

It was soon after he learned to press typewriter keys that our son, David, pressed "2A."

"What's 2A?" asked his father.

David, then three, looked at my husband as though he were a dim bulb. "The track," he explained patiently. "The track our train leaves from."

For more than four years—from the time he was three months old until he was 4½—David commuted with me from our suburban home in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, to the building in Philadelphia where I worked and he went to day care. At first, my husband, Ralph, and I worried that riding trains for an hour a day would be hard on our son. But you couldn't have convinced David. For years, those daily trips were the highlight of his week.

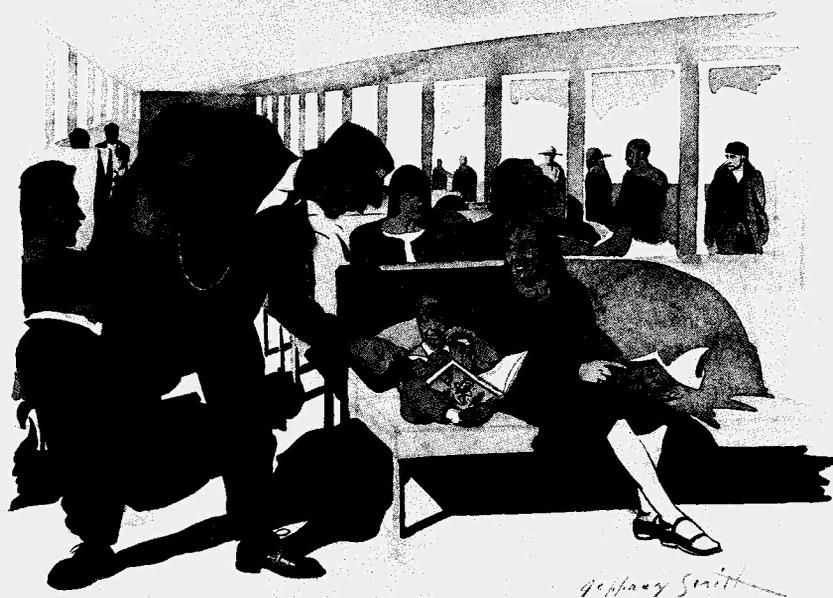
"We went on the 8:18!" was David's usual response when Ralph asked him how his day was. Or "We got one of the old cars, the kind with a table"; or "Our train's number was 542"; or (all too often) "We made an unscheduled stop!"

Spending so much of his early life on trains gave David's play a special quality. His toy train tracks were set up to resemble those he traveled on daily. Toy stations had real names. In front of them, David placed little plastic people who were "waiting for the train." Sometimes they had to wait a long time; in David's world, toy trains, too, faced delays. More often, he would move the train (not just any train, but the 8:18, the 7:42, or the 8-0-0) from station to station, announcing stops as he went: "Morton! Secane! Lansdowne! 30th Street—CONNECTIONS FOR ALL AMTRAK TRAINS!"

In a very real sense, train cars were David's earliest classroom. The first word he ever spelled was no. When we asked how he knew that word, our son replied, "From the No SMOKING signs." And David learned his numbers from the schedules, the train tracks, and the numerals painted on each car's side.

The World of Work

If day care was our son's initiation to groups of children, train cars introduced him to the world of working adults. Since so many of the commuters he met were women,



THE 8:18 TO DAY CARE

A working mother tells how commuting with her young son was a trip

BY MURIEL KEYES

lar became something of a celebrity, and I got to know many of my fellow passengers through him. During the weeks after he stopped riding the train, people to whom I'd never spoken would approach me and ask where David was. Without a little boy at my side, I felt more invisible on the train. At times, it felt lonely; at other moments, the anonymity was a blessing.

Not everything about our commuting together was pleasant. This was particularly true after David turned four. By then, if he was tired or hungry at the end of a long day, my son was not the curious and happy passenger he used to be. His episodes of crying and whining were particularly hard to handle in a public setting, and more than one trip nearly ended with both of us in tears. But for the first two years, the time I spent on the train with my son at the beginning and end of every weekday had a very special quality.

Within months after we stopped commuting together, David's interests shifted to boats and rockets, and he said he didn't miss the train. But when his kindergarten class visited a Philadelphia museum, our son was beside himself with excitement—not about going to the museum, but about taking the train there.

That night, his father asked him about their field trip. "We got one of the old trains!" David replied. "The kind with a table! The number was 3-5-7!"

"And guess what, Dad?" said our son. "We got off at our old track 2A!"

Muriel Keyes now lives in Yellow Springs, Ohio.