Across America on an Emigrant Train Short Guide

Across America on an Emigrant Train by Jim Murphy

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Overview

In 1879, Robert Louis Stevenson, then an obscure Scottish writer, learned that the woman he loved was seriously ill in California. Stevenson was nothing if not passionate, and he reacted quickly to the news— he took what money he had and borrowed more from friends, and then set out for California on an emigrant ship. Because he had little money for the journey, he shared the experiences and hardships of the many poor Europeans onboard who were emigrating to the United States in search of a better life.

Stevenson's family was well-to-do, and they disapproved of his running after a woman they disliked. Fanny Van de Grift Osbourne was more than ten years older than twenty-nine-year-old Stevenson, and she was already married to another man.

Because of her age and marital status Mrs. Osbourne was regarded as a bad match by Stevenson's family. Nevertheless, the pair were ultimately married following the Osbournes' divorce in 1880.

Stevenson must have been a truly stouthearted man, because he set all his prospects for his future aside, resisted his family's disapproval of Fanny Osbourne, and set out to be at her side. That the word from California was that she was dying seems to have made him even more determined to help the woman he loved. Thus the story of Stevenson's long, hazardous trip to California is one of romantic love that would not be denied and of a man who knew his own heart very well.

About the Author

Jim Murphy was born in Newark, New Jersey, on September 25, 1947, to Helen (Grosso) and James K. Murphy. His father was a certified public accountant, and his mother was an artist who also worked as a bookkeeper. Murphy was not particularly interested in reading as a youngster, but he was athletically precocious and adventurous. As a teenager, he held a number of physically demanding jobs and remembers construction work as his favorite of these.

He also was a nationally ranked high school sprinter who participated on two national champion relay teams. He became interested in literature in high school only after he discovered that there were books adults did not want him to read; this motivated him to find and read those books.

Murphy attended Rutgers University, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1970. He attended graduate school briefly at Radcliffe College in 1970, and he married Elaine A. Kelso, who is a successful business executive, on December 12, 1970.

He landed a job as a secretary in the juvenile department for Seabury Press (now Clarion Books), a publisher highly regard ed for the quality of its publications for children, and he eventually became managing editor. While working for Seabury Press Murphy realized that his childhood adventures and the various jobs he held as a teenager provided him with experiences that he could write about for young readers. In 1977, he left Seabury Press and became a freelance writer and editor. His first book, Weird and Wacky Inventions, was published in 1978. The nonfiction work received very good reviews, and Murphy's literary career was set in motion. During the 1990s, Murphy turned increasingly to historical subjects, of which Across America on an Emigrant Train is a typical example.

Setting

There are two principal settings in Across America on an Emigrant Train: one on a ship crossing the Atlantic Ocean and the other in the railroad cars in which Stevenson travels. On board the ship, he is somewhat separated from the poorest travelers by having a small cabin; he can hear the people in steerage, and he mingles with them on deck during the day, but he can retreat to his cabin if he wishes. Murphy provides a good description of what shipboard life was like for the poor, while quoting Stevenson's impressions of the people he met.

Stevenson found his compatriots to be intelligent, knowledgeable people; those with musical talent were much appreciated for the entertainment they provided. He contrasts the steerage passengers with the superior behavior of the wealthier passengers, who had no cause, as far as he was concerned, to act superior—"We were in truth very innocently, cheerfully, and sensibly engaged," he says of himself and the steerage passengers.

Life on board ship could be difficult for the poorer passengers such as Stevenson, but he had a significant advantage over the people with whom he conversed and played games—by having even the small cabin he had, he qualified for a rush through immigration and into New York City; the steerage passengers had to endure hours of suspicious questioning before being allowed to enter the United States.

The central attraction in Across America on an Emigrant Train is Stevenson's journey by train from one coast of the United States to the opposite one. The cars in which Stevenson rode were not the most elegant ones, with uncomfortable wooden seats and inadequate space for sleeping; they were for the most part intended for poor people or emigrants. Traveling in the railroad cars brought Stevenson into contact with all sorts of people from many different nations, most of whom were united in the hope that they could build better lives for themselves in the Midwestern or far western United States.

