

RAMSEY COUNTY  
**History**  
*A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society*

**Summer 2013**

Volume 48, Number 2

*Whither the Passenger Train?*

St. Paul Union Depot:  
Decline and Rebirth

*John W. Diers*

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*For the Masses or the Classes?*

Fine Art Exhibits at the Minnesota State Fair 1885–1914

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*This is an oil painting of an Irish wolfhound named "Lion," painted in 1841 by Charles Deas (1818–1867), an early Minnesota artist. The painting was a first prize winner in the 1860 Minnesota State Fair. In the article beginning on page 3, Leo J. Harris provides the background on this painting and considers fine art exhibitions at the Minnesota State Fair later in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 48, Number 2

Summer 2013

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ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS ON DECEMBER 20, 2007:

The Ramsey County Historical Society inspires current and future generations  
to learn from and value their history by engaging in a diverse program  
of presenting, publishing and preserving.

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and by a contribution from the late Reuel D. Harmon*

## A Message from the Editorial Board

As the St. Paul Union Depot reopens with fanfare and hope for a revitalized future, John Diers takes us on a tour of its past—not just the romanticized version, but with a clear-eyed view of its strengths and weaknesses. After its completion in 1926, the Depot was managed by nine railroads and anchored by a massive postal operation. But already, the availability and use of automobiles was making inroads in rail passenger service, and soon air travel would do the same. The fascinating business story of the Depot over its working life has not often been told, and Diers does a great job. Leo Harris also shares with us the eclectic history of the fine arts exhibit at the Minnesota State Fair, which began as a tribute to European artists before the rise of local museums. Later, it evolved as a display of home-grown talent, reflecting popular Victorian pastimes—think china painting—as well as paintings by Minnesota artists. Finally, check out our book reviews for tales of two murders, 130 years apart, and John Milton's complete examination of the life and times of Nick Coleman, former Minnesota Senate majority leader. Take this issue to the cabin or the beach and enjoy.

*Anne Cowie,*  
Chair, Editorial Board

# *Whither the Passenger Train?*

## St. Paul Union Depot: Decline and Rebirth

*John W. Diers*

**T**he St. Paul Union Depot Company was incorporated in 1879 by the railroads serving St. Paul for the purpose of building and operating a single, jointly owned passenger station. The first depot opened in 1881. It was destroyed by fire in 1884 and, subsequently, rebuilt. Fire struck, again, in 1913, hastening plans already underway for construction of a new depot. Work finally commenced in 1917 after considerable delay due to a dispute among the nine owning railroads over the size and cost of the replacement facility. The more prosperous railroads, notably James J. Hill's Great Northern and the City of St. Paul, wanted a civic monument, worthy of a capital city and a gateway to the Pacific Northwest. Less prosperous roads, like Samuel Felton's Chicago Great Western, wanted something less grand in scale. Felton suggested that if the City of St. Paul wanted a civic monument, it should pay for one.

### **Building the New Depot**

What evolved was a compromise design costing \$15 million that is the current Depot, fronting on Fourth Street between Wacouta and Sibley Streets, just north of the Mississippi River in the area of the city known as Lowertown. Charles Frost, who was responsible for the Great Northern and Milwaukee Road depots in Minneapolis and, a nationally, well-regarded architect of railroad stations, was selected as the architect. George J. Grant Construction Company and Foley Brothers were the principal contractors. The new Depot was the largest construction project in St. Paul in the twentieth century.

The new facility went up on the site of the old. Passenger trains continued to arrive and depart from the old train shed, which had survived the 1913 fire. A nearby warehouse was converted to a temporary ticket office and waiting room. All tracks and approaches to the new Depot were elevated above the original site. As the elevated construction progressed, the old tracks on the lower level were taken out of service and removed, and the old train shed, demolished. The entire project took some nine years to complete. The headhouse and ticket lobby opened first, in April 1920, followed by the concourse

and waiting room, which were completed in phases between 1920 and 1924. All work was finished in 1926.

All the amenities of a big city passenger station greeted arriving and departing

passengers: Travelers Aid, barber shop, drug store, coffee shop, dining room, and a newsstand. Restrooms offered bathing facilities for the tired traveler. Upstairs, there were offices, a small emergency hospital and a recreation center that featured a twelve-lane bowling alley. Beneath the concourse, below track level, was a large area set aside for the handling of mail and express. Excepting New York and Chicago, St. Paul Union Depot was among the largest railway mail transfer facilities in the country.

