

Railways and Folkways

It would be a mistake to limit an examination of the role of the M & O to its commercial aspects only. By its very nature the railway, up to World War I and possibly a decade thereafter, played an important part in the American scene and in rural folkways. Being community-owned and as close to public-operated as a private line could be, the M & O was the subject of Manchester's personal and friendly interest. Every week the little road's timetable would appear in the *Press* and the *Democrat*. At the end of the "ad" was that magic sentence: "Through tickets sold to all points in North America."

To be sure, its little engine pulling a lone coach or a brace of cars could not compare to the Illinois Central's Ten-Wheelers or powerful Pacifics. Nor could the M & O boast of Pullmans, diners, or brass-railed observation units. And it did not have the spit and polish of the IC's *Hawkeye Limited* or even *The Clipper*. But every local citizen blessed the fact the M & O ran almost to the corner of Main and Franklin — right in the heart of town. It connected with almost everything on rails at Oneida. It brought all the circuses to Manchester. It ran picnic trains and

county-fair specials, and excursions for the asking. It brought the mail from every direction. It had W. C. Beeman at the throttle, Harry Purvis "firing," and Lee Burbridge punching tickets, and the jovial Major running the whole business. What more could the community ask?

Since the road allowed each voter two free round-trips, nearly everyone in Manchester had had a train ride. When it came to promoting rail travel, the M & O was second to no other short line of comparable size. Hardly had the line commenced operation when it advertised a one-day excursion, on August 22, 1901, to Monticello. The trip featured a through train ("no change") in conjunction with the Milwaukee Road for \$1.25. Apparently that was a success because it was followed by another special a week later to Anamosa, ten miles further down the line. Four cars were ordered for the latter run.

Not to be outdone, the Great Western soon joined the M & O in the excursion trade. For 85¢ a head (children half-fare) the M & O-CGW teamed up to run an excursion without change to Dubuque, stopping only at Oneida and Almorat, on October 12th. Headquarters at Dubuque were at St. Luke's Church, where dinner was served for 25¢. Two Sundays later the Maple Leaf Route announced a special to Chicago for \$3.00, round-trip. The papers recorded 160 excursionists on the M & O-CGW odyssey.

Although diesels and air-conditioning were unknown, train travel had tremendous appeal. It opened new vistas and afforded much fun. With a shoe-box lunch, the whole family embarked upon a trip of high adventure. Windows open wide, one relaxed on big red plush seats without a care except for some cinders and an occasional bee. On the way home the Pintsch lamps gave a dim religious ray, which was just as well, for then the streaks of soot on Junior's Sunday shirt and sister's oversize hat were not so noticeable.

In winter the coaches might be drafty, but the pot-bellied stoves at either end were hot and glowing. If eating in the diner could be afforded, that was sheer paradise. Moreover, the Great Western specialized in "European Plan Meals," giving the most for the money and accenting both quality and quantity. For excursionists there was the train butcher who dispensed coffee, sandwiches, cake, and candy along with worldly wisdom. If prospects of an excursion looked lucrative, the hawker might even "work" the train both to and from Manchester. And there were the Pullmans. To the uninitiated and stay-at-homes, a Pullman ticket was regarded as the hallmark of an experienced traveler. Even the M & O boasted of a Pullman and a smiling dusky porter when it organized its annual winter tour to Los Angeles. Going via the Great Western to Kansas City, thence over the Sante Fe, it was a so-

cial event of note. For one day a year at least, it gave the M & O greater stature and class.

By 1905 catering to excursionists had become big business on this little railroad. The M & O advertised a ten per cent discount on round-trip fares to all stations on the Great Western within 166 miles, good for thirty days. With equal zeal the papers plugged the \$49.00 round-trip specials to Portland, Oregon, and the Ladies Aid Society's ice cream social at A. Hoag's in Oneida on Saturday, August 5, 1905: "Everyone Invited." The M & O had a 25¢ round-trip rate for the social.

