CHANGING TRAINS IN COLUMBUS

By John Anderson Carnahan

In our constant quest to improve our lot, we Americans sometimes manage to cast out the baby with the bathwater. So has it been with the way we travel. Most of our passenger trains are gone, victims of our national haste to *make* haste.

Today, for the sake of celerity, we routinely submit to being stuffed into oversized toothpaste tubes and hurtled through the atmosphere, knees-to-chest, munching on stale pretzels, trying in vain to spot something of interest out the window or in the bland décor of a Boeing 767. We have sacrificed civility to speed.

I now and then feel this sacrifice with pangs of slight sadness and nostalgia because I am old enough to recall how it was to travel by train and because I am fortunate enough to have experienced, when I was young, the essential grace and leisure of that *civilized* form of locomotion.

No doubt there are those of my vintage who would remind me that traveling by train was not always a fun trip. There were, to be sure, delays, missed connections, the surly ticket clerk eyeing you suspiciously from his brass cage, grumpy conductors, and occasional irate passengers. And, truth be told, steam engines, although marvelous creatures, did generate soot and steam and grime. Furthermore, even the great streamliners took valuable *time* to get from one point to another.

In 1945, for example, a New York-bound Columbus traveler could depart the old Union Station on North High Street at 6:20 PM aboard the New York Central's *Ohio State Limited* and arrive in Grand Central at 9 the following morning. For variety, the traveler might choose the Pennsy's all-sleeper *Spirit of St. Louis*, leaving Union Station at 9:35 at night and arriving at Penn Station a few minutes before 10 the next morning.

Yes, a twelve-to-fourteen hour trip from Columbus to New York seems extreme in these days of super-jets. But, to paraphrase Cunard, *getting there was half the fun.*

On a train, it was actually possible to stretch your legs full length, to walk about, to sit at a table graced with linen and crystal, to eat a good meal, to look out the window and see people and places*, to watch America go by.*

I began to learn these things starting back in the 1930s when I was first introduced to the marvels of train travel.

I grew up in Cleveland, but beginning in 1936 and extending through the 1940s I had the good fortune to spend my summers on family farms in Pulaski County in the New River Valley of southwestern Virginia. I was introduced to the glories and excitement of train travel in 1936 and became an instant fan of

railroads and steam engines. I began making the trip alone, at age eleven, in 1941.

I would board New York Central's *Capital City Special* in Cleveland's Union Terminal. It left there at 5:50 in the afternoon and arrived in Columbus at 8:50 – after dark. For a boy who loved trains, Columbus was Heaven on Earth – a place where the *action* was.

Trains first came to Columbus in the early 1850s, and the city's importance as a hub for passenger travel was quickly established over the following decades. The last Columbus train station - the grand Union Station, erected on the site where the Hyatt Regency now stands - was completed in 1897. Its designer was Daniel H. Burnham of the famed "Chicago School" of architects. It replaced two earlier, rather drab, forebears that served as many as one hundred arriving and departing passenger trains daily.

Rowlee Steiner, a local historian, in a monograph entitled *Columbus Union Depot 1851-1956,* gives us this picture of Burnham's Union Station:

> The grand concourse of the new structure was located midway between east and west on the second floor of the building, which floor was at [the High Street] viaduct level. The ceiling was forty-five feet above the floor, and the ceiling and upper walls were ornately finished in plaster paneling and figures, while marble wainscoting of six-foot height embellished the lower walls. The concourse contained the main waiting room, ticket offices, telegraph counter, and news stand, and off in the southwest corner was a smoking and rest room for men. A spacious corridor with a big arched ceiling led from the west middle of the concourse to the main entrance of the building at a canopied portico. The corridor was flanked by a comfortable waiting room for women, and by baggage and parcel counters. A pair of wide marble stairways led from either side of the north areas of the concourse to the ground floor, which was at track level. The ground floor contained rooms for handling mail, baggage and express and another large waiting room which was originally intended for excursions and immigrants…….