The nine railroads that owned it and oversaw the Depot Company that managed operations at the station were the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy (Burlington); Chicago Great Western; Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul & Pacific (Milwaukee Road); Chicago, Rock Island



*1878 found seven railroads and thirty-eight daily passenger trains arriving and departing at four depots crowded on, or near, St. Paul's Mississippi levee. None of these stations was adequate for the number of people and trains coming and going every day. A new depot was needed and the railroads, after haggling over ownership issues, agreed to form a union depot company that provided for joint ownership and operation of the new facility. Prominent Twin Cities architect L.S. Buffington was hired to design the building, and it opened on August 21, 1881. It was rebuilt in 1884 following a disastrous fire. There were improvements in subsequent years, but it was claimed, again, by fire in 1913. The present depot took its place. Photo by Joel Emmons Whitney. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*



*It is 12:53 P.M. on a fall day in 1948, and the Milwaukee Road's Afternoon Hiawatha is ready to depart St. Paul Union Depot on a six-hour twenty-minute dash to Chicago. Passengers who boarded in Minneapolis are already having lunch in the dining car, while, nearby, a switch engine works a cut of mail cars and coaches on Northern Pacific's train 61, an all stops local that just arrived after a four-hour trek from Duluth. At precisely 12:55 the Hiawatha's conductor will take a last look down the platform, highball the engineer and swing aboard. The engineer will turn on the engine bell and headlight, release the train brakes, notch out the throttle, and the 14-car speedster will slowly slip away from the platform, clump through a series of switches and begin its 400-mile sprint to the Windy City. It is a daily scene that will go on for several more years. But change is coming to the passenger train and St. Paul Union Depot. In six years its steam engines will be gone, banished by the diesel. Then the passenger trains, themselves, will disappear, one by one. There are 174 arrivals and departures this day. In a few years there will be none. Photo by St. Paul Pioneer Press and Dispatch. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

& Pacific; Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis & Omaha; Great Northern; Northern Pacific; Minneapolis & St. Louis; and the Minneapolis, St. Paul & Sault Ste. Marie (Soo Line).  
 Practical rather than pretentious, St. Paul Union Depot was no Grand Central Terminal or Penn Station. It never fulfilled the expectations of its builders or paid off its construction debt, but it was the largest and most important rail passenger station west of Chicago. For fifty-one years, millions of people bought tickets and walked through its lobby and concourse to board waiting trains. Others came to see friends and family off, or welcome them home. It sent children to summer camp and school and young men and women to war—many never to return. It hosted U.S. presidents,

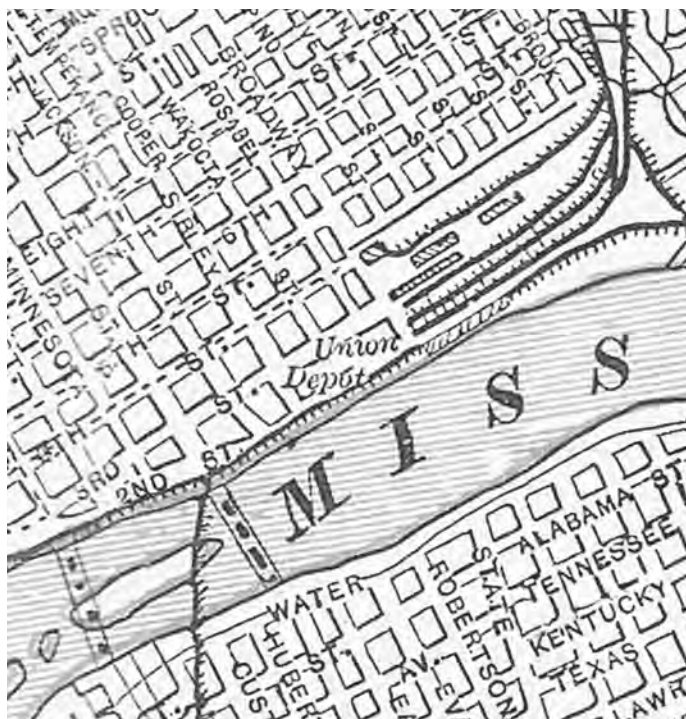
royalty, authors, movie stars, the rich and famous, but it also sheltered the homeless and the troubled seeking a warm space on a cold night.  
 At the turn-of-the-twentieth century, when planning for St. Paul's new Depot

was underway, the railroads were moving virtually all of the nation's intercity passenger traffic and most of its freight. Prosperity for the passenger business seemed permanent and assured. W. C. Armstrong, chief engineer for the St.

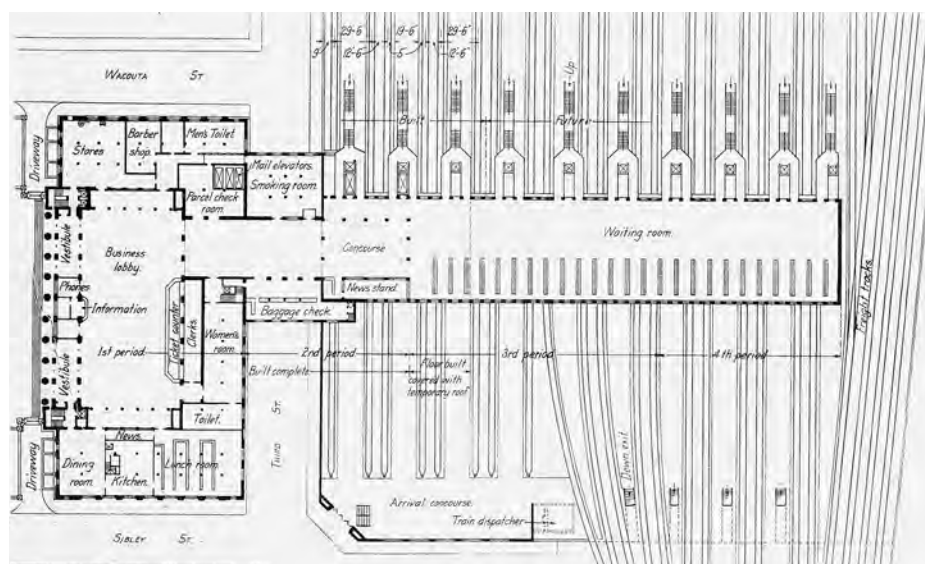
Year	Daily Passenger Trains Arriving & Departing	Tickets Sold Annually	Pieces of Mail Handled Annually
1927	297	496,743	20,164,538
1929	253	302,857	21,070,163
1937	180	191,649	16,454,315
1944	186	366,871	18,966,479
1952	156	195,012	22,624,449
1962	84	100,370	18,963,090
1969	48	64,852	16,155,838

