

THE HOMECOMING TRAIN

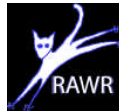
Charles Manson's
Escape to Destiny



Lawson
McDowell

The Homecoming Train
Charles Manson's Escape to Destiny
By Lawson McDowell

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"The Homecoming Train" is a prequel to:

Before He Became A Monster
A Story of Charles Manson's Time At Father Flanagan's Boys Town
By Lawson McDowell

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The Homecoming Train

Charles Manson's Escape to Destiny

By Lawson McDowell

Indiana, 1947

In deepening twilight, a 12 year old boy stood in the woods east of Coal Bluff, Indiana. He was hungry, lost, and desperate. As he scanned the forest, he heard a distant voice singing. The rich baritone melody made his heart beat faster, creating simultaneously hope and alarm.

The boy crept toward the singer until he reached the edge of a clearing where he saw that the vocalist was a hobo sitting beside a stream and tending a cooking pot over a campfire. A railroad bridge towered behind the hobo. Beyond the bridge, the evening sunset cast a soft radiance over the glade. The setting before the boy might have served as an artist's scene, but this day, apprehensions eclipsed any aesthetic consideration.

The boy slipped in behind a tree and studied the man who was now humming as he added sticks to the fire. The hobo was dressed in old clothing as evidenced by a patch on the sleeve of his coat, but he appeared clean, certainly cleaner than the mud-covered boy. He looked about 35 years old with several days' growth of stubble that failed to hide kindly eyes and gentle expression. The boy started to relax until he remembered monks who also wore pleasant expressions even as they beat the spirit from boys.

While the boy watched, a freight train rumbled overhead on its run from Indianapolis to St. Louis. Both man and boy were invisible to the outside world. Passengers and railroad employees would have had difficulty spotting them. Had they been seen, the public above would have felt uncomfortable seeing the plight of those who camp under bridges. Piles of rusting tin cans and abandoned fire pits showed that the site had once been a regular stop for the poor and jobless, yet the flow of people through the campsite had slowed to a trickle since the war ended Hoover's Great Depression.

Now, in the quiet time between trains, the man peeled a wild onion for his stew.

The boy changed his position for a better vantage and in doing so stepped on a stick. The report was sharp and singular.

The man gave no outward indication that he heard the noise, but he listened intently while he quartered the onion. Instinct told him man, not animal. He knew he would be an easy target for a highwayman intent to harm.

A minute passed. The boy moved, and another twig snapped. The man's concern mounted. He added the onion to the stew and called out to the fading woods.

"I know you're there. If you're friendly, you might as well step out and join me. If you're unfriendly come out and take your chances."

There was no response.

"Come on out, pal," the man persisted. "You're making too much noise to sneak in on me."

There was a rustling. In the dimming light, the man saw the boy step into the clearing. He was thin and dirty, but wore durable clothing and good shoes. He had no coat to protect him from the chilly April night ahead.

When the man saw he was not at risk, his fear turned to curiosity about the arrival of a visitor who was likely more frightened than he.

His eyes followed the boy as he stepped closer. When the firelight shone on the young face, the man saw eyes more ardent than the campfire flames.

"You look like a guy a long way from home," the man said.

"I'm lost and got no place to sleep," the boy answered.

"Where you headed?" the man asked. He leaned over and stirred the stew.

"Going to Indianapolis." The young voice conveyed an air of resolve.

"That your home?"

"My ma's there. I'm going to find her."

The man had a hunch the boy was in trouble, but he suppressed his desire to probe.

"Indy's a big city you know," the man said. "Must be eighty miles from here. And you're already lost. Sounds like you're in for a hard time."

"Oh I can find my mom. All I need to do is get there. She sent me a letter a couple of months ago. Her address is right on it."

The boy pulled an envelope from his back pocket and held it in fire's glow for the man to see proof that he was truthful.

"She ain't been able to visit me in several months, but she told me we could be together soon. She's working real hard to get a place ready for us."

A train roared overhead shaking the bridge and campsite. The boy looked into the lighted passenger cars and caught glimpses of wealthy men and women with their pampered children. He turned again to the man, eyes fervent.

"Now that I've found the railroad tracks, I aim to catch a freight train tomorrow. I'll be in Indy by tomorrow night."

"Ever hopped a train before?" the man asked.

"Heck. I can figure it out."

The man wondered if the lost boy knew east from west, much less the dangers of riding freights.

"I bet you haven't eaten in a while. You hungry?"

