

RISE AND DECLINE OF THE ROCK ISLAND PASSENGER TRAIN IN THE 20TH CENTURY

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Part I

Part II of the "Rise and Decline of the Rock Island Passenger Train in the 20th Century" will appear in the Fall, 1971, issue of the ANNALS.

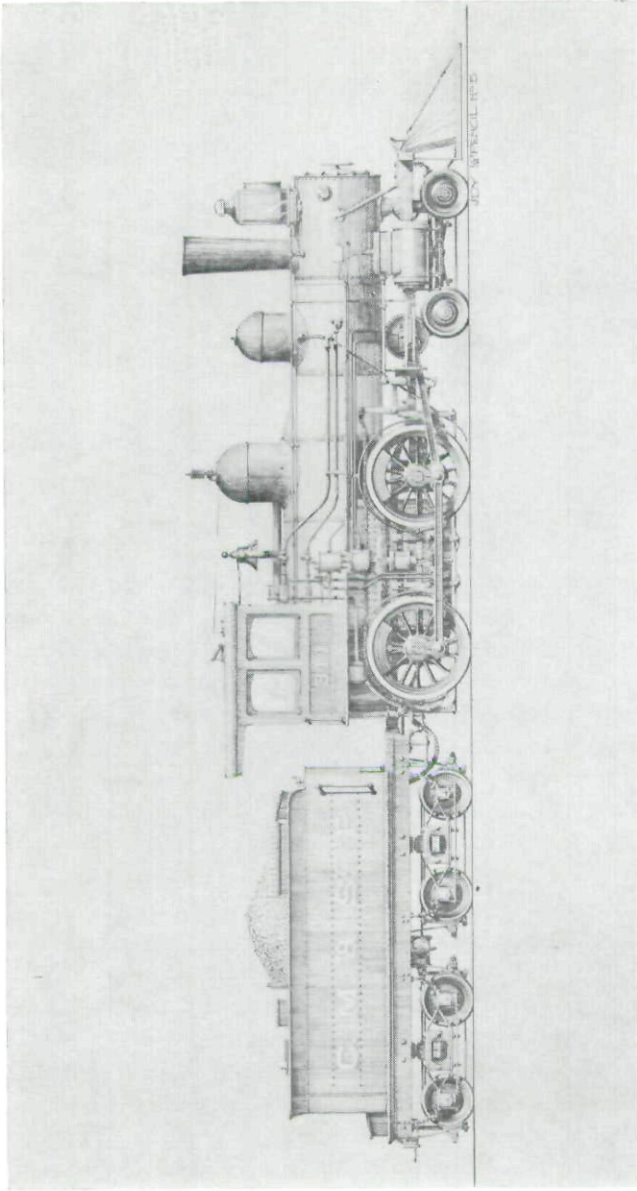
Mr. Nelson was born in Wessington Springs, South Dakota, but has lived in Roland, Iowa in "Rock Island country" for fourteen years. He acquired his first interest in railroads from an American Flyer electric train he received when only two years old. This interest has continued to grow throughout the years and has now become a serious hobby.

Foreward:

I had often wanted to do some kind of research on Rock Island's passenger trains. As a junior at Luther College, Decorah, Iowa, the opportunity arose last January. At Luther we have "Interim" during January, in which we study topics other than those we have had for the past semester. I chose to do an independent study on Rock Island's passenger trains, and was fortunate enough to have the assistance of Mr. James C. Hippen, my history professor at Luther. Mr. Hippen is also a train buff, and was very willing to help me with the topic. He was always encouraging and I have been in and out of his office many times since November when the work on this project was begun. I also must thank Mr. James Windsor, Des Moines, for all the encouragement and help he gave. All the *Rocket* magazines used in this paper were those borrowed from his collection. Finally, Luke Sinclair, Ames, was a tremendous help. He had several old timetables and *Official Guides* which he was kind enough to let me use.

This paper does not go into the development of commuter trains, as they are really a different aspect of passenger service. Some statistics may include commuter trains where none were available for through trains only.

60257-4



A typical American type (4-4-0) Fast Passenger Locomotive of the 1800's. This type was in general use on all railroads at that time.

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The abbreviation "ICC" stands for the Interstate Commerce Commission. When I refer to "Budd Cars" or RDC's, I am referring to Rail Diesel Cars built by the Budd Corporation. These cars were a single passenger coach and were self-propelled.

INTRODUCTION TO PASSENGER TRAINS

Today the passenger train is a vanishing means of travel in America. There are a myriad of reasons why this phenomena has come about and many of these will be dealt with throughout this paper. People have turned away from the passenger train and one basic reason why train travel is not utilized nearly as much as in past years is its lack of flexibility. Automobiles are simply much handier, especially for short distance trips. For example, back in the 20's and 30's, people would take the train for a five or ten mile trip to the next town to do shopping or business. Today, few would take the train even if that service were offered. The private automobile is so much more convenient; it runs when you want it and where you want it to go. Other major reasons for the decline in riding trains by the public include improved bus and airline transportation over the years.

There has been much speculation that the railroads have discouraged passengers by providing poor service, taking off convenient trains, and many other complaints filed by train lovers. Certainly there are two sides to this issue. This writer thinks it is obvious that both the public and the railroad have had a hand in the decline of passenger train travel. Thus, the question is, just *how much* the railroad has had to do with the drop in passenger travel by rail. This will be another main point that will be brought out in relation to Rock Island's passenger trains, as the rise and decline of their passenger service is discussed.

A few facts will show how the use of passenger trains has dropped. For example from 1916, the peak year for the number of passenger trains operating, to 1966 this country grew from 100 million to 197 million people, nearly doubling, while the rail passenger traffic in those years was cut in half. Even as late as 1940, the railroads were still carrying

65 percent of all commercial inter-city passenger traffic.¹ Today the railroads handle less than 10 percent of all commercial inter-city passenger traffic. Who caused the decline is not exactly clear as previously mentioned, but the fact that there is a drop is very distinctive. In comparing rail inter-city travel to that of the airlines we find that in 1950, 76 percent of inter-city travel was on railroads, while by 1960 this had dropped to 39 percent, and in 1968 was down to 12 percent.² Please note that these figures are the percentages between rail and airline inter-city travel and do not take other forms of transportation into consideration.

The public has criticized the railroads' service, but yet the public, especially government leaders, has done little to encourage improvement until railroad management has become ready to take trains off of passenger service. It seems that for a few years the majority of people saw no need for passenger trains. However, times are changing as always, and it seems the passenger train is on its way back up. In fact many transportation experts feel short trips of 300 miles could be made profitable, featuring downtown-to-downtown service, not slowed by weather or traffic problems.³ Even if they couldn't be made profitable, many feel passenger trains are a necessity, and a continually growing one. This feeling is exemplified in a new bill known as "Railpax," which allows the Federal Government to take over passenger trains effective May 1, 1971.⁴ The Government has evidently come to the realization that some passenger trains are, and will become, an increasing necessity whether they make money or not. The Federal Government has also demonstrated its interest in passenger service by its subsidies of the Metroliner running between New York and Washington.

¹John F. Stover, *The Life and Decline of the American Railroad*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 124, 203.

²*Ibid.*, p. 218.

³*Wall Street Journal*, 23 June 1969.

⁴The new federally operated Rail Passenger System (Railpax) will cross southern Iowa on the tracks of the Burlington Northern Railroad. Many Iowa Congressmen were upset by the selection of the Burlington Northern for they felt that the Rock Island line would have served many more Iowa people. *Des Moines Tribune*, 3-22-71.

It seems that when looking at the Metroliner, the trains of the future won't need all the luxuries of trains in years past, such as barber and valet service, but rather they will need to be clean, comfortable and on-time.⁴ With our increasing population, it appears that we will necessarily have to have passenger trains between certain points. Thus, this study on the rise and decline of the Rock Island's passenger trains is being done in part to determine why certain trains could not succeed financially, and thus were discontinued.