Sources: Interstate Commerce Commission Reports; Minnesota Historical Society.





This portion of a mid-1920s map of St. Paul shows the location of the Union Depot just above the letter "I" in the label for the Mississippi River. In addition to marking the proximity of the Depot to the river and the heart of the city, the map shows how the various railroad lines (shown with hash marks) came together at Third and Fourth Streets. Of particular note is the railroad bridge across the river adjacent to the Robert Street Bridge (to the left of the "M") that gave access to trains operated by the Chicago Great Western to the Depot. Map courtesy of the Collections of the Ramsey County Historical Society.



This is an original drawing that shows the head house and business lobby, concourse, waiting room, and the order in which they were built. Phase one, beginning in 1917, involved the head house, which was completed and opened to the public in April 1920. Phase two was the concourse, spanning Third Street (today's Kellogg Boulevard) and the first six elevated tracks. It was completed in October-November 1921. In phase three, completed in 1924, the waiting room was extended over the next six elevated tracks. In phase four the waiting room was extended over the remaining tracks. Finishing work was completed in 1926. Records of the St. Paul Union Depot Company, History Center, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minn.

Paul Union Depot Company, in a report to the company's president and Board of Directors concluded that, based on the 500,000 passenger cars passing through the Depot in 1915 and then current trends, the new station could expect 850,000 cars by 1933 and 1,100,000 cars by 1955, when it would reach capacity. The Board adopted these projections, but they proved far too optimistic. When all work was finished in 1926, the passenger train and the great downtown stations, including St. Paul Union Depot, were already in decline.

## The Rise of the Automobile

There were 200 automobiles registered in Minnesota in 1900 and no paved roads. By 1913, the year the former depot burned, the number had grown to 37,000 and the Good Roads movement was well underway. In 1920, the same year that the headhouse opened, Northwest Airlines won its first airmail contract, and there were 320,000 automobiles in the state. Seven years later, in 1927, the year after the depot was completed, there were 648,000 automobiles in Minnesota, and Northwest Airlines had begun scheduled passenger service to Chicago.

When the Bureau of Railway Economics published, *A Statistical Review of The Railroad Year 1924*, it noted there were 15 million automobiles in the United States and commented, prophetically:

The American people will have their passenger transportation in the form in which they want it. Although long distance automobile travel is frequently more expensive than travel by rail, even when the latter is undertaken with the most luxurious conditions and environment, yet the pleasure of traveling as a free agent in an individual unit of transportation seems to outweigh, in the minds of many, the comfort, speed and convenience of travel by passenger train.

The number of trains calling on the Depot declined in the 1920s and '30s, briefly revived during World War II, only to slide, again, as the railroads discontinued passenger service in response to falling ridership and huge economic losses. By 1969 there were 48 arrivals and departures compared to the 297 in 1927. Two years later St. Paul Union Depot closed.

Amtrak took over all intercity passenger services, moved its operations to the Great Northern station in Minneapolis, then later to a new depot in the St. Paul Midway neighborhood. Shortly before the end of passenger service, discussions were held with the U.S. Postal Service about converting the Depot to a mail-processing center, but they were unsuccessful, and, by 1971, all of the Post Office's bulk mail operations had been moved to a new site. The U.S. government statistics for operations at the Depot show how quickly the decline came.

### A White Elephant

The Depot was a huge white elephant, and finding new uses was a problem for its owners. The Minnesota Transfer Railway maintained offices in the Depot until 1974 when they were relocated to the Minnesota Transfer Railway Company's own office building near Cleveland and University Avenues. Finally, in March of 1977 the concourse and the waiting room were sold to the Postal Service for document and equipment storage. The train deck became a parking area for Post Office trucks. All of the tracks and boarding platforms were removed and the roundhouse building and yard office razed, but miraculously the depot building, itself, survived.

The next six years brought a succession of plans and proposals among them a children's museum, and a river garden complex that would feature offices and retail space in the headhouse and new construction on the former train deck. Then in 1983, the Depot ticket lobby was sold to a consortium of developers who moved ahead with plans to renovate and restore the interior for restaurant and office use. The plans were not completely successful and ownership of the building changed hands multiple times.

