For more than 150 years railroads have had a pronounced impact on the lives of residents of North America. More than any other form of technology, the iron horse literally became an engine for growth and general well-being. By the 1880s the railway age had fully arrived, although expansion continued into the 1920s, especially in Canada. In 1880 U.S. mileage stood at 92,147; a decade later it soared to 163,359, peaking in 1916 at 254,251. In states such as Illinois, Iowa, and Ohio, mileage became so dense that inhabitants of small communities might have two or more carriers, and farm families likely lived within a manageable driving distance to a station.

The earliest expectations of “rail road” proponents mostly materialized. When on October 1, 1833, Elias Horry, president of the South Carolina Canal and Railroad Company, addressed an audience in Charleston about the impact of the recent opening of his 136-mile road between Charleston and Hamburg, briefly the world’s longest, he hardly misrepresented the railroad of that day or even later. “Our citizens immediately, and correctly saw, that every benefit arising from the system [of railroads], could be extended to every City and Town in the United States, and particularly to those near the Atlantic.” Added Horry, “That, by establishing Rail-Roads, so located as to pass into the interior of the several States, every agricultural, commercial, or saleable production could be brought down from remote parts of the Country to these Cities and Towns; and from them, such returns, as the wants of the inhabitants of the interior required, could be forwarded with great dispatch and economy, thereby forming a perfect system of mercantile exchanges, effected in the shortest possible time, and giving life to a most advantageous Commerce.”

The impact of the railroad upon the daily lives of Americans can be seen in a variety of ways. This social history arguably is best revealed by exploring the topics of trains, stations, communities, and legacies. Travel by rail left lasting memories. The sight of a train alone could conjure up wonderful dreams about people and places. Similarly, even if train travel were not taken or contemplated, the station for generations served as a locus of community life, and the individuals associated with it were important to nearly everyone. The railroad, too, long affected communities, even their physical appearance. And the legacy of trains has had both a contemporary impact during the railway age and an ongoing one. Whether in literature, music, language, or art, the social history of this often-beloved transport form remains alive.

**Trains**

The train, with its fascinating and powerful steam locomotive, was much more than an instrument of progress; it was a wonder. In “To a Locomotive in Winter” poet Walt Whitman captured the essence of the common attraction for these mechanical marvels: “Type of modern-emblem of motion and power—pulse of the continent.” It took novelist Sherwood Anderson more words to convey a similar message: “There was a passenger train going away into the mysterious West [at Clyde, Ohio] at some twenty minutes after seven in the evenings and, as six o’clock was our universal supper hour, we congregated at the station to see the train arrive, we boys gathering far down the station platform to gape with hungry eyes at the locomotive.” Although Anderson pursued a literary career, it is understandable that with the dawn of the railway age the desire to work on or around the iron horse became great. Starry-eyed farm and village lads, often seeking their first regular wage-earning experience, found employment with the local railroad company. Whether they won jobs in train service, machine shops, or country stations, thoughts of being connected to the railway had strong appeal. “Every day that I went to work, I encountered new experiences,” remembered a veteran depot agent. “I would always see trains, freight and passenger, something that I never, never, tired of.” And he admitted, “Railroading got totally in my blood.” Some of the first employees had originally worked for other forms of transport that declined with rail competition. It was not unusual for a steamboat captain to become a locomotive engineer or a stagecoach driver to take the position of train conductor.

The first trains, which were dedicated more to transporting goods than passengers, had at the throttle of the locomotive the most skilled crewman, the engineer, and
his hardworking assistant, the fireman, who stoked cord wood (later coal) into the firebox. When not braking, coupling, or uncoupling cars, a head brakeman usually joined them in the cab. The caboose, “crummy,” or “way-car” (its name varied from road to road) became home to the conductor or “captain,” who commanded the train, and a brakeman or two.