One reason that we will need an increasing number of passenger trains in the future is that our highways are becoming more and more overcrowded; even the interstates in some areas are becoming congested. Studies have been done which point to the obvious fact that many more passengers can be handled most efficiently by railroads as compared to buses, automobiles or airplanes. Airports are also becoming overcrowded. Just earlier this month, *Jan. 1971*, United Air Lines announced it was raising its rates between some points because planes often have to make a lengthy circle of O'Hare Airport, thus forcing up costs and delaying flights.⁵ Railroads have the advantage, of course, in that more cars can be added to a train without causing added congestion.

Also, railroads are probably the most pollution-free mode of transportation we have, other than walking or riding a bicycle. One passenger train can carry hundreds of passengers and cause little more pollution than a bus carrying 50 or 60 passengers. Congress is concerned about the need for rail transportation, as mentioned. In a letter from U.S. Representative Neal Smith, 5th district of Iowa, he assured this writer, "I think you are correct in saying trains cause less air pollution than automobiles. A number of proposals have been introduced in Congress designed to improve rail transportation service."⁶ Thus, certain congressmen have been working on improved passenger train service, evidenced by the previously mentioned "Railpax" as well. Another pro-

⁴James H. Windsor, III, Rock Island railfan, telephone interview with the author, 8 January 1971.

⁵*Des Moines Register*, 14 January 1971.

⁶Neal Smith, U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C., letter, 13 May 1970, to the author.

blem relating to increasing use of airplanes is noise pollution. Jet aircraft are considerably noisier than trains, and this can become a problem for people living near airports, such as those living near O'Hare where they have to put up with the noise of a jet landing or taking off every 40 seconds.⁷

Many people enjoy traveling by trains. This writer has found it a most relaxing means of transportation. You do not have the annoying glare of car headlights nor the problem of feeling congested as one has when driving. And when traveling on a train one can walk around, as well as enjoy the scenery, which is not nearly as possible when driving one's own car. There once was a distinct luxury in riding trains. People would go to the barber on the train, or have their clothes pressed enroute to their destination. It was a leisurely life this country will probably never know again; people have become in such a hurry to get places. Yet, trains of short distances should be able to survive. As airports become increasingly over-crowded, the flights will either be delayed, or new, larger airports will be built even further from downtown. Thus, it seems that trains can be built that will compete in speed with airplanes for distances under 300 miles, and thus eventually, perhaps, this mode of travel will become popular again.

Since there does seem to be an increasing need for passenger trains, this writer has felt it feasible to study and write the history and development of the foremost passenger carrier in the State of Iowa at one time, the Rock Island Railroad. Perhaps from this study it will be seen why and when the passenger train declined, and what will have to be done to once again make it a successful means of transportation.

ROCK ISLAND PASSENGER TRAINS, 1900-1936

Even though the Rock Island in the early 1900's had no trains comparable to the Rockets, many trains of luxury were operated. The *Golden State Limited* was the most publicized train of the Rock Island Line in the early 1900's. This train was put into service on November 2, 1902. The *Golden State Limited's* original equipment included olive

⁷Stover, *American Railroads*, p. 148.

green sleeping cars pulled by an Atlantic (4-4-2) locomotive. It was described as the most luxurious train to the Pacific coast.⁸ The equipment roster in a 1906 *Guide* included the statement that the train was "an electric lighted train," and that it included a Buffet, library car and an Observation sleeping car along with regular sleeping cars.⁹ The *Golden State Limited* was designed as direct competition to the Santa Fe's *California Limited*.¹⁰ Some of the publicity regarding the *Golden State Limited* included this ad:

There are many ways to go to enjoy California, but only one *best* way to go. The route of lowest altitudes means the quickest escape from winter, and there is a train which makes the three short days of luxurious travel a pleasant incident to a delightful holiday: *Golden State Limited*, via Rock Island Lines.¹¹

Other features of the *Golden State Limited* are included in this description by Lucius Beebe:

It was a train of solid comforts, cut flowers, in the public apartments, heavily embossed stationery in the lounges, finger-bowls with lemon water in the diner and an over-all sense of enormous well-being.¹²

There were those who felt there was no other way to southern California comparable to the *Golden State Limited*. The train was advertised as "extra fare, extra fine." It featured sleepers for San Diego and Santa Barbara as well as for Los Angeles.¹³ In order to find a name for its new Chicago to Los Angeles train, the Rock Island ran a contest to determine the best name, with a \$100 first prize. The name *Golden State Limited* was selected from thousands of entries.¹⁴ This train, later called the *Golden State*, would continue to operate until 1968. In the early years, the *Golden State*

⁸William Edward Hayes, *Iron Road to Empire*, (New York: Simmons-Bordman Publishing Corp., 1953), p. 164.

⁹"Through Car Equipment," *The Official Guide of the Railways and Steam Navigation Lines of the United States, Puerto Rico, Canada, Mexico and Cuba*, XXXVIII (April 1906), 712.

¹⁰Lucius Beebe and Charles Clegg, *The Trains We Rode*, Vol. II, (Berkeley, Calif.: Howell-North Books, 1966), p. 703.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 703.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 701.

¹³Frank Donovan, "The Great Rock Island Route," *The Palimpsest*, LXIV (September 1963), p. 435.

¹⁴David F. Myrick, "The Strange Story of the El Paso and Southwestern," *Trains*, XXVI (February 1966), 48.

ran on the El Paso and South Western Railroad from Tucumcari to El Paso, and from El Paso to Los Angeles on the Southern Pacific.¹⁵ The El Paso and South Western was eventually taken over by the Southern Pacific.

There were several unique advertisements in the early years for train travel. For example, on the cover of one timetable issued by the Rock Island shortly before the turn of the century, there was a picture of a large horseshoe which had printed on it, "Good luck to all that travel the Great Rock Island Route."¹⁶ In those days of wooden coaches, and poor roadbed and rails, perhaps a wish of good luck was necessary. The Rock Island, however, like other railroads, became known for their safety in passenger travel. Even today, many who take the train, rather than the airplane, undoubtedly do so because of the safety factor involved.

Other advertisements described the *Rocky Mountain Limited*, which in the early 1900's was running with such luxury equipment as an observation lounge car, parlor car and a dining car. One ad in a 1909 Rock Island timetable described this train thusly:

Affording barber, valet to press garments, daily newspapers, telegraphic stock report, library, magazines, writing facilities, unique buffet-library-observation car, drawing room sleeping, and mission style dining car."¹⁷

These luxurious services and equipment were a little before this writer's time, but one can imagine these trains must have been like stepping into a millionaire's mansion.

There were advertisements boasting of the Rock Island's dining car service, too. This advertisement described a service characteristic of the Rock Island:

Neither expense nor trouble is spared in making the dining car service perfect, and my suggestions from passengers tending toward improvement will be carefully considered and acted upon if found practical and consistent.¹⁸

The Rock Island had reason to boast of their dining service; they simply were known for their excellent food service. "Many railroaders have told me their (Rock Island) meals

¹⁵Rock Island Public Time Table, issued 12 March 1922.

¹⁶R. C. Brown, Burlington-Northern Agent and Yardmaster, Creston, Iowa, letter, 10 January 1971, to the author.

¹⁷Rock Island Public Timetable, 21 March 1909, pp. 6,7,14.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 21.

and dining service was (*sic*) far superior to other railroads in the early 1900's."¹⁹ The Rock Island's quality food service continued. Even in the late 60's, as will later be noted, they were winning awards for their superb dining facilities.

Mention must be made of the continued growth of the Rock Island, and how this growth affected the financial status of the company, thus influencing the passenger trains. The Burlington, Cedar Rapids and Northern (B. C. R. & N.) was purchased outright by the Rock Island in 1903; this was a 1310 mile system when purchased by the Rock Island. Through the acquisition of the B.C.R. & N., the Rock Island gained entrance to Minnesota and established through service between the Twin Cities and northern Iowa in 1902.²⁰ The line from Des Moines to the Twin Cities was not acquired until the 1910's, during President Mudge's administration. South of Des Moines, part of the present north-south mail-line had to be constructed in order to complete the line from Minneapolis to Kansas City. On September 14, 1913, through passenger and freight service was established between the Twin Cities and Kansas City.²¹ The route between Kansas City and the Twin Cities became known as the Mid-continent route, route of the *Short Line Express* and later the *Twin Star Rocket* and *Mid-Continent Special*.

