Nothing Could Be Finer
America's Marvelous Restaurants on Wheels

BY GERALD R. BERTOLDO

Once upon a time travel by rail on premier trains guaranteed the patron a journey replete with courtesy, comfort, and quality. Dining services featured prominently in the center of this luxury, land-cruise experience. Often a meal in a full-service dining car was the highlight of one's travel be it with family or for business. Remember the adage: "half the fun is getting there"? Decades later this fond memory and associated lore has remained vivid long after the demise of the train itself.

It has been fifty years since the railroads, except for the Southern, the Rock Island, and the Denver & Rio Grande Western, were relieved of the financial burden of long distance, passenger service with the creation of Amtrak. Subsequently the semblance of exceptional cuisine and superior service so prominent through the 1950s that remained slid further into the abyss. By Amtrak's birth on May 1, 1971, only a few carriers such as the B&O, Illinois Central, Seaboard Coast Line, Southern, and Sante Fe had endeavored to maintain a service reasonably reflective of the halcyon days on the few trains that remained.

In truth, the prominent trains of the Golden Age featured a host of specialty cars which all contributed to the lure and pleasure of rail travel. A variety of configured Pullman cars, domes, observation lounges,

The pleasures of dining by rail were captured in this color photograph, using professional models carefully chosen, positioned, and posed by company photographer Ed Nowak in one of the four full dining cars built by Pullman-Standard in 1948. One has to wonder how long the couple in the right foreground had to hold those poses. NYCSHS Collection.

reclining seat coaches, tavern, and parlor cars with attractive color coordinated schemes, shades, Venetian blinds, curtains, superior staff, piped in music, stewardesses, telephones, and stationery immersed the passenger in a pampered world.

Gerald Bertoldo's presentation on railroad dining services drew a large and appreciative audience at the Society's 2019 Annual Convention, and it was suggested that the information be more broadly shared with the membership by means of an article in *Central Headlight*. Although Jerry's original presentation was more than two years ago, the editor is pleased to present a more formal, expanded, and illustrated version of it here.

The Evolution of Dining on the Rails

Eating on the move was contemplated within a decade of the introduction of the first successful steam locomotive, the *Tom Thumb*. The engine was placed in service on the Baltimore and Ohio in 1830. The earliest record of a meal being offered and consumed on a train in transit was in 1842 also on the B&O. This led to the development of what was called "refectory cars" adopted by many railroads. These conveyances were a collage of baggage cars, coaches, and sleeping cars set up for pre-prepared meals. Despite the crudeness, accumulated cooking odors, and the bother of converting from sleeping to dining and vice versa, this type of car predominated for over twenty years. The fare offered was often superior to the environs in which it was presented. These operations

