

NRHS Activities in Iowa

Aside from issuing a monthly periodical, the Iowa Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society sponsors trips. These excursions have covered many out-of-the-way places in Iowa. They have opened to the public, if only for a day, branches and short lines which have not seen passenger service for years. They have brought visitors from all over the nation to see Iowa and her railroads.

From 1953 to 1958 the Chapter sponsored forty trips. Some were conducted on a charter basis, others made use of regular trains. A few have been on mixed trains, and one or two featured caboose operation. Their participants have ranged in number from a scant dozen to 500. Their friendly informality has drawn "outsiders," who have come for the ride with no particular interest in railroading. Often visitors are amused by leisurely schedules, frequent halting for picture stops, and use of equipment something less than modern. But they soon learn this is characteristic of railroad fans. When long stops are made to inspect roundhouses and terminals, they read their copy of *Life* or the *Post*.

The first trip in July, 1953, brought a turnout

of 140, representing fourteen states, including New York and California. They came to ride the Fort Dodge, Des Moines & Southern, one of the last of about a dozen interurban lines still operating in the United States. For a day Boone became a mecca for traction lovers. At 9 a.m. a special three-car electric train left town to cover most of the railroad. Hardly had the special got under way when it stopped so that delighted fans could photograph it crossing the high bridge north of Boone. And so it went all the way to Fort Dodge. Then the excursionists were taken to Webster City, which had not seen riders on the line since passenger service was discontinued in 1921. The day was hot, but with windows open and soft drinks provided gratuitously by the trolley line everyone had a good time.

Doubling back from Webster City, the special went to Evanston Junction, where it was shunted south to Lehigh. Here passengers were given a miniature drainage pipe manufactured in the nearby kilns. On the return run the party made a side trip to Rockwell City. The Milwaukee Road had obligingly taken a small steam engine out of its roundhouse there so it could be photographed. The old locomotive and a stub switch at Gowrie proved to be the major attractions and accounted for many a roll of exposed black-and-white, color, movie, and still film.

The train arrived in Boone three hours behind

schedule, but nobody cared. How could they? They were the ones who made it late. Among the visitors was Rogers E. M. Whitaker, an editor of *The New Yorker* and dean of American railroad fans. He has ridden every mile of line having passenger service and came that day to "pick up more mileage which could not otherwise be covered." Another rider was A. J. Olmsted of Arlington, Virginia, a retired associate curator of the Smithsonian Institution. He recounted how his father, a North Western fireman, had met his death when a pilot engine fell through the flood-weakened Honey Creek bridge near Boone in 1881. This was the time the celebrated Kate Shelley crawled along the storm-swept right-of-way and saved a following passenger train.

For scenery and comfort the outing on the Milwaukee's Cedar Rapids-Calmar train in November, 1953, had much to commend it. The railroad added one of its luxurious Hiawathatype, air-conditioned coaches that day. The run in Fayette and Winneshiek counties is among the prettiest in Iowa and ideal for picture-taking. As an added attraction, the crewmen permitted hobbyists to ride in the engine-cab, two at a time. Fortunately, a couple of overalls were brought along, and the fans took turns in wearing them. Although the jumpers were several sizes too large, Mrs. Floyd Parker, an avid Newton fan, did not miss out on this feature of the trip.

In 1954 the most successful trip was the Webster City-Alden run over the North Western. It had all the requisites for the fans: steam operation, an itinerary covering two branch lines, plus a "branch on a branch," and antiquated, turn-of-the-century equipment. The result was a sell-out.

About two hundred were on the June excursion, which started at Webster City, on the road's north-and-south line running through the center of Iowa to Des Moines. The special went south to Jewell; thence east on the Wall Lake-Tama branch to Eldora Junction. From the Junction the train wended its way over the little-used route to Alden. West of Iowa Falls the light, 54-pound rails followed the scenic Iowa River. The special included a baggage car (for refreshments and lunch concessionaire), four superannuated ex-Chicago commuter cars, and one air-conditioned coach. The railroad decorated the baggage car with historic pictures of the Iowa Division and blueprints of the original line as proposed in 1880. To heighten this period-picture, an old Stanley Steamer met the train at Owasa station.

The air-conditioned car was for those who liked their history in comfort rather than in vintage rolling stock. It was also used by the railroad men to whom the run was just a day's work. But the air-conditioning broke down in the "luxury coach," and its occupants sweltered in the air-tight vehicle. Those in the outmoded cars, on

the other hand, enjoyed a refreshing breeze through open windows.

The banner year for excursions, however, was 1955. That period marked eleven successful trips. It also witnessed the biggest turnout in the Chapter's history. This all-time high came about through another North Western special. It featured the run from Tama to Eldora Junction, thence a repeat of the 27-mile branch to Alden. The outing had all the characteristics of an old-fashioned train ride at the time an automobile was a novelty.

The "Big Steam Passenger Excursion" sponsored by the Iowa Chapter, NRHS, with the collaboration of the State Historical Society of Iowa, had eight cars; and all were packed. The train stopped at every station so local riders could be picked up along the route. As the handbill described the rail ramble, there were "Many Photo Stops — Lots of Smoke," also "Sandwiches — Soft Drinks — Candy On the Train." Prospective passengers were adjured to act quickly: "Steam Passenger Trains are History. This May Be the Last."

About five hundred crowded aboard. At every stop townsfolk surrounded the train. People who had not ridden the line in decades climbed aboard to relive an experience they had not had since childhood. At Gladbrook, thanks to the promoting of A. C. West, publisher of the *Gladbrook*

Northern, 75 people boarded the coaches. Twenty-five Eldora Boy Scouts made the round-trip to Alden.