The boy nodded.

"I don't mind sharing. Have a seat."

The boy surveyed the situation, unsure, but the smell of the stew and the man's friendly manner were a welcome alternative to the dark woods. He drew closer to the warmth of food and unexpected company.

The man pulled a rag from his pants pocket and used it as a pot holder to lift the stew from the fire. He poured a portion into a tin cup can and handed it to the boy.

"What about you, mister? You lost too?" the boy asked.

"No. Not in the way you're lost. I'm headed to St. Louis. I been wandering around since the war ended, deciding what to do. I got no family, no wife, no obligations. My name's Frank. How about you?"

The boy swallowed hot stew and chewed on a morsel of rabbit.

"My name's Charlie," he said, mouth half-full.

They nodded to each other, acknowledging introductions.

"Good to meet you, Charlie."

They sat by the fire and ate. They talked, but the conversation was mostly one-sided. The man listened as the boy grew animated, telling about his journey that day—

how he had tumbled down a muddy bank into a creek, how a bull had chased him, and how he had eaten his only food long before noon.

The conversation inevitably turned to more personal topics.

“So, Charlie, how is it you’re way out here in the woods so far from your mother? Where ‘ya been?”

The boy talked freely.

“I’ve been living at Father Gibault’s Boys Home in Terre Haute.”

“Reform school?”

“Nah. It’s a place for orphans and poor kids. They say it’s a notch or two better than reform school, but believe me, they’ve got plenty of bad kids. And bad monks too, with leather whipping straps.”

“How’d you end up there?”

“My ma was poor. They made me a ward of the state while she got her feet on the ground. I bet you never met a real ward of the state.”

“Can’t say that I have,” said the man. “So, what happened? You just walked away from this school?”

“Trust me. I took all I could of that place. Besides, Ma said she’s doing better now. She told me she’s almost ready to come get me. So, I waited for the right time, slipped out a window and ran like hell.”

The man nodded. “I guess they’re looking for you.”

Charlie saw the questions in his eyes.

“Sure they probably looked all day with their long leather straps. But this was my third try to escape, and I outsmarted them monks. They won’t whup me this time. I went south into the woods and fields, away from the roads and the big federal prison. They got guards everywhere up north, so I circled way around Terre Haute to the south and then east for a long time before coming north to the tracks.”

“Took you all day, huh?”

“Yeah, but I kept out of sight and got clean away. And when my train gets to Indy tomorrow, Ma’s gonna see how much I’ve grown up. She’ll be proud of me. I won’t be a burden no more.”

“You don’t look too grown up to me,” the man said.

In Charlie, Frank saw reflections of himself. It occurred to him that they were both totally adrift in a hostile world, just in different ways. *This kid knows exactly where he wants to go. I wish I did.* He felt a soft spot for Charlie and worried for him without understanding why.

Charlie spoke abruptly from behind the can of stew at his lips, “My ma was in prison, you know? Her and my uncle robbed a gas station.”

“No kidding?”

In listening to Charlie’s tale and learning about his parentless life, Frank’s thoughts drifted to his own son’s tragic death. Frank had been fighting in Guadalcanal when word came from home that the boy had been hit by a car. The loss had led to the demise of marriage and descent into hopelessness.

I figure Junior would have been about Charlie’s age now.

As his empathy took him further beyond the realities of his own life, he realized he wanted to protect and help the boy. Frank poked at the fire with a stick to avoid the boy’s eyes and asked, “What about your Dad?”

Charlie answered without emotion.

“We never knew for sure who my dad was. One of Mom’s boyfriends, I reckon.”

By the time Charlie finished his stew, the sun was fully down and the sky dark. The blazing fire burned down to small flames that begged attention. An evening chill crept into the camp. The man added dry wood from a pile at his side.

“How cold do you think it will get tonight?” Charlie asked.

“Darn chilly without a coat. It’s warmer on this side of the fire. Come sit over here. I’ll keep the fire going.”

Charlie moved beside Frank and held out his hands to feel the fire’s warmth. They talked for an hour longer under a star-filled sky, interrupted only when an occasional train thundered by. They spoke of their dreams. Frank learned that Charlie had an interest in singing and had taken voice lessons in past.

About ten o’clock, Charlie fell asleep and slumped into his new friend. Frank succumbed to his fatherly inclinations and placed his coat around the boy and then his arm to give warmth.