Once the railway passenger train developed beyond the initial primitive locomotive pulling what might be described as stagecoaches on flanged wheels, the typical “consist” also had a similar array of employees. By the 1870s there might be situated directly behind the cab crew an express agent who organized and guarded often- valuable shipments in the baggage or express car. If the train included a U.S. Railway Post Office (RPO) car, which appeared about the same time as express equipment, several RPO employees would be sorting mail en route. In the passenger coaches the conductor, who was officially in charge of the train, worked with several trainmen, who collected tickets, assisted riders, “called” stations, and at stops protected the train with flags or flares. When dining cars became common by the 1880s, there was a complement of stewards, cooks, and waiters. If the train included a dining car, it probably carried one or more sleeping cars with a conductor and porters, the latter nearly always men of color. Porters made beds, served meals, and shined shoes. Some trains might have “news butchers,” entrepreneurial lads who sold newspapers, tobacco products, and sundries.

During Prohibition news butchers might unlawfully offer “hooch,” and, in fact, other crewmembers might do the same. In the 1920s passengers who traveled through the Midwest could usually purchase the popular “Templeton rye,” an illegally distilled liquor produced in the Carroll County, Iowa, village of Templeton. And for years “moonshines” in the mountains of northeastern Georgia maintained a regular “drop” for train crews on the Southern Railway’s Charlotte-Atlanta line. These trainmen merely put down their empty canning jars, albeit with cash, and later picked up filled ones of “white lightning” for their own consumption or for resale, perhaps on board a train.

Although American train riders did not confront the rigid class structure of Great Britain, with its first-, second-, and third-class carriages, affluent travelers could purchase luxury accommodations. In the mid-1870s Florence Leslie, wife of the well-to-do publisher of Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, described the resplendent Pullman Hotel car that operated between Chicago, Illinois, and Omaha, Nebraska: “Our chef, of ebon color, and proportions suggesting a liberal sampling of the good things he prepares, wears the regulation snow-white apron and cap, and gives us cordial welcome and information.... At six the tables are laid for two each, with

The U.S. mail began using the railroad from an early date, and the Railway Post Office was a marvel of speed and efficiency. Postal clerks sorted the mail even as the car sped through the night (left), and the specially designed post catcher made it possible to pick up mail en route even as the train went by without stopping (right).

—(both) Middleton Collection.
dainty linen, and the finest of glass and china, and we presently sit down to dinner. Our repast is Delmonican in its nature and style, consisting of soup, fish, entries, roast meat and vegetables, followed by the conventional dessert and the essential spoonful of black coffee."

Fine accommodations and food remained available throughout much of the passenger era. Not until jet airplane travel, which burst upon the transportation scene in the late 1950s, did luxury service decline, at times precipitously. When in January 1918 the family of a wealthy Cedar Rapids, Iowa, businessman escaped from a harsh midwestern winter to the sunny warmth of Southern California, a daughter vividly recalled the posh service that was part of a first-class Pullman ticket on the Overland Limited. "The first day on the train was just as exciting as getting on it. After we had taken turns... getting washed up in our small washroom with the shiny nickel-plated wash bowl... a waiter arrived all the way from the din-

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Long-distance travel by rail could be comfortable for those who could afford the best accommodations. The Pullman Palace Car was lavishly furnished and decorated (Illus. 3), and the washroom facilities were commodious and well equipped (Illus. 4). The tiny kitchen was a marvel of efficiency, and the dining staff could offer a multicourse meal (Illus. 5 and 6).

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Middleton Collection; (Illus. 4 to 6) London Illustrated News, Union Pacific, Trains Magazine Collection.
the high. In the age of streamliners, leading trains, including
but the quality of service on these fast trains remained
electric-powered streamliners. The grime produced by
heavyweight steel cars, gave way to lightweight, diesel-
thermos jugs into our cups, and topped them off with
bacon and jam. Besides that we poured hot cocoa from
another and filling our plates with hot corn muffins,
soon we were peeking into one covered silver dish after
ing car, bringing us breakfast on a huge silver tray....
[He] spread a white table cloth, unloaded his tray, and
soon we were peeling into one covered silver dish after
another and filling our plates with hot corn muffins,
bacon and jam. Besides that we poured hot cocoa from
thermos jugs into our cups, and topped them off with
whipped cream. Through the windows we could see flat
snow-covered Nebraska. We were on our way!

In the 1930s trains like the Overland Limited, with their
heavyweight steel cars, gave way to lightweight, diesel-
electric-powered streamliners. The grime produced by
most coal-burning locomotives became only a memory,
but the quality of service on these fast trains remained
high. In the age of streamliners, leading trains, including
the City of San Francisco, the Panama Limited, and the
20th Century Limited, featured uniformed nurses or similar
personnel to assist passengers, particularly the young
and the elderly. In the dining cars delicacies such as fresh
tROUT, berries in season, and fancy pastries adorned
menus. For the business traveler there might be an on-
board barber, secretary, and valet. A few trains boasted a
small reading library.