Also by the addition of the B.C.R. & N. to the Rock Island, several lines in northern Iowa were added to the system, including the Cedar Rapids to Sioux Falls line and the Cedar Rapids to Decorah branch.²² The latter branch is of special interest to this writer because of its termination in Decorah. In 1906 there were two trains each way per day between Cedar Rapids and Decorah²³ on the "Pea Vine," as it was called by railroaders because it curved back and forth between Cedar Rapids and Decorah.²⁴ The fastest train

¹⁹Brown, letter, 10 January 1971.

²⁰Hayes, *Iron Road*, p. 164.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 181.

²²Frank Donovan, "B.C.R. & N" *The Palimpsest*, LXIV (September 1963), 414.

²³*Official Guide*, 1906, p. 712.

²⁴E. R. Carlson, Rock Island Depot Agent, Grinnell, Iowa, personal interview with the author at Grinnell, 11 Jan. 1971.

on this line made the run in 4 hours and 50 minutes.²⁵ Even though this is quite slow for our present day standards for a 124 mile trip, it is considerably better than the nine hours the train took operating as a mixed train in 1942.²⁶

Expansion of the Rock Island continued through the early 1900's. During the decade of 1910, President Mudge was very influential in getting his road to acquire certain lines. Mudge spent large amounts of money acquiring property in the Southern states, as well as greatly increasing the number of Rock Island locomotives. His first acquisition for the Rock Island was the joining of the line in Oklahoma, Texas and Arkansas, giving a through route from Memphis to California.²⁷ This route later became the route of the *Choctaw Rocket* and the *Cherokee*.

By 1914, the Rock Island operated 7407 miles as compared to only 3403 miles in 1902.²⁸ Partly because of some over-expansions and other financial difficulties, the Rock Island went into receivership in 1915. Two years later it tried to make it on its own, but really struggled along for 16 more years until 1933 when it asked for protection from the courts.²⁹ This financial position, caused in part by the depression, had some affect on the road's passenger trains, as the number of passengers carried in 1933³⁰ was the lowest that it had been for many years.

One effect of the Rock Island's financial position was evidenced by its proposal to discontinue night trains between Cedar Rapids and Sioux Falls, S.D., in January 1932. This discontinuance was not permitted, however.³¹

Only three years earlier, Rock Island had placed in service a very fast train between Lincoln and Chicago, named the *Iowa-Nebraska Limited*. This train made the run in only

²⁵*Official Guide*, 1906, p. 721.

²⁶Rock Island Public timeable, 21 March 1909, pp. 6,7,14.

²⁷Hayes, *Iron Road*, p. 181.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 183.

²⁹Frank Donovan, "Disaster and Aftermath," *The Palimpsest*, XLIV (September 1963), 429.

³⁰*Moody's Manual of Investments, American and Foreign-Railroad Securities*, John S. Porter, editor-in-chief, (New York: Moody's Investors Service, Inc., 1937), p. 768.

³¹*Des Moines Register*, 1 January 1932.

nine hours, stopping only once between Des Moines and Chicago, thus reducing the Lincoln to Chicago time by six hours. An advertisement in the 1929 Rock Island timetable described the Rock Island's new trains:

America's Newest Finest Trains, the *Iowa-Nebraska Limited* is one of three spick and span new trains built especially for the Rock Island, including the new *Golden State Limited* and the new *Rocky Mountain Limited*.³²

As mentioned in the above advertisement, new equipment was received in 1929 for the *Rocky Mountain Limited*, which included two entirely new standard trains. This train was still running in luxury. "Barber and valet service were taken for granted on the *Rocky Mountain Limited* in the 20's."³³

Not all trains contained these luxuries, however. In fact in the late 20's and early 30's, there were several mixed trains making runs that did not have regular passenger service. The passenger equipment on several of these lines, however, was nothing more than a way-freight caboose, carrying cream cans and express, along with seats for passengers.³⁴

The period from 1900 to 1936 was one of many struggles for the Rock Island, and thus for their passenger trains as well. The first decade of the century was probably the most prosperous, highlighted by the introduction of the *Golden State Limited* and the acquisition of La Salle Station in Chicago. The depression greatly affected the number of passenger trains running, as in 1913 there were 18.8 million passenger train miles³⁵ while by 1933 this figure had dropped to 8.4 million.³⁶ The Rock Island's total mileage experienced a great deal of growth in this period. Part of the growth was good and economically important, but in other cases, it was unnecessary, and made management difficult. The story of the Rock Island passenger trains will now move into her years of glory and the introduction of her famed Rockets.

³²Rock Island Public Timetable, 29 September 1929, p. 16.

³³Beebe and Clegg, *Trains We Rode*, p. 704.

³⁴E. R. Carlson, interview, 11 January 1971.

³⁵*Poor's Manual of the Railroads of the United States*, (New York: Poor's Railroad Manual Co., 1914), p. 1123.

³⁶*Moody's*, 1937, p. 768.

GOLDEN AGE OF THE ROCKETS, 1937-1959

The first sign of recovery to the financially plagued Rock Island came in May 1936 as John Dow Farrington became the chief operating officer. Farrington undertook a program for renewing the Rock Island. His program eventually pulled the Rock Island from bankruptcy to one of America's top railroads.³⁷ To the Rock Island and its employees, the hiring of J. D. Farrington would mark the beginning of a rebuilding program which would become known as "nothing short of miraculous."³⁸

The big story behind J. D. Farrington is that in 1937, with the economy picking up, he announced that the Rock Island had placed an order for new streamliners. The Union Pacific and Burlington had earlier received publicity for introduction of streamliners on their roads. Farrington used cash and equipment trusts in order to secure six passenger diesels and 20 stainless-steel streamlined passenger cars of various types.³⁹ The plan in January 1937 was to introduce the new trains by May 1937, but they were not put into service until September because of a steel strike.⁴⁰

The name Rocket was chosen for the new streamlined trains. These trains were completely new units, and the Rock Island did not intermingle standard passenger cars nor steam locomotives with Rocket equipment. The Rockets became known as the famous "Rock Island Rockets", and made the Rock Island Railroad, "Route of the Rockets." The name Rocket came from the name on the first locomotive ever to pull a train over the Rock Island on October 10, 1852.⁴¹

The Rockets had a tremendous effect on the employees of the Rock Island. "Many women and men still serving the railroad will remember what the advance of diesel operation did for the morale of all employees."⁴² The employees spoke with new life at the sight of the Rockets, and they

³⁷Hayes, *Iron Road*, (jacket).

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 236.

³⁹Hayes, *Iron Road*, p. 239-240, 205.

⁴⁰*Des Moines Register*, 29 January 1937.

⁴¹Hayes, *Iron Road*, p. 5.

⁴²"John D. Farrington Dies," *The Rocket*, XX (November-December, 1961), p. 2.

became excited about and proud of their jobs.⁴³

Rockets were put on display throughout the Rock Island Lines in August and September 1937, before they were put into service.⁴⁴ Also, tests were made on the Rockets. In one test a Rocket made a trial run between Minneapolis and Kansas City, reaching speeds of 104 m.p.h. "There were hundreds of persons at the Des Moines station for the five minute pause."⁴⁵

The equipment on the Rockets was modern and luxurious, and would be considered so even today. The first announcement of the Rockets in January 1937 described them as "being completely streamlined, air-conditioned, and ultra-modern in every respect."⁴⁶ The paint scheme on the locomotives was supposed to resemble a "Rocket", done by alternating streamlined bands of maroon and vermilion, "augmented by silver stripes." The passenger cars on the Rockets were of stainless steel and included both indirect and direct lighting. "They were air-conditioned and insulated to such an extent that the horn on the locomotive could not be heard when the train was running. The color scheme in the observation car was termed, 'beautiful and in good taste' by women on the train, Saturday."⁴⁷ The new Rockets could perhaps be best described by the following advertisement which appeared in the Rock Island timetable in July 1937:

Six new Rock Island Rockets, Budd built of stainless steel will flash across the Middle West with the speed and beauty of as many Fourth-of-July skyrockets! Most complete and distinctive fleet of Electro-Motive Diesel-powered trains ever placed in service—the crowning achievement of engineers experienced in the field of streamlined construction.

