

Adventures in McCloudland

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Chapter 41

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As we stood on the train tracks in the bitter cold of night Dec. 31, 1998, we waived lanterns at the stalled train a quarter mile away, and prayed it would approach and stop at our lanterns. If it didn't stop, we'd have to return to the hotel and explain why the robbery failed.

It had all started on the porch outside of our living room waving at the departing dinner train. Nick said, "You know...Someone ought to pull off a Great Train Robbery."

Thus began the 1998-99 New Year's Eve Great Train Robbery by the Butter Knife Booty Gang and more fun than anyone ought to have. Nick and Darlene Taminich and Bev and John Brandis had been frequent guests. They had become friends often surprising us with gifts for the hotel and welcome food from the Bay Area. While most of the guests were getting ready to board the special New Year's Eve train, we were all picnicking in our living room enjoying wonderful cheeses and special treats John and Bevi had brought from the Sattui Winery. We finished and chatted about good food, great wine and new friends.

The train whistle sounded a couple of short bursts, indicating it was about to pull out of town. We went out on the porch and waved farewell. It was then that Nick uttered those fateful words, "...train robbery."

With Nick's comment, we all looked at each other and essentially agreed, Why Not? Even tho we were nearly sober, we decided, sure.

It happened so fast, I'm not sure anyone gave it much thought. It just sounded like fun and then we were waiting out on the track, 15 miles east of town at a crossing where we could see at least 1/2 mile down the track. The van was parked with its lights toward the expected train, and we stomped around in the cold trying to generate some heat.

Darlene and Nick had lit the lanterns, Jeff was putting coins on the rails to create a souvenir of our adventure, and Lee and I were checking disguises. We'd all gathered an assortment of stuff, big red clown noses, funny hats, and nose snoods (a little crocheted thing that warms your nose. Darlene had made them to sell and they still had the price tags hanging from them.) We had our canvas bags for the booty and huge spatulas to point and use as weapons. What can I say; we were having too much fun.

We had talked in the van on the way to the great heist about what we wanted to steal. We figured we might get into real trouble if we tried to lift someone's jewelry. No, that wouldn't work. It had to be something that wouldn't disrupt dinner too much, but would have enough value to be able to ransom later. Butter knives. They're essentially useless. Folks could still cut their steaks. That's it. We'll be known as the Butter Knife Booty Gang. It was settled.

In the cold, crisp night, the mountain was silhouetted against the starry sky and layers of hills and dark trees filled the foreground. It was amazingly beautiful. We waited, giggled, and talked about how the train "probably won't stop, anyway."

Then a light appeared about 1/2 mile down the track. In the quiet stillness we heard the rhythmic pulsing of the engine. The light seemed to stop. We thought it was staring at us, wanting to know what to make of these folks waiving lanterns. Several minutes passed. The train started to inch forward. Slowly. It pulled gently up next to us...and stopped. "Oh-my-god, it stopped," someone said. We looked up 12 feet to the engineer leaning out of a window. I hoisted an oversized rubber spatula in the air in his direction. My cohorts lifted spatulas and sticks and said menacingly "This is a stick-up." "Let us aboard."

To our utter amazement he replied, "Sure, just let me pull up a little."

I could not believe it. I thought he still might speed off. But the engine started inching forward, passed the dance car, and stopped again with the door to the first dining car perfectly positioned for our boarding. Jeff Forbis leaned out over the solid metal closed ramp and looked puzzled at the strange group with even stranger disguises. "This is a stick up," I shouted again. It wasn't very original, but I couldn't think of anything else. "Open the ramp so we can board, right now." I continued waiving the spatula.

"Uh, sure."

Then he actually let down the ramp so we could board. Even today I can't believe the train stopped, or that Jeff let us on. He admits he didn't know who we were, but we seemed harmless enough.

We nearly ran up the stairs and started down the aisles. We each waived our weapons at startled guests and demanded their butter knives. They dutifully dropped their knives in our waiting bags. One passenger replied, "Just a minute...let me butter the roll first." Then he dropped it in the bag. Another guest got so nervous he dropped in the dinner knife. We learned later that he was embarrassed to ask for another knife to cut his steak.

Susan Nichols, public relations director and major good friend, commented, "I know that voice," as she looked in my direction. I'd been had.

Verlene Forbis, however, seemed too stunned to say anything at all.

We quickly moved toward the back of the car where the chef and his assistant watched the strange parade. The assistant, Josh, huddled in a corner. Poor boy, he thought the heist was for real.

Bolstered by our success, we moved to the second car...and then the third.

At one point, I looked up at a guest to see a video camera in my face and a little red light glowing. I'd been had again. I pushed my hand against the lens and continued on. Some of the passengers I recognized as guests of our hotel, but they didn't seem to recognize me. We were swift and agile. Pros.

After collecting the loot from the fourth and last car, we jumped down and ran along the train to the waiting getaway van. What a time. No one could believe it had gone so well. You'd think we had just lifted millions instead of a bag of butter knives. But the excitement and feeling of accomplishment swept over us completely. We fantasized about what we could get for our booty. Maybe we could trade for that classy round sign on the back of the train that said "Shasta Sunset Dinner Train" with a picture of the steam engine pulling away. If they didn't want to trade, we could just bury the loot somewhere in the woods and give them clues to its location.

Then we heard the two-way radio sputter. Male voices were breaking up badly, but we were sure we heard "train...robbery...back to McCloud."

Oh-my-god. Did we hear right? Did they call the Sheriff?

As we pulled up to the hotel, we looked around for the Sheriff's car. The coast looked clear.

Inside, in front of a warming fire, we congratulated ourselves on a perfect heist. The phone interrupted, and as I picked it up, a voice said, "This is Officer Somebody from the 217 precinct. A train robbery has been reported and some of your guests are suspected. They were seen leaving the hotel about an hour ago."

I could hardly believe it but managed to respond, "Really? Gee, I don't think so, but if we see them we'll give you a call," and hung up. I figured we were done for.

But Nick Taminich was not done for the night.