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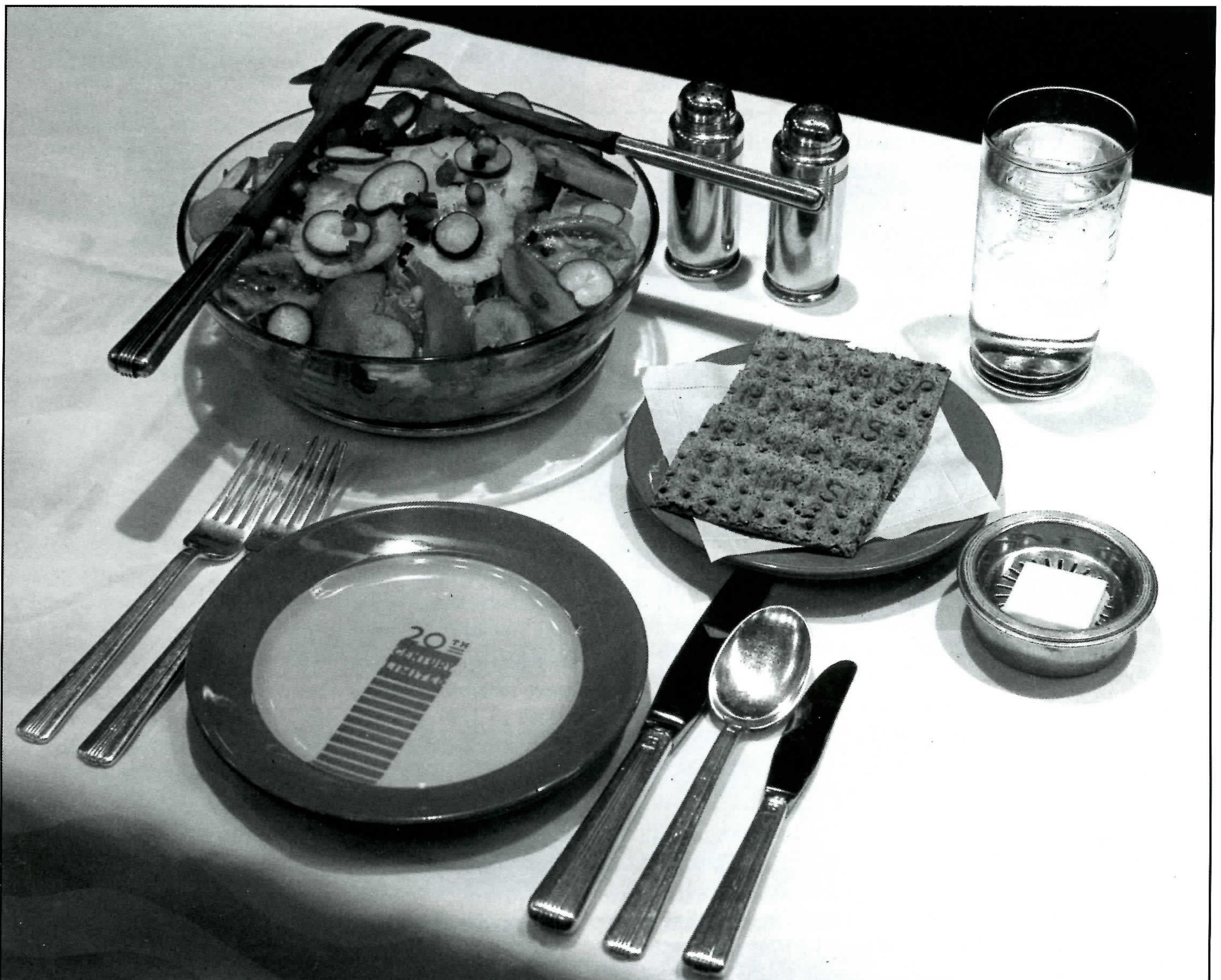

The New York Central salad, elegantly served with its trademark four pieces of Rye Krisp, provided a foretaste of the dinner to follow. Photo on a lightweight *20th Century Limited* diner by Ed Nowak, NYCSHS Image PB572053.

Restaurants... *(Continued from page 23)*

were invariably under the auspices of already famous hotels and renowned chefs. The already-cooked meals were heated and served en route.

In 1867 George Pullman, under the name of the Pullman Palace Car Company, designed and built the first "hotel car," a vast improvement over the refectory cars. These both slept and fed patrons, however meals were prepared in a well-laid-out and outfitted kitchen complete with stove, ice coolers, water, sinks, and an array of victuals. China, linens, and silver service graced the removable tables. Porters doubled as waiters. Except for occasional complaints of nausea from cooking odors, the public was quite satisfied. These cars were appointed in exquisitely paneled, stenciled, and painted wooden interiors, a style that pervaded passenger car building until the steel car era. Ornate lighting fixtures and mirrors helped highlight table settings reflective of the best hotels and restaurants. Unfortunately for the public, if you did not book passage on a refectory or hotel car, no meal service was offered on any other part of the train. Until the patented, enclosed vestibule with end-of-car diaphragms and curtains introduced by Pullman in 1887, walking between cars in motion was a risky adventure and generally avoided.

According to the caption provided with this photo, this is not a model, but Mrs. F. Burton aboard the *Century* on March 14, 1946, enjoying the 20th Century Salad Bowl. The caption further states that Mrs. Burton would continue with Crème Longchamps Soup; Baked Stuffed Lobster or Chicken Pie, NYC; and Apricot and Almond Custard. NYCHS Archive Image WR360124.