When the U.S. Postal Service announced that it would move its facilities to Eagan, it offered the waiting room, the concourse, and the train deck to the Ramsey County Regional Railroad Authority, which was making plans to convert the depot to a multi-modal transit center. The Rail Authority purchased the bulk of the 35-acre property in 2008 and shortly thereafter acquired the ticket



Photographer Kenneth M. Wright took this photo of the main waiting room in early 1924. The multiple electrical cords dangling from its vast ceiling indicate that the chandeliers that would help to light the space had not yet been installed and this portion of the Depot was not yet open for public use. Photo from the Kenneth M. Wright Collection. Photo courtesy of Jay Pfaender.

lobby, portions of which had been converted to condominiums by its previous owner. Total cost of the Depot restoration and conversion project was \$243 million, which was mostly paid for by federal transit and stimulus funds, some bonding money from the state of Minnesota, and county rail authority funds.

After years of neglect, the Depot reopened in December 2012 for Metro Transit and intercity buses. Amtrak service is scheduled to follow later this year and the Central Corridor Light Rail Line (the Green Line), which has a stop outside the Depot on Fourth Street, begins operations between St. Paul and Minneapolis in 2014. In coming years, it may host commuter and high-speed rail.

### One Transportation Professional's View

I came to St. Paul Union Depot on April 30, 1971 to say farewell to the St. Paul Union Depot and the trains of my childhood. They had been the pride of the railroads and the employees who ran them, but that night, when the *Empire Builder* and the *North Coast Limited* made their

last westbound departures, St. Paul and scores of other cities across the country lost all direct passenger service. Next day the government run Amtrak took over what was left, the Depot closed, and the era of the great trains came to an end.

Growing up in St. Paul in the late 1940s and early '50s, St. Paul Union Depot was one of my favorite places. I was there when Harry Truman came to town on his 1948 campaign trip and saw Eisenhower in 1952, but more often I went there to take the train. We lived in Ft. Dodge, Iowa, in 1947 and my mother and I made regular trips to and from St. Paul to visit my grandparents aboard the Chicago Great Western's *Twin City Limited*. The Great Western wasn't a rich railroad, and its *Twin City Limited*, despite the name, was a well-worn collection of World War I-vintage coaches with red plush seats, powered by a smoky steam locomotive. It poked along at an easy 30 miles-per-hour stopping at every town, consuming seven hours to cover the 220 miles between Ft. Dodge and St. Paul. I loved every moment of it.

We moved to Philadelphia in 1949. It was my introduction to the streamline

era and the premier trains of the early 1950s. Grandmother always took the train. She refused to fly and would never travel coach on an overnight train trip. It was first class all the way. We always had parlor car seats on the *Hiawatha*, or the *Zephyr*, to Chicago and a Pullman bedroom, or drawing room, on the *Broadway Limited*, to Philadelphia. Breakfast, lunch and dinner were always in the diner. Once, when Grandmother wanted to see some shows in New York, we traveled there and stayed for a couple of days, then returned to Chicago on the *Twentieth Century Limited*.

The *Broadway* and the *Century* were all Pullman, first class trains that catered to business people, entertainers, and the carriage trade. Their observation cars were filled with gentlemen in suits and ties and ladies in feathered hats. It was a more elegant time, and, in those days, before body scans, pat downs, boarding cattle calls, and other indignities. You dressed for travel. Grandmother always



In this 1919 photograph taken at Fourth and Wacouta Streets, work on the construction of the head house of the Depot is well underway. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.



It took nine years to build, and when it was completed in 1926, St. Paul Union Depot joined passenger terminals in Omaha, Cincinnati, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles as one of the last great railroad stations constructed in the twentieth century. The view is looking toward the Mississippi River across Fourth Street. Photo by C.P. Gibson. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

made me wear a Little Lord Fauntleroy suit. She also had an annoying habit of licking her fingers and applying saliva to tamp down my cowlick. But all this was forgotten once we got aboard.

The *Broadway* and the *Century* had amenities. If you needed a trim, there was a barber on board and a lady's maid to assist women traveling with children. Did your suit need a press? Call the valet. Feeling ill? Call the nurse. There was a radiophone to keep in touch with the office and a train secretary who could type a letter, and, of course, there was the dining car and the steward who presided over his domain like the conductor of a symphony orchestra.

### Improvements Fall Short

At the end of World War II the railroads spent over \$500 million of private capital on improved infrastructure and fleets of streamlined trains that were the envy of the world. Dome cars, all room sleeping cars, leg-rest coaches and elegant dining and observation cars greeted prospective passengers at depots everywhere. In the East all Pullman first class trains such as The *Broadway Limited* on the Pennsylvania and the *Twentieth Century Limited* on the New York Central, wooed New York and Chicago travelers.

