



Entrance to Union Station, circa 1950, from the Bruce Warner Collection

## THE COLUMBUS UNION STATION

Serving 115 daily passenger trains of five railroads, the building on N. High Street is a place where the drama of life plays continuously. An “inside look at the terminal.

By Mary Ellen White

(Columbus Sunday Dispatch, October 2, 1949) “**THERE’S** never a dull moment. Time goes just like that.” With a quick snap of his fingers, Gateman Fred Lodge expressed the opinion of many employees at the Columbus Union Station. From porter to stationmaster, they find the Union Station is the personification of life.

To this sprawling building six blocks north of Broad and High come people from every Main Street in America. They come as travelers, as home folk to bid good-by to friends or as interested bystanders to watch the ceaseless panorama of action.

A honeymoon couple . . . a blind man leading a blind women . . . a young girl with a smile on her face and tears in her eyes as she whispers good-by to her husband or sweetheart . . . a lonely little boy who has lost his parents . . .

*Help you with your bags, ma’am? Shoeshine, mister? What time does the train to Dayton leave? Where can I get a cracker for my baby to chew on? How do these here lockers work? How much delay will there be? Where do I check my baggage? Could you tell me where I can get a quick shave and haircut? What track does the train to Cleveland leave on?*

The only question which seems to stump all employees is “When was the Union Station first built?” The answer was finally found in a yellow newspaper clipping. In 1850, a frame building was constructed to meet the needs of the three tracks. It was

established by the Columbus & Xenia, and the Cleveland & Cincinnati railroad companies.

The original station was located just outside the city since downtown Naghten Street, then called North Public Lane, served as the north corporation line.

That was the day of the original New Look as dresses swept the dust of the unpaved streets. The belching smoke of the iron horses was blacker and uglier than now.

In 1855, Columbus newspapers began their campaign to lessen the dangers caused by the trains crossing High Street. In 1873, the City Council joined them by declaring either a tunnel must be built under or a bridge over the tracks. A tunnel was built but the general public refused to acknowledge its existence. Only the streetcar went through the narrow, dark and poorly ventilated interior.

Meantime, the Cleveland, Columbus & Cincinnati and the Pittsburgh, Cincinnati & St. Louis companies formed the Union Depot Company in July, 1869, and during the next few years agreed to build a new station 350 feet east of High Street.

On February 14, 1875, Panhandle No. 2 was the first train to roar into the new station. The trains continued to cross High Street and the newspapers continued to battle against the practice. By 1890, a total of 245 trains crossed the main drag in a period of 24 hours, obstructing traffic some seven hours a day.

All this was remedied in 1894 with the erection of a completely new station and a viaduct. The station was grandiose with a train shed, concrete driveways and a covered walk from the train shed to the viaduct. It was completed in 1896.

Pictures of the station at that time reveal that many changes and improvements since have been made, but fundamentally the building remains the same. The original carved children still cavort atop the High Street façade.

Union Station is now owned and controlled by the Pennsylvania, the New York Central, the Norfolk & Western, the Baltimore & Ohio and the Chesapeake & Ohio railroads. The Union Depot Company, a subsidiary of the five railroads, supervises all operations within the station.

Most people regard the depot as a place to buy a ticket, hop aboard the right train and arrive at their chosen destinations. Most never appreciate the operations that take place behind the scenes.

*Ticket to Charleston, West Virginia, please. What track?*

Stationmaster W.F. Callahan and his assistants have the gigantic job of seeing that some 115 passenger trains, plus several freights, are routed in and out each day.

The track each uses may be any one of eight. The stationmaster and his aides must keep account of delays and inform the gatemen, switchmen and other attendants of them.

The gatemen post train times on the big-time board, answer questions and announce trains.

### *What time does the train leave?*

To the throng who descend upon Union Station daily, approximately 1000 tickets are sold. The majority of these are to Ohio Towns. The farthest point to which a ticket has been sold is Mexico.

Columbus is one of the 12 cities in the United States which serve as distributing centers for war dead. This necessitates one of the saddest tasks performed at the station. Since the end of the war, about 75 military dead have been taken in and out of the station daily.

Downstairs in the baggage department, rows of caskets, each draped with an American flag, each tagged with a name and destination, stand awaiting their last ride.

### *Too late to check my bags? Free of charge, huh?*

Against a background of luggage, Sam Cohen, baggage checkman bluntly declared, "We have more trouble with people than with dogs." Just a few moments prior to this remark, he had made arrangements to ship a 100-pound pet to its master. The men in this department are fortunately graced with a sense of humor that enables them to cope with unreasonable travelers.

Bags must be checked within 30 minutes of train time in order for them to be shipped on the same train with the passenger. During the course of an ordinary day, the men check approximately 200 pieces of outgoing luggage, deliver 65 pieces and check innumerable parcels between trains.

### *Ah, an empty locker . . . might as well put these in here . . .*

If people don't check their parcels at the baggage window, they may put them in any of 152 lockers. Of course, some people may be confused at this procedure, such as the young lady who was off on her first train trip. Her luggage was small, so she carefully stored the pieces in a locker and blithely left Columbus for Pittsburgh.

Upon her arrival there, she sought out the locker corresponding to the number of the one in Columbus and opened it to get her luggage. Oddly enough, it wasn't there.

### *Sure get hungry waiting for a train . . .*

The gateway restaurant is often filled to its capacity of 100 during the big rushes of the day. Twenty employees work in shifts during the day to serve the public.

Loretta Cary, one of the waitresses, has a hobby of collecting the autographs of celebrities who come in the restaurant. She has been able to obtain many signatures, meanwhile getting a kick out of watching and listening to people from all over the United States.

### *Three-quarters of an hour yet . . . guess there's time for a shave.*

Mirrors throw back the images of the customary barber implements. Fred Arendt has served as barber for 39 years in the barber shop which opened in 1897. He can still remember the days when the street cars used the viaduct and immigrants came into the station tagged like pieces of express.

*Feel better after that shave . . . nice fellow, that guy . . . looks like that old lady is lost . . .*

Over in one corner of the station is the Travelers Aid Society. It calls its work a chain of service, for the aid extends across the country. It serves the ill, the stranded, the very young, the handicapped and the uncertain.

A child could travel alone from New York to San Francisco, or any long distance, with a representative meeting the child in all terminals to see that he or she is placed on the next train.

Workers also assist foreign travelers, including many war brides in recent years. They help parents and relatives locate runaway children and attempt to locate relatives for those who are lost or without funds.

*Sure, I'll have a shine. How's business?*

*"Awful slow in good weather." And tips haven't been flowing too freely, either, according to William Smith, a shine boy.*

*Train for Xenia, Dayton, Richmond, Track 1.*

People crowd about the track gate . . . the sound of voices grows louder . . . a laugh echoes . . .

The train rumbles under the 53-year-old building: one, two, three, FOUR . . . one, two, three, FOUR. A pause, then the wheels begin to chug again. Faster . . . faster . . . faster . . . the whistle cries out in a muffled, forlorn wail and a cloud of black, thick smoke rolls past the windows. Another train has left Columbus Union Station.



Waiting room and gate to track 1 and 2, circa 1955, photo by Galen Gonsler.