They mingled with poor and working-class Americans who journeyed to visit relatives, to conduct business, to pursue adventure, or to migrate from the eastern United States to do much as the emigrants from overseas wanted to do—start life over.

Looking out from the railroad cars, Stevenson watches much of America pass by his usually small windows. He chronicles his impressions with care. Disembarking from his railroad car often meant that he had to rush to another train station to transfer to another car to continue his journey, so his impressions of New York and Chicago are spare; he had only a little time to view the cities. He does note that he had contributed to a fund to help Chicagoans who had been displaced by the Great Fire of 1871 and that he wishes someone would reward him with a good meal. But he was not to eat very well during his trip, and he lost much weight, eventually looking very unhealthy. The rough riding and poor food probably contributed to making him susceptible to the tuberculosis that would eventually kill him.

Social Sensitivity

The treatment of Native Americans through whose traditional lands the railroad often crosses is a major part of Across America on an Emigrant Train. Murphy cites numerous examples of how Native Americans were portrayed in supposedly accurate travelogues of the 1870s, and he points out that some of the documents were written by people who had never made the westward trip—who were inventing images of Native Americans out of their imaginations. Thus, Native Americans were depicted as animal-like savages or as simple-minded brutes who were doomed by civilization. Indeed, a few writers seemed to look forward to their extinction.

Independent-minded Stevenson, who appears to have long been determined to think for himself, has enjoyed numerous opportunities to mix with people of different classes by the time he begins seeing Native Americans during his journey. His view is, "The eviction of the [tribes], the ill-faith of all, nay, down to the ridicule of such poor beings [by those] here with me upon the train, make up a chapter of injustice and indignity such as a man must be .. . base if his heart will suffer him to pardon or forget."

Murphy expands on this sentiment, commenting that for Stevenson, "The United States was a land noted for freedom, and yet he saw all around him people who were targets of prejudice—Native Americans, Chinese, blacks, and many of his fellow emigrants. Stevenson had even found people suspicious of him because of his thick Scottish accent." Prejudice was one of the many obstacles to the good life in America that were experienced by emigrants of all kinds; Stevenson resists the prejudice, focusing on his experiences with individual men and women, whose intelligence, worldliness, and courage defied bigoted stereotypes to reveal a migration of people whose individual passions and hopes were more important than social station.

Literary Qualities

Across America on an Emigrant Train blends text with illustrations, and Murphy includes numerous photographs, drawings, and engravings from the 1870s. The illustrations help to show what he is talking about, and such photographs as those depicting the slaughter caused by sports hunters offer concrete evidence for Murphy's descriptions—in this case piles of dead animals.

The illustrations are bound to captivate people who like reading about railroads, because there are many pictures of engines and cars, with numerous interior views.

Other illustrations offer visions of social history; particularly interesting are the huge snow sheds in which families lived and children played, their parents charged with watching for fires that could be caused by sparks flying out of the stacks of trains that ran through the sheds.

The text itself is a combination of several written accounts of the experience of emigrating across the United States. The principal account from which Murphy draws is Stevenson's own, but he supplements Stevenson's observations with those of other riders, thus giving a sense of the wide variety of people who traveled westward by railroad. Excerpts from diaries are typical of Murphy's historical writings, but Across America on an Emigrant Train relies more on such literary accounts as Stevenson's Across the Plains (1892) than do The Boys' War and The Great Fire.

As is typical of Murphy's historical writings, there is an emphasis on the importance of the individual, even if that person is an ordinary individual with little claim to fame. Stevenson's Across the Plains shares this emphasis, with Stevenson detailing the individual people he met and who often befriended him. This makes for an intimate narrative; it is as if one were on the trains with Stevenson and the many people whose activities fill out the lively narrative. Across America on an Emigrant Train is alive with busy people, with each one being important; the value of the journey lies in whether specific people benefit or suffer because of it. For both Murphy's narrative and that written by Stevenson this means that a concern for people's welfare is found throughout. For instance, Stevenson is appalled by the apish behavior of white passengers when they meet a Native American family at a station. Stevenson, as well as Murphy, sees the Native Americans as individual human beings as deserving of respect as any other human beings; some of his fellow passengers seem to view the Native Americans only as stereotypes.