For a few minutes, Frank allowed himself an image of family. After two drinks from a pint bottle, Frank slept too, propped against a tree. He dreamt of how his life might have been. They became a unit, fighting the chill away. For one night, a family.

At dawn, Frank awakened first. He stood quietly to let Charlie sleep and stretched the stiffness from his limbs before building up the fire. Then he laid out cold biscuits on a rock for their breakfast. In this quiet time, he considered inviting Charlie to go with him to St. Louis, but he quickly dismissed the idea. The boy needed his mother.

Charlie woke up reenergized in a world of bright sunlight. Hues that had grayed in the sunset were now vibrant. For the first time, he saw colorful wildflowers scattered among the abandoned fire pits and recognized beauty in the little clearing. He watched as Frank gathered his belongings.

“It’s a big day for me, Frank. I’m catching my train to Indy. Got any tips for hopping a freight train?”

“Sure, kid,” Frank said. He covered the melancholy tone in his voice. “I’ll take you to the best spot and help you get on.”

After breakfast they climbed from the streambed to the tracks.

“The trick,” Frank explained, “is knowing how to make the train stop.”

A mile’s walk from the bridge, Frank climbed a signal mast, opened the metal housing, and fiddled with the wiring inside. The signal light turned from green to red.

Charlie watched and learned.

“That should do it,” Frank said. “Next train that comes along will have to stop. Now we wait. We’ll hide in the brush down the track where the freight cars will stop.”

Frank’s plan worked. A freight train stopped in front of them within minutes, hissing steam. Charlie and Frank stepped quickly from the underbrush twenty cars behind the engine.

“Here’s your homecoming train, sir,” Frank said with an exaggerated arm wave. “Hey, you’re lucky! I see an empty boxcar! You’ll ride in style.”

At the car, Frank boosted Charlie into the open door and gave his parting advice.

“When you get into Indy, slip off the train when she slows to enter the rail yard. Look around for a hobo camp. It’ll be close by. And when you set out to find your mom’s house, ask a taxi or truck driver for directions. Postmen are good too.”

As Frank finished talking, the train lurched ahead denying them a proper handshake and goodbye.

“Thanks, Frank,” Charlie hollered and waved.

“Good luck, boy,” Frank yelled back.

Frank felt happiness with Charlie’s departure. In helping the boy, he had forgotten his own bad memories for a while.

* * * *

To Charlie’s delight, the train ride was rough, noisy, and thrilling. He loved every jolt, knowing that he was moving steadily closer to his mother. The woods and streams that had produced heart-pounding fear yesterday were reduced to a blur today. The little towns he rolled through looked friendly enough, but he knew that on foot, his presence would have drawn attention. But not today! On the homecoming train, he passed the cops and busybodies without notice.

At Greencastle, the train stopped in a side track for the train to pick up more cars. Charlie hid in the corner of his box car as a brakeman walked by inspecting the train.

At Danville, Charlie saw kids walking beside the tracks. A girl spotted him in the box car door and waved. Charlie waved back with a broad smile.

At Avon, the train stopped for the crew to eat lunch and deliver cars to a grain elevator. Charlie waited patiently and ate the piece of rabbit jerky Frank had given him. When the train started again, his anticipation mounted.

In the late afternoon, the train pulled into the Indianapolis rail yards. Charlie slipped carefully from the car as Frank had instructed him. Hungry, he sought out the hobo camp at the end of the yard. He found an assortment of bums, winos, and hobos who welcomed him. Charlie ate his fill of vegetable soup and slept warmly that night under cardboard and a borrowed blanket.

When morning came, Charlie found that Indianapolis had given him a beautiful April day. After thanks and goodbyes, he plunged confidently into the city provisioned with two fresh campfire biscuits in his pocket. At a stop light, Charlie approached a truck driver to ask directions.

“I know the street,” the driver said. “It would be quite a walk from here. Hop in. I can take you part way.”

Charlie appreciated the lucky break. His excitement built, anticipating the reunion with his mom.

He walked the last three miles along traffic-choked streets through a city bustling with activity. He observed the stores and homes and schools. He passed factories with assembly lines under tall smokestacks. And the people? They had it good. They were free to be with their families. He liked the feel of Indianapolis. He knew he would treasure this trip forever.

Once he found the right street, it became a simple matter of finding the right address. He almost ran the last three blocks.

The address on the envelope turned out to be a ramshackle hotel in an older part of the city. He discarded the vision of a white house with a picket fence and puppy in the yard. A dilapidated three story building had not been what he pictured, but he knew the important thing was being with his mother.