Surprisingly, it was Pullman who in 1868 constructed a rather luxurious car whose sole purpose was to prepare meals and feed passengers. At first glance this appeared to be an effort to put his own hotel cars out of business, but such was not to be the case for two more decades. The creation was named *Delmonico*. The kitchen was much larger in comparison to those in refectory and hotel cars. There was more storage space for consumables, water, linens, china, and glassware. The car's staff prepared everything on board with an astonishing selection of delectable offerings. Ventilation was improved greatly, effectively cooling the kitchen and reducing cooking odors. Although it was not the first dedicated food-serving car, *Delmonico* set the basic design for all dining cars that would be built from then on. It remained in revenue service until 1898 when destroyed in a wreck.

A major competitor to Pullman was the Wagner Palace Car Company. Originating as the Vanderbilt-owned New York Central Sleeping Car Company in 1858, Wagner also built hotel, dining, parlor, and business cars. The NYC&HR utilized Wagner dining cars exclusively until Pullman bought Wagner out on January 1, 1900. The newly-named Pullman Company in effect now had a monopoly on building and operating sleeping cars. The Wagner main shop was located on 35 acres in East Buffalo adjacent to the West Shore main line and roundhouse. It continued to serve Pullman until 1959.

Full-service dining cars such as the *Delmonico* began slowly appearing on midwestern railroads starting with the Chicago & Alton in 1872. For some years, eastern roads crossing more populated areas continued to rely on "station restaurants," "eating stations," or "beaneries." These had been established beginning in the 1840s, and varied widely in food quality and sanitation. Some were notorious greasy spoons serving "mystery meat" and "sinker" biscuits. Others were outstanding and reputable. Trains would stop and disgorge passengers who flocked into these establishments where food was placed on tables ready to eat. An average of twenty minutes was allowed for the stop often resulting in chaos, indigestion, or worse. Station restaurants were profitable and much easier to manage than hotel cars or full diners. New York Central operated or contracted a number of these station restaurants exemplified by outstanding ones at Poughkeepsie, Utica, and Buffalo in the early Twentieth Century.

The onboard enterprise on a car dedicated to dining alone was a breakeven proposition at best. Pullman figured this out early in the game. The company built dining cars to sell to the railroads as well as to

Some measure of the opulence of earlier New York Central dining cars may be gleaned from this interior view of a diner on the original *20th Century Limited* of 1902. The offset aisle between tables for two and tables for four would be standard for many years. Jeff Hands Collection, NYCSHS Archive Image PB596094.

operate independently on premier trains carrying Pullman-operated cars. More importantly, Pullman's contracts had safeguards to make at least a small profit on full dining service. The railroads believed that the dollar loss attributed to meal service was a justifiable cost because of the good will and advertising value. Whether by paying Pullman or bearing the total cost on their own, it was considered worth the expense. This attitude and business model was ironically pervasive into the 1950s despite growing passenger operation losses after World War II.

Diners were adopted more readily by the larger railroads – Michigan Central (1876), Rock Island (1878), Baltimore & Ohio (1881), Pennsylvania (1882), New York Central (1883), New Haven (1884), and Erie (1885). Pullman also owned and operated full-service diners under contract to other carriers. The real financial picture, however, showed that sleeping car, parlor, club, and buffet business had always resulted in a healthy return on investment

