

The Road of Orange Trains

The harvest orange trains of the Milwaukee blended in well with the billowing fields of tall Iowa corn. Other roads, in sober contrast, had passenger equipment of an orthodox pullman green serving the state. But the Milwaukee was as distinctive in color as it was independent in management. For over a half century it operated its own sleepers, whereas nearly all the other lines contracted with the Pullman Company for such equipment. Apart from this, the Milwaukee built many of its own locomotives; and its Pacifics and Northerns are a legend to this day.

Excluding the North Western, the trains of the Milwaukee were the only ones crossing Iowa on double track most of the way. The high iron between Chicago and Council Bluffs always commanded a goodly amount of freight going through the Omaha gateway. While for many years the North Western was the Union Pacific's preferred passenger connection, the Milwaukee had one or more trains with through equipment to the Pacific Coast for at least fifty years. There was a time, also, when the Union Pacific shifted its crack *Overland Limited* to the road with the orange trains east of Omaha.

During the heyday of passenger service, the colorful Milwaukee cars blanketed Iowa. For a road which bypassed most of the larger cities in the state or served them by branch lines, the Milwaukee had an amazing lot of through coach and sleeper routes. In addition to the solid trains to the West Coast via Omaha, the once-popular line of the *Southwest Limited* accounted for many passengers through the Kansas City gateway. Up until the Milwaukee built the Kansas City Cutoff, all Chicago-Kansas City trains went via Cedar Rapids. With the advent of the Cutoff, the shorter route through southeastern Iowa was used. Even so, for several years an "Iowa Section" of the *Southwest Limited* carried a sleeper between Cedar Rapids and Kansas City.

Very popular around the turn of the century were the "Personally Conducted" Judson Tourist Cars, which were operated on Thursday and Saturday westward, and on Monday and Wednesday eastward, through Iowa. They were through sleepers from Chicago via Kansas City to Los Angeles, Santa Barbara, and San Francisco, over the Missouri Pacific, Rio Grande, and Southern Pacific railroads. The berth fare, Chicago to West Coast points, was only \$7.

Among the standard through sleeping car runs, long since abandoned, was the Chicago-Twin City service via Savanna, Illinois, Dubuque, and Calmar. Dubuque, now without north and south pas-

senger trains, was once an important center for rail service up and down the river on the Iowa side. The city was favored with a set-out sleeper from Chicago, along with a sleeper to Rapid City, South Dakota, via North McGregor (now Marquette) and the Iowa & Dakota Division.

The yellow and red timetable in 1909 indicates an equally strange "buffet sleeper" from Rapid City to Minneapolis via Calmar; and another from Rapid City to Chicago via Dubuque and Savanna. For some reason through sleeper service from South Dakota points — as well as from the Twin Cities — to Chicago did not use the line by way of Prairie du Chien and Madison, Wisconsin, until the 1920's. But when the Madison line became an accepted route Dubuque, as far as the Milwaukee was concerned, regressed to a community with infrequent branch-line coach-service until all the road's passenger trains were removed.

Elsewhere in Iowa, sleepers rolled over the prairies on now forgotten routes. One could get a berth at Union Station, Des Moines; and in the course of the night he would be taken up to the main line at Madrid, thence westward to Manilla, from whence he would travel the branch to Sioux City, arriving at the latter community in time for breakfast.

For day coach riders there was through service between Minneapolis and Mason City via Austin, Minnesota. Although there were faster and more

comfortable limiteds on the Rock Island linking the Twin Cities with Cedar Rapids, the Milwaukee had a through coach between the two destinations. Leaving Minneapolis, the orange car went through Cresco and Calmar; and after a detour westward to Jackson Junction, it meandered southward on a circuitous course via Delaware and Monticello, finally arriving at Cedar Rapids twelve hours later.

On a humid summer day when it was sweltering in Des Moines, a relaxing ride on the observation lounge or dinner in the buffet was a part of the fun in going up to the Okoboji-Spirit Lake region for a weekend. But long before through service was featured between the Capital and Iowa's two great lakes, the Milwaukee sought to make Okoboji a fashionable and popular summer resort. Indeed, the Milwaukee and the Rock Island pioneered in advertising the two lakes and in making them readily accessible to Iowans. By low fares, frequent excursion trains, steamers on the lakes, and luxurious hotels, the railroads gave the initial impetus to the lovely region which later came to full fruition with wide-spread use of the automobile.

Since the Rock Island more or less preempted the Spirit Lake section, the Milwaukee concentrated its efforts on the Okoboji area. At a point known as Arnolds Park, where East Okoboji meets the waters of West Okoboji, the road built a 50-room inn. Called *Hotel Okoboji*, the impos-

ing 4-story structure stood beside the little depot. It had a restaurant and ballroom facing the lake, and it was regarded as a choice spot for dining and dancing in that vacation country.

