

## Heyday of the North Western

Here and there along the main line of the North Western in Iowa one sees faded, weatherbeaten signs warning enginemen to "R. S. 70," that is, reduce speed to 70 m.p.h. They are unheeded today, for the top speed is 60 miles per hour and if a freight exceeds that limit, the automatic train control will bring it to a stop. At the same time, these signs are a reminder of the long, colorful era when the North Western was the great speedway between East and West.

Presidents and visiting nobility, immigrants and millionaires, tourists and business men — indeed, people from every corner of the globe sped across Iowa on their way to and from the fabled West. Fast mail trains kept the rails hot. Solid "consists" of express, chartered trains of the rich, extra sections and extra trains with rattan seats for homesteaders or the most luxurious appointments for those of means, shuttled across Iowa. It was a grand cavalcade, a spectacular cross section of America and a fair sampling of visitors from every civilized nation. It is safe to say that, while it lasted, more people from more places rode the North Western across Iowa than any other transcontinental rail route in North America.



From the start the North Western fought aggressively for United States Mail contracts. Its races across Iowa in competition with the Burlington were classic. While the Burlington is credited with having the first railroad car for sorting mail in transit, it was the North Western which had the original Railway Post Office unit as we know it today. The specially designed car made its initial run between Chicago and Clinton in 1864.

There was magic in the very name FAST MAIL. It called for the swiftest engines, the most skilled "throttle artists" and a clear track all the way. Everything "went in the hole" for the mail. So spectacular was the flight of the mail that in 1899, when the North Western cut nearly two hours from its Chicago-Omaha run, the popular *McClure's Magazine* ran a lead feature about it. Written by Cleveland Moffett, with W. D. Stevens detailed to make on-the-spot drawings, the story related the struggle between the North Western and the Burlington for the "million dollar mail contract." The run across Illinois and Iowa was characterized as —

the hottest, maddest part of its sweep between the oceans . . . where level ground and keenest competition offer such a spectacle of flying mail service as has [never] been seen before since letters and engines came upon the earth.

The article was appropriately called "At Ninety Miles an Hour." At that time the North West-



ern's *Fast Mail* left Chicago at 10 p.m. and arrived in Omaha at 8:15 the next morning.

To further speed the mail the North Western took delivery of six American-type locomotives, outshopped by Schenectady in 1899. They had 80-inch drivers and wagon-top boilers with 2,353 square feet of heating surface. Another half dozen 4-4-0's with 75-inch drivers and 2,508 square feet of heating surface were part of the same order for heavy passenger train use. *The Railway Gazette* described them as having "the largest boiler ever used with an eight-wheel locomotive" and having "practically the same heating surface as the new Atlantic type locomotives of the Burlington."

The Burlington's answer to its rival was two 4-4-2's, alluded to above. Built by Baldwin, they had high,  $84\frac{1}{4}$ -inch drivers and a total heating surface of 2,500 square feet. The *Gazette* characterized them as "the largest engines of this type so far built." These Vaucrain compounds, with curious English-style six-wheel tenders, proved a marked contrast to the more orthodox American Standards on the North Western. The new motive power served to intensify the keen competition between the two railroads, and items on "the fast mail" often made newspaper headlines.

In 1869, when "The Overland Route" to California was first opened, the North Western in conjunction with the Union Pacific and the Central Pacific was the first to send a train from Chicago



to the Pacific Coast. It was also the first to operate dining cars over the route.

For variety of food, few restaurants anywhere came near offering the bountiful selection featured on the Pullman Hotel Cars. In June, 1877, for example, there were six kinds of steak on the menu, including venison. Besides such prosaic meats as chicken, chops and cutlets, one could get pheasant, snipe, quail, plover and duck. Seven varieties of oysters were offered and four of clams. There were in addition several kinds of fish, along with cold plates of turkey, lobster and potted game. Nearly a dozen vegetables were included, and the relishes numbered sixteen. Some twenty desserts were listed, including pastries, cakes and fruits.

For over a half century one train became a distinguished symbol of the North Western-Union Pacific, Southern Pacific route to the coast. It was *The Overland Limited*. Even the name has a distinct historical connotation. It stood for the land route across the Nation, in contrast to the sea voyage around the Horn, or by way of the Isthmus of Panama. The *Overland* started in December, 1887, and faded out in 1955. But even through the Great Depression of the 1930's the comfortable *Overland* ran serenely on, seemingly impervious to time and change.

Countless authors and newspaper writers have left the memory of their trips on the "Overland Route" in books and periodicals. Undoubtedly



the most detailed account of a journey on the North Western is in the late J. P. Pearson's four-volume *Railways and Scenery*. Pearson, Great Britain's counterpart of *The New Yorker's* Roger Whitaker, painstakingly recorded minute details. Of the Chicago-Omaha limited he noted:

Side and end walls were in brown wood, with fine panels, while the clerestory roof and the curve up to it . . . were in a brownish-yellow material with a gilt scroll inside the border of silver colour. . . . A bevelled mirror was furnished between every other side window . . . .

In between noting the gradients and "clocking" (he quoted arrivals and departures in seconds), the alert Pearson found time to admire scenery. He was fascinated by the view near Council Bluffs where the Boyer River Valley

fringed with trees — with sunlight on leaves and water — took its way among a park-like expanse of meadows. A marsh and a lake, with the bold outline of bluffs standing out picturesquely on the south-eastern side of the valley, against the soft blue of the sky, followed, and made one of the finest pictures I have ever seen.

In the parade of extra trains racing across Iowa over the years, probably none had more glamour than the Warner Brothers Special of 1940. Operated from Chicago to Nevada, it took motion picture stars, movie magnates, press agents and others to attend the opening of *Virginia City*. No money was spared to make the première a success, and everyone praised the glorious North Western.