All of these trains—air-conditioned, of course—will be operated on daylight schedules—offering superb Coach, Parlor Car, Refreshment and Dinette service—at no extra fare.⁴⁸

Other descriptions of the Rockets included praise for the diner. "Most ultra touch of the new streamliners is the diner. All tables are covered with cellophane until passengers

⁴³Hayes, *Iron Road*, p. 239.

⁴⁴*Des Moines Register*, 12 September 1937.

⁴⁵*Des Moines Register*, 10 August 1937.

⁴⁶*Des Moines Register*, 29 January 1937.

⁴⁷*Des Moines Register*, 12 September 1937.

⁴⁸Rock Island Time Tables, 25 July 1937, p. 13.

sit down, despite dust-proof windows and an air-purifying system.⁴⁹

The first Rocket to be placed in service was the *Peoria Rocket* on September 19, 1937. The *Des Moines Rocket* was placed in service on September 26, 1937. Only three days later, the *Rockets* between Kansas City and Minneapolis were put into service. Unlike the Des Moines to Chicago and Peoria to Chicago runs, where only one train of four cars was used for the daily round trip, the *Minneapolis-Kansas City Rockets* were two trains of three Budd cars each.⁵⁰

The Rockets became one of the best investments that could be made. In ten years they returned \$46 million, or 734 percent on a \$6.6 million investment!⁵¹ Also pointing to the financial success of the Rockets is the fact that the first four paid for themselves in less than two years.⁵² The best paying one proved to be the *Des Moines Rocket* with \$.508 expenses per mile and \$1.385 net revenue per mile in 1939.⁵³ The Rockets found little but praise by the press, by those who rode them, and by almost everyone. Many of these favorable comments have been mentioned. Two more include, "It [*Peoria Rocket*] was a bright and beautiful thing to behold; it soared into prominence overnight."⁵⁴ "The Rockets have an individuality that highlights and glamorizes the road that operates them."⁵⁵

In 1938, despite the fact that the economy was down, a new Rocket, which would later become the *Texas Rocket*, was placed in service between Kansas City and Dallas.⁵⁶ There were also plans being made at that time to add a new streamliner between Chicago and Colorado to replace the *Rocky Mountain Limited*. The Rockets, especially the *Peoria* and *Des Moines Rockets*, had been so successful that there

⁴⁹*Des Moines Register*, 10 August 1937.

⁵⁰"Streamliners Roll up a Record," *Business Week*, no vol. (February 10, 1947), p. 49.

⁵¹William Draper, "The Rocketing Rock Island," *Railroad Magazine*, LVI (October 1951), 16.

⁵²S. Kip Farrington, Jr., *Railroads of Today*, (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1949), p. 245.

⁵³"Streamliners Roll up a Record," p. 49.

⁵⁴Hayes, *Iron Road*, p. 240.

⁵⁵Farrington, *Railroads of Today*, p. 245.

⁵⁶"Streamliners Roll up a Record," p. 49.

was little question in regard to the merit of adding a Rocket between Chicago and Denver. Thus, in 1939 the plans for the *Rocky Mountain Rocket* were being finalized. The new train would offer the only main-line streamliner service between Chicago and Colorado Springs. The new Rocket would be split at Limon with half of it going to Denver and the other part of it to Colorado Springs and Pikes Peak.⁵⁷ Before the new Rocket was placed in service it was put on display in major cities along the run. Despite the fact that the *Des Moines Rocket* had been running for two years, there was great interest in the *Rocky Mountain Rocket*. When the *Rocket* was on display one day in Des Moines in early November 1939, 8,000 people walked through it.⁵⁸ On November 11, 1939, the last *Rocky Mountain Limited* made its run.⁵⁹ The next day, the *Rocky Mountain Rocket* ran in its place. On the first day of service, a Sunday, 1000 persons came to the Des Moines station to watch the train come in.⁶⁰ The *Rocky Mountain Rocket* was in service for less than 30 days when it was already called a success.⁶¹

Other Rockets that were put into service in the early 40's included the *Choctaw Rocket*, running between Memphis, Tennessee and Amarillo, Texas, and the *Zephyr Rocket*, running between St. Louis and the Twin Cities.

The Rockets were indeed very successful. This country was just coming out of the worst financial disaster in its history when they were introduced. People were ready for new trains after using old ones for so many years. Also, the railroad did a lot to get the public enthused about them. They put the Rockets on display and encouraged the press to talk them up. Even though the *Des Moines Rocket* was the most successful of the early Rockets, the others were all good money makers, too. The Rockets were put into service, in part, to compete with rival roads. Also, the Rock Island needed new equipment, and fortunately Farrington had the foresight to order diesels and streamlined cars rather

⁵⁷Hayes, *Iron Road*, p. 242, 245, 248.

⁵⁸*Des Moines Register*, 10 November 1939.

⁵⁹Beebe and Clegg, *Trains we Rode*, p. 708.

⁶⁰*Des Moines Register*, 13 November 1939.

⁶¹Hayes, *Iron Road*, p. 246.

than purchasing steam locomotives and standard cars as a few railroads did while the Rock Island was acquiring its first Rockets.

One advantage of the Rockets was realized immediately; this was, of course, that the Rockets made for faster schedules. For one thing, since they were lightweight trains they were capable of speeds somewhat faster than the fastest steam-pulled standard train. Also, the Rockets did not stop at nearly as many stations as did the other trains. For example, between Mason City and Des Moines, the *Rocket* had no scheduled stops and only one conditional stop at Iowa Falls, while the next fastest train had one scheduled stop and three conditional stops between these points. The slowest train had ten scheduled stops between Des Moines and Mason City and seven conditional stops.⁶² Thus, the time of travel between two points was greatly shortened with the advent of the Rocket. Between Minneapolis and Kansas City the fastest train in 1937, before the *Rockets*, took 14 hours to make the trip. In 1942, the fastest train, other than a Rocket, made the trip in 12½ hours, while the *Rocket* made the run in nine hours.⁶³

There were other important trains running in the late 30's and early 40's in addition to the Rockets. The *Golden State Limited*, for example, though still running behind steam and non-streamlined,⁶⁴ was all-pullman. Included in its consist was an observation car featuring Ladies' Lounge, Shower-Bath, and Maid and Manicure service. The club car of the *Golden State Limited* featured such luxuries as a men's shower bath, barber and valet service, along with radio.⁶⁵ The *Californian* in the late 30's featured Stewardess-Nurse service. The Stewardess-Nurse was described in an advertisement in the timetable, as, "being a graduate nurse, she can act quickly and think correctly."⁶⁶ Rock Island evidently had great confidence in nursing schools! A dining car was also part of the standard equipment on the *Californian*, serving

⁶²Rock Island Timetable, Corrected to 22 November 1942.

⁶³RI Timetable, 1937, p. 20; RI Timetable, 1942, p. 20.

⁶⁴Beebe and Clegg, *Trains We Rode*, p. 700.

⁶⁵Rock Island timetable, 1937, p. 6.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, p. 16.

"Economy meals", with Breakfast only 25 cents, luncheon 30 cents, and dinner 35 cents.⁶⁷

The *Arizona Limited* came into service in 1940. This train was an extra-fare deluxe passenger train running during the winter for persons taking Arizona vacations. The *Arizona Limited* was an all private-room accommodation train with a deluxe dining car and a buffet-lounge observation. Extra fare on the train was \$6.00 between Chicago and Phoenix. The *Arizona Limited* was taken from service after only two seasons of use because of travel restrictions during the war.⁶⁸

In terms of the railroad's financial position, things began to look up in 1941 when the Rock Island showed its first net profit in 11 years.⁶⁹ Because of the war, however, little could be done to improve the passenger fleet between 1942 and early 1945. For example, in 1942, the Office of Defense Transportation began to restrict the selling of steel for streamliner cars. Thus, even though the railroad then had the money, they would have to wait until the end of the war before they could add any more streamliners.⁷⁰ Another effect of the war occurred in 1945 when a total of 14 sleeping cars on regular runs were taken off because of an Office of Defense Transportation Order of July 15, 1945. These sleeping cars were taken off in order to be used for military movement. To compensate for these losses, the Rock Island adjusted schedules in some cases. In one instance, between Chicago and Des Moines, the Rock Island added the *Des Moines Limited*, a train bound for Des Moines leaving Chicago in early morning. The equipment on this train included air-conditioned coaches, parlor and dining cars.⁷¹

By 1945, equipment was beginning to become more available, though still not plentiful enough to form a complete new train. Yet Farrington was becoming anxious to get another Rocket running between Minnesota and Texas, so he

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁶⁸Beebe and Clegg, *Trains We Rode*, p. 716.