Even before the Milwaukee financed the hotel, the road exploited the lakes with a palatial 80-foot steamboat christened *Ben Lennox*, in honor of an official of the company. She was built in 1884 on the lakeside at a cost of between \$6,000 and \$7,000. With the possible exception of the Rock Island's *S. S. Queen*, the *Lennox* was the largest and finest boat on the lakes at that time. For years the two railroads sought to outdo each other in providing attractive rail service to the region, in maintaining the most luxurious steamers on the waters, and in the finest accommodations in company-sponsored hotels.

Besides the "railroad boats," smaller craft maintained scheduled sailings from points on the lakes to connect with the Milwaukee trains at Arnolds Park and those of the Rock Island at Orleans and West Okoboji. For several decades it was a common sight to see long lines of orange day coaches lined up in the Okoboji region as excursion trains, run in sections, puffed along the branch. Waiting boats were always on hand to take passengers to resorts, camps, and picnic grounds, for which the locale was famous.

Although *Hotel Okoboji* was burned in 1911, having been in use for about a decade, and the *Ben*

Lennox was run by the railroad for only a few years, the Milwaukee continued to haul trainloads of vacationists until motor vehicles became commonplace. Even then, parlor cars and buffet-drawing room-observation units were still an added attraction on the branch when such vehicles had been removed from other secondary runs.

Without doubt, the strangest national convention for which the Milwaukee unwittingly helped to provide transportation was that of "hobos in Britt." The idea of a national assemblage of hobos stemmed from the curiosity of T. A. Potter, a local businessman. He heard of a conclave of tramps in Illinois and wrote them, half-seriously, that Britt would make an admirable locale for a national hobo convention. The idea gained momentum, and Potter was made Britt's first member of the "Order of the Honorary Sons of Rest," identified by a membership button for "Tourist Union No. 63." E. N. Bailey, editor of the *Britt Tribune*, joined Potter in promising a carload of beer and food to sustain up to five hundred tramps. It was pointed out that fast freight trains barrelled through the town on the Milwaukee's main line from Chicago to Rapid City; and that convenient north-and-south service was provided by the Minneapolis & St. Louis Railway.

The happy world of trampdom responded with enthusiasm at the prospect of free lodging, free "grub," and most of all free beer. Britt set August

22, 1900, as the date of the convention and waited to see what would happen. They soon found out, as tattered delegates alighted from box cars of every train a day or two before the meeting. But the grand officers of the hobo association came in one of the Milwaukee's own orange sleepers, which was set out at Britt on the morning of the convention. Most of the conventioners, however, came by "side door Pullman," "riding the blinds" of passenger trains, or the "rods" of freights.

It was estimated that 250 bona fide delegates, ranging from "society" tramps to genuine hobos, attended the convention. Onlookers and town folk accounted for about 5,000 more people. Ample lodging was provided at the fair grounds, where the Weary Willies were housed in hog and cattle pens provided with clean, straw bedding. Chicago, St. Louis, and Twin City newspapers sent reporters to cover what is said to have been Iowa's first national convention.

The convention was well-behaved, considering the nature of the guests, and it gave nation-wide publicity to Britt. Very few delegates overstayed their welcome, for they promptly left town after the meeting. The next day saw Milwaukee freights carrying more than their usual quota of transients as police and trainmen graciously looked the other way. For one time, at least, they were acknowledged guests of the Milwaukee Road, as they had been of Britt the previous day.

To modernize its service through Iowa in the years preceding World War II, the Milwaukee added the *Midwest Hiawatha* to its growing fleet of streamliners in 1940. The sleek, new train with its Tip Top Tap Dining Car and beaver tail observation lounge created a sensation. It operated between Chicago, Sioux City, and Sioux Falls, with an Omaha section via Manilla.

Branch lines, on the other hand, often saw small, more economical motor units replacing steam trains where passenger service had not been already discontinued. Friendly "doodlebugs," as they were nicknamed, continued to link countryside and town. The late Robert S. Cooper, Sr., who for seventeen years was a brakeman on the "motor train" between Cedar Rapids and Ottumwa, recalled the esteem in which railroaders were held by local people. His most poignant memory was the generosity of the thrifty Germans from the Amana colonies at Christmas. They would appear at the rural depots with savory hams, delicious wines, and gifts for the crew. "If those folks took a liking to you," Cooper remarked, "there's nothing they wouldn't do for you."

The familiar orange trains, however, began to thin out as automobile, bus, and plane competition became more pronounced. Then, a few years after 1955, when the Milwaukee officially changed its color to yellow, only the main line to Omaha, and the branch to Sioux City, retained passenger service within the state.