

The Big Four Railroad *

By Roger Hensley
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Many times, I have had the question asked of me, "What exactly is the Big Four?" For that question there can be two answers. One is the gentlemen who controlled the building of the railroads out west, it's nominally about the "Big Four" who made their fortunes from the building of the Central Pacific Railroad - Huntington, Leland Stanford, Charles Crocker and Mark Hopkins, and the other is the railroad that ran through Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. This is our "Big Four". The origin of that name came from the building of the railroad and that is our answer.

The Big Four railroad was the CCC&StL. The actual name was the Cleveland, Cincinnati, Chicago & St. Louis Railroad (source - Edson's "Railroad Names"). The CCC&StL was an independent system until the 1880s or 1890s when it became a part of the New York Central Lines. Essentially, it became the NYC between Cleveland and East Alton with GM&O trackage rights to East St Louis. Other connections were the Cleveland to Cincinnati via Columbus and Dayton, and the Cincinnati to Kankakee via Indianapolis, with trackage rights on the Illinois Central into Chicago. There were numerous associated branches such as the Michigan Division of the Big Four that ran through Anderson connecting Louisville Kentucky with Benton Harbor Michigan via trackage rights from North Vernon to Louisville.

The CCC&StL was a home-grown Indiana-Ohio product. It started with the Bee line connecting to its counterpart in Ohio and the railroad began to build around that main line. They leased and bought and built and they were THE power from Cleveland to Columbus to Cincinnati to Indianapolis to Chicago to St. Louis and Peoria. It's no wonder that the New York Central Lines wanted them.

The New York Central leased the railroad from the CCC&StL. This was a common way for one railroad to acquire another connection and/or operation. Another reason for the leasing of a property was the financial obligations of the leased line. The CCC&StL and THE BANKS owned a lot of property and equipment. Even when the equipment carried the name of the leasing RR (ie. NYC Lines) there would be a small tag somewhere stating that the owner was the CCC&StL.

At one time, the Big 4 was headquartered in Indianapolis. Its HQ building still stands, I believe, on the SE corner of Meridian and Maryland streets. That's across from the Circle City Mall in downtown Indy. The Big 4 began construction in 1906 of a new shops complex in Beech Grove. This is the Amtrak Beech Grove Shops today. Previously, the Big 4 had a shops complex on the east side of Indianapolis along the Bee Line. That line was still being used by Conrail as its Cleveland to St. Louis Mainline and is still used today by CSX. The CCC&StL Avon yards to the west of Indy is still very active.

I live a quarter block from track one of the old Bee Line/Big 4 Main line in Anderson Indiana. The NS dispatchers were still referring to the Conrail crossing of the NS in Muncie as the Big 4. "The Big 4 is running one ahead of you" was a common statement that I would hear on my scanner as the NS train slows to a crawl or a stop until they could cross in the clear.

Old names can take a long time to die. The 'Bee Line' name comes from an 1864 merger that opened the line from Indianapolis to Bellefontaine Ohio. Yet another merger in 1868 let the new railroad reach Cleveland and then when the road was consolidated in 1889 with two other lines now reaching from Chicago to Cincinnati, St. Louis, Indianapolis and Cleveland, and the Big Four was born.

The CCC&StL, increased in importance as a part of the NYC Cleveland Division when control of the road passed to New York Central Lines in 1922 through the leasing mentioned above. By 1930, it was firmly a part of the New York Central. However, when you made a comment about how well the New York Central was operating their passenger trains out of Cleveland, the Conductor would reply, "This is the CCC&StL!" Then passenger service was done away with and the property then passed on to Penn Central, Conrail and now CSX and NS.



Big Four Train No. 46 N. Y. & Boston Special Leaving. Columbus, Ohio.

* *The Big Four Railroad* was originally posted on the Facebook Group - the New York Central Railroad Fangroup

Roger Hensley & Maurice Lewman are the authors of *The CCC&StL and the New York Central Railroads in Indiana*.