

Walk Along The Tracks



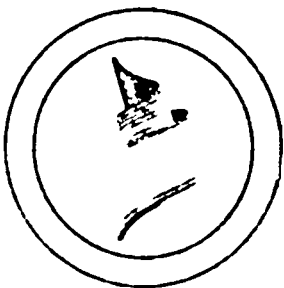
L. A. Vincent



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Front cover image shows a goods train leaving Ipoh Station on
the morning of 30th May 1991. Photo shot by Tan Kim Seng.

Back cover image is a picture from the 1956 Malayan Railway
Annual Report showing passenger train number 2 Up at
Kuala Lumpur Station s Line 1.

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The cold morning rides to the bus stop sitting atop the bicycle's crossbar listening to my father's flat, tuneless rendition of South of the Border or Harbor Lights. His renditions in a vocal or a whistle version took your mind off the sleep on those cold, misty mornings.

Signalman Joe, my father.

"Oh I see, you children want extra pocket money? Be a little patient, please. We will ask the Government to print some extra money for your father on his next pay day!"

Selvam my mother.

That very nice lady who always saw me off at our home's doorway with a flask of thick steaming black coffee and a plastic-ware of biscuits to take along to destination sites. On occasions when these were at nights, the flask of hot coffee was heaven sent. Bless your generous soul my dear!

Veron my wife.

The impish face of a shrewless, two-year-old-girl with a mouthful of stories, standing at the window grill of our railway house every time I returned home after the sounding of Sentu Workshop's siren.

Mangai my daughter.

And the four-year-old boy telling a colleague on train S2Up to Ipoh that his father was DTS Ipoh and then promptly replying "I don't know Uncle" when asked what a DTS did

Mohan my son

Memorable milestones from a lifelong walk along the tracks.





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AUTHOR'S NOTES

When I first mentioned writing a book to friends, their initial reaction was: "Well, okay, but why on the subject of a railway? Who is going to read it? It will be such dry stuff; all about trains!"

Well, for a start, I am a third generation railway descendant from both sides of my family. With such a long affiliation to the Railways, I was pretty sure that somewhere round the corner, there definitely was a railway story just waiting to be told. But even more important than that was what happened during my life in the railway districts. And I spent almost nine years in three railway districts. No matter how much care you take things like track washouts due to floods, derailments and delays do happen. More so in a single-line system such as the one we had here for the best part of our 125 odd years as a railway. On a single-line system, incidents such as these have a snowball effect and result in delays until they are sorted out.

During such occasions, when restoration works take some time, it would be perfectly normal to trans-ship passengers between the affected areas by bus, or hold up the train at some station. On occasions such as these, the situation at the rail stations where the trans-shipment or train detention takes place, would appear seemingly chaotic. You will find people who seem lost, and parents harassed by small children. Everyone would be wondering, "Okay, where do we go now?"

At such times you often hear remarks like, "You know these people have been running the railways for almost a hundred years and yet do not seem to have got the hang of it! It is still the same story all over again! When will they ever improve?"

Every time I attended a function outside the Railways [and on time, mind you!], I would hear a remark like, "Ah, that railway fellow is on time for once!" When on the rare occasion you did arrive late, then the other remark would be, "You Railways fellows are always

late!" It was 'heads I win, tails you loose'! You never won; the dice somehow always fell on the wrong side of the divide!

At times like that, I used to tell myself that there was so much more to the Railways than just these occasional mishaps and delays. For a third generation railwayman like me, the railway was a way of life with its own culture and practices. There are some things about the Railways that very few people know or have even heard of. Not many know that railway salaries were for a long time paid from a traveling pay train with its own escort from the Railways' own police force. Not many people are aware of the *dead-man's safety pedal* on a locomotive that would automatically bring a train to a stop if a driver should keel over dead or unconscious. Or that a large amount of the coal that was used on the steam locomotives of our Railways from the very early days, came from our very own colliery at Batu Arang. And then, there was the 'Sodthi Express' between the Sentul and KL stations to ferry railway workers to and from work. This train ran a distance of four miles, made three stops on its run and was fondly dubbed an express! These are things that the public today may not be aware of. They are scenes from an era long since gone but still fresh in the minds of an ever-dwindling band of old, retired railwaymen.

During train delays, invariably newspapermen would be hovering around, wanting to know the cause of the incident. It was the only issue of any overriding importance to them about the Railways. The cause! The cause! Can we know the cause, please? The rest was secondary. Wanting to know the cause may have been very important to them but giving 'line clear' for the train was my first priority. It would also ensure that the wrath of my boss, the ATMO [assistant traffic manager, operations], did not fall on me! I remember telling them on a number of occasions, "Why don't you guys write about how the rehabilitation work is going at the spot to restore services? At least that would give some degree of balance to your coverage." But no, that hardly ever happened. On the next occasion, it would be the same question again. "So, Mr. Vincent, could you tell us the cause for this?" When you said that it

was still being investigated they would respond by saying, "Don't worry Sir, we'll not quote your name. We'll just say that it is from a reliable source! We will not reveal the source. Besides, Sir, this is a matter of public interest."

It was then that I promised myself that when I had the time, I would sit down and write about *my* Railways! With retirement from the Railways just round the corner, it seemed as good a time as any to be fulfilling that promise. But the decision to do so was easier said than done. When I started on this in December 2004, it was a very simple decision. But as time went by, I felt that I had got myself into more than what I had bargained for. There was always that extra and usually elusive bit of information that was needed to fill up some glaring gap in the story. And that was when the problems started. Information was difficult to come by, and when it did, it was also confusing and contradictory. I started to wonder if I had taken on more than I could chew!

At the outset, I must make it clear that this is not a history of the local Railway or a need to apologize for shortcomings. History books are for historians, I am not one. About the only chapter that can be termed as totally historical would be the first chapter. This is a railway story and a historical background of its origins would allow for a better appreciation of the story. If you are not a history purist, you could safely skip that chapter and be none the poorer for it. This 'first person' narration is naturally the voice of being part of a sprawling railway community that is now almost 125 years old. In the process of writing it, I have however provided some historical background and footnotes to some of the subjects that I have covered in my book. Some readers may not be from Malaysia or, they may want to know some basic background as a matter of interest. To them, these small historical notes may prove helpful. In providing them, I have also not taken any interpretative position on issues. Nor have I consulted any acknowledged authorities for that matter. They are as they appear in most basic history books. In the final analysis, whatever historical background given is also extremely brief.