

Topics

Helpful Conrail and Other Surprises

Conducting a Search

Conrail has been taking its lumps recently. Rare is the patron who does not dine out on a favorite horror story, like the time the 4:08 arrived at 8:04. Well, not every Conrail tale is like that. Consider the case of the Purse at Croton-Harmon.

A woman we know reports that she set out from Grand Central last Friday evening to visit friends in Poughkeepsie. At first all went smoothly. The train left on the dot, the atmosphere was temperate, the bathroom smells were confined to the bathroom. But then she had to change trains and in the rush, left her purse in the Croton-Harmon station. The purse was heavy on valuables but light on identification; even if some young Abe Lincoln did find it, there was no chance of getting it back before Monday. So much for daydreams of a carefree fall weekend touring castles on the Hudson. Our traveler spent the remaining miles distraught.

Then, just when the world seemed unfaceable, the train arrived and her friends greeted her with miraculous news. The purse had been recovered and would be sent north on the next train. Someone had turned in the purse to the night stationmaster in Croton-

Harmon. He found the owner's name and address on her checkbook and phoned her in New York. No answer. Next clue: the appointment/address book. Alas, "Friday" contained only the cryptic reference, "Eric and Susan's." Undeterred, he combed the dog-eared address book until he found an entry for "Eric and Susan," called ahead, dispatched the purse and won a rare place for Conrail in a rider's heart.

Inventions

We don't presume to second-guess the Singer Company's decision to abandon the sewing machine; Singer has been losing ground to foreign producers for years, and it has now apparently chosen to get out before the business drains cash from more lucrative endeavors. Besides, Singer's real contribution to American industrial history is certain to live on.

Contrary to myth, Isaac Singer didn't invent the sewing machine. That honor belongs to Barthélemy Thimonnier. To the great displeasure of a lot of people employed as hand sewers, he built a machine in 1841 to make uniforms for the French Army. Nor was the improved Singer design,

allowing the operator to sew on any part of the material, truly an original. Elias B. Howe won a patent infringement suit against Singer in 1854.

What Singer probably *did* invent — and what surely allowed his company to take the world's sewing machine market by storm — was consumer installment credit. He found that the biggest market for sewing machines, the middle-class parlor, was not easily breached because the machines cost so much. His answer: give buyers years to pay off the purchase price. The idea was pure gold. Before long, Singer representatives were knocking on doors all over the world. It's a fitting moment to give credit where credit is due.

Light Bulb Joke

How many years does it take to change a light bulb? When a woman named Helen Hausinfrats changed the bulb on her front porch in Jackson, Mich., not long ago, it was a memorable event. The light bulb had lasted 50 years. A shining symbol of enduring value? No. The word from the factory was that the bulb must have been "defective" or it would have burned out in the normal way.