Homeseekers and investors were invited to sign up for the "Canadian Excursion" to the Milestone district and eastern Assiniboia area, up in the "No. 1 hard wheat" country. The tariff: \$24.25; "Pullmans extra." The date: August 15, 1905. Then on the 29th J. A. Strickland, land agent, and the M & O-CGW got together with a "big special, after harvest excursion to South Dakota" leaving Manchester depot at 4:45 p.m. The tab: \$15.16, plus a dollar a day for tourist sleeper.

August was Fair month, too; and it featured extras to these popular functions. There was the State Fair at Des Moines with the CGW cooperating, and the Anamosa District Fair in that community with the Milwaukee quoting low rates. In addition, there was the National Encampment of the G. A. R. in Denver, August 30th to Sep-

tember 4th. The Great Western was in on that, and ever-ready to sell tickets, at a nominal fee, in conjunction with the M & O.

Cold weather saw end-of-the-year campaigns to woo passengers with "Winter Vacation Week End Rates" to Waterloo, Dubuque, and Chicago over the Great Western at "one way fare for the round trip." The CGW-M & O also "pushed" its budget plan (not less than 75 miles or over 150) travel at the rate of 1-1/3 fare for the round trip. The *Delaware County News* of December 13, 1905, advertised a similar rate for distant points for "students and teachers" during the Christmas and New Years holiday season "on presentation of certificate from Miss Amy Boggs, Superintendent of Schools, Manchester, Iowa."

"Best of all," recalls C. J. Boardway, "were the one-day jaunts up to Strawberry Point. We'd run right through, stopping only long enough to get clearance on the Milwaukee at Oneida Jct. and put white flags (signifying an extra train) on the engine. A Milwaukee engineer would ride in the cab as a 'pilot,' although our men knew the way almost as well as he."

On these occasions the old wooden open-platform coaches would be swarming with picnickers. Upon returning to Manchester the cars would be hurriedly cleaned of peanut shells, popcorn, and paper for the next day's service. Often there were beer bottles and sometimes a flask, but for

the most part the excursions were orderly and neighborly. "You'd have to watch out for the youngsters, though, with those open platforms," observed Boardway. "We tried to keep people inside the cars, but you know how it is with kids. Still, we never had an accident of any consequence."

Another source of revenue, more or less peculiar to the M & O, was the circus trains. In yesteryear nationally-advertised circuses included the smaller cities on their circuits. When they came to Manchester, they came "M & O." Running within a block of the Fair Grounds, the road was a must for the "big top." None, however, put on a better show or drew more people than did Hagenbeck & Wallace in 1915. Boardway remembers that outfit distinctly on account of its size and the trouble the road had in getting it in one day and out on the next.

"It came in four sections," he recounts with the measured words of one who had supervised its movements. "We used our two locomotives to double-head one section, and the Milwaukee loaned us six engines to take care of the other three. Every available track, from the 'doubling spur' at the top of the hill at Oneida, to 'Hockaday's,' near the middle of the line, not to mention the Quaker Mill siding, was chuck-full of cars. As for the Manchester yards . . . shucks, they couldn't hold more than a fraction of the circus.

Why, we had an overflow on our main track extending half way through town. There were elephants, clowns, 'barkers' and circus paraphernalia all over the place." When asked about regular operation Boardway grinned, "We simply announced 'all trains annulled account of circus.' People understood. Nobody wanted to travel anyway; they were all at the circus!" The veteran traffic manager never said truer words, for Hagenbeck & Wallace drew about 9,000 people, the largest single assemblage ever recorded in Manchester.

On another occasion a circus special came to an unscheduled stop in the open country on the M & O. When no flagman hurried back to protect the rear, the circus trainmaster became alarmed. "Where's the flagman," he shouted, "the limited will plow into us." By the time Boardway got around to quieting the distraught trainmaster, others in the crew had told him, "There isn't any limited; your train is the only one on the line."

So much of an institution had the road become that Harry Utley called his new eating house on South Franklin (now occupied by Kephart's Pool Hall) the "M & O Restaurant." Though Captain John F. Merry, the general immigration agent for the powerful Illinois Central, was indubitably the town's "biggest" railroad officer and man of parts, Major Carr, more often than not, stole the

show. The latter had a folksy, dramatic way of recounting his experiences as a grass-roots railroader at Chicago traffic meetings and in the legislative halls of the ICC in Washington. He liked to tell the way some of the statesmen would become patronizing when they found out he represented an 8-mile line. With all the skill of an experienced raconteur he would retort: "The Manchester & Oneida may not be as long as other roads, gentlemen, but it's just as wide." The anecdote was told by short liners all over the country. Chairman Carr never claimed it had originated with him. He had used it, however, merely as a telling yarn, which it was.

