

The Great Rock Island Route

Throughout the years the Rock Island has had (and still has) more through-passenger trains going in more directions in Iowa than any other railroad. With Des Moines as the hub, trains radiate in all directions. "The Great Rock Island Route," as the road was called, meant just that to Iowans.

A glance at the timetable during the palmy days of 1927, when America was riding the crest of prosperity, reveals a profusion of named trains. Going east and west through Des Moines was the *Rocky Mountain Limited*. Linking Chicago with Denver and Colorado Springs, it carried a full complement of Pullman accommodations along with "Barber and Valet Service." For passengers going from the Windy City to San Francisco there was the *Colorado Express*, with through sleepers in conjunction with the Denver & Rio Grande-Southern Pacific route beyond Denver.

North and south, the *Mid Continent Special* backed into the busy Des Moines station just before midnight on its way north and shortly after midnight on the trip south. While the city slumbered, the red brick depot was agog with activity. The *Mid Continent* carried sleepers between the Twin Cities and Dallas and a 12 section drawing

room and compartment car from Minneapolis to Los Angeles via Kansas City. There were also set-out Pullmans for Des Moines and Kansas City. In addition, the *Firefly* and the *Short Line Express* were likewise popular coach and Pullman trains shuttling between Minneapolis and Kansas City via Des Moines.

The pride of the road, however, was the much-publicized *Golden State Limited*, which cut across Iowa from Davenport to Allerton on its way between Chicago and Los Angeles. Operated over the famed "Golden State Route" in conjunction with the Southern Pacific west of Santa Rosa, New Mexico, the crack train was advertised as "extra fare, extra fine." It featured the plushiest and most luxurious Pullman accommodations from Chicago to Los Angeles, along with sleepers for San Diego and Santa Barbara. For folks of modest means there was *The Apache*, a secondary train to Los Angeles, consisting of standard and tourist sleepers and coaches.

The Rock Island spelled travel and romance to many a boy, but to none more so than to James Norman Hall. The man who co-authored *Mutiny On the Bounty*, and other adventures of the high seas, found as much enchantment down at the Colfax depot in his teens as he did in later years while living in Tahiti. Hall, who was an airplane pilot in World War I, yet never drove an automobile, loved trains. In his autobiography, *My Island*

Home, he tells about his nocturnal escapades in riding to Grinnell:

Number Six was due at Colfax at 10:45 P.M., but a good five minutes before that time it appeared around the curve westward, at the top of the Mitchellville grade, six miles away. The headlight proclaimed the glory of its coming, and the first faraway whistle was like a call to adventure in the summer night, sending shivers of delight up and down the spines of three of us more than ready to respond to it — Buller Sharpe, "Preacher" Stahl, son of the Methodist minister, and myself. Number Six took water at Colfax, and we waited beneath the water tank about fifty yards past the end of the station. We would hear the fireman climb onto the tender and pull down the iron spout with the canvas nozzle attached; then silence, save for the plash of water pouring in and the gentle yet powerful breathing of the engine. Presently up went the spout, spilling the water remaining in it onto the ground just beyond where we were concealed. Then came the "high-ball" — the most stirring of signals — two short sharp blasts of the whistle. Peering out from behind the post supporting the water tank we would see the conductor swinging his lantern from the station platform. The fireman gave a pull at the bell rope; the great wheels began to move, and at the first mighty "hough!" of the engine we skipped out, leaped on the pilot — or "cowcatcher" as it is called by the uninitiated — and vanished into the pool of darkness just beneath the headlight.

A letter from a Rock Island official to "The Mayor, Colfax, Iowa" informing him of the "confirmed pilot jumpers," put an end "to those wonderful journeys." But Hall to the end of his life never ceased to have a fondness for railroads,

especially the Rock Island. In his book *Under A Thatched Roof* he has a fine essay on "Trains" with nostalgic references to his boyhood on the Rock Island's main line. Again, from an earlier volume, *On the Stream of Travel*, one learns of his informal education imparted by wandering vagrants, traveling hoboes and other "itinerant professors" as they sojourned at Colfax between trains.

The Rock Island has been celebrated in story, song, motion picture and drama until it has become an institution in Iowa. Phil Stong's homespun novel, *Village Tale*, has its setting along the Keokuk and Des Moines Division. A little local train, called the "Kaydee," runs through the story as a quaint fixture in the life of the rural community. Who has not heard *Rock Island Line* ("is a mighty good road"), an old Negro work song, in its spirited recordings?

In the realm of motion pictures, *Rock Island Trail* recounts the building of the railroad westward. It was released by Republic Pictures in 1950 and is based on the historical novel, *A Yankee Dared*, by Frank J. Nevins. Far more popular, however, is the motion picture, *The Music Man*, starring Robert Preston and Shirley Jones. It will be recalled, the inimitable "music man" came to River City (Mason City) on a Rock Island train to peddle his "seventy-six trombones" and to organize a town band. The Warner Broth-

ers picture was the outgrowth of a Broadway hit of the same name written by Meredith Willson, who was born in Mason City. Great pains were taken in filming the picture to make the "River City" depot look like its prototype in Mason City as it appeared around the turn of the century.

Many people in Iowa remember the excursion trains which the Rock Island ran for various public functions. On the "Pea Vine," as the Decorah Branch was locally known, there were special trains to the horse races at Independence. Racing enthusiasts came on excursions from many parts of the Midwest to Charley Williams' kite-shaped track in Rush Park. Here some of the Nation's swiftest pacers and trotters raced on the "Fastest Track on Earth." Conductor R. C. Hubler recalls the exciting days when trainloads of passengers came up the branch to see the world-famous harness horses vie for rich prizes.

Excursions are rare today, with the exception of football extras, which still bring record crowds to Iowa City. When Iowa beat Wisconsin in 1960 the Rock Island ran four, long specials carrying a total of 3,516 people. They came from Des Moines, Manly and the Quad Cities, handling the mass movement smoothly and without strain. Going to and from the game by train is still a tradition for three generations of football fans and old grads.