

T ***Trains*** **across the USA**

by Phyllis McIntosh

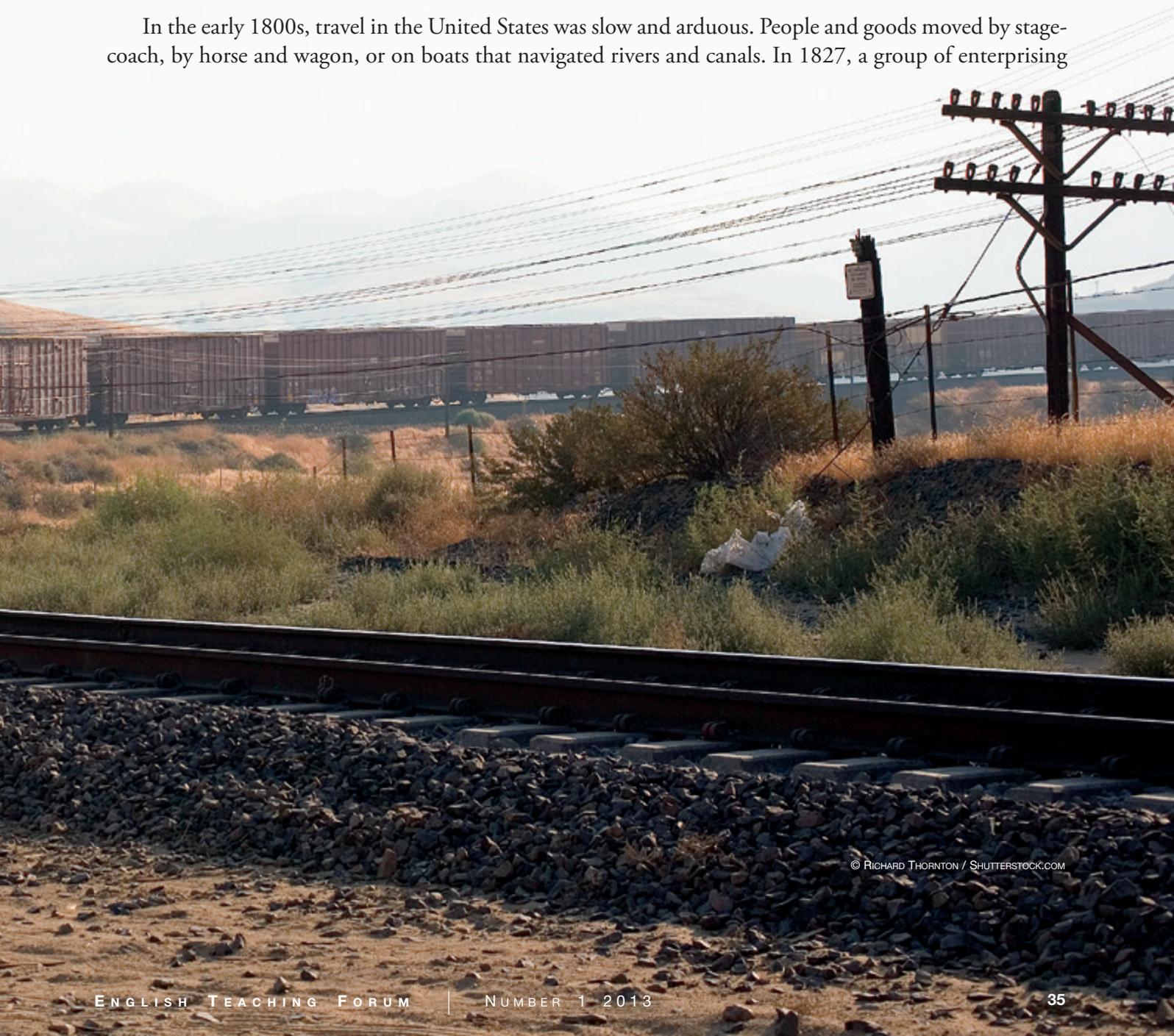


With colorful names like Wabash Cannonball, Speed Witch, and Tom Cat, trains have steamed their way into the American psyche. They have a mystique all their own that persuades railroad enthusiasts to lovingly preserve old locomotives and picturesque train stations and entices generations of children, and adults, to play with model railroads.