In the West, St. Paul-based Great Northern reequipped its *Empire Builder* with new streamlined equipment and domes. New trains were added to its schedules, the *Internationals* between Seattle and Vancouver, B.C. The *Red River* between Grand Forks and St. Paul, the *Dakotan* to Minot, and a second trans-continental streamliner, the *Western Star* between Chicago and the Pacific Coast. Competitor Northern Pacific bought new dome cars, observations, diners, club cars, coaches and Pullmans for its *North Coast Limited* and speeded up its secondary St. Paul-Seattle train, the *Alaskan*, giving it a new name, the *Mainstreeter*, to go with its brand new equipment.

There were new *Hiawathas*, *Twin Zephyrs* and *400s* that offered six-hour sprints and 100 MPH speeds between St. Paul and Chicago. There were the new *Rockets* on the Rock Island that sped travelers from the Twin Cities to Kansas City, St. Louis, Dallas and Houston in style and luxury with through Pullmans



*This view of the exterior of the Depot looking toward Sibley Street shows how it fronted on Fourth Street. Although areas of grass, shrubs, and other plantings have been added, the absence of travelers on the sidewalks probably dates this photo from before the head house building opened for use in 1920. Photo from the Kenneth M. Wright Collection. Photo courtesy of Jay Pfaender.*

for Los Angeles that connected with the *Golden State* at Kansas City. Not to be outdone, The Chicago and NorthWestern offered a through Pullman via Omaha for Los Angeles on the Union Pacific's *City*

of Los Angeles and another for Denver on the *City of Denver*. Even marginal passenger carriers such as the Chicago Great Western and the Soo Line made efforts to spruce up their older pre-World War II



*An enterprising newspaper photographer took this shot of the railroad yards east of the Depot from the top of the First National Bank in the early 1930s. The Dayton's Bluff neighborhood lies at the top of the photo and the Mississippi River to the right. Together they hemmed in the sprawling yard. Operating and maintaining these yards and their facilities was a major cost to the Depot Company. When the time came to trim expenses, especially once train arrivals and departures began to decline significantly, there were few places where this type of operating cost could be reduced enough to improve the bottom line. St. Paul Daily News photo. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*





*St. Paul Union Depot was headquarters for the Tenth Division of the U.S. Railway Mail Service and a gateway city for mail and express moving from the Eastern seaboard and Europe to the Dakotas, Montana, and Idaho, the Pacific Northwest, Alaska, and the Orient. Next to New York and Chicago, it was the busiest railway mail terminal in the country. In the 1940s and early 1950s, four hundred people were employed at the Depot loading and unloading the 40,000 sacks of mail that passed through every day. Photo courtesy of Aaron Isaacs.*

equipment. The Soo Line's *Mountaineer* ran through from St. Paul with connections at Portal, North Dakota, for Vancouver, B.C.

Elsewhere, there were new *City Streamliners* to Los Angeles, Denver, and San Francisco on the Union Pacific, a new *Sunset Limited*, *Coast Daylight*, *Lark*, *Cascade* and *Shasta* on the Southern Pacific and the all-time, train-of-trains between San Francisco and Chicago, the *Vista Dome California Zephyr*.

But the passengers didn't come and railroad managers were horrified in 1957 when they opened the books on their passenger business and saw nothing but red ink. They'd lost their multimillion-dollar bet on passenger trains, leaving them with deficits and empty seats. Soon the trains, themselves, would be gone.

The culprits were the automobile and the airplane. Thanks to the automobile, fewer passengers were traveling short distances on local trains. On the Great

Northern the average distance traveled in 1920 was 80 miles, by 1924 it was 107 miles, and by 1931 it had nearly doubled to 202 miles. Fewer local passengers meant lower passengers per train mile, less revenue, and lots of empty seats on trains traveling short distances.

The *Wall Street Journal* intoned in its February 18, 1926 edition that:

Short haul business is gone as far as railroads are concerned and cannot be regained by them. The only thing to do is to adapt operations to new conditions. Local business on the Northern Pacific fell off 50% from 1920 to 1924, while long haul passenger business increased only slightly. In 1925, 150,000 persons visited Yellowstone National Park. Automobiles brought 100,000 of them. From 1914 to 1924 there was a falling off of 60% in all passenger business. Sooner or later railroads will be compelled to cut down on the cost of local passenger service and the sooner the better.

Local streetcar service was similarly affected. The Twin City Rapid Transit Company carried 238 million riders in 1920. By 1940 it was down by half, with 109 million passengers using its streetcars and buses.

Despite the early signs of trouble, few believed the great trains would ever make their last calls. The market crash on October 24, 1929 and the Great Depression that followed underscored, however, the economic weaknesses of the passenger business. As the statistics on daily train arrivals and departures and passenger tickets sold annually in the table accompanying this article show, the decline in usage was catastrophic. The passenger numbers of the 1920s would never return, and, by the end of the 1930s, one third of the nation's railroads were in bankruptcy.

There was a brief revival during World War II and signs that business might improve after the war. Railroads promoted their new trains and the advantages of rail travel in newspapers and magazines and on radio and television. Rocky, the Great Northern's mountain-goat mascot urged travelers to "Go great, go Great Northern." Sue, the stewardess nurse welcomed everyone aboard a "happy train," the *Vista-Dome North Coast Limited*.