⁶⁹Farrington, *Railroads of Today*, p. 95.

⁷⁰Hayes, *Iron Road*, p. 256.

⁷¹"Des Moines Day Train in Operation, Aug. 5," *Rock Island Lines News Digest*, IV (July 1945), p. 7.

put together as many streamlined cars as possible, and added a few standard cars to make up the new Rocket.⁷² The name *Twin Star Rocket* was adopted by this train in early 1946. The train derived its name from the two states the trains terminated, Minnesota, the North Star State and Texas, the Lone Star State.⁷³ The *Twin Star Rocket* became known for being the longest north-south train run in the country. The *Twin Star Rocket* became completely streamlined in 1948 when new equipment, including all-room sleeping cars, streamlined lightweight diners and new observation parlor cars, was added.⁷⁴



Courtesy of Paul C. Nelson

Southbound Twin Star Rocket at Iowa Falls

Another Rocket added in the mid-40's was the *Corn Belt Rocket* which made its first run between Chicago and Omaha on November 23, 1947. The equipment on this train included

⁷²Hayes, *Iron Road*, p. 260.

⁷³"Minnesota . . . Land of 10,000 Lakes," *Rock Island Lines News Digest*, V (July 1946), 8.

⁷⁴Farrington, *Railroads of today*, p. 247.

a dining car, parlor car, a parlor observation and reclining seat chair cars.⁷⁵

To top the list of post-war additions, Rock Island and Southern Pacific, in early 1946, jointly began planning for a new train to run from Chicago to Los Angeles. This train would be called the *Golden Rocket* and would operate on a tri-weekly basis, making the trip in 39½ hours. Two eleven car trains were ordered, and construction began in 1946. But suddenly, for some reason, Southern Pacific backed out of the plan and cancelled its order.⁷⁶

The Rock Island, then, hearing that the Southern Pacific was backing out of the plan, decided to refurbish the *Golden State Limited* with the cars that had been ordered for the *Golden Rocket*. Also, three, new, 4000 horsepower diesel-electric locomotives were added to the *Golden State Limited*. The name *Golden State Limited* was changed to the *Golden State* with the birth of this new, modernized, faster train. Its new schedule went into effect on June 2, 1946. This schedule took 49 hours from Chicago to Los Angeles⁷⁷ compared to 59 hours in 1942.⁷⁸ Some of the luxury accommodations on the new *Golden State* in 1946 was described thusly:

The new *Golden State* contains all the conveniences of first-class travel, with streamlined, lightweight sleeping cars. There are also lightweight reclining seat coaches with all seats numbered and space individually assigned.⁷⁹

The new *Golden State's* equipment also included two dining cars. One dining car included coffee shop service while the other was a standard diner. Other features of the *Golden State* in 1946 included barber and valet service, and lounge cars equipped with radio and reading material.⁸⁰ The new *Golden State* was successful as described by one source: "As a result of the new high speed run the *Golden State* is enjoying a heavy booking." Also, coach passengers stated that they were very pleased with the lightweight streamlined

⁷⁵*Des Moines Register*, 2 November 1947.

⁷⁶Arthur D. Dubin, *Some Classic Trains*, (Milwaukee: Kalmbach Publishing Co., 1964), p. 221.

⁷⁷"They're off," *R I Lines News Digest*, V (May 1946), 3.

⁷⁸RI Timetable, 1942, p. 8.

⁷⁹"They're off," p. 3.

⁸⁰"They're off," p. 3.

reclining seat coaches. They also praised the services of the coffee shop where popular priced meals and refreshments were provided for coach passengers. One person wrote after her first trip on the newly remodeled *Golden State* in 1946, "The personnel of the Rock Island are determined to make your trip a pleasant one and they have succeeded."⁸¹

Another major improvement in 1946 along the Golden State Route included the introduction of the *Imperial*, a third train for the route. This train went into service on October 6, 1946 and was added to provide additional coach and sleeping car accommodations. The schedule of the *Imperial* was designed to provide a convenient connection in Kansas City for travelers from Des Moines and the Twin Cities to California. The *Imperial* acquired its name from the Imperial Valley which the train crossed in southern California. On its route, the *Imperial* passed into Mexico, going through Mexicali, Calexico and El Centro. Among the equipment on the *Imperial* were special sleepers bound for Tucson and Phoenix.⁸²

The Rock Island was quite proud of their service on the Golden State route in 1946, and indeed they had reason to be. Both the UP-C&NW and the Santa Fe had numerous trains between Chicago and Los Angeles, and this undoubtedly was one of the reasons why they felt the need to upgrade service. Also, so much improvement came in 1946 because the war was just over. They not only could easily afford these improvements, but, also the equipment was available for improvements. The Rock Island described their service like this: "On these three trains, the *Imperial*, the *Golden State*, and the *Californian*, passengers have an outstanding selection, both as to times of departure and arrivals and types of accommodations they desire at various costs."⁸³

The decade of the 40's proved to be favorable to the advancement of Rock Island passenger trains. First, there was the *Rocky Mountain Rocket*, born on the eve of 1940. Other Rockets followed, including the *Twin Star Rocket* in 1945

⁸¹"Golden State Booked Solid on 1st High Speed Run," *Rock Island Lines News Digest*, V (July 1946), p. 3-4.

⁸²"Introducing the Imperial . . .," *RI Lines News Digest*, V (October 1946), 3.

⁸³*Ibid.*

and the *Corn Belt Rocket* in 1947. Many new cars were added to the Rockets during the late 40's. The Rock Island's financial position continued to improve in the 40's, evidenced by the fact that in 1948, the railroad emerged from bankruptcy.⁸⁴ The war provided for quite an increase in the use of Rock Island passenger trains also. For example in 1936, 1.7 million passengers, not including commuters, were carried.⁸⁵ In 1940, this figure was much the same, standing at 1.6 million. By 1942, largely because of the war, 3.8 million passengers were carried, and by 1944 the number was at a high of 6.6 million. By 1949, things were pretty much back to normal with 2.0 million passengers carried.⁸⁶

In the early 50's, the drive was on to eliminate steam locomotives from the Rock Island. The number of steam passenger miles vanished quickly in the early 50's. In 1951, 2.7 million miles of passenger trains were still pulled by steam. By 1952, this number had dropped to 530,000 miles⁸⁷ and by 1953 to 11,367 miles. By 1954 there were no passenger trains pulled by steam on the Rock Island.⁸⁸ After April 1952, very few steam locomotives were left, and none were left on regular passenger service. In early 1952 the only passenger trains still being pulled by steam were trains 6 and 9 between Des Moines and Chicago.⁸⁹

The Rock Island was willing to try new ideas and equipment as evidenced by their early retirement of steam locomotives. Another new idea was put into effect in 1952 when the Rock Island introduced the family fare plan available on all their passenger trains. Under this plan the head of a family traveling together payed one full fare and the other members traveled at $\frac{1}{2}$ fare. This plan was under experiment at that time and, according to Farrington, was tried in order to encourage a greater use of trains.⁹⁰

⁸⁴Jervis Langdon, jr., "Statement in relation to proposed Discontinuance," *ICC Finance Docket #26175* on trains 7 & 10 between Chicago and Council Bluffs, p. 4.

⁸⁵*Moody's*, 1937, p. 768.

⁸⁶*Moody's*, 1950, p. 393.

⁸⁷*RI Annual Report to the Stockholders*, 1952, p. 21.

⁸⁸*RI Annual Report to the Stockholders*, 1954, p. 21.

⁸⁹*Des Moines Register*, 19 March 1952.

⁹⁰J. D. Farrington, "To the Stockholders: CRI&P RR Co.," *Annual Report to the Stockholders*, 1953, p. 8.

