

Exit the Passenger Train

In this era of the motor car and airplane it is easy to forget the once-important role the railroad played in many hundreds of Iowa communities. The passenger train was often the only link with the outside world. Dakota City, for example, is a little way station, the second town west of Eagle Grove, where shops and offices of the former Northern Iowa Division were located. In the 1920's it had four daily passenger trains including Nos. 24 and 25, the "Flyer." The Flyer not only covered the 145-mile branch from Eagle Grove to Hawarden, it went east to Chicago and west to Huron, South Dakota.

For a branch line, the Flyer was quite a train. Pulled by a high-stepping Atlantic-type engine with a United States mail car behind the tender, it usually had a brace of express cars, a baggage car, a smoker and two chair cars, followed by one or two Pullmans. That was the first train west. Basil W. Koob, who started railroading as a clerk at Dakota City station, recalls the hard work required at train time.

There was often a traveling salesman or two, and when I saw them I knew there would be a lot of excess baggage on that train. They always had big, heavy trunks carry-

ing their wares, which were drayed to local hotels. Every hotel of any consequence had a "sample room," where drummers displayed their merchandise. It was up to me to check all the baggage for excess weight (over the 150-pound maximum) and load it back on the train again when the "traveling men" left town.

More arduous labor followed when the way freight clanked into town between 9 and 10 a.m. It first halted for water, Dakota City being the only water-stop between there and Eagle Grove. When the train finally pulled up to the depot the conductor swung down from the caboose with a fist full of waybills. As Koob relates:

The usual routine was to begin from the rear car, just in front of the "crummy," and work toward the engine. We unloaded every conceivable size and description of merchandise and foodstuffs, including fruit, vegetables, fresh meats, canned goods . . . even machinery. That took from a half to three quarters of an hour. Then the "peddler" whistled a reply to the conductor's "highball" and the cars rumbled by, leaving a pile of assorted merchandise on the platform.

Afternoon brought the locals, one east, the other west. This meant issuing tickets, mostly to way points, and checking baggage. Later in the day the erratic eastbound "peddler" showed up. Along between 8 and 9 o'clock in the evening, tickets would be sold and space confirmed for the Chicago-bound Flyer. That popular train operated over three branches via Eagle Grove, Jewell, and Tama, thence on the main line for its early-morn-

ing arrival in the Windy City. Saturday was "stock day," and livestock trains kept the rails polished through early Sunday morning.

The decline of passenger business started with the short-haul rider. Most Iowans felt that the main line's streamliners on the North Western were an institution here to stay. It was a glamorous era that would never end.

One could stand in Clinton and watch the parade of yellow cars go by, starting at 7:02 in the evening and continuing until almost midnight. There were seven trains, beginning with the streamlined *City of Denver* and ending with the quite orthodox steam-operated *Gold Coast*. The streamliners had new roomettes along with open sections, drawing rooms and other customary sleeping accommodations. All West Coast-bound "City" trains were streamliners usually featuring valet service, barbers and radios. Most of them also had baths.

Even secondary trains had unusual attractions. The *Los Angeles Limited* and the *San Francisco Overland* boasted of through sleepers from New York City to the Pacific Coast, in conjunction with the Pennsylvania and the New York Central. The former also had through Pullmans from Washington, D. C., via the Pennsylvania. Apart from this there were other through-car routings of long standing from the Twin Cities to the West, in collaboration with the Omaha Road. Indeed, *The*

Nightingale and *The North American* were both crack "Omaha" trains with sleepers to and from Los Angeles. They were popular with retired Minnesotans, who fled from zero climes to spend the winter in balmy southern California.

By 1955 trans-Iowa service was trimmed to five Chicago-to-the-West through trains in each direction. The airplane had taken its toll, as had stiff competition from the luxurious *California Zephyr* on the Burlington-Rio Grande-Western Pacific route and accelerated schedules of the Santa Fe's smart streamliners. Moreover, dissension between the Union Pacific and the North Western did not help matters. The former was not satisfied with the service given east of Omaha; and the latter wanted a bigger division of revenue to help underwrite high Chicago terminal expenses. The outcome of the quarrel made headlines in the Midwest and rated columns in *Time* and *Newsweek* when the Union Pacific announced that on October 30, 1955, it would switch its through trains between Omaha and Chicago to the Milwaukee Road.

The North Western countered by advertising three new streamliners, two of which would cross the state, to substitute for the withdrawn trains. One was the *Corn King*, an overnight train having coaches, sections, roomettes and bedrooms, together with a diner-lounge. The other, called *The Omahan*, consisted of coaches, a parlor car with

drawing rooms, and a dining car on its daylight run. A third train, running between Chicago and Boone, was appropriately named the *Kate Shelley*. It featured modern coaches, a parlor car and a diner-lounge on a fast afternoon and evening schedule.

The new trains were not profitable, and service soon deteriorated. The *Kate Shelley* was cut back to Marshalltown, then to Clinton. Pullmans were shed from the night train, and the parlor car and diner withdrawn from the Omaha day run. On May 15, 1960, passenger trains between Clinton and Council Bluffs made their final runs. Meanwhile, the Omaha Road had already ceased carrying passengers between the Twin Cities and Council Bluffs as of October 25, 1959.

Today the North Western does not have a single passenger train in Iowa save for a few hundred feet where the *Kate Shelley* comes into Clinton from the east. Moreover, North Western mail and express service in Iowa is a thing of the past; and what little less-than-carload shipments remain is only of an interstate nature.