But the passengers never came, and as losses mounted pessimistic railroad managements looked at declining passenger numbers and rising costs and decided the only way to cope with the “passenger problem,” as it came to be called, was to stop running passenger trains. Until 1953, many trains were at least covering out of pocket costs. Then came 1954 and the bottom fell out. The railroads lost \$669.5 million on their passenger services.

By 1957 they were spending \$161.86 for each \$100 of revenue they grossed on passenger traffic and lost \$723.4 million on the passenger business, almost as much as their entire net income. That same year the airlines were carrying more passengers than the railroads and the passenger losses for the railroads serving St. Paul Union Depot became unsustainable. The tipping point was the Federal Transportation Act of 1958, which stripped state regulatory authorities of their powers over discontinuing interstate passenger trains, making it easier for the railroads, who wanted to exit the business, to get out. But it also started a decade-long fight between those who wanted to save the passenger train and those who thought its usefulness was at an end.

### Creative Destruction

The late William (Bill) Bannon was president of the St. Paul Union Depot Company in the late '50s. He had been a senior manager with the Milwaukee Road for many years and, at one time, was involved with the management and day-to-day operation of Chicago Union Station. John Jensen was its chief engineer and after the Depot closed went on to become chief engineer for the Minnesota Transfer Railway. I talked with them when I was researching my book on St. Paul Union Depot. Both were in the middle of the fray and were there as one by one the passenger trains came off.

Economists apply the term *creative destruction*, the process in which technology and innovation drive out the old and bring in the new, to describe what happened to the passenger train. Bannon and Jensen were professional railroaders, not sentimentalists. Their immediate concern was to manage Depot operations at a time of declining passenger traffic. The



*A grandmotherly farewell as a young man is about to board the Milwaukee's Hiawatha for Chicago. The emblem on his jacket is for the Future Farmers of America Vocational Agriculture program. Scenes like this were repeated every day for fifty years. They made the Depot a special place for thousands of people. Photo courtesy of the Minneapolis, St. Paul and Edina Newspaper Photographs Collection, Minnesota Historical Society.*

passenger train had lost its battle with air and auto competition. They were there to preside over an orderly retreat.

There were many factors, notably a perverse public policy that sent huge public subsidies to highways and airlines and taxed railroads to help pay for them. Then there were work rules and archaic and discriminatory Interstate Commerce Commission regulations that made it impossible for railroads to respond to the changing nature of the passenger business. They also recalled that there was

no unanimity among railroad executives about the nature of the problem and what could be done about it.

Southern Pacific President Donald Russell presided over some of the best passenger trains in the country until 1956 when, on a trip aboard his railroad's premier New Orleans-Los Angeles *Sunset Limited*, he counted only 19 passengers in its four Pullmans and 57 in the coaches. Russell immediately resolved to rid his railroads of passenger trains. Executives at the Chicago and Northwestern, Rock



*Workers torch the Depot's sign. Its trains are gone. Soon it will lose its identity. Over forty-one years will go by before this historic landmark reopens to buses, Amtrak passenger trains, and the Central Corridor Light Rail Line. Photograph courtesy of the St. Paul Pioneer Press.*

Island, Soo Line, and Chicago Great Western serving St. Paul Union Depot took a similar course. The Hill roads, Great Northern, Northern Pacific, and the Burlington were less pessimistic.

In St. Paul, Great Northern President John Budd strove for a middle course. Budd acknowledged the problem and looked for ways to reduce losses, but he was determined that the Great Northern Railway would provide good trains and

good service as long as it was in the passenger business. Both the Great Northern and the Northern Pacific actively promoted travel to the 1963 Seattle World's Fair and were rewarded with increased traffic. The Great Northern also went after tour business for Glacier Park, as did the Northern Pacific for Yellowstone. By 1966, however, Budd conceded what appeared to be a lost cause and ordered the firm of Wyer, Dick & Company to

make a study of the Great Northern's passenger trains and their future:

It does not seem to us that for the long pull there is any future for Great Northern passenger service and that over some period of time there should be a gradual phasing out of such service. Pullman passengers handled over the past few years have generally been decreasing, no doubt brought about by the severe competition from the airlines for the long distance traveler. Coach passengers handled over the past few years have held reasonably constant no doubt due to the high cost of air travel and the general unacceptability of bus travel. However, with the improved modern highway system and the deterioration of connecting rail service we anticipate a decline in coach passengers, as well. . . .

The railroad problem is further complicated by the use of older physical facilities such as stations compared with the modern airline or bus terminals. The improvements that have taken place in the facilities for the bus and airline operations, many of which are government financed, have been an important competitive factor insofar as railroad passenger service is concerned and, in our opinion, will continue to be an important factor. . . .