Themes and Characters

Stevenson's personality is at first introduced by showing his reaction to the news of Fanny Osbourne's dire illness. His wandering in France with her and his desire to marry her may at first seem like immature infatuation, but his choosing to risk everything—his standing with his family, his career, and even his life—to come to Osbourne's aid suggest that there is much more to his passion than an attraction to her exotic looks.

According to Murphy: As far as he [Stevenson] was concerned, Fanny was perfect in every way. She was small and fine-boned, with a dark, mysterious complexion. An acquaintance of Stevenson's noted that her "eyes were full of . .. mystery as they changed from fire to fun to gloom or tenderness." Stevenson wasn't attracted to her simply because of her exotic looks. He admired her independent spirit, her keen mind, and her strong opinions. She could talk intelligently and with authority on a wide number of sub jects, from art and politics to travel and literature.

Murphy's explanation for Fanny Osbourne's attraction for Stevenson is important for how Murphy depicts Stevenson throughout Across America on an Emigrant Train. "She could talk intelligently and with authority" declares Murphy, and on the Devonia and during the journey by train, Stevenson seems continually interested in intelligent, experienced people. He defends his fellow travelers against prejudiced views by insisting that they were sensible, wellspoken people. Plainly, his intellectual life is important to Stevenson.

Even so, Stevenson is no weakling romantic, too sensitive to live. Instead, he is a robust young man, physically courageous.

He may be thoughtful, and he may choose not to follow where others go—for example, refusing to have anything to do with tormenting Native Americans—but where hard work and cooperation are needed, he does his best. He is also open-minded and willing to accept people of very different backgrounds from himself. He has an intellectual interest in people of varying cultures, but his interest in them extends to a willingness not only to understand them but to share with them, even sharing the hard wooden sleeping benches on trains.

Stevenson is a professional writer, not yet famous, but with a writer's eye for detail and a writer's interest in words. Thus America touches him in many important ways: There is no part of the world where [the names are] so rich, poetical, humorous, and picturesque as the United States of America. All times, races, and languages have brought their contributions.. . . The names of the States and Territories themselves form a chorus of sweet and most romantic vocables: Delaware, Ohio, Indiana, Florida, Dakota, Iowa, Wyoming, Minnesota, and the Carolinas; there are few poems with nobler music to the ear; a songful, tuneful land.

This joy with the sounds of America is tempered by his experiences traveling across it. Stevenson does not much care for the open expanses of the Midwest, where flat lands

extend beyond the horizon. He is from Scotland, a nation of hills and valleys, of richly varied landscape, and the Midwest seems to disorient him. Indeed, the lack of varied landscape seems to bother him every bit as much as the poor food and difficult nights trying to sleep, so that when he reaches the Rockies, he declares, "Every spire of pine along the hilltop, every trouty pool along the mountain river, was more dear to me than a blood-relation."

There is a childlike joy in his words, and this may be why he is such an amiable traveling companion for the reader of Across America on an Emigrant Train. Stevenson experiences America as something brand new and fascinating, and he is excited not only by what he sees but by America's promise of freedom. His joy is tempered by his hardheaded observations of people's behavior, but when he lets his spirit soar with the moment, he becomes a reminder of why people migrated to America and why people are passionately attached to America and its land.

Topics for Discussion

1. Stevenson writes with disgust about America's treatment of Native Americans, yet he rides the railroad that was built through tribal lands. Does this make Stevenson a hypocrite?

2. Why does Murphy continue to use the word emigrant instead of immigrant to describe people migrating to the United States even long after they have journeyed on the railroad into the heart of America?

3. What are the best illustrations in Across America on an Emigrant Train? What makes them good?

4. Stevenson quickly makes friends and almost as quickly loses them, probably never to see them again. How does Stevenson react to this?

5. How does Stevenson's journey effect him physically? How does this influence his perceptions?

6. What aspect of America seems to interest Stevenson the most? What does this suggest about his character?

7. Murphy provides much historical background to his account of Stevenson's trip. How helpful to understanding events is the historical background? Is it as interesting as the parts of Across America on an Emigrant Train that focus on Stevenson's personal experiences?