At the desk, a suspicious clerk eyed the muddy shirt and tangled hair. There was an awkward silence before he pointed to the stairway and said, “Room 314. All the way to the top.”

On the staircase, Charlie was bursting. This had been a terribly hard trip for a twelve year old boy, but he was proud he had completed such a grown up undertaking.

Charlie’s heart was racing when he knocked on the door.

She’ll be so surprised.

But Charlie was the one surprised when a very unfriendly-looking man opened the door. He was young, no more than mid-twenties. He wore an armless undershirt and hair slicked back in the style of city toughs. He frowned at Charlie.

“Whaddaya want?”

“Kathy Maddox live here?”

“Maybe.”

The two eyed each other for a moment. Hatred flashed in the boy’s eyes.

The man hollered toward the back of the room.

“Hey, Blondie, is your real name Kathy?”

From somewhere, a woman's voice answered, harsh and defensive: "Yeah, how'd you know?"

"Some punk's here askin' for you. Mighty young for a customer, I'd say."

A woman in her twenties appeared from the bathroom, cigarette dangling from a corner of her mouth. She held a bottle of vodka in one hand. When she saw the boy, she stopped in her tracks, almost dropping the bottle.

"Charlie?" she said. "Well I'll be dammed. It *is* you." Her face showed surprise but no joy.

When he saw her, Charlie broke past the man and threw his arms around her with complete abandon. She returned the embrace, still clutching the bottle. Over Charlie's shoulder she gave the man a curious look and shrugged.

When the hug ended, she held him at arm's length. "What are you doing here, Charlie? My goodness, where you been? You're filthy."

Charlie smiled hugely.

"I've come to be with you, Mom. We can live together again. You told me that you were coming to get me soon. I know how busy you've been, so, well, I saved you the trouble. I'm here now, and I'm old enough to really help out."

The man snorted.

"Who is this kid?" he interrupted, lip curled.

"This is my son, Hank. This is Charlie."

Charlie asked, "Who's this guy, Ma?"

"It's okay, Charlie. This is your uncle Hank. We visit occasionally."

Charlie was quick to answer, still smiling with euphoria.

"I used to believe that, Ma, but I'm twelve years old now. He ain't an uncle. I know better, and it's okay. Just get rid of him for now, huh?"

"Hank you'd better go," she said. "I'll see you in a day or two."

Hank found his shoes and shirt, donned them, and huffed out. "Yeah. I'll be back. Maybe."

Charlie was happy. He refused to accept any disappointment, or mourn his tarnished dream. He loved his mother no matter where she lived or what she did. As long as he had her, the world was right.

“Let’s try this again, baby. Why are you here?”

“I couldn’t take the monks any more. Couldn’t take the guys who bully me.”

“But the judge sent you there. You got a court order.”

“That’s not a problem. You can talk to him, like you did before. You can tell him that it’s time for us to be together again. Tell him we’ll be okay now.”

“I don’t know, Charlie. I don’t know if he’ll think I’m ready.”

“Sure he will. You can make him understand how good we’ll do.”

They ate cheese and crackers for dinner, facing each other over a wooden table.

Charlie read to her from a newspaper that night to show how much he had learned. And when he bathed and went to bed, he was as content as he had ever been. A soft rain washed the city that night.

The morning came. Charlie was still asleep when a door opened. He was still awakening when a man’s voice broke the relaxed peace.

“Wake up, young man. It’s time for you to go back where you belong.”

Charlie opened his eyes. He recoiled at the sight of a uniformed policeman reaching for him.

“Mom!” Charlie looked beyond the cop with confused eyes and saw his mother turn away. “Mom!”

Six hours later, Charlie finished processing at police headquarters. A juvenile officer escorted him to a waiting car and pointed him to the back seat. As the door closed, the officer tossed in a sack lunch that Charlie never opened. He was on his way back to Terre Haute before the full impact of his situation hit.

The more he comprehended his mother’s rejection, the more his heart broke. Handed to the cops while she turned her back. Indescribable betrayal. Rejected by the mother he worshiped. Charlie felt the worst despair of his life.

On the return trip to Father Gibault’s, the sky wept for him on a sunless, dismal day. Charlie also cried most of the way to Terre Haute, but the tears were inside where no one could see. They were tears that soured and embittered his soul.

The physical punishment came within an hour of returning to the boys home. The headmaster, a pious monk, led Charlie to the mechanical shop where three more monks waited with leather straps. He knew they were unbending, these monks who practiced

self-flogging to bring themselves closer to Christ. Charlie had seen their unsympathetic eyes before.