One of the basic problems in trying to improve the operation of Great Northern's passenger service is that it is not operated in a vacuum. It is influenced by the operations of other railroads, and, at the same time, it is restricted in many areas to improving its service unless such improvements were, as a minimum, carried out by other western railroads. . . . We doubt that many of the possible changes will be made by the railroad industry because a substantial part of the industry is generally against passenger service and "wants out" as soon as possible. It is possible that the attitude on railroad passenger service has deteriorated to such point, both within the industry and within the eyes of the public that it cannot be revived except by, perhaps, a massive government transfusion of public money along with changes in public policy. . . . Inasmuch as we believe there is a limited future for railroad passenger service, and little prospect of growth, which might cure its deficit problems, it eventually should be phased out.

Passenger trains were slow. Although point to point speeds took a big jump in

the 1930s with the introduction of light-weight, streamlined cars and high-horse-power diesel locomotives, most of them plodded along, like my favorite train to Ft. Dodge.

Then there were labor productivity issues. Between St. Paul and Seattle the Northern Pacific's *North Coast Limited* changed engine crews (engineer and fireman) sixteen times and train crews (one conductor and two brakemen) eleven times for a total of 65 employees over a distance of some 1,800 miles. Operating employees, enginemen and trainmen, worked only across districts or divisions. None of them worked a full eight hours. Their workday was determined by geography, not time on the job. This was the "basic day rule," which had been in effect since 1919 when passenger trains averaged just 20 miles per hour.

Besides the train crews, there were another 20–25 on-board employees—dining and club car personnel, coach and sleeping car porters, a stewardess nurse—who were there to take care of passengers' needs. There was even a traveling electrician to handle any maintenance issues that might occur. At division points, or every 500 miles, a team of carmen would meet the train to inspect it, perform a required ICC brake test, fill water tanks, and fuel the locomotives. A typical summer season *North Coast Limited* of the early 1960s ran to about 14 cars and could accommodate approximately 400 passengers. Assuming the train was full throughout the entire trip from St. Paul to Seattle, and it seldom was, that works out to roughly four passengers per onboard employee. With five trains on the road, a pool of approximately 450 operating employees was needed to maintain daily service.

Ironically, it was this high ratio of employees to passengers that gave long-distance passenger trains their cachet. Passengers who rode them expected a high level of personal attention and service from the crew, along with Pullman accommodations for overnight travel, elegant dining, club and observation cars, and dome cars for watching the scenery during daylight hours. All of this came at a very high cost that couldn't possibly be recouped from ticket revenues, especially when fewer and fewer tickets were being sold.



Passengers wait for trains in the Depot's business lobby, while others queue up to buy tickets on this busy 1952 morning. 156 trains will arrive and depart this day and 195,000 tickets will be sold in all of 1952. Vista-Domes, private-room Pullmans along with elegant diners and observation cars continue to draw enthusiastic riders, but there is less enthusiasm in railroad accounting departments as more and more travelers switch to airlines and automobiles, and railroads continue to lose money on every ticket they sell. Photo courtesy of the Minneapolis, St. Paul and Edina Newspaper Photographs Collection, Minnesota Historical Society.

Work rules were another issue. One, as an example, forbade road crews from doing their own switching en-route, or at terminals. Thus, if a car had to be added, or one taken off, the road locomotive was cut off and pulled away, and a switch crew and locomotive were summoned to do the work. To this add all the maintenance employees, ticket and station agents, commissary workers, and other back-room employees associated with passenger trains, then add in depreciation and capital costs and it's obvious

why they were never profitable except, maybe, during the standing-room-only days of World War II.

## The Rise of the Suburbs

In the postwar era, business and residential development moved to the suburbs. The 1940 census found 287,366 people living in the city of St. Paul, 22,199 in Ramsey County. By 1970, the year before Amtrak took over the nation's passenger trains, there were 309,866 people in St. Paul and 166,389 in greater Ramsey





*Red Caps, or station porters, assisted passengers with luggage, arranged for taxicabs, answered questions, directed passengers to trains, helped the blind, infirm, and those in wheelchairs, watched out for small children traveling alone, and in dozens of other ways worked to ensure the safety and comfort of arriving and departing travelers. In the restored Depot there is a banquet room named in honor of the Red Caps. To learn more about Red Caps and the Rondo neighborhood many called home, visit <http://rondoavenueinc.org/saint-paul-red-caps>. Photo by Kenneth M. Wright, 1952. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

County. 3M retreated from St. Paul to Maplewood. Subdivisions sprouted and retailing withdrew from downtown to places like HarMar, Sun Ray Shopping Center, and Rosedale. Meanwhile, railroads confronted declining passenger traffic with the additional burden of huge downtown passenger terminals that were increasingly expensive to operate and maintain. St. Paul Union Depot was one of them. Most were heavily mortgaged, still carrying their original construction debt. Costs loomed larger and larger as ongoing operating expenses had to be spread over a dwindling number of trains. Parking and downtown traffic made them more inconvenient and inaccessible. With fewer incentives to go downtown for prospective passengers, they became just another reason not to take the train.