By the early forties, at the height of World War II, Union Station had lost some of the elegance that Mr. Steiner describes, and the number of daily trains arriving and departing Union Station had grown to 112. To put it mildly, the place, whether or not its earlier grandeur had dimmed, presented to my young eyes an exciting, sometimes chaotic, scene. Uniforms were everywhere - soldiers and sailors on their way to or from a boot camp or Naval station, some alone and disconsolate, others surrounded by teary families, still others kissed and embraced by their sweethearts. This was a place of constant motion – Americans *on the move.*

But best of all, there were the *trains.*

My memory of Union Station, unsullied by the architectural fine points observed by Mr. Steiner, is of a structure shaped like a recumbent upside-down

letter “L” with its “arm” turned to the north. Looking from High Street facing east toward the main entrance, one could see a long driveway, with a pedestrian walkway, extending to the main entrance. Upon entering the station, the visitor arriving from the street would walk along a long corridor to the “business part” of the waiting room. On the north side of the approaching corridor was a lunch counter operated by the Merkle Family.

The ticket counters were to the right along a long wall, and it was in front of these booths where the most frenetic activities took place: baggage and khaki knapsacks everywhere; Redcaps hustling from one place to another; the Nickelodeon blaring out the latest jitterbug hits; the Western Union counter where out-of-cash travelers waited anxiously for help from home. Then there was the Travelers Aid desk – identified as such by a lighted globe and a pleasant and friendly “Gray Lady” sitting at a desk behind it, helping the lost and lonely.

Photo booths were popular accoutrements of train stations in those days, and I soon discerned that they were popular spots for servicemen and their girls; for only a quarter they could have their picture snapped behind a little green curtain which, no doubt, also afforded them the opportunity for a quick and private smooch. And it was in the Columbus Union Station that I became keenly aware of the sadness and gladness that permeated the atmosphere of railroad stations. Arrivals appeared to be mainly cheerful affairs filled with smiles and laughter, hugs and kisses. Departures, on the other hand, were more likely to be tinged with tears and sorrow. This was particularly true during the War. Who knew what this young soldier was going toward? Who knew whether he would ever return? Who knew, for that matter, whether his girl, now so clinging, teary and affectionate, would be waiting for him when he came back home, *if* he came back home?

But for me both arrivals and departures were happy events – arrivals because I could take part in the excitement of Union Station; and departures because I could look forward to a long trip on a beautiful train

At the back or east side of the main waiting room was Merkle’s Restaurant. I never ventured into that regal establishment, although I was envious of those who could afford such a treat. It appeared to me just as Mr. Steiner describes it - clearly beyond my limited means, though, with its heavy linen tablecloths and what looked to me to be fine silverware and crystal.

Off to the left – north of all of this - was the “arm” of the upside-down L, the long Waiting Room – a concourse with four doorways on each side, each doorway bearing the numbers of two Gates (1 to 8). Across the entrance to each doorway was a thick leather rope to keep people from descending to track level until they were permitted to board. From his post at a microphone Fred Lodge – a longtime fixture at Union Station - would announce the arrivals and departures in bored, dreary tones, each syllable drawn out, without inflection and with Stationmaster imperiousness: “Bal-ti-more and O-hio Train Num-ber 38 for New-ark, Zanes-ville, Cam-bridge, Barnes-ville, Bell-aire, Wheel-ing, West Vir-gin-i-a, Wash-ing-ton, Penn-syl-van-ia and *Pitts*–burgh, Penn-syl-van-i-a now departing

on Track Num-ber 2. Alll-aboooard." Then, his appearance as laconic as his voice was flat, he would amble to the Gate, unlatch the rope, and watch in a sort of studied disinterested silence as the departing herd descended. (He is reported in a 1949 *Dispatch* story to have declared that there was "never a dull moment" at Union Station. His demeanor, as I recall it, gave the lie to that pronouncement.)

Great high and wide windows afforded spectacular views from the concourse down to the trains and tracks below, and when a steam engine passed beneath us the glass shuddered and great billows of smoke and steam poured up to block the view momentarily. The benches close by the Gates were long, solid oaken affairs, parts of which, I suspect, have survived in other Columbus domains. No one but departing passengers were allowed on the track level below, and the ropes extending across each Gate served to deter, but not necessarily prevent, an artful dodger from ducking under and racing down the stairs, two at a time. Once on the platform, a knowledgeable kid – as I became with practice – could meld into the surroundings and simply observe the goings-and comings.

