
Bruce Catton’s readers must not fail to read his compact autobiography, Waiting for the Morning Train. An American Boyhood. It is the story of his childhood and adolescence in Benzonia, Michigan, told with sentiment, gentleness, and humor.

The title of the book is symbolical. Youth boards the morning train, first on vacation trips. Then as an adolescent, he makes frequent trips to establish himself, from one of which he may never return to his birthplace. Old Age “waits at the railroad junction for a train that is never going to come back.” He has a reservation, and the conductor will call him in the morning.

Catton tells not only the story of his early years in Michigan but also the past, present, and future of his home state. In fact, Benzonia is still his home. In the past, it “was the frontier, where you could find the bleak spine of the upper peninsula of Michigan, a reef of the oldest rocks on earth, pre-Cambrian rocks. . . .” Yet in this state, once touched by the ice age, Catton at present looks out of his study window at distant radar domes. Three hundred miles away is Detroit, representing the industrial present and future. But the frontier of Michigan’s future, like that of the world, has now become outer space.

A brief history of the Michigan Indians completes the introduction, relating how they lost their land titles: Secretary of War John C. Calhoun, in the interest of rapid development of Michigan’s lower peninsula, stated that “this can be best effected by an entire extinguishment of the Indian title.”

The Cattons were early residents of Benzonia, the only non-lumber town for many miles, planned by Oberlin men as an ideal place to rear families and to found a college that would be their contribution toward a better world. “Growing up in Benzonia was just a bit like growing up with the Twelve Apostles for next-door neighbors. You never could forget what you were here for.”

In 1863 Grand Traverse College admitted thirteen students. (In 1890, the name was changed to Benzonia College.) Each of the founders donated a piece of land, boarded students, and scrabbled around for money for a few buildings. The first classes were held in people’s homes. In 1900, the college gave up the struggle and became Benzonia Academy, which was discontinued in 1919.
Mr. George R. Catton, Bruce's father, was a member of the college faculty. For a brief period he tried to sell insurance "to make a little money," then happily returned to Benzonia Academy as a teacher-principal. He seems always to have been on the move to recruit students and beg for funds. Mr. Catton was a self-educated man who spoke and wrote beautiful English, loved books, and encouraged his students to love them; he made a college education seem the most desirable goal in the world. Bruce admired and loved his father.

The entire life of Benzonia, holidays and all, forms the background of the book. The whole town, with few exceptions, was poor, but to paraphrase President Dwight D. Eisenhower's famous remark to a reporter about Abilene, they did not know that they were poor.

As an environmentalist, Bruce Catton has described life in the lumber camps and the lumber industry's despoliation of Michigan's virgin forests. There is also a section on the disappearance in Michigan of the grayling and the passenger pigeon. Unemployed people either moved to neighboring states or stayed in Michigan to work in industrial plants, summer resorts, railroads, or lake steamers, until the automobile spelled the doom of big hotels, because most people preferred to move on to explore the United States.

However, the parts of the book most nearly linked with Catton's future are the references to the town's Civil War veterans, numerous enough to have a thriving G.A.R. post. He saw, he talked to these old men whose youth would be the subject of his many books, an experience not to be obtained by any amount of research. In his memory, Decoration Day was inseparable from the scent of lilacs. "We looked at these men in blue, . . . honored and respected by all, moving past the mounded graves with their little flags and their heaps of lilacs, and we were in awe of them . . . to watch them was to be deeply moved."

Catton especially looked forward to the appearance in the G.A.R. hall of the sixtyish "Drummer Boy of the Rappahannock," an entertainer limited to Midwest posts. The big moment was the reproduction on his drum of the mighty sound of a Civil War battle. But in 1916 a single remark from the Drummer Boy destroyed the illusion of a Civil War battle when he assured the 1916 audience that the sound was like that of the French front.

The academy closed in 1916. Benzonia is fortunate to have such a distinguished writer to describe its past. Incidentally, study the illustrations. They are interesting.

**Pittsburgh**

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