As an efficient mode of transportation, trains revolutionized travel and commerce across the vast expanses of the North American continent and united the states from east coast to west. Although in recent decades trains have been overshadowed by automobiles and airplanes as modes of general travel in the United States, they still carry more than 40 percent of the nation's freight. And passenger trains, whose routes traverse some of the most scenic regions of the country, remain a popular and relaxing way to travel. Though modern trains may lack the charm of their forerunners, they harken back to a golden age of transportation that lives on in American culture.

Birth of Rail Travel

In the early 1800s, travel in the United States was slow and arduous. People and goods moved by stage-coach, by horse and wagon, or on boats that navigated rivers and canals. In 1827, a group of enterprising



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This antique illustration shows workers of the Union Pacific Railroad laying track for the transcontinental railroad that was completed in 1869.



gentlemen in Baltimore, Maryland, took a gamble on a new means of transport, chartering the nation's first commercial railroad to compete with New York's Erie Canal. Because their goal was to extend the rails 380 miles from Baltimore to the Ohio River, these men named their railroad the Baltimore & Ohio, known simply as the B&O.

On July 4, 1828, 90-year-old Charles Carroll, the last surviving signer of the Declaration of Independence, laid the ceremonial first stone for the new railroad. Two years later when the first 13 miles of rails opened, horses pulled the trains along the track. But the B&O soon introduced a small experimental steam engine called the Tom Thumb, thought to be the first steam locomotive built in the United States. According to legend, the Tom Thumb once raced a horse-drawn rail car. The horse galloped to victory after a mechanical failure halted the locomotive, but steam power won out in the end. By 1831, the B&O's four-legged horses had been replaced by the Iron Horse, the name given to the early steam locomotive.

As trains became more common, not everyone welcomed them. Turnpike operators, canal companies, stagecoach companies, tavern owners, and innkeepers

mounted sometimes violent opposition to the newfangled railroads. Even author Henry David Thoreau ranted about "that devilish Iron Horse, whose ear-rending neigh is heard throughout the town."

Such complaints could not stop progress, however. By 1840, there were 2,800 miles of railroad track east of the Mississippi River; a decade later that figure had tripled to 9,000 miles. During the Civil War in the 1860s, railroads played a vital role in moving men and materials to the battlefield.

Amid the darkest days of the Civil War, the United States embarked on a mission to complete a transcontinental railroad, a dream long held by President Abraham Lincoln. Over six years, two companies—the Union Pacific starting in Omaha, Nebraska, and the Central Pacific starting in San Francisco, California—laid more than 1,700 miles of track. The Central Pacific employed thousands of Chinese laborers, who had immigrated to the United States after gold was discovered in California, for the grueling task of carving the railroad through the Sierra Nevada mountains.

On May 10, 1869, the two rail lines met at Promontory Point, Utah, where they were joined with a ceremonial golden spike. As the message "Done" was tele-



Now on display for its historical significance, this steam locomotive was part of the Florida Railway System in the late 1890s and early 1900s.

graphed across the nation, bells rang out in cities from coast to coast. A cross-country trip that, a decade earlier, had taken several months could now be completed in just one week.

The Golden Age of Railroads

The turn of the 20th century ushered in a golden age of railroads that would last for 50 years. Some features of this golden age are described below.

- **Steam locomotives.** In the early 1900s all trains were powered by massive steam locomotives whose boilers were fired first by wood and later by coal. The distinctive chuff-chuff sound produced by the venting of steam inspired the term *choo-choo* as a nickname for a train. Among the most famous steam locomotives were the Union Pacific Railroad's Big Boys of the 1940s. Weighing 600 tons and extending 132 feet in length, these powerful machines were designed to pull freight trains over a mountainous route in Utah and Wyoming.

During the 1930s, railroads began to turn to cleaner, less labor-

intensive forms of locomotion, such as diesel engines and electricity provided by overhead wires. The last major steam-powered rail line closed in 1960, and by the end of the decade, steam locomotives had all but disappeared from the nation's rails. They live on, however, in dozens of museums, on short-line scenic railways, and in the hearts of thousands of enthusiasts who volunteer their time to educate a new generation about the mystique of the steam locomotive.

- **Luxury passenger trains.** By the early 20th century, railroads took pride in speeding customers to their destinations in comfort and luxury. In addition to standard seating, trains began to feature specialized cars for dining, sleeping, socializing, and enjoying the scenery. Most were produced by the Pullman Company of Illinois, best known for its Pullman sleeper, which featured private accommodations for nighttime travelers.

