

Way of the Zephyrs

The *Zephyr* saga goes back to 1933. Its principal actors were a railroad president, a manufacturer, and an inventor. Ralph Budd sought a fleet of light-weight, internal-combustion trains to reduce expenses and win back passengers from the highways. (Budd had experience with diesel-electric power units in building the Cascade Tunnel when he was with the Great Northern.) He gave Edward G. Budd, Sr. (no relation), of Philadelphia's Budd Manufacturing Company, a carte blanche to build such a unit. And he left it up to Charles W. ("Boss Ket") Kettering, General Motors vice president of research, to design the engine. Thus it came about that the two Budds and Boss Ket evolved America's first diesel-powered streamlined train. It was out-shopped on April 7, 1934, and two days later made a shake-down run over the Reading Company rails from Philadelphia to Perkiomen Jct., about twenty-five miles.

In the words of David P. Morgan, editor of *Trains*, the creation "was like nothing else on rails." From slanted nose to rounded solarium-lounge, the bantam-weight, snake-like train tipped the scales at 97½ tons. The three-unit job was

articulated, thereby having only four trucks instead of the normal six. The lead car, powered by a 600-h.p. diesel generator set, was the "working unit." It also had a Railway Post Office and mail storage compartment. Next came a combination baggage-express, buffet-grill and coach unit. Finally, there was the coach and observation-lounge car at the end of the silvery streamliner.

Indirect lighting, pastel shades of pleasing gray and green, silk drapes, air conditioning, carpeted floors, radio reception, trays for meals while seated, made it so far removed from the orthodox day coach or pullman as to seem almost preposterous on any railroad. Apart from this, it was the first stainless steel train. Unorthodox, new, daring, little wonder Boss Ket characterized Budd, who sparked the idea, as "a very nervy railroad president."

The little streamliner was called *Zephyr*, the Greek personification of the West Wind. Much to the amazement of a Chicago columnist, Budd explained the derivation of the word and nonchalantly quoted a passage from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* which he deemed especially appropriate. The *Zephyr* soon took off on a five-week barnstorming tour of the East before the acid test: a 1,000-mile non-stop run on the "Q."

Budd, for all his modesty and engineering exactness, had a bit of showmanship in his make-up. He and his associates set out to really dramatize

the new train. The *Zephyr* would make a dawn-to-dusk run without a stop from Denver to Chicago, where, as a grand climax, it would be on hand for the reopening of the Century of Progress.

Once committed to the idea, Budd never faltered. The day before the run an inspector discovered a cracked armature bearing in one of the *Zephyr's* traction motors. Mounting tension was temporarily released by an unusual phone call from a Denver newspaper editor. He asked Vice President Edward E. Flynn if he could bring along a Rocky Mountain canary as a gift to the Century of Progress.

"What's a Rocky Mountain canary?" queried Flynn.

"A burro."

"A what?"

"A donkey, a small one."

Flynn was nonplussed. He contacted Budd and received the now classic reply.

"Why not? One more jackass on this trip won't make any difference!"

That evening Ralph Budd went on the air before a nation-wide radio audience and announced "Tomorrow at dawn we'll be on our way!"

By this time a new armature had been discovered in the UP's Omaha shops, and it was being flown by chartered plane to Denver. It was, however, en route when Budd was at the "mike." In fact it did not arrive until after midnight.

Scheduled to leave at 4:00 a.m. on May 26, the *Zephyr* did not get under way until 5:05 a.m. Ahead lay a 1,015.4-mile route. This was less than the regular run, for a short cut into Iowa was made by using the Plattsmouth bridge instead of going via Omaha and Council Bluffs. As a precaution against accidents, a flagman was stationed at each of the 619 private roads, and two men at each of the 1,070 grade crossings. In switchshanty lingo, "The *Zephyr* was given the railroad."

Speed was moderate at first so the new bearing would not run hot. Later on the train averaged 90 miles an hour. Then it was revved up to 106.2. Top speed was 112.5 m.p.h. Budd was exultant, as were all the other road's officials on the epoch-making ride, not to say members of the press. But their hopes were soon dashed. A short circuit, caused by a slammed steel door, burned out the engine starter cable. The train slowed down to a mere 15 m.p.h. At this point a courageous mechanic grabbed and held the ends of the wires together, and with a flash, the engine started up. The man's hands were burned, but the streamliner did not stop.

Later the prolonged blowing of the horn for crossings reduced the air pressure to where the brakes were automatically set. Again the train was about to halt. A quick-thinking technician, however, jammed the throttle wide open. The

motors pulled against the brakes and speeded up the air pumps fast enough to supply more air. The brakes finally released as the streamliner zoomed ahead.

