his face like our empty coal box. His shirt was dirty and ragged from labors. His neck was sweaty, grimy. Forearms were black, thick as upturned roots, his eyes blue as a pair of marbles on my bedroom windowsill. With a slight shrug of those huge shoulders, he smiled.

And that mouthful of white teeth gleamed at me. For a moment, he studied the boss engineer who was at the throttle, gazing down the tracks. Then he smiled again, and, like a god at a fountainhead, began to lay out shovel after shovel of coal chunks on the track bed. Big chunks came down in the cascade. Half of West Virginia’s or Pennsylvania’s mines! Black anthracite crying for ignition. Oh, half of B&M’s coal that trusty and merciful man must have thrown down at my feet. It littered the tracks, the great chunks of it! Combustion! The black gold of the Depression!

Scurrying about, frenzy popping through my veins, the little man about to bring the bacon home, I filled my red wagon. It brimmed and brimmed again. I found an old apple box and balanced it on top and filled that. The mother lode! My breath came heavy. The smile kept coming down at me, at once angelic and mischievous. His shovel flashed in the air. I still see that man in dreams. In reveries. In a hole stretched against the sky on every cold winter day that gets a knife edge under memory.

After five full loads hauled home, put to coal box, I told my mother about him. “For sure, it was cousin Myrtle’s husband Danny,” she said. “He works for the B&M. For sure. Or Mrs. O’Meara’s boy, William. For sure. For sure.” Her eyes sought out the deep past, the voyages, Ireland astern of everybody she knew. She believed in connections.

My father, when I told him about my extraordinary good luck, smiled, rubbed his hand over the top of my head as if words were being deposited, nodded, winked at me with a chuck under the chin one more time. He believed in generosity. He believed in early manhood.

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A Boston & Maine steam tender, c. 1930s.

The Depression sat around me, enveloping me, like a mist or a fog.

see again. Yet I have not forgotten him. In near darkness that one time, down the railroad’s Saugus-Linden branch, he floated away from me, nameless, riding off to wherever nameless people go. Life is rampant with such departures, and some — indelible, surviving erosion — never leave you.

His face I see to this day: wide grin, flare of white teeth, like lights inside barn doors left briefly ajar, eyes bright as new marbles.

One Saturday of winter, coal remnants thinned out and my red wagon alongside the railroad tracks was half full in search of coal bits, usable clinkers. I stood looking down the tracks toward Linden, then

pour at a slag mill. Ferric, almost. Near white in heat. Loud as gunfire.

I looked up to see the fireman staring down at me, checking out my red wagon parked on the wayside, eyeing the half load, the incomplete errand. The Depression sat around me, enveloping me, like a mist or a fog. His shoulders were broad as I-beams, eyes soft in comparison, hard in reality. I swear a kind of history moved across his face, identification, knowledge of root structure, full of realization and measurement. I shivered as he drained into my eyes and took something from me. I could feel it going out of me, leaving my soul, taking a weight off my arms, felt something coming back. I knew he was