In the 1930s, the outward appearance of many passenger trains also changed. Inspired by the Art Deco movement, railroad companies enshrouded their locomotives



The Crawford Depot in Carroll, New Hampshire, built by the Maine Central Railroad in 1891, is typical of railroad architecture of that era. Preserved as a visitor center, the depot was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1982.

and cars with an aluminum skin that gave them a sleek, modern look. Known as streamliners, these trains epitomized style, comfort, and speed.

The most celebrated of the streamliners was the 20th Century Limited, operated by the New York Central Railroad between New York City and Chicago. Catering to upper class and business travelers, the Limited was renowned for the plush red carpet that was rolled out for passengers to walk on going to and from the train. That practice is thought to have given rise to the phrase “red carpet treatment” to refer to special service.

- **Iconic railroad stations.** The hundreds of railroad stations built in the late 19th and early 20th centuries included numerous architectural gems, ranging from the wood and brick Victorian-style depots that graced towns across the country to the ornate railway palaces of the major cities. As pride in these

architectural works of art has grown, many towns and small cities have taken steps to preserve their stations, converting them into museums, restaurants, and shops. Some of the grandest structures, like New York City’s Pennsylvania Station, are gone forever. Others, notably New York’s Grand Central Terminal, escaped the wrecking ball through the efforts of celebrities such as Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis.

- **Harvey Girls and Pullman Porters.** Women and African Americans played key roles in the early days of railroads. The Union Pacific Railroad, for example, hired women as nurse-stewardesses to assist elderly passengers and women with children on cross-country journeys.

The best known of the early railway women were the Harvey Girls, young women hired by entrepreneur Fred Harvey to work as waitresses in his restaurants and hotels at stops along the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad in the west-

ern states. These young women in their starched black-and-white uniforms conveyed a wholesome image that attracted railroad passengers to the more than 80 Harvey House establishments. Because many of the Harvey Girls eventually married and settled in the areas where they worked, they are credited with helping to civilize the Wild West.

African American men, hired by George Pullman to staff his Pullman sleeping and dining cars, were the backbone of customer service aboard trains in the early 20th century. Although working on the trains was considered one of the most prestigious jobs open to blacks at the time, the porters often were overworked and underpaid. In 1925, led by activist A. Philip Randolph, the porters formed the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the first black labor union to bargain successfully with a major corporation. Randolph and the Sleeping Car Porters remained major voices in the civil rights movement through the 1960s.

Railroads Today

With the growth of air travel and development of the interstate highway system following World War II, the heyday of the railroads came to an end. Both passenger and freight revenues declined, and by the 1960s railroads were in financial trouble. But over the years, with help from the U.S. government, the railroads have rebounded; once again they represent a major segment of transportation in the United States. And today's rail service includes:

- **Long-distance passenger trains.** To relieve railroads of the increasingly



Amtrak's 40th anniversary train makes a stop at the station in Bakersfield, California, during its anniversary tour in 2011.



An Amtrak conductor signals to someone on the platform at the Wilmington, Delaware, train station.



The Empire Builder, a passenger train with a scenic route from Chicago to the Pacific Northwest, makes a station stop.



A commuter train pulls out of downtown Chicago.

A string of tank cars rattles along a railroad track.



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steep costs of running passenger trains, Congress in 1970 passed a law that created the National Railroad Passenger Corporation—known as Amtrak—to provide passenger service between cities. Amtrak, which celebrated 40 years of continuous service in 2011, carries nearly 29 million passengers a year on a nationwide network serving 500 destinations in 46 states and three Canadian provinces.

Amtrak's busiest route is the Northeast Corridor between Washington, D.C., and Boston, which transports more than a quarter million passengers every weekday. One loyal and enthusiastic rider for 35 years was Joe Biden, who as a U.S. Senator commuted via Amtrak from his home in Delaware to Washington every day that Congress was in session.

Trains remain a favorite way to see the United States in all its wonder. Popular scenic routes include those of the California Zephyr, which passes through the Rocky Mountains and the Sierra Nevadas on its daily run from Chicago to

San Francisco; the Coast Starlight, which skirts the West Coast from Seattle to Los Angeles; and the Empire Builder, whose route from Chicago to Seattle and Portland, Oregon, includes the majestic wilderness of the Pacific Northwest, Glacier National Park, and the Columbia River Gorge.