A few, notably Pennsylvania Station in New York City, were architectural monuments that cried out for preservation, but

most were lost when their railroad owners, in need of cash, demolished them and redeveloped the valuable real estate they occupied. Others, Michigan Central Terminal in Detroit and Washington Union Station, for example, were neglected and allowed to rot, becoming hangouts for vagrants and petty criminals. Some larger cities had suburban stations that shared both long distance and commuter trains, but dispersing all intercity trains to them would have made it difficult, if not impossible, for passengers to transfer from one railroad to another. Ownership of downtown stations by public authorities was out of the question. There was no support for it, and there wouldn't be for another twenty years. By then the intercity network had dwindled to a handful of passenger trains running on borrowed time.

St. Paul Union Depot fared better than most. Its standing as a postal cen-

ter helped, and four of its owners, the Great Northern, Northern Pacific, the Burlington, and the Milwaukee were still running some classy passenger trains. Even so, Depot management was focusing more on what to do with the place once the trains stopped running. At the end, it was an empty, lonely space.

### **What's Next for SPUD?**

I asked Bannon and Jensen when I interviewed them what they thought about the future of passenger service. They agreed there was cause for modest optimism. Onerous work rules were gone. The regulatory environment had changed and best of all, the railroads were making money and their attitude toward passenger service had also changed from outright hostility to mild enthusiasm. Passenger and freight trains were seen as coexisting with government infrastructure, benefiting both passenger and freight service.



*The Great Northern pampered first-class passengers in luxurious observation cars on its 1947 Empire Builder, the first new streamliner to enter service after World War II. Travelers could relax, engage in conversation and enjoy the passing scenery, perhaps while having a cocktail before dinner in the Builder's elegant dining car. Photo courtesy of the Great Northern Railway Company Record Collection, Minnesota Historical Society.*

Today there is a growing public acceptance of a balanced approach to transportation funding. Still, the question is asked: if passenger trains couldn't compete with Model Ts, Ford Tri-motors, and DC3s in the '20s and '30s and freeways and Boeing 707s in the '50s and '60s, how can they compete today, even at 100 miles per hour?

I'm a pessimist. Passenger train advocates see the Chicago-Twin Cities corridor as a market for high-speed service, and it is. The current Amtrak route, however, which once saw 100-mile-per-hour passenger-train speeds, has been downgraded from two tracks to one and all the high-speed signaling equipment removed. It will take millions of dollars to upgrade track and signals, and purchase passenger equipment, just to return to 1930s-era speeds and running times. Billions would be needed for European- or Japanese-style high-speed trains.

Restoring Duluth service is, also, mentioned. However, the railroad bridge that once carried passenger trains over the har-

bor into Duluth Union Station has been removed. It would have to be replaced or an alternate high-speed route developed. Both the Chicago and the Duluth services are feasible, but require huge sums. For that reason, in these days of shrinking public budgets and conflicting priorities and needs, the possibilities, and the benefits, of passenger rail service involving the St. Paul Union Depot remain elusive. Restored and revitalized so that it can serve as a multi-modal transit center for intercity bus, Amtrak, and light rail service, St. Paul Union Depot is, once again, doing what its builders intended, this time with a bright, new future that is no longer solely dependent on passenger rail service.

*John W. Diers spent thirty-five years working in the transit industry and has written extensively about transportation history. He is also a member of the RCHS Editorial Board. Portions of this article were previously published in his recent book, St. Paul Union Depot, published by the University of Minnesota Press.*

## Note on Sources

Readers and researchers looking for additional information on St. Paul Union Depot, passenger trains in Minnesota, and the railroads that ran them are encouraged to visit the library of the Minnesota Historical Society in St. Paul, home to the corporate records of the St. Paul Union Depot Company, the Great Northern and Northern Pacific Railways, and the Soo Line. This article contains excerpts and other material from *St. Paul Union Depot* by this author published by the University of Minnesota Press, 2013. Other sources and suggested reading include the following:

Frailey, Fred W. *Twilight of the Great Trains*. Waukesha, Wis.: Kalmbach, 1998.

Hidy, Ralph W., Muriel E. Hidy, Roy V. Scott and Don Hofsommer. *The Great Northern Railway: A History*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

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Proesser, Richard S. *Rails to the North Star*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

Schwantes, Carlos Arnaldo. *Going Places: Transportation Redefines the Twentieth-Century West*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003.

The late David P. Morgan was editor of *Trains* magazine in the 1950s. In April 1959, he devoted an entire issue to the declining fortunes of the American passenger train, predicting accurately, as it turned out, that, barring drastic changes in the industry and government policy, the passenger train would be extinct by 1970. It is the best analysis that I have found by a contemporary, industry journalist on the travails of the passenger train in the 1950s and is a must read. Library copies are available, for example, at the James J. Hill Library, St. Paul, which has access to an online edition of the complete run of this magazine.

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*Railroads spared no expense promoting their postwar streamliners in newspaper and magazine ads, on radio and television, and in colorful timetables such as these from the 1950s and '60s. All the rail lines represented here served the St. Paul Union Depot. Regrettably, many members of the traveling public found the competing appeals of Chevrolet, Ford, and Northwest Airlines were more persuasive. For more on the St. Paul Union Depot and passenger travel by train, see page 12. Timetables courtesy of John W. Diers.*