High point of the tour was the half-hour stop at Conrad. Here 300 excursionists swarmed into the Franzenburg Smokehouse for a complimentary roll of bologna. The meat plant had estimated only a modest give-away, and had wrapped samples accordingly. When the whole train disembarked at the smokehouse, all hands were hard put to keep up with the crowd. Only when the last engine-whistle tooted did the meat packers relax — and wonder if the plant would still operate at a profit that month.

The State Historical Society also helped to publicize the Chapter's "Indian Summer Special" from Ottumwa to Indianola and return in October, 1956. The jaunt boasted of a venerable 4-6-0 type engine manufactured by Rogers in 1892. It is the oldest locomotive in limited service on the Burlington line. Passengers were entreated to "get a deep breath of good old coal smoke once more" as this would "positively be the last steam passenger train in the state." The four-car special made a fast run on the Burlington's main line to Chariton, thence up the 30-mile branch to Indianola.

When it was learned that the Burlington planned to abandon a 26-mile segment of its Keokuk-Humeston Branch, the Chapter officers

planned a commemorative last day excursion. So did the Wayne County Historical Society. The Iowa Railway Historical Museum also participated. (All NRHS trips since 1958 have been sponsored jointly with the Museum.) The three groups cooperated to make the last passenger train between Centerville and Corydon a gala affair. Actually, the diesel-powered train rattled on to Humeston, but the Centerville-Corydon section was the part to be scrapped and the reason for the special trip. When the four-car excursion left Centerville, March 22, 1958, it had about 100 comfortably-seated participants. When it reached the end of the line 426 were aboard and packed like proverbial sardines.

At Promise City a parade and band met the train. The star attraction in the parade was eighty-six-year-old Mrs. Iona Robertson, who rode up to the depot in her carriage. She had ridden the line in 1879, when it was opened, and wanted to ride the last train before it closed. West of Promise City a hold-up was staged and the train "looted." Another delegation and band greeted the special at Corydon.

Riding on fan trips is fun, but for those who plan and execute them it is a headache. Railroads understandably want to make a special train pay, or at least meet out-of-pocket expenses. To do this they set up a minimum. But a \$1,000 minimum to a chapter with about 100 members is a

lot of money. Then the underwriters of a trip have to put up with the possibility of rain or a slow advance sale of tickets. This causes sleepless nights for Chapter officers. Occasionally a special run can be cancelled in time to avoid a thumping deficit. More often it is too late to do anything — the trip must go on.

Other things militate against special trains. Frequently passenger cars have to be "deadheaded" hundreds of miles to the locale of an excursion. Then, if the extra train crosses a division point, another crew must take over, even if it only goes a few feet on the second division. Again, there are the full-crew laws. Most trains have a minimum of five men, although four or even three may suffice to do the work adequately. Finally, some railroads are not interested in borrowing equipment or otherwise going to the trouble of scheduling a special passenger train.

Trolley lines by their very nature are more readily equipped to run extra cars and special trips. For this reason the Chapter has had many enjoyable outings over the Waterloo, Cedar Falls & Northern, the Fort Dodge, Des Moines & Southern, and the Charles City Western. One by one, however, these interurbans have "gone diesel." An exception is the latter road, although at this writing its sole passenger car is out of repair and may not be put in running order again.

There is, nevertheless, one bright spot in the

realm of Iowa trolleydom. This, as we have seen, is the friendly little Southern Iowa Railway, an "operating appendage" of the Iowa Railway Historical Museum. Each year a half dozen fan trips are run for the faithful. And each season sees stimulated interest, which bids well to make the "Route of the Trolleys" an operating rail-mark for Iowa and the Midwest.

Railroad fans look for the novel, the strange and even the bizarre. Give them a caboose to ride, and they are as happy as millionaires of yesteryear riding private railroad cars. Besides, cabooses are plentiful, whereas "varnish" cars are not. In view of this situation, it is not hard to promote a caboose trip, provided a railroad is willing. An informal excursion of this nature was held on the Wabash from Bluffs, Illinois, to Keokuk in 1954.

The North Western went even further. It tied on four passenger cars and an extra caboose to its time freight running through Iowa's midriff from Eagle Grove to Elmore, Minnesota. Moreover, it was doubleheaded with steam! About 185 people made the run one rainy April day in 1955, including some 50 Boy Scouts.

From freights it is a step up to mixed trains. Instead of a shabby way-car bringing up the rear of the Burlington's "mixed" on the Fort Madison-Bloomfield run one balmy summer day in 1955, there was a string of clean, well-filled coaches.

About 140 passengers enjoyed the scenic hill section in the southeastern part of the state. It likewise featured steam: the historic Ten Wheeler No. 637, equipped with a diamond stack.

There is one type of motive power almost overlooked. It is the rail motor car, once a familiar sight on many an Iowa branch line. To include such an item in the Chapter's trips, the first excursion of 1959 ran on the Burlington's Creston-to-St. Joseph, Missouri branch. It featured the regular motor car operating on the line, along with a trailer, to provide extra accommodations for the fans. Despite an unexpected snowstorm which blocked the highway, the run was made on schedule. It was the last motor car operating in Iowa; the train has since been discontinued.

If it runs on rails — passenger train or freight, mixed or motor, steam, electric or diesel on main line or branch — the Iowa Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society has ridden it.

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