Not all riders received such favorable treatment. For
decades literally thousands of main- and branch-line "lo-
cals" rattled leisurely along their routes, hauling pas-
engers, mail, and express. Often railroads assigned their oldest,
soot-blackened equipment to these runs. When, for
example, air-conditioned passenger cars made up the best trains,
open windows in these locals provided the only circulating air, allowing cinders, dirt, and smoke to penetrate the coaches.

Nevertheless, these workhorse trains meant much to
their patrons. Most of all, they offered a dependable
means to travel from their hometowns to destinations
both near and far. The usual train crews might become popular with "regulars" and even be honored on special occasions. In the 1930s the Milwaukee Road local that operated between the Iowa cities of Cedar Rapids and Ottumwa, a distance of 89 miles, had employees who became near and dear to the German-American residents of the Amana Colonies. "They would appear [at Christmas time]," fondly recalled a brakeman, "with savory hams, delicious wines, and gifts for the crew."

In the South, or wherever “Jim Crow” laws had been enacted, trains nearly always featured racial segregation. Companies either used a coach partitioned into white and “colored” sections or provided separate cars, with ones assigned to African American riders often being the most decrepit rolling stock. Since train crews (with the possible exception of the locomotive fireman and porters) were white, the feeling of personal closeness between black riders and passenger train employees likely never developed.

Passengers commonly experienced the worst equipment on “mixed” trains, where companies, frequently shortline carriers, found it uneconomical to dispatch separate freight and passenger trains. These runs, designed to haul “hogs and humans,” typically consisted of ancient coaches located behind a string of freight cars and not-so-modern locomotives. Stops might be made in rail yards rather than at depot platforms, attesting to management’s main desire to serve freight customers. The public might be told that these trains had “service irregular” or “subject to freight connections” or “passenger connections uncertain,” and that they operated “Mon., Wed. & Fri. only.” Although such consists brought joy to railroad enthusiasts, they usually did not please patrons. Yet for thousands of Americans, “mixed trains” were their only links to the outside world until automobiles and all-weather roads increased their options, and these trains were thus as familiar as the general store and the country church.

Whether the passenger train was a “ballast-scorching” express, a plodding local, or a poky mixed, there were riders who did not usually fuss about what they rode. Indeed, these riders “without tickets” were more likely to “take freights.” For decades there were hoards of hoboes or “boes” who never paid for rail transportation, especially after the Civil War and on through the Great Depression of the 1930s. These men (and occasionally women and children) sought adventure or a better life down the tracks.

Traveling the “side-door Pullman route” took various forms. Frequently the ticketless rider sat inside an empty boxcar or on a flatcar or squatted on the roof of a freight car. If he actually “rode the rods,” this meant placing his “ticket,” namely a thick wooden plank, between the metal support trusses that were once found underneath rail cars and lying horizontally on it. Another alternative was “riding the blinds.” The hobo stood in the recessed entryway of a baggage or mail car or coach that was positioned directly behind the locomotive tender or “tank.” Occasionally he dared to make the trip on top of a passenger car—called “decking”—or even aboard the tender, hiding in piles of coal. One adventurous youngster related his exciting, albeit foolhardy, trip with a companion in the late 1890s on the pilot or “cowcatcher” of an Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway locomotive across the Kansas prairie: “Now the light beam from the headlight, shining on the track, made the rails look like two silver ribbons that were being unreeled out of the darkness ahead of us and swallowed up right under the pilot below us and we went sailing along through the dark and gee, we were getting thrills and chills in turn, one after another.”