This plan proved to be a success as in 1954, even though the plan resulted in a somewhat less gross passenger revenue, Farrington seemed pleased that it had attracted larger numbers of passengers who might have ridden other modes of transportation had it not been for the family plan.⁹¹ Thus, Farrington and the Rock Island were concerned about trying to get more people used to riding the train.

Farrington was not about to maintain trains that lost money, however. He made this clear to the stockholders in 1952, stating, "The program of eliminating unprofitable passenger train service, wherever permission could be obtained, continued through the year."⁹² So, even in 1952, the railroad was not about to keep any unprofitable trains.

Farrington was concerned, however, that the government had increased its use of planes in the transportation of troops in 1953. He said, "the use of non-scheduled air lines by the military for the transportation of troops is a matter of grave concern."⁹³ Farrington assured the stockholders he was doing everything he could to get the military to use trains as much as possible.

The announcement that a Talgo-type streamliner had been ordered was made by Rock Island in June of 1954. This new streamliner became known as the *Jet Rocket* and the nation's first Talgo-type, lightweight, passenger train created wide spread interest.⁹⁴ The *Jet Rocket*, when delivered in 1956, received almost as much publicity as the original Rockets had received when they were introduced in 1937. The first display of the *Jet Rocket* in Iowa was in February 1956 when 12,000 people toured the *Jet Rocket* in Des Moines. Even though it never ran to Des Moines on a regular schedule, there were plans in early 1956 for another *Jet Rocket* in the near future which would run between Chicago and Des Moines.⁹⁵

⁹¹J. D. Farrington, "To the Stockholders," *RI Annual Report*, 1954, p. 8.

⁹²*Ibid.*, p. 8-9.

⁹³Farrington, "To the Stockholders," 1953, p. 8.

⁹⁴Farrington, "To the Stockholders," 1954, p. 8.

⁹⁵*Des Moines Register*, 6 February 1956.

The *Jet Rocket* was built in 1955 by General Motors and was described as a "futuristic-looking" locomotive, and indeed it was. Since the *Jet Rocket* was so unique, it is interesting to note a few of the facts concerning it. The original ten coaches were entirely experimental and introduced a "low center of gravity" element to passenger cars.⁹⁶ The cost of the four car *Jet Rocket* was \$788,000. It was powered by a 1200 horsepower, 12 cylinder diesel which used only \$10 worth of diesel oil to run the 161 miles from Peoria to Chicago. It had a capacity of 308 passengers,⁹⁷ and the entire train weighed less than one-half that of the conventional streamliner of the same length.⁹⁸ The brakes on the *Jet Rocket* were an internal, expanding automotive type,⁹⁹ which incidently proved to be one of the problems with the operation of it.

There were several unique features of the *Jet Rocket*. One favorable aspect of the new trains was their ability to accelerate and decelerate rapidly and maintain high speeds on curves.¹⁰⁰ An unusual fact about the *Jet Rocket* cars was that they would "bend" as the train went around curves, because the cars had wheels in the center in addition to on both ends.¹⁰¹ Inside the cars, one person described the sensation of going from one room to another, unlike the "old-style" coaches with doors.¹⁰² Another very unique feature of this train was that a television camera was mounted in the locomotive cab, pointing directly ahead of the train. This camera transmitted to a 21 inch receiving set in the club car, permitting passengers to share the engineers view down the track.¹⁰³ This indeed would be a special treat.

The *Jet Rocket* made its first revenue run on February

⁹⁶"Aerotrains Presented to Museums," *The Rocket*, XXV (November-December 1966), p. 5.

⁹⁷*Des Moines Register*, 6 February 1956.

⁹⁸"Futuristic Train Finds a Buyer," *Business Week*, No. vol., (June 26, 1954), p. 76.

⁹⁹"Jet Rocket Is Previewed," *The Rocket*, XIV (June 1954), 4.

¹⁰⁰"Futuristic Train," p. 76.

¹⁰¹*Des Moines Register*, 6 February 1956.

¹⁰²"Jet Rocket is Previewed," p. 4.

¹⁰³*Des Moines Register*, 6 February 1956.

11, 1956, replacing the regular *Peoria Rocket*.¹⁰⁴ There was much favorable reaction to the new train. One would have thought it would last for decades. The Rock Island employee magazine boasted about the new *Rockets*: "The *Jet Rocket* was the *First*, low-slung extra-lightweight streamliner ever ordered by an American railroad."¹⁰⁵ I. C. Bruce, Rock Island traffic chief, said concerning the *Jet Rocket*, "There is no finer passenger rail service in the world than Peoria now has to Chicago."¹⁰⁶ Other comments regarding the train included one by Mr. Jenks, President of Rock Island: "It is our belief that this train will be able to re-educate the traveling public to the advantages of train travel, getting them off the jam-packed highways and into the worry free relaxation of a train."¹⁰⁷ This statement pretty well sums up Rock Island's attitude toward passenger trains in 1956. Rock Island was still absolutely convinced that fast modern trains could be run profitably on trips between two large urban areas, and were willing to try new ideas. Mayor Robert Morgan of Peoria said of the *Jet Rocket* — "The train should be one of the greatest reasons to bring people back to the rails — a transportation cheaper and safer than cars."¹⁰⁸ The Rock Island railroad was therefore very optimistic about the future of the passenger train with the introduction of the *Jet Rocket*. It was realized, however, that the future of such trains would depend on public acceptance. One reason Rock Island was so optimistic about the *Jet Rocket* was that "its lower cost to operate and maintain is expected to result in considerable savings. Public reaction to the trains has been immediate and favorable."¹⁰⁹ This writer feels that any railroad that could go to such great lengths by buying ultra-modern equipment in trying to attract passengers must have had some hope for the future of the passenger train.

The Rock Island had not originally planned on having a diner on the *Jet Rocket*. However, it did a survey on the

¹⁰⁴"Jet Rocket is Christened," *The Rocket*, XV (March 1956), 4.

¹⁰⁵"The Jet Rocket," *The Rocket*, XVI (February 1957), 2.

¹⁰⁶"Jet Rocket is Christened," p. 4.

¹⁰⁷"Birth of an Era," *The Rocket*, XV (February 1956), 10.

¹⁰⁸"Birth of an Era," p. 10.

¹⁰⁹Farrington, "To the Stockholders," 1955, p. 8.

Chicago to Peoria runs to try to determine what the reaction would be to having hostesses serve passengers snacks in their seats. Seventy-two percent of those interviewed wanted a diner and choice of food and only a few complained about the cost of food. Thus, the Rock Island changed its original intentions and placed complete dining facilities on the trains.¹¹⁰ This is still another example of how the Rock Island tried to serve its passengers in the best way that it could.

The introduction of the *Jet Rocket* was indeed an important and significant event for the Rock Island. As one writer put it, "The Rock Island can be known as a history of railroad 'firsts', but perhaps none as dramatic as the first *Jet Rocket* run."¹¹¹ Also, the *Jet Rocket* was described as beginning a revolution in American passenger train car designs with railroads and car builders seeking the answer to the ideal low-cost fast train.¹¹² Much time has been devoted to the *Jet Rocket*, yet it was such an innovating and publicized step for the Rock Island that this writer feels it deserves a lot of study when considering the rise and decline of the Rock Island passenger trains.

The *Jet Rocket* lasted for a much shorter time than had been expected. Its operating problems caused them to be taken off the Peoria to Chicago run on August 21, 1957; they were replaced by a regular Rocket.¹¹³ There were several problems involved with the *Jet Rocket* including the fact that the cars could not be interchanged with other passenger coaches, which in part made for time-consuming and costly switching. Special maintenance was also required for this train, which made for expensive repair problems. Also, at high speeds there was a high noise level, and the riding quality of the coaches was not good. The *Jet Rocket* was used in suburban service until 1965.¹¹⁴

Even though the railroad had lost its *Jet Rocket*, there were still some luxurious Rockets being run. For instance,

¹¹⁰*Des Moines Tribune*, 4 February 1956.

¹¹¹"Birth of an Era," p. 10.

¹¹²"The Jet Rocket," p. 2.

¹¹³"Peoria Rocket ties together Illinois' Two Largest Cities," *The Rocket*, XIX (May-June 1960), 4.

