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The Fair of the Iron Horse: The Baltimore & Ohio Railroad was the oldest common carrier railroad in the United States. Although steam trains did not run on the original line from Baltimore to Catonsville until 1830, the first rail was laid for horse-drawn trains in 1827, when a ceremony was held in West Baltimore with Charles Carroll of Carrollton, the only living survivor of those who signed the Declaration of Independence, on hand as a featured celebrity.

During the Civil War, the B & O was the only major railroad connecting Washington with the states remaining in the Union. Its main lines to Baltimore and west toward Ohio were almost entirely south of the Mason-Dixon Line. Much of this line was under constant attack from Confederate forces, and "Stonewall" Jackson stole nearly 100 locomotives from the railroad near Harpers Ferry early in the war. Much of the time, it seemed that Union troops did little to guard the railroad; at other times northern soldiers played a major role in keeping the B & O in Union hands. The railroad's president, John W. Garrett, was determined that the B & O should not fall to the Confederates, and was commended by President Lincoln for his efforts.

In 1927, when steam power still reigned supreme, the B & O Railroad planned an extravaganza to celebrate its 100th anniversary. The "Fair of the Iron Horse" was planned at Baltimore and ran for several weeks during that summer. It was widely promoted with bargain prices on rail tickets from distant points for those who wanted to attend. In a large fairground area, over ½ mile of track was laid in front of bleachers that extended for most of this distance. Almost every historic locomotive that had been preserved by the B & O was restored and fired up to pull primitive passenger trains. At least once a day during the festival, these trains would move past the bleachers at slow speeds under their own power. Actors dressed in period costumes were the passengers on the early trains.

What I recall is the following: Either the original or a replica of the "Tom Thumb" of 1830, with a tiny four-wheel open car behind, led the procession. About 10 passengers could stand in this car for their 10-m.p.h. journey. Next came the "Atlantic" of 1832, nicknamed the "Grasshopper Locomotive." The nickname came from the large connecting rods activating its two vertical cylinders, all exposed, that resembled a huge grasshopper. It pulled 3 double-decker cars, where passengers could ride on both decks. The top deck was covered with a canvas canopy. These cars resembled stage coaches of the time. All these early locomotives had vertical boilers and burned wood.

In order to increase the size and power of steam locomotives, the boiler was turned on its side about 1840. This required an entirely different design, with a firebox and its crown sheet to the rear of the "barrel" section of the boiler, which was filled with many small tubes or flues below the water level. With a smoke box to collect burned gases in addition to exhaust from the cylinders at the front of the locomotive, this design allowed the locomotive to be fired and operated from the rear, where an attached tender with water and wood or coal was easily accessible to the fireman. The problem was the same for almost all steam locomotives that were built in the next 100 years: the engineer and fireman were at the rear and could not see where they were going.

In the 1850s, this design was beautified, with the addition of shiny paint of various colors and polished brass. Most but not all of them adopted the 4-4-0 wheel design, which became known as the "American" type. William Mason of Taunton, Massachusetts, was renowned for the beauty of his locomotives, and the B & O saved one that was named for its builder in 1856. This handsome beauty pulled several passenger coaches of the pre-Civil War period. Next in the line was the "Thatcher Perkins," a slightly larger 4-6-0 "ten-wheeler" locomotive built in the B & O shops in 1863. It, too, pulled wooden civil war coaches, usually painted yellow.

In the 1927 procession then came some heavy freight locomotives to complement the passenger fleet. A Consolidation was a 2-8-0 configuration, and a Mikado was a 2-8-2. Before World War I, the B & O had settled

on the 4-6-2 "Pacific" type to pull most of its fast passenger trains. The most famous of these Pacifics were the 5300-class, originally named for the first 24 U.S. Presidents. In 1927, these were still the most modern passenger engines in the B & O system and pulled such trains as the "Royal Blue," the "Capitol Limited," the "Cincinnati," and the "National Limited." People didn't have as many attractions available to them in 1927 as we have today, and the Fair of the Iron Horse was a great success. A few of these locomotives operated again at World's Fairs in Chicago (1933-34) and New York (1939-40).

In the early 1930s, when my father took me to elementary school in Wilmington, he would often stop for gas at Mac's Filling Station at Pennsylvania Avenue and Union Street, adjacent to the B & O main line just west of the Delaware Avenue station. A morning New York-Washington passenger train with one of the "Presidents" on the head end would be pulling away from the station, and we would see how many presidents we could account for in a period of time. As late as 1934, on the eve of the Diesel-powered streamliners, the B & O put on display the "President Cleveland" at the Century of Progress Exposition in Chicago, and those interested, as we were, could walk through the cab. In 1936, I rode the "Royal Blue," behind a streamlined President-Class 4-6-2 painted blue, from Washington to Wilmington.

On July 15, 1950, having obtained a special pass beforehand, I climbed into the cab of one of the 5300s at Wilmington's Delaware Avenue Station, for the trip to Washington and return. With Diesels in command of most passenger service, the few 5300s still running were relegated to local trains, and train #35 westbound and #36 eastbound, each with about five passenger cars, were just that. It was a great day with a lot of stops. The speedometer on the locomotive showed 86 m.p.h. just before we slowed for the stop at Newark. The many station stops in each direction, plus travel through Baltimore's Howard Street tunnel between Camden and Mount Royal Stations, enhanced my education of old-time technology. The last steam passenger trains on the B & O were in 1953, and all passenger service east of Baltimore was terminated in 1958.