8. Why would Americans be prejudiced against emigrants? Why would even emigrants, who were themselves discriminated against, tease the Native Americans they meet?

9. What was the most important aspect to Stevenson of the occasion he bought a glass of milk?

10. Why does Stevenson endure hardship in order to be with Fanny Osbourne?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. How did the railroads deal with the Native American tribes whose land they crossed? Who was treated fairly? Who was treated unfairly?

2. What role did Chinese immigrants play in the building of America's railroads? What jobs did they do? Why did they come to America to build railroads?

3. Murphy mentions that some people were prejudiced against particular ethnic groups. Who were these groups? Why were people prejudiced against them? How did they deal with the prejudice?

4. Murphy describes the laying of track, including the amazing single-day record set by Chinese laborers. Describe the laying of a section of track in Stevenson's day. What were the different jobs people filled for the laying of the track? What was the step-by-step procedure for the laying of the track?

5. Murphy suggests that Stevenson contracted the disease that would eventually kill him during his journey to California. What do other biographers of Stevenson suggest about how he became ill?

6. As Murphy points out, salesmen traveled through Europe trying to persuade people to move to the United States. Who were these salesmen? How did they go about doing their jobs? How successful were they?

7. In 1879, what were the different classes of railroad passenger cars? What were the differences among them? Who rode in each class?

8. Why would anyone be "suspicious of him [Stevenson] because of his thick Scottish accent"?

9. Stevenson sailed on the Devonia. What kind of ship was the Devonia? Describe what ships such as the Devonia were like. Who built them? What were they designed to do? What cargoes did they carry? Where did they sail?

10. Stevenson has to switch from one railroad company to another during his journey. What were the railroad companies in 1879? What were the rules or laws that governed how they interacted?

For Further Reference

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Short summary of Murphy's career with some photographs. Reprints the interview from Contemporary Authors, Volume 111 (see below).

Leslie, Mrs. Frank. California: A Pleasure Trip from Gotham to the Golden Gate. New York: Frank Leslie, 1877. This book provides an interesting counterpoint to Stevenson's experiences by detailing how wealthier people experienced the journey westward on the railroad.

Lester, John E. The Atlantic to the Pacific: What to See, and How to See It. Boston: Sheperd and Gill, 1873. One of the unreliable guidebooks that Murphy mentions.

Marton, Diane S. School Library Journal 39, 12 (December 1993): 129-30. A review that recommends Across America on an Emigrant Train.

"Murphy, Jim." In Contemporary Authors.

Volume 111. Edited by Hal May, et al.

Detroit: Gale Research, 1984. This has a summary of Murphy's career to 1984 and a brief but informative interview with Murphy.

Rochman, Hazel. Booklist 90 (December 1, 1993): 689. A review that lauds Across America on an Emigrant Train.

Stevenson, Robert Louis. Across the Plains.

London: Chatto and Windus, 1892. This is the enjoyable narrative that inspired Murphy's Across America on an Emigrant Train.

Related Titles

Murphy's interest in history was evident early in his writing career in books such as Weird and Wacky Inventions (1978), Baseball's All-Time Stars (1984), and even The Custom Car Book (1985). It was in the 1990s that he began publishing the complex, heavily illustrated, histories for which he is probably best known. The Boys' War:Confederate and Union Soldiers Talk about the Civil War (1990) features the careful interweaving of firsthand testimony from participants in historical events with Murphy's account of the context in which the events take place that is typical of not only Across America on an Emigrant Train, but The Long Road to Gettysburg (1992), The Great Fire (1995), A Young Patriot: The American Revolution as Experienced by One Boy (1996), and Gone a-Whaling: The Lure of the Sea and the Hunt for the Great Whale (1998).

Like Across America on an Emigrant Train, A Young Patriot is a biography that uses the real-life experiences of an historical figure to illustrate important aspects of America's history. Although in Across America on an Emigrant Train, the central figure is someone famous, Robert Louis Stevenson, in A Young Patriot, the central figure is a littleknown teenager who wrote a book about his service in the American army during the Revolutionary War. The Great Fire and The Long Road to Gettysburg are focused on single significant events, and they share the quality of having many different perspectives from people who were there, giving the reader the feeling of eyewitness testimony.

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