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## A First Trip East, 1928

Hans Otto Storm

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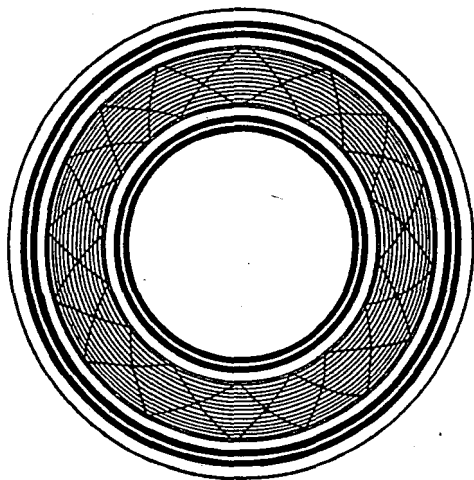
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America's  
changing face



HANS OTTO STORM  
*A First Trip East, 1928*

THE RAIL CLICKS BEGAN TO SOUND MORE RAPIDLY AS THE TRAIN RAN downward through the dusk into a level country of occasional wind-mills, and with the descent there came over him a feeling of helpless uncertainty, like the more physical misgiving that comes to the air traveler in an unexpected dive. Here on the ground the train had labored for two long days up the colossal western slope of the cordillera, and somehow that had been to him more understandable. Desert, dry pines, blocklike mountains, rivers consisting of thin trickles in a waste of sand, alluvial effects placed in the middle distance with theatrical effect, railways cut into canyon walls — to the perspective of these things he was adjusted, as to sunshine that beat straight and hard upon one's back, alternating with a night that chilled. Here ahead, in a twilight that was of the sight only, while the heat of the day still hung around one unremitting, there unrolled endless miles of a country that was flat — or rather, not mountainous or hilly but simply uneventful — differing decidedly from the spectacular flatness sometimes encountered to the west where ancient deposits of alluvium, suddenly laid down, have been left dessicated as museum specimens for future ages.

This present uneventful largeness was oppressing, not because it

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*Hans Otto Storm, an electronics engineer, met death while working on a giant transmitter in San Francisco, two days after the Pearl Harbor attack. Also a novelist, his best known work is Pity the Tyrant. According to his good friend and literary executor, David Greenhood, to whom we are indebted for this piece, it is a passage from the first draft of a short biographical novel Storm wrote in the same year that he went East to take a job on an important engineering project on Long Island.*

was largeness but because it appeared in some way muddied by domesticity that had no point to it — although the land did not seem used in any realistic sense, yet it was tamed. Occasional fences and occasional abandoned, rusted implements gave to the empty acres a stamp that indicated they never would be new again. Stations appeared, station buildings quite unrelated to a town or crossroad; they clipped past and disappeared as if there were no thought that anything should ever stop there.

“Where do you think we are?” asked Hermione.

“In Colorado, still.”

He looked into a timetable in which he had marked their train by a line raggedly drawn with a fountain pen. “It seems to be another hour until we eat.”

“To think of paying twenty cents apiece for oranges,” said Hermione.

It darkened. This was totally new country to them both. The sky was overcast; when daylight went out, there were no lights to punctuate the countryside. On curves, one could look forward past the headlight of the engine, to where the telegraph poles swept by as sharp, bright lines. But there was little use for curves; mostly the track rolled straight ahead. Lights were turned on in the rather comfortable train. One could not see anymore past the windows; one trusted mechanically and was blind.

Strange, and strange even for its being strange, this well-tamed section of the earth they called his country, chunky and square and rational on the map and well filled out, he had been accustomed to consider as a unit social and geographical and picturesque. Yet it was big enough to seem possible for one to grow up to a sort of maturity in one small corner. The center that was assumed the whole was copied from with uniformity he had lived half a life without approaching. He was not localized; he had been into Mexico and spent one summer in Alaska, but until this journey he had not been East. He felt quite suddenly that here ahead in a rolling repetitive monotonous land which might be still quite alien to him had been made the history, the literature, the inventions of a culture that after all he had known only at its outposts.

Hereafter, he had been told by competent historians, there would be no more outposts. The knowledge did not add to his enthusiasm for the journey.

He was going East; he was, in the last analysis, releasing the pressure on his life by going East, and this itself seemed an admission of defeat. Remotely English, still more remotely Scandinavian, Polish, possibly

a trace of Tartar, he had been born into the grand tradition of the westward march. In particular, his father had carried it along from Pennsylvania, somewhat behind the pioneers in time but making in one jump the last such move that ever could be made. He himself had taken it as a tactic that when wide experience should call him forth he would be going to China, or the Pacific islands. Instead of them the East. The wave of pioneers had broken and was definitely washing backward. He, after four thousand years of westward wanderings, was being washed backward with them into the unutterably tamed.

At the last of the brick station restaurants they went to dinner. Suddenly and for no noticeable reason there appeared a town — coal chute, water tank and sidings, railway station and a restaurant — one of those agglutinations of the transportation system that is called a town between the 100th and the 115th meridians. Hungry, they followed the quickly stepping line of people along the brick-edged platform to where one of the magnificently timbered gongs announced refreshment. The night was hot, promising to turn sultry. At the door he was told he would have to wear his coat. He did not actively resent the insult, but the train was long and to go back and forth would have been inconvenient. Hermione motioned him to come away. Beyond the railroad property, as closely as the law allowed, a man was beating a gong slightly smaller and less resonant, and offering dinner at a slightly lower price. They went. The food was execrable and the coffee worse.