¹¹⁴"Aerotrains Presented to Museums," p. 5.

the railroad's top Rocket, the *Rocky Mountain Rocket*, was described as the "shining pride of the Rock Island Railroad." In the late 50's, this train ran with an average of 12 cars and 200 passengers.¹¹⁵ One comment from a passenger on the *Rocky Mountain Rocket* was, "outside, you're amazed to see how many people still come down to the depot, just to see the train go by."¹¹⁶

Further events affecting passenger trains occurred in the late 50's when the Transportation Act of 1958 was passed. This act was called a "bright spot" by President Jenks. The legislation was the result of a long struggle by the nation's railroads to change the Interstate Commerce Act. One feature of the new legislation was that the ICC became boss over state commissions in determining abandonment of losing passenger trains.¹¹⁷ This was an important step and should be considered when noticing any drop of passenger trains after 1958.

In March of 1958, the *Short Line Express* between Minneapolis and Kansas City was dropped from service.¹¹⁸ A train by this name had run since the early 1900's. The *Short Line Express* was not a very fast train and during its last years was basically a mail and express train. During the late 40's and early 50's, this train sometimes ran as many as three sections, especially during the Christmas season.¹¹⁹ The *Short Line Express* ran between Kansas City and Minneapolis in about 16 hours, while the *Twin Star Rocket* made the trip in only nine hours. Northbound, the *Express*, #16, made a stop of 3½ hours in Des Moines. The reason for this long stop might have had something to do with mail connections, but yet it seems that something could have been worked out so that the ridiculously long stop wouldn't have been necessary. Even as late as 1956 a three hour stop in Des Moines was made. Certainly very few people would

¹¹⁵"The Rocket to the Rockies," *The Rocket*, XVIII (September-October, 1958), p. 4-5.

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹¹⁷D. B. Jenks, "To the Stockholders," 1958, *RI Annual Report*, p. 5-6.

¹¹⁸M. H. Bonesteel, Director of Rock Island passenger services, Chicago, letter, 21 December 1966, to the author.

¹¹⁹E. R. Carlson, interview, 11 January 1971.

take the train all the way from Kansas City to the Twin Cities when one could leave Kansas City the next morning on the *Twin Star Rocket*, nine hours after the *Short Line Express* left, and still arrive at the Twin Cities 1½ hours sooner.¹²⁰ Trains 16 and 17 of the *Short Line Express* were fittingly referred to as the "dogs" by railroaders.¹²¹

In 1958, Rock Island was still trying to attract passengers. One step it made was to increase its sleeping and parlor car passenger business by cutting round trip fares 28 percent. The reductions were initially put in for nine months, "sufficient time to determine the public's reaction."¹²² One year later it was shown that these reductions were successful, as the reducing of fares had made for an increase of 25 percent in usage of passenger trains with a gain in revenue of 12 percent. Thus, in 1959 because of the previous success, Rock Island lowered coach fares by 22 percent.¹²³ The passenger train future looked good in 1958, according to President Jenks who noted that all Rock Island passenger trains, with one exception, showed an increase in revenues in 1958.¹²⁴

Another step taken by the Rock Island in order to try to entice more passengers was made in 1959 with the overnight sleeping car service introduced between the Twin Cities and Omaha, beginning in November. The railroad stated at that time that, "more cars will be added if public acceptance deems it necessary."¹²⁵

Another step regarding sleeping cars in the late 50's, was the decision for the Rock Island to take over sleeping cars which were previously operated by Pullman.¹²⁶ The only sleeping cars not affected were those operated jointly with the Southern Pacific on the *Golden State*. No reason was given for the change, but evidently the Rock Island

¹²⁰*Official Guide*, 1956, p. 953.

¹²¹E. R. Carlson, interview, 11 January 1971.

¹²²*Des Moines Register*, 19 December 1958.

¹²³"Fare Reduction Proves a Success," *The Rocket*, XVIII (November-December, 1959), 16.

¹²⁴"Lightweight Streamliners go into Suburban Service," *The Rocket*, XVII (November-December, 1958), 5.

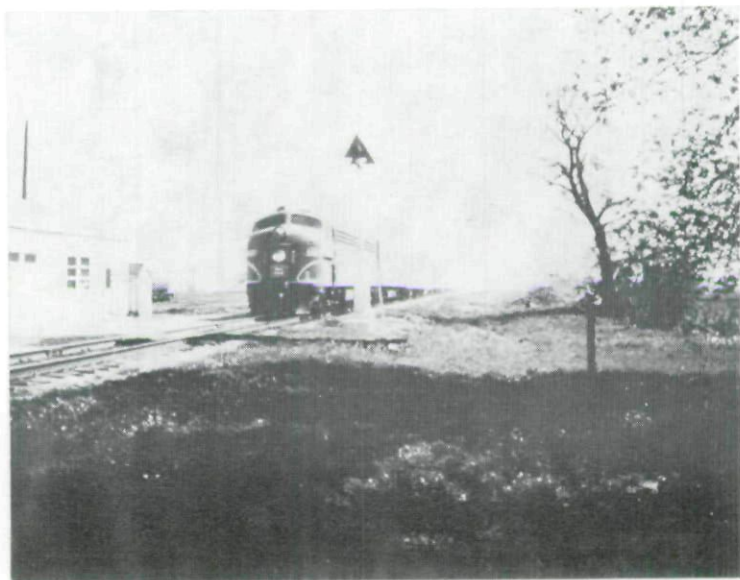
¹²⁵"Rock Island Sleeping cars have Twin Cities Travelers," *The Rocket*, XVIII (November-December 1959), 16.

¹²⁶D. B. Jenks, "To the Stockholders," 1959, *RI Annual Report*, p. 8.

and the Pullman company could not come to financial terms.

One occurrence on the *Twin Star Rocket* in 1959 showed that at that time there were still times when people would swarm to the trains. The following is a summary of what appeared in the *Des Moines Register*:

Nearly 1,000 persons tried to get on the *Twin Star Rocket* in Minneapolis, yesterday. About 900 managed to jam into the 16 cars on the *Rocket*. Aisles were packed and people were sitting on arms of coach seats. For the most part, it was an extremely large amount of holiday travel, which resembled war time traffic. The *Twin Star Rocket* usually has 400 people aboard 12 cars. The Rock Island was handicapped by a lack of extra equipment because five special trains had been formed to take people to the Rose Bowl. The Westbound *Rocky Mountain Rocket* will operate two sections out of Chicago Sunday and the Eastbound *Corn Belt Rocket* will operate two sections out of Omaha to take care of students headed back to college.¹²⁷



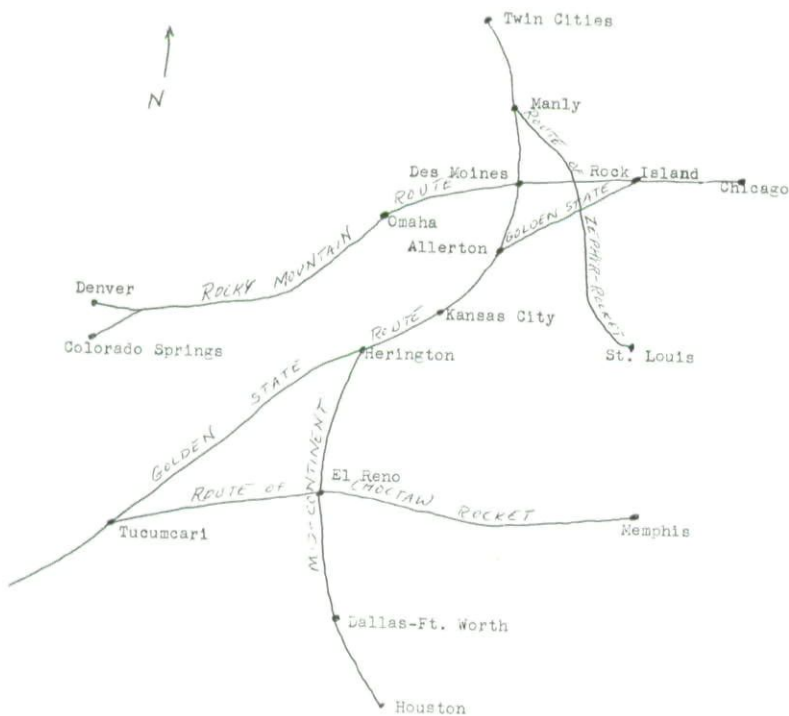
Courtesy of Paul C. Nelson

Northbound *Twin Star Rocket*, #18, at McCallsburg, Iowa.