Railroad companies’ attempts to keep hoboes from their trains met with limited success, yet they extended free passage to others. Most full-time railway employees and their immediate families received complimentary passes. If the rider lacked ticket or pass but was a railroad man and carried his paid-up dues receipt to one of the several brotherhoods, a freight or passenger conductor might allow him to ride in a caboose or coach. Before passage of the Elkins Act in 1903, railroads commonly distributed passes to a variety of nonrailroad persons, including clergy, journalists, and politicians, in an effort to create goodwill.
There were other riders who might be closely watched and asked to leave the train or even placed under arrest. Conductors and railroad detectives (“cinder dicks”) kept a watchful eye out for confidence men, professional gamblers, and prostitutes. But many of these unsavory individuals understood how to ply their trade in the presence of railroad personnel. One frequent traveler remembered that in the early 1940s two women had a standing reservation for the drawing room of a Pullman car on the Sunshine Special, a popular Missouri Pacific Railroad train that operated between St. Louis and Texas destinations. “Business always appeared to be good on the southbound trip,” he recalled. “There was never a ‘line’ to this rolling brothel (which was occupied by one of these entrepreneurs each night), but somehow word would get around to the other sections of the train.” Apparently these hookers were not “put off” the train, although surely the crew, including the Pullman conductor, knew what was happening. Perhaps money exchanged hands or sexual favors were bestowed.

In addition to regularly scheduled passenger runs, from their earliest days railroads offered special “excursions.” These trains ran as “extras” that flew white flags or at night carried white classification lamps on the locomotive to denote this distinction. Railroad companies promoted virtually any type of public attraction to generate business. On May 20, 1847, Superintendent Charles Minot of the Medford Branch Railroad in Massachusetts announced: “During the whole of the week of the Religious Anniversaries in Boston, commencing on Monday, May 24th, an Extra Train will leave Medford for Boston, every Evening, except on Saturday, at 9 1/2, p.m.; and returning, will leave Boston at 10, p.m.” More than a half century later the Minneapolis & St. Louis Railroad distributed a graphically attractive broadside: “VISIT THE LEGISLATURE, SPECIAL TRAIN TO DES MOINES AND RETURN, FRIDAY MARCH 22,” advertising an excursion train that would depart Ruthven, Iowa, at 5:45 A.M. and make 22 intermediate stops before arriving in the Iowa capital at 11:13 A.M. Excursionists would reboard in Des Moines for a 6:30 A.M. departure. As late as September 28, 1957, the Wabash Railroad operated a special “Theatre Train” between Decatur, Illinois, and St. Louis, Missouri, for a Saturday matinee performance of a stage production of My Fair Lady at Kiel Auditorium. Never overlooking an opportunity for extra passenger business, the Illinois Central Railroad once maintained a tariff for “spectacle” lynchings and public hangings. If such a horrific event were to occur, a local station agent could request a special train or additional coaches on a regularly scheduled run and advertise reduced fares.

Much less ghoulish were organized tours that either used a scheduled train or an occasional extra operation. Beginning in 1880, the Phillips-Judson Company, based in Boston and with offices in other American cities, offered “Personally Conducted Overland Excursions.” The firm sold sleeping-car space and provided guides en route and at publicized stops. In 1898, for example, Phillips-Judson arranged an eight-hour layover in Salt Lake City, Utah, providing an escorted tour of “the great Mormon Temple, the Tabernacle, and the many places of historic interest in the city.”

One version of the “organized tour” or special movement was the troop train. Although during the Mexican War between 1846 and 1848 some soldiers and their equipment traveled over rail routes, the Civil War demonstrated that railroads were vital to the military. Armies of both the North and the South moved extensively by rail. In the summer of 1863, for example, the Confederate high command transferred the forces of Gen. James Longstreet from Virginia to northern Georgia (Chickamauga), and in the early fall of 1863 the 11th and 12th Corps of the Union army journeyed from northern Virginia to relieve the Army of the Cumberland at Chattanooga, Tennessee. Both sides pressed into service all types of rolling stock. Soldiers might find themselves riding in boxcars, prompting them to tear off the side boards or even the roof itself for better ventilation and “to see the country.” Long after the Civil War troops continued to move by rail. During the Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, and the Korean Conflict, troop trains were common. As with earlier experiences, soldiers often found their accommodations less than satisfactory. “I believe for many GIs that being herded onboard troop trains during World War II convinced them that they never again would travel by rail,” observed one railroad official. “Likely with the troop trains the industry planted some of the seeds that grew eventually into the demise of the intercity passenger service.”