If Manchester began to take the road for granted, there were circumstances which brought it into the limelight and made the town very much aware of its railway. One such event was the blizzard and the coal shortage in February, 1936. The temperature dropped to 20° below during what the Federal Weather Bureau reported as the longest cold wave in Iowa since 1819. Coal dealers found their yards practically empty, with railways and highways completely blocked. A severe fuel shortage threatened unless the blockade could be broken quickly. The M & O responded with forty men to clear the line. They worked day and night, shoveling, plowing and ramming the dry, packed snow. The windswept cuts on the Hakinson, Lindsay, and Cox farms, where snow banked

higher than at any other points, were the crucial tests. The men shoveled on, then stood aside to let the locomotive charge its metal-sheathed pilot against the drifts — more shoveling — another onslaught with wide-open throttle and drivers spinning. A foot or two, maybe five or six if they were lucky, and the process was repeated. Finally they got through to Oneida, where seven coal-filled gondolas (from the Great Western) awaited them. The *Manchester Democrat-Radio* subsequently recounted the feat under the heading "M. & O. Railway Saved the Day."

The role of a railroad in forming a small community is admirably illustrated in the birth, rise, and decline of Oneida. That hamlet came into existence because it was at the intersection of the Great Western and Milwaukee railroads. With the coming of the M & O, the junction grew in importance, and Oneida prospered. From the time the little road first linked up with the Great Western, the two carriers had a joint agency at Oneida station. The Milwaukee had its own depot south of town, but one could easily walk from the CGW-M & O station to Oneida Junction, as the Milwaukee called its stop. If necessary, the local drayman would assist in the transfer. At any rate, M & O trains pulled up to both depots and had car interchange by connecting trackage.

In the heyday of railroad travel Oneida was a busy spot with two operators, each working a 12-

hour trick at the CGW-M & O station, and one at the Milwaukee. Charles Kimber, retired joint agent at the former depot, remembers selling as much as \$1,200 worth of passenger tickets in a month. He likewise recalls the time when he flexed his muscles on some 50 loaded milk cans each day, for transfer from Manchester. The station never had eating facilities, but the nearby Ferris Hotel served good meals and took care of many a traveler who missed connections.

"Entering Manchester the back way" or "by the back door," was the expression used for coming into town from Oneida on the M & O, but it was far from an unpleasant experience. Ruth Suckow, the novelist who writes so feelingly about Iowa and Iowans, vividly recalls entering Manchester this way as a child. "The very small coach going through the wide farm country in the late afternoon," she reflects, "seemed very special to a girl of thirteen."

Largely because of its importance as a railroad transfer point, Oneida's population grew from 75 in 1900 to 200 by 1910. At its zenith it boasted two grocery stores, a bank, creamery, drugstore, blacksmith shop, livery stable, hardware store, pool hall, church, and hotel, together with a jeweler and a barber. In more leisurely days passengers waited for trains by strolling down to Plum Creek and watching the farm boys fish for bull-

heads, or sauntering up to the village to get a cool refreshing drink at the town-pump.

Oneida flourished because of the M & O. When the railroads largely gave way to the automobile for private transportation and partly to the truck for local and long distance hauling, Oneida declined. Finally, when the M & O ceased operation, Oneida retrogressed to a point where she was before Major Carr had brought in his railroad. Today the community has a combination store and post office, a church, a consolidated school, and a rest home. Its population has dropped to 75. Both the Great Western and the Milwaukee railroads have withdrawn all passenger trains. No longer are there agents, for both depots have been razed; not even a siding or interchange track remains. Now six-unit diesels pulling 150-car freight trains on the Great Western go by without stopping, and local freights on the weed-covered tracks of the Milwaukee pass by, too — without stopping.

But Manchester is only fifteen minutes away by automobile or truck.

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