Even though the 50's were years of transition for Rock Island passenger trains, they were not nearly as transitional

¹²⁷*Des Moines Register*, 3 January 1959.

Passenger Trains Operating on "Routes" of The Rock Island



as were the upcoming 60's as we shall soon see. Among the developments in the 1950's were the reduction of most mail-express-passenger trains that made stops at nearly every station. One such train was old train #9 between Des Moines and Chicago, stopping at 40 stations between these points compared to the five stops of the *Rocky Mountain Rocket*.¹²⁸ Also, most mixed trains and branch line trains were eliminated. In 1960, however, most mainline trains of reasonable speed were still running, and for the most part, still included plenty of extra equipment, such as lounges, full diners and the like. The *Jet Rocket* was, of course, the biggest news regarding passenger trains in the 50's. Even though it didn't succeed, it proved that rail personnel could still get excited about passenger trains. The number of passengers using Rock Island trains continued to drop, although there were, of course, fewer trains running by 1960. In 1949, the Rock Island carried 11.9 million passengers.¹²⁹ By 1955 that figure had dropped to 10.2 million passengers, and by 1960 to 8.6 million passengers.¹³⁰ During this same time, revenues per passenger train mile, not including mail or express, went from \$1.906 in 1949 to \$1.939 in 1960.¹³¹ This increase is undoubtedly reflected because of the elimination of many branch and mixed trains.

THE 60'S AND THE END OF THE ROCKETS

The 60's became significant in the decline of the Rock Island passenger trains, as by 1970 there were no longer any Rockets, and only a very few inter-city Rock Island passenger trains.

In August 1960, Rock Island announced its intention to take off its *Des Moines Rocket*, running from Des Moines to Chicago.¹³² The other train involved was train #1, running overnight between Chicago and Des Moines, carrying coaches only. Train #1 was not an especially likeable train for passengers, taking three hours longer for its run

¹²⁸Rock Island timetable, 1952, p. 14.

¹²⁹Moody's, 1950, p. 393.

¹³⁰RI Annual Report, 1955, p. 22; RI Annual Report, 1960, p. 20.

¹³¹Moody's, 1950, p. 393; Annual Report, 1960, p. 20.

¹³²Des Moines Tribune, 20 August 1960.

than did the westbound *Des Moines Rocket*.¹³³ The eastbound *Des Moines Rocket*, however, was the favorite train of many. It left Des Moines at 7 a.m., and arrived in Chicago in the early afternoon, making convenient connections with several east coast bound trains. Evidently this train was mainly for passengers and carried little mail or express, since Rock Island wanted to take it off. There was another passenger train running the same route eastbound, from Des Moines to Chicago, arriving in Chicago at 4:30 A.M. No mention was made of this train, however, so it seems the Rock Island was more interested in a mail train than in one of its "crack" passenger trains. There was a lot of publicity and dissension concerning the proposal to drop these trains, and there was concern about the possibility of delay of mail if train #1 was dropped. Some felt mail could be delayed by as much as a day if the train were dropped.¹³⁴ The Iowa Commerce Commission was very concerned about these trains, too. They ordered the Rock Island to continue operating the trains, though the Rock Island ignored the order. A district judge then ordered the Rock Island to resume operation until something could be worked out.¹³⁵ Rock Island then operated a connecting train leaving Des Moines at 5 A.M., and connected this train to the *Golden State* at Rock Island for late morning arrival in Chicago.¹³⁶ This temporary train did not last long, however, even though there was considerable argument on how much the railroad had done to attract passengers. The last trip out of Des Moines at 5 A.M. was made on February 3, 1961 with 15 passengers aboard.¹³⁷

The Iowa Commerce Commission was still not happy, saying that the temporary run should have been longer, as the trains didn't get a fair trial because they were not listed in the timetable, nor in the *Official Guide*. Also, other railroads were not informed of the trains' schedules.¹³⁸ The Commerce Commission did have a point there. It seems

¹³³Rock Island public timetable, 1959, p. 3,8.

¹³⁴*Des Moines Register*, 25 August 1960.

¹³⁵*Ibid.*

¹³⁶*Des Moines Register*, 16 August 1960.

¹³⁷*Des Moines Tribune*, 4 February 1961.

¹³⁸*Des Moines Register*, 12 January 1961.

that in this case, there was no effort on the part of Rock Island to attract passengers. Actually, it seemed like a definite discouragement by the Rock Island. Besides, who wanted to board a train at 5 o'clock in the morning? The Rock Island, however, didn't care for the temporary trains because they carried no express—none was available that early, and they carried no mail—the postal authorities didn't want to adjust mail routes for a temporary train.¹³⁹ The Rock Island put it simply enough, "Both the trial and the original trains were not bringing in enough money."¹⁴⁰ This was quite a ridiculous comment, however. Of course, the temporary trains wouldn't bring in much money if no one knew about them; they left at five o'clock in the morning, and carried no mail or express. This entire situation seems to be a turning point in the attitude of the Rock Island management. Prior to 1960, no Rockets had been taken off, and few had been downgraded, and most trains that had previously been taken off were obvious money-losers. The *Des Moines Rocket*, however, was a "crack" train, loved by many. It has been on occasions like this that the public has lost confidence in the railroads and their desire to run passenger trains.

However, neither the railroads nor the Rock Island can be totally blamed. After all, the facts are that railroads make much more money on freight traffic, and it was even stated in 1960 that the railroads hadn't made money on passenger business since 1946.¹⁴¹ The railroads are not government run or subsidized, so thus, they must try to make as much money as they can in order to be a successful private corporation. Very few people who complain about the discontinuance of passenger trains would want the trains to run if they themselves were paying for the operation of the trains.

There was still a certain amount of pride shown by the Rock Island in 1960 towards its passenger trains. This was shown by an article describing the careful treatment and cleaning given the *Peoria Rocket*. "Mopping and washing of the cars is done each night in the Peoria layover, as well

¹³⁹*Des Moines Tribune*, 1 January 1961.

¹⁴⁰*Des Moines Tribune*, 4, February 1961.

¹⁴¹"Pa\$\$enger\$?" *Newsweek*, LVI (September 12, 1960), 79-80.

as the cleaning of the outside of the cars." The Rock Island was proud of its *Peoria Rocket*, and the train did have certain things in its favor. One favorable aspect of the train was its speed. It made the run from Chicago to Peoria in 2 hours, 45 minutes, (and still does) which is faster than the airlines when downtown to airport time is considered.¹⁴² It is trains like these that should be promoted, because if they can beat the airlines, they have a chance of emerging successfully.

But even in the 60's, Rock Island was still experimenting with fare reductions in order to increase patronage. Beginning July 1, 1961, Rock Island started honoring coach tickets in parlor cars, on an experimental basis. Because of this drop in fare, parlor car patronage went up 27 percent.¹⁴³ Another fare reduction of the 60's occurred in early 1965 when Rock Island introduced "Monday through Thursday" fares. Under this plan a 25 percent reduction was given to passengers traveling on those days.¹⁴⁴

[To be continued]

MRS. HAROLD AVERY DONATES LUCAS TREASURE TO DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND ARCHIVES

by Linda K. Thomson

On Thursday, May 27th, Mrs. Harold Vincent Avery, of Nevada, Missouri presented to the Department of History and Archives a daguerreotype of Gov. Robert Lucas, the first Territorial Governor of Iowa. This was indeed a momentous occasion as the daguerreotype is the only known one of its kind in existence and had been given to Mrs. Avery by her grandmother, Carolyn Susan Cramer, a direct descendant of Abigail Lucas, Governor Lucas' sister. Mrs.

¹⁴²"Peoria Rocket Ties two Cities," p. 4.

¹⁴³R. E. Johnson, "To the Stockholders," *R.I. Annual Report*, 1962, p. 7.

¹⁴⁴*Des Moines Tribune*, 11 January, 1965.

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