Amtrak also boasts the longest passenger train in the world—the Auto Train, which carries passengers and their cars 900 miles from Lorton, Virginia, near Washington, D.C., to Orlando, Florida.

- **Commuter trains.** Two dozen commuter rail lines transport millions of passengers daily between the suburbs and central business districts of major metropolitan areas. Operated mostly by local governments or quasi-government entities, these trains share tracks with Amtrak and freight railroads. Many connect to bus and subway lines in the cities.

Many commuter trains run only during morning and evening rush hours—when most people are going to and from work—but others operate from morning until late at night



A train loaded with freight containers makes its way to a port where the containers will be loaded on ocean-going ships.

transporting people to sporting events and other recreational destinations in addition to places of employment.

The New York City and Chicago metropolitan areas have the greatest concentrations of commuter trains in the United States. The nation's oldest and busiest commuter railway is the Long Island Railroad, which operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week. With 700 miles of track, it covers the entire length of Long Island via two routes and connects to three terminals in New York City.

- **Freight trains.** In the 1970s, Congress passed laws to rescue declining freight railroads. Now largely deregulated, the railroads have reorganized, discontinued unprofitable routes, and returned to prominence in transporting goods across the country. Of the more than 500 freight railroads currently operating in the United States, the vast majority are local short-haul lines. Seven major long-haul railroads account for most freight industry revenue, however.

Trains carry 43 percent of intercity freight as measured by weight, according to the American Association of Railroads (AAR). The most important commodity transported is coal, which is used mainly to generate electricity at coal-fired power plants. Other major rail commodities include industrial chemicals and fertilizers, grain, food, steel, forest products, motor vehicles, and waste and scrap materials.

Many freight trains carry a variety of goods in a mix of specialized cars, such as flatcars, oil tank cars, closed boxcars, and motor vehicle carriers. But some are dedicated to a single product. One notable example is the so-called juice train, which travels northward daily from Florida's citrus region.

Recent Trends in Railroading

Containerized freight shipping

The past two decades have seen tremendous growth in an efficient means of transport known as intermodal service, or containerized shipping, in which freight

Acela trains, seen here in Washington, D.C., provide high-speed rail service—reaching speeds of 150 miles per hour—along the Northeast Corridor of the United States.



is packed in containers that can be carried by train, truck, and ocean-going ships. The method combines the door-to-door convenience of trucks with the long-haul economy of railroads, and it greatly streamlines international shipping.

Focus on the environment

Both Amtrak and freight railroad companies emphasize that trains' fuel efficiency and lower pollution levels make them a greener alternative to other means of transport. According to the AAR, trains on the average are four times more fuel efficient than trucks. Furthermore, a single freight train can take the loads of at least 280 trucks off overcrowded highways.

For passengers, railroads represent a welcome alternative to clogged highways and cramped airplanes, and, according to Amtrak president and CEO Joe Boardman, trains “preserve the pleasure that once made people want to travel.”

High-tech equipment

Like many aspects of modern life, railroads today operate with the aid of computers, satellites, and remote sensors. Many railroad employees are white-collar workers who command trains from hundreds of miles away through electronic

control of signals, switches, and other high-tech mechanisms.

High-speed rail

Currently, the nation's only high-speed service is Amtrak's Acela Express, inaugurated in 2000 along the Northeast Corridor. The Acela is capable of speeds up to 150 miles per hour, but because of aging track and congested areas, it actually reaches that speed on only a portion of the route.

Amtrak says it is planning for 220 miles per hour service on the Northeast Corridor. In California, construction is slated to begin in 2012 on an 800-mile high-speed system that will link the state's major cities.

* * *

Although modern trains lack the aura of a chugging steam locomotive or a sleek twentieth-century streamliner, the plaintive sound of a train whistle in the night can still stir the soul. As train aficionado Ruth Guyer commented on National Public Radio: “The other evening I stepped onto the track near my home and stared off till my eyes met the vanishing point where the glistening iron rails seemed to merge. I knew the tracks would never do that, but I thought if the trains themselves were ever to vanish, the romance of travel would surely be lost.”