The train dashed across Iowa, going through Burlington like a flash. At 7:10 p.m. the *Zephyr* broke the timing clock tape at Halstead Street, Chicago, making the run in 13 hours, 4 minutes, and 58 seconds. It was a world's record for a non-stop run. Soon afterward the party, including the donkey, rolled onto the stage of the "Wings of a Century" at the Century of Progress Exposition.

The pioneer *Zephyr* went into revenue service between Kansas City, St. Joseph, Council Bluffs, Omaha, and Lincoln on Armistice Day, 1934. By this time the Union Pacific had two aluminum non-diesel streamliners on the rails. But they were still on tour, thereby making the Burlington's tri-state run the nation's first streamliner in revenue operation.

After that came a rash of lightweight streamliners gliding over the Burlington. The next train of this type in Iowa was the *Mark Twain Zephyr*. As its name would suggest, the train ran through Samuel Clemens' home town of Hannibal, Missouri, on its 217-mile run between St. Louis and Burlington. The four-car articulated unit began operation October 28, 1935.

Meanwhile, management was thinking of a gen-

uine long-distance streamliner with full pullman, dining, and coach facilities. The remarkable Hudson-type steam locomotive at the head end of the *Aristocrat* did a splendid job. With coal and water stops, the *Aristocrat* took 28 hours and 40 minutes to make the Chicago-Denver trip. Could the run be sliced to 16 hours? Budd and his colleagues thought so. The goal became a reality with the inauguration of the *Denver Zephyr* on November 8, 1936. Actually, there were two 10-car trains having non-articulated locomotives, with up to five times the horsepower of the original *Zephyr*. And they ran the gamut of accommodations, from reclining coach seats to open-berth and private-room sleeping accommodations. (For the record, it may be added that while the deluxe long-distance streamliner was in the process of construction, the original *Zephyr* equipment was run on the 16-hour schedule as a forerunner of what was to come, as well as to protect the mail contract.) Four years after the Denver streamliner went into service the road put in operation its *Ak-Sar-Ben Zephyr* between Lincoln and Chicago.

The first north-and-south stream-style train to go from border to border in Iowa was the *Zephyr-Rocket*, a joint Burlington-Rock Island creation. It entered service between St. Louis and the Twin Cities on January 7, 1941. That part of the run north of Burlington was over the Rock Island.

Iowa had to wait until the end of World War II for more "Q" streamliners. During the summer of 1947 the road put in effect what was a form of commuter *Zephyr*. Leaving Hannibal, Missouri, at 5:50 a.m. and calling at Quincy, Keokuk, Fort Madison, and Burlington, it gave patrons of the river communities a chance to reach Chicago before noon. Returning, the mini-"light-weight" departed from Union Station at 6:15 p.m. and finished up at Hannibal by 12:40 a.m. Later that year saw the *Nebraska Zephyrs* gliding across Iowa on their daylight runs between Chicago and Lincoln.

But the road's flagship, "America's most talked about train," was in the works. First, however, some background history. With the formation of a shorter route through the Rockies via the Moffat Tunnel and the opening of San Francisco's Golden Gate International Exposition in 1939, a new travel market beckoned. The one through sleeper on the old *Overland*, jogging along on its 80-hour schedule from Chicago to the West Coast, was pitifully inadequate. So the collective heads of the three interested roads, viz, the Burlington, Rio Grande, and Western Pacific decided to "do something." They came up with the *Exposition Flyer* on a 60-hour "transcontinental schedule." Mostly steam powered, it had standard equipment, was air-conditioned, and featured economy meals as low as 90¢ a day. It was popu-

lar in peace time and infinitely more so during the war years. Later on, after the conflict, it boasted of coast-to-coast sleepers. East of Chicago transcontinental pullmans were handled to and from Gotham on alternate days via the New York Central's *Commodore Vanderbilt* and the Pennsylvania's *General*.

Success of the "Expo" convinced management that the time was ripe for the grandest, most luxurious streamliner to polish the rails of the three component roads. The tab was approximately \$15 million. For that money the roads got six 11-car streamliners. Each train was amply supplied with five of the new Vista Domes. Meals of culinary splendor were made by reservation—no waiting. A pretty and efficient hostess, known as a "Zephyrette," was on beck and call to minister to the travelers' needs. Called the *California Zephyr*, the train was a success from the start. Time and again the "CZ" established new highs in occupancy, and for the first 10-year period it operated at 89.4 per cent of capacity.

FRANK P. DONOVAN