“Wish we’d gone back,” he said to Hermione.

“You didn’t want to.”

Laughing slightly he said, “Looks as if the country’s getting us.”

They went back into their train, where the berths were already being folded down. As the new engine settled to its pull they folded themselves in behind the curtains and retired. He lay awake some time after Hermione had gone to sleep. It was the first time on a fast train he had not been gathered in immediately by the delightful relaxation of swift forward movement. He was easily affected by such trifling incidents as had happened at the restaurant. He was too easily affected by the moods of places. He had scientific training; so he could not give way to superstition except by downright dishonesty, but he had a tendency to see things as symbolical, as with this thing of turning Eastward to try out his skill.

**HERMIONE WOKE HIM SOON AFTER THE FIRST LIGHT. HIS MIND SWUNG like a compass-needle abruptly released from clamping; with successive**

and sudden oscillations he remembered where he was, what direction he was going; finally also where and why, and then he was entirely awake. All these instants, while deduced reminders, were making him again a rational creature; he knew with a heavy solidity of feeling which permeated sleep and waking that he was rolling downward into strangeness, that his heels had been two days up out from under him on throbbing cushions, and that the slow west wind which drifted after them in their haste had been so many times polluted and refreshed that it had quite forgotten the valiant sea in which it had its origin.

"It must have rained," he said, looking at the saturated earth. "I didn't know it could rain like this in summer."

"Of course it rains, silly! Or where would you think all those rivers come from?"

He enjoyed having her chide him for being ignorant. "I don't know," he said. "I just thought maybe they had pumping plants . . ."

Kansas appeared deliquescent. Plowed fields in which the clods had melted into muddy lumps sagged down to streams in which the willows stood double from recent floods, brown twigs and flotsam still clinging to their leaves where higher flood had placed them. Desultorily the land seemed cultivated. Knee-high corn rose with a sorry effort from the mud, and drooped to leeward, tapering down to nothing in less favored spots — it was as if someone far off, living in a city, had put down those seeds, hoping perhaps sometime to produce a crop, who knows? At intervals they saw a barn, at more rare intervals a farmhouse. Both the barns and houses seemed to have stood long, and to have stood long since anyone had been able to afford to paint. The houses were weather-beaten to the color of the earth; into the earth they appeared to be sagging at the corners of the porches, and no one sufficiently interested to prevent. It seemed incredible that this land had been cultivated less than a hundred years, and in those hundred years had been twice fought for. . . . They passed a town, wooden stores with false fronts not quite straight; a blacksmith shop, closed, abandoned, its own peculiar characteristic griminess of craft weathering slowly into the uncomplimenting immortality the temperate zones allow the works of man.

TOWARD MIDAFTERNOON THEY APPROACHED THE FATHER OF WATERS. Still, gray, flat; it lay under a dull, flat sleep, enclosed, yet part of the great world, one surface stretching without break to the Gulf, to Europe, to the Argentine.

The train rumbled over the high bridge, and for those minutes the

spell of the corn country was broken. They became immersed in it again until evening; then factories, canals, smells, lurid flares, a maze of steel tracks. Chicago.

Even into Pennsylvania, from which his father forty years had emigrated. He was surprised at the apparent emptiness. Space was used up, and yet it did not seem to be at this time used. Between the agglutinations of the towns, there seemed a hopeless vacantness; slack tillage, waste land, high and forbidding fences that shut in nothing more tangible than the forbidding ghost of Property.

And those towns! They had been told the West was crass — yes, it was crass, but one could weep for its crassness as for that of a young child who at last whoops loudly, unaware of life's impending frightfulness . . . The towns were black. Coal chutes and coal cars and coal elevators. He and Hermione had never seen the like — people did not use coal in the West.

In crowded cars, the Pennsylvania Railroad separated them for the night. He climbed into an upper berth. Under a steel canopy that resounded now and then to the clattering raindrops, he tried to sleep. Snores, rumbles of different pitches. Trestles, tunnels; creak of curves. He resented that there was no window to see out of. He got down and went into the smoking room. No one was in there. He could press his face against the window unobserved. These stolid people with their hearts full of coal dust would think it queer that a man should want to see where he was going.

Pressing his face against the black window he saw his first Bessemer converter — a shower of white and yellow light, fresh and unsulliable. He would have liked Hermione to see this. The thing lived. In it was no defeat, no hopelessness, no age.

Their schedule so arranged itself that they passed under the metropolis without once coming above ground. The Red Line, that sign of ultimate abdication of autonomy, guided them from West to East. Somewhere above them the great personality he knew from hearsay must exist, was dimly rumbling. "It becomes of less and less importance" — so said Spengler — "what one thinks away from these large population centers." Well, enough. The Red Line, then, was the megalopolis. Mile upon mile of vaulted, knobby concrete, mumbling megalopolis.

A train of coaches glided out of the station, and he knew by the pain in his ears that they were again descending to pass underneath a river. They were East.