The headmaster spoke.

“God demands obedience, and so does this God-fearing school. Purity must be restored before bad company corrupts good.”

They wasted no time. Two monks seized Charlie and bent him over a work table. Charlie knew from the forceful handling that his penance would be severe. He was right.

The cleansing was violent. The four monks took turns delivering five lashes apiece, each blow more intense than the last, as if the beating was a competition to achieve higher degrees of purity with more pain.

By the seventh strike, blood oozed from Charlie’s right shoulder blade, causing the headmaster to order a more widespread pattern.

Through it all, Charlie remained silent. No screams. No tears. No appeals for mercy.

When the monks finally put away their straps and bandaged the wounds, they sensed fulfillment knowing moral purity was reestablished. They paraded him through the dormitory in a solemn procession, so other students could see the wages of disobedience.

At his cot, they forced him to his knees to pray. Charlie bowed his head and began to plan. He knew he would run again, no matter what the cost.

I can do better on my own. I can be like Hobo Frank. A guy don’t need much to get by.

To dorm mates who tiptoed around the cot and winced at the sight, Charlie appeared deep in prayer. But behind the closed eyes, Charlie was hatching a plan.

At dinnertime, Charlie told inquirers who dared disturb him that he was not hungry, and so they went to the dining hall without him.

When they returned an hour later, Charlie surprised them. He was sitting cross-legged on his bed, waiting for them with a wide smile. They saw a different Charlie than the sullen boy they had left behind. He had washed his face, straightened his hair, and slipped on a clean shirt that covered the beating’s marks.

In the dorm that night, Charlie concealed his vulnerabilities and pain to charm his dorm mates. His uncle was a Methodist preacher who had always told him, “Tell ‘em what they want to hear.” Charlie did.

“Let me tell you, guys. That was the finest trip a fellow could ever take. Heck, a few bruises are a cheap price for a trip like that. I did things you choir boys can’t imagine doing. Real *man* things. My homecoming train was the best adventure of my life. And I got to visit my ma too. She’s coming for me soon.”

They listened, seated around him as students before a great teacher and were drawn into excitement rarely felt at Father Gibault’s home.

“Let me tell you ‘bout ole Hobo Frank. He was as good a person as I ever met. Fed me. Kept me warm. Taught me about making trains stop for you any time you want. Sharp as a tack he was. Makes these monks look like donkeys.”

Charlie talked and entertained and did everything he knew to interest his friends and keep the agony cloaked.

They heard a train whistle blow somewhere toward the river. Charlie paused in his story to listen. It was nothing like the mournful, lonesome whistles that had floated into the dorm before.

“Listen guys. Hear that train? Bet Hobo Frank is passing through town.”

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End Notes

The Homecoming Train is based on a true story. It stems from the author’s discussions with Charles Manson during 2010 and 2011. The story’s context, timeframe, and principal events are accurate. It is not intended as a complete portrayal of Manson’s escape.

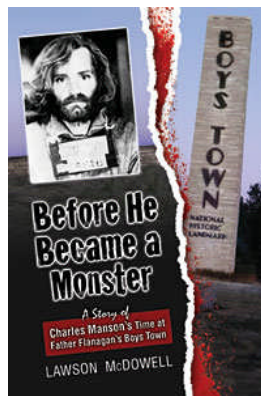
Charles Manson escaped several times from Father Gibault’s Boys Home. At age twelve he lived alone in Indianapolis. He survived by working as a messenger, sweeping walks, and mowing lawns. He rented his own place. Left alone, he turned to petty crime,

then burglary to supplement his income. His experiences in Indianapolis and later at Boys Town in Omaha, Nebraska helped define the boy before he became a monster.

Manson remains relevant in American society. He receives more mail than any prisoner in U. S. history. Many consider him a counter-culture icon. His influence increases every year, particularly with young people.

Manson still maintains his innocence for involvement with the barbaric Tate-LaBianca murders in 1969.

Thank you for reading this prequel. The story continues two years later in *Before He Became A Monster*, a story of Charles Manson's time at Father Flanagan's Boys Town. Something went very wrong there that altered the course of history.



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Author Lawson McDowell lives with his family in Omaha, near Boys Town. He works as a network operations director for a Fortune 500 company. *Before He Became A Monster* is his second historical fiction work.



For more information visit: www.lawsonmcdowell.com