Caboose

Train Talk

ballast – gravel, slag, or other material placed on the rail bed to hold tracks in place

brakeman – train crew member who inspects the train, assists the conductor, operates the brakes, and assists with switching

caboose – car attached to the rear end of a freight train for use by the train crew

conductor – person in charge of a train and its crew

coupler – a device for connecting train cars or locomotives together

engineer – person who operates a locomotive

limited – a passenger train that serves only main stations; emphasis is on comfort, speed, and convenience

main line – the principal artery of a railroad system; used by trains operating between cities

roundhouse – a building, usually circular in design, where locomotives and other railroad cars are inspected, cleaned, repaired, and serviced

siding – a short stretch of track used to store railroad cars or enable trains on the same line to pass

switch – a connection between two lines of track that permits trains to pass from one track to another

Websites of Interest

Amtrak

www.amtrak.com

In addition to routes and schedules, this website of America's passenger railroad network offers virtual tours of sleeping car accommodations, information on planning a vacation by rail, and an online magazine with feature stories, riders' memories, and a "Kids Depot" game section.

Association of American Railroads

www.aar.org

This website of the trade association that represents the freight railroad industry includes statistics and information about the efficiency and impact of freight trains in transporting the nation's goods.

B&O Railroad Museum

www.borail.org

A guide to the museum of the nation's first commercial railroad, this site features an education section with information about the history of railroads in the United States that includes downloadable lesson plans.

National Museum of American History

<http://amhistory.si.edu/onthemove/exhibition>

A virtual tour of the Museum's America on the Move exhibition about transportation, this site traces the impact of railroads on people, towns, and commerce from the late 1800s until the present day.

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Romance of the Rails

Trains evoke a sense of romance and adventure that moves people to bestow names on them and immortalize them in story and song.

What's in a name?

Some trains have had straightforward names that identified their freight contents—Johnstown Steel Special, Beef Train, Florida Perishables. Some names indicated a train's route or destination—the Southwesterner, City of Miami—and some their typical riders: Fisherman's Special.

Many other trains have names that denote power and speed, such as Thunderbolt, Rocket, Cannon Ball, Blue Dart, Silver Streak, or simply Guts. Animal names—Black Cat, Red Fox, Blue Goose, Rabbit Run—are popular for freight trains. Passenger trains

have borne names of American heroes—George Washington, Abraham Lincoln—and poetic labels that create images of pleasurable escape—Desert Wind, Gulf Breeze, Starlight, Southern Belle.

A streamliner of the 1940s acquired its name, Phoebe Snow, from an advertising campaign that had run several decades earlier. Around the turn of the century, the Delaware, Lackawanna, and Western Railroad created a fictional character named Phoebe Snow, a young socialite in a pristine white dress, to promote its trains powered by cleaner-burning anthracite coal. Lackawanna's riders, the railroad claimed, would still look clean when they reached their destination, unlike travelers on other steam trains, who often emerged from a long trip covered in black soot from burned soft coal.

Train songs

Trains figure prominently in American folk songs, blues, and country music. Most Americans have sung or heard the traditional song “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad,” for example. “The City of New Orleans,” a popular folk song of recent years recorded by such artists as Willie Nelson, Arlo Guthrie, and Johnny Cash, immortalizes a nightly Amtrak train that still travels between Chicago and New Orleans.

More upbeat songs include “Chattanooga Choo Choo,” a Big Band favorite in the 1940s, and the bluegrass fiddle tune “Orange Blossom Special,” which commemorates a luxury passenger train that once ran between New York City and Miami. Another bouncy melody, “On the Atchison, Topeka and the Santa Fe,” sung by Judy Garland in a 1940s movie about the Harvey Girls, pays tribute to the railroad along which Fred Harvey built his famous Harvey House restaurants.

Colorful characters

Trains are associated with a variety of larger-than-life characters, both real and imagined. One legendary hero is John Henry, an immensely strong railroad builder who wielded his hammer in a race against a drilling machine. Henry won but, exhausted, collapsed and died with his hammer in his hand.

Engineer Casey Jones, a real-life railroad hero from 1900, has become part of American lore for trying to slow his train as it was about to wreck, losing his life but saving other lives in the process.

A romanticized group of railroad characters are the hobos, who sneaked onto freight trains to roam the country in search of work, especially during the Great Depression of the 1930s. The number of hobos declined when diesel power replaced steam; trains no longer had to make frequent stops for water, which had given the hobos opportunities to hop on and off the trains.



The Casey Jones Home and Railroad Museum in Jackson, Tennessee, pays tribute to the famous engineer who lost his life, while saving others, in a train wreck.