Although troop trains occasionally derailed, perhaps engineered by the enemy during the Civil War, wrecks of passenger trains were common, whether with the earliest trains that treaded slowly over spindly iron-strap rails or the later limiteds that sped along “high iron.” Before trains customarily traveled faster than 30 or 35 miles an hour, loss of life or serious injury was unlikely; an accident became merely an inconvenience. But when speeds increased, carnage became common in a major mishap. Indeed, speed played a role in America’s worst passenger disaster. On July 9, 1918, two Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis passenger trains, each running at approximately 50 miles per hour, smashed head-on near Nashville, Tennessee. Rescuers found 101 dead crew members and passengers and scores more who were seriously injured.

Railroad companies made serious attempts to improve safety. Starting in the early twentieth century, the Chicago & North Western Railway launched a safety crusade and in the process coined the famous “Safety-First” slogan, widely emulated by other carriers and industries. But speed of travel served as a major attraction of rail transport; in fact, Americans expected it. They read with pleasure newspaper accounts of the first 100 mph passenger-train run. In May 1893 the New York Central & Hudson River Railroad’s Empire State Express, pulled by the high-stepping American-type (4-4-0) locomotive 999, reached...
112 mph near Crittenden, New York, establishing a world record.

Railroads also claimed newspaper space for nonspeed events, and these happenings often became part of an individual’s memory of trains. It was not uncommon on the day of the funeral of a prominent politician or railroad executive to have trains briefly come to a standstill. On September 19, 1901, the Wabash Railroad (and most others as well) halted their service to commemorate the martyred William McKinley. The trainmaster at Moberly, Missouri, for one, issued this train order: “ ‘God’s will not ours be done.’ All trains and Engines will stop for five minutes at two o’clock P.M. [CST] September nineteenth out of respect for memory of President McKinley.”

At 2 P.M. (CST) on May 31, 1916, the hour of the funeral of James Jerome Hill, founder of the Great Northern Railroad, every train on the Hill Lines stopped for five minutes. Passengers on a Northern Pacific train high in the Rocky Mountains, enjoying lunch in the dining car, laid down their cups, glasses, and silverware in silence when the conductor explained the reason for their unscheduled stop.

One of the most touching unscheduled timetable stops in the annals of American railroading honored the “Little Fellow.” From the late 1880s until the end of passenger service in 1950, Chicago & North Western train crews on the Watertown-Redfield, South Dakota, branch halted every Memorial Day to place flowers and to pray at a modest grave marker on the lonely prairie. Buried there was a boy, his name forgotten, the son of a construction worker and cook, who had died in a bunk car near Elrod, South Dakota, and was interred at that trackside location. The event vividly revealed the human side of a colossal American industry.

No matter the train or the occasion, a railroad journey surely provided at least one memorable experience. For children it might be a walk through the aisles to a water cooler or toilet; for families it could be dinner in the diner or a more economical home-packed meal of fried chicken, bread-and-butter sandwiches, and cake; for newlyweds it was probably the privacy of a sleeping car; and for the professional traveler or “drummer” it was perhaps the lively after-dinner card game or drink and cigar in the parlor car. Anticipating this special event, travelers customarily wore their Sunday clothes when they boarded a passenger train, and everyone was usually on his or her best behavior.

By the beginning of the twentieth century passenger trains paid calls at more than 125,000 communities in North America, even though some places had only mixed-train service. It was common for citizens who felt that they should have more or better train service to complain to railroad officials and to public officials, usually state railroad commissioners. Some residents might continue to fuss about trains that operated on Sunday, although most criticisms had ended by the Civil War. Still, some roads, usually small ones, cooperated with these diehard Sabbatarians. But as America became more urban and industrial, the issue of trains on Sunday became largely moot, and progress prevailed over tradition.

Stations

In every community the building most closely associated with the railroad was the depot, a tangible manifestation of the modern industrial age. Residents universally viewed the “dee-po” as a vital public place. Whether it occurred in a vibrant metropolis or a peaceful village, train-time excited the residents. “The depot is always a beehive of activity,” observed a midwestern businessman shortly after a passenger train arrived.

A recurrent theme in railroad folklore is the story of a dead child buried alongside the track. This is the “Little Fellow” grave near Elrod, South Dakota, where the crew of a Chicago & North Western train stopped every Memorial Day.

—Chicago & North Western, Trains Magazine Collection.