Wonderful trains - arriving from all over the continent it seemed to me - converged upon Columbus. The *Jeffersonian,* the *St. Louisan,* the *Lake Shore Limited,* the *Spirit of St. Louis,* the *Ohio State Limited,* the *Knickerbocker* , the *American* , the *Southwestern Limited,* the *Iroquois,* the *Cincinnati Limited,* and many others – most of them not "name" trains, but simply numbered – brought the world to Central Ohio. Their operators were the Baltimore & Ohio, the Chesapeake & Ohio, the New York Central, the Norfolk & Western, and the great and mighty Pennsylvania Railroad, all five with tumultuous histories rooted in the 1840s and 50s. The B&O has disappeared, swallowed up by the C&O, now renamed CSX. The mighty New York Central and Pennsylvania entered into a disastrous marriage in the 1960s, then were devoured by a creature of the federal government – Conrail – which in turn has been carved up and served in large pieces to CSX and the N&W (now the Norfolk Southern). In the process, since those heydays of crisp, clean and roomy coaches, Pullmans, roomettes, drawing rooms, parlor cars, buffets, diners, and observation cars, the elegant passenger train has all but disappeared from the American scene. (Columbus is certainly one of the largest cities in the world, if not *the* largest, without passenger train service of *any* kind. The last scheduled train to visit the Capital City was Amtrak's *National Limited.* It gave up the ghost in 1979.)

My boyhood practice was simply to mingle with the arriving and departing crowds at track level so that I could observe closely what was going on with the *trains.* Overalled "car men," carrying long-necked oil cans, would check the journals (axle-ends) on each car to make certain that there were no "hot boxes" that required attention. The journal lids made a singular clanking sound when they were dropped back into place, and the car men kept up a constant stream of chatter and occasional yelling among themselves.

Other harried workers attached great hoses to fittings to make certain that each car was adequately stocked with water. Up toward the engine, baggage

handlers were passing suitcases and boxes - and an occasional casket - into the Railway Express car. The sounds of steam and water and the smells of grease, soot, creosote and steam enhanced the sense of urgency, the need to hurry this train on its way. Sometimes, teenage boys – “news butchers” - selling newspapers, candy, cigarettes, sandwiches, and magazines, were allowed to enter the cars to hawk their wares to through passengers who had not de-trained.

But the feature attraction was the *engine.* I always found it difficult to determine which was more exciting: the arrival or the departure. I could count on being close to the engine upon its arrival because it had to pull through the station in order to position its following cars along the passenger platform. A clanking, bell-ringing, hissing locomotive, redolent of steam and soot, arriving from some far-off point on the compass, never failed to raise my level of *involvement* - my intense desire to be where the engineer was, to become part of the whole operation – to *run the railroad.* In modern parlance, I “really got into it.”

If I was lucky and the engine had not pulled too far forward into the yard and beyond the platform, I might even chat with the engineer. The engineers of my experience were mainly nice people, and I found that they were tolerant of young boys who liked steam engines. So, I might show off a little by noting that the engine was a K-1 Pacific or one of those new Northerns or Alleghenies and by referring casually to the “side rods” or the “firebox” or the “reverse gear,” or some such. I was usually rewarded with smiling acknowledgment that I seemed to know a thing or two about steam engines.

The departures were different, although equally exciting. Several “All Aboards” would echo down the line, back to front, folding metal floor plates would *clang* into place, doors would close with a solid *chunk,* and then the engine bell would start its rapid ringing, a first gentle *chuff* would sound and then off she would go, with deceptive quiet and a brief whistle, accelerating rapidly, lighted cars gliding by, faces looking down upon the boy on the station platform gazing up at them with wonder and awe.

I had, in my mind and imagination, launched another train from Columbus to Washington or Chicago or St. Louis or New York.

At last, when it was my turn to leave, Fred Lodge began droning the imminent departure - at 10:30 in the dark of night - at Gate 6, of Norfolk & Western Number 4, the *Po-ca-hon-tas,* bound for Cir-cle-ville, Chil-li-coth-e, Ports-mouth, Iron-ton, Ken-o-va, Will-iam-son, Welch, Blue-field and Ro-a-noke, and I was going to experience, once again, the unalloyed joy of a long train ride from Columbus, Ohio into the mountains of southwestern Virginia.