

**“Discomforts of Old Cars,” from *The American Railway*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1889.**

The railroad was a decided step in advance, compared with the stage-coach and canal boat, but, when we picture the surroundings of the traveler upon railways during the first ten or fifteen years of their existence, we find his journey was not one to be envied. He was jammed into a narrow seat with a stiff back, the deck of the car was low and flat, and ventilation in winter is impossible. A stove at each end did little more than generate carbonic oxide. The passenger roasted if he sat at the end of the car, and froze if he sat in the middle. Tallow candles furnished a “dim religious light,” but the accompanying odor did not savor of cathedral incense. The dust was suffocating in dry weather; there were no adequate spark-arresters on the engine, or screens at the windows, and the begrimed passenger at the end of his journey looked as if he had spent the day in a blacksmith-shop. Recent experiments in obtaining a spectrum-analysis of the component parts of a quantity of dust collected in a railway car show that minute particles of iron form a large proportion, and under the microscope present the appearance of tenpenny nails. As iron administered to the human system through the respiratory organs in the form of tenpenny nails mixed with other undesirable matter is not especially recommended by medical practitioners, the sanitary surroundings of the primitive railway car cannot be commended. There were no double tracks, and no telegraph to facilitate the safe despatching of trains. The springs of the car were hard, the jolting intolerable, the windows rattled like those of the modern omnibus, and conversation was a luxury that could be indulged in only by those of recognized superiority in lung power. The brakes were clumsy and of little service. The ends of the flatbar rails were cut diagonally, so that when laid down they would lap and form a smoother joint. Occasionally they became sprung; the spikes would not hold, and the end of the rail with its sharp point rose high enough for the wheel to run under it, rip it loose, and send the pointed end through the floor of the car. This was called a “snake’s head,” and the unlucky being sitting over it was likely to be impaled against the roof. So that the traveler of that day, in addition to his other miseries, was in momentary apprehension of being splitted liked a Christmas turkey.

Baggage-checks and coupon tickets were unknown. Long trips had to be made over lines composed of a number of short independent railways; and at the terminus of each of the bedevilled passenger had to transfer, purchase another ticket, personally pick out his baggage, perhaps on an uncovered platform in a rain-storm, and take his chances of securing a seat in the train in which he was to continue his weary journey.