

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, March 31, 2008

When We Rode the Rails: Fifty years after it happened, it's difficult to realize how fast Americans' travel habits changed. Did we not always fly all over the country to get to far-away destinations? In the old days, we actually looked for the shortest way to go because it was the quickest and the cheapest. Why doesn't this still make sense?

While I flew in B-24s mostly out of Guam in the last year of World War II, my very first commercial flight was in 1950, shortly after I became a travel agent. Still in its infancy, the airline industry would do some wonderful things to entice travelers to this exciting new method of travel, although only a small percentage would dare try it. Three then-major airlines—Eastern, TWA, and American—had city ticket offices in Wilmington and flights from New Castle Airport. Air tickets were a very small part of a travel agent's business in 1950, but 10 years later, everybody was flying; large jet passenger planes were used on many long-distance flights; and the railroad passenger business (what was that?) was down to a fraction of the volume it enjoyed in the late 1940s. The airlines and the Interstate Highway system had essentially shut it down.

In the early '50s, if you stood on the platform at the Wilmington Pennsylvania Railroad (PRR) station in late afternoon, 18- to 20-car passenger trains pulled by the PRR's famous GG-1 electric locomotives would come through in both directions, pulling many big-name passenger trains. Every hour there was a New York-Washington express led by the *Congressional*, plus four trains a day each way that ran to and from Boston. From the south, name trains such as the *Orange Blossom Special*, the *Silver Meteor*, the *East and West Coast Champions*, and the *Crescent* stopped to take on and discharge passengers. If you stood on the platform at Paoli (Pennsylvania) in early evening, the Pennsy's name trains to the west, having originated in New York, stopped briefly for Philadelphia's suburban trade. While some of these trains carried reclining seat coaches for the economy traveler, most carried the famous sleepers often called "Pullmans" (the Pullman Company of Chicago actually owned many of these sleeping cars). Available at varying cost were upper and lower berths (called sections), roomettes, single bedrooms, double bedrooms, compartments and drawing rooms. Some of the name trains were the *Broadway Limited*, the *General*, and the *Trail Blazer* for Chicago, the *Spirit of St. Louis* and the *Jeffersonian* for St. Louis, the *Red Arrow* for Detroit, and name trains for Cincinnati and Cleveland as well. Business men going from New York to Chicago, and there were many, could make the trip in 16 hours. Nor did they have to use the Pennsylvania Railroad. Some preferred the New York Central with its *20th Century Limited*, *Empire State Express*, and many other fast trains. New York-Chicago service was also offered on the B & O, the C & O, the Lackawanna, the Lehigh Valley, and the Erie, on somewhat slower schedules. On these overnight trips, a dining car was available for a leisurely dinner and hearty breakfast, and your berth would be made up, your trousers pressed, your shoes shined, and any special requirements performed by the friendly black porter on your car.

I never experienced a lot of Pullman travel, but I'll mention the trips I recall. On a limited basis, troop trains carried sleepers for the officers. I traveled on a troop train from Oklahoma City to Savannah, Georgia, two nights, in 1945 and from Oakland Pier (California) to Baltimore, five nights, in 1946. These trains were pulled by steam locomotives, and the sleepers were old heavy-weight section cars (uppers and lowers). In May 1951, on business as a travel agent, I went from Paoli to Richmond, Indiana, and return on the *Spirit of St. Louis* (out one night, back the next), and in July that year, I came home from Greensboro, North Carolina, on a sleeper, having flown down on Eastern Airlines. In April 1956, as a guest of Canadian Pacific, along with several Philadelphia-area travel agents, I went on the overnight train from Grand Central Station to Montreal and returned the following night over the same route. The next month, Norbert Behrendt and I took the night sleeper from Washington to Roanoke, Virginia, in order to ride the cab of the *Powhatan Arrow* on the Norfolk and Western Railroad from Roanoke to Bluefield, West Virginia, and return, a great experience on a main-line steam locomotive. We returned to Washington the following night. I experienced a roomette a few times, but mostly it seemed to be a lower berth in a section car.

In addition to business travel by rail, of which we handled very little as a travel agent, several tour companies and Union Pacific offered rail tours of the West during the summer months. The total length of the trips was anything from one to four weeks, and about half the nights were spent on sleeping cars, the other half at nice hotels, many in National Parks. The western railroads, through their Philadelphia representatives, competed for business when a group wanted to arrange a tour of the West or to Alaska. Railroad sales personnel would assist agents in making these arrangements. Our agency ran a tour to Alaska in 1953, on which we provided an escort, and a similar one to the lesser-known National Parks of the West in 1954. On the '53 trip, we chartered our own sleeping car, using the PRR to and from Chicago, Northern Pacific from there to Seattle and return, and the Alaska Steamship Company through the Inland Waterway to Seward, Alaska. In retrospect using sleeping cars was not always popular with business travelers, many of whom never slept well on the train, but it was a great improvement over all types of land travel that preceded it.