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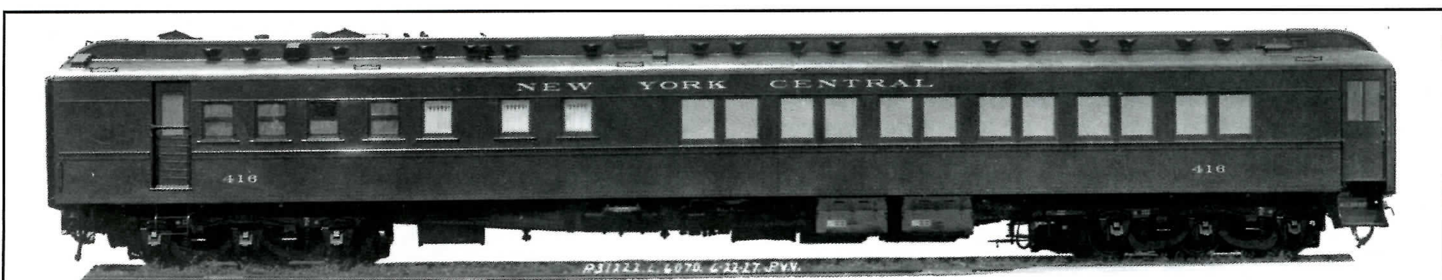
Arched and transom windows were still in vogue on steel diners when NYC 462 was built in 1920 as one of five cars in Lot 917 by Central's West Albany Shops. Originally seating 36, the car was later converted to a diner-lounge. It was renumbered to NYC 537 and, as X-23304 went into non-revenue service in October 1952, and was retired in February 1956. Car history courtesy of Hugh Guillaume. NYCHS Archive Image PB513027.

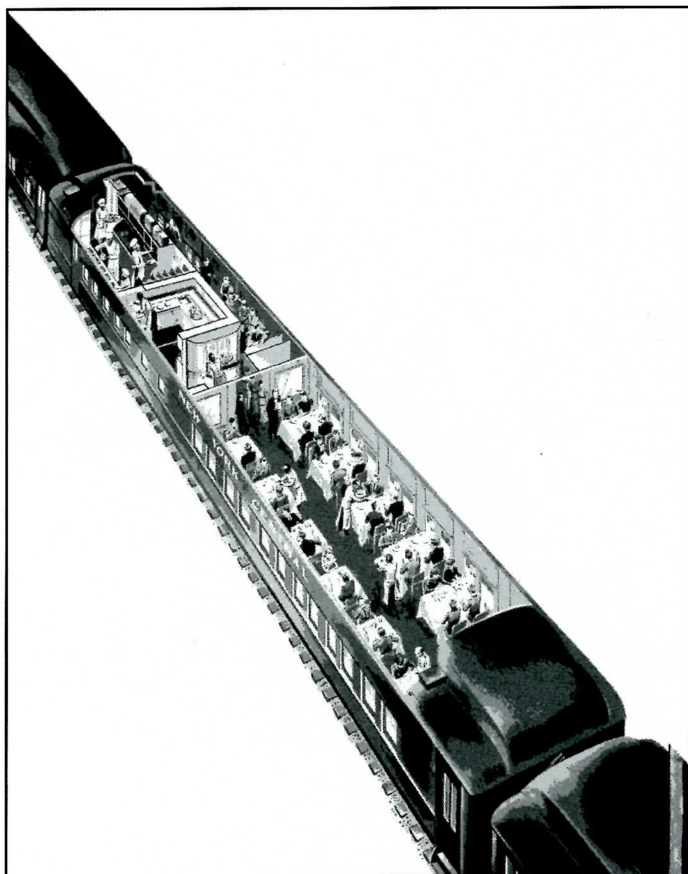


Built by Pullman Standard in 1927, NYC 419 was one of twenty diners built as Lot 2042 that were the first NYC diners to be built with a kitchen access door, certainly a useful addition for stocking the cars. In 1936 it will be renumbered to NYC 630. The 1944 passenger equipment classification book indicates a seating of forty. Air conditioning will be applied to this and other NYC diners in the early1930s. NYCSHS Archive Image PB060013.

Restaurants... *(Continued from page 25)*

unlike the operation of dining cars. The Pullman concept of standardized, high-end service on any line, anywhere across the country, was difficult to replicate with full-service dining cars. Regional tastes in food, increased zeal by the railroads to outshine competition, local availability of provisions, or seasonality of menu items was contrary to the one-plan-fits-all mantra of Pullman. Additionally, dining cars were increasingly cut in and out of trains for servicing, restocking, and redeployment at locations logistically efficient for the railroad, but not for Pullman facilities and staff.

In contrast to the trend of providing noteworthy on-board meals, the Sante Fe sought to provide quality meal stops rather than dining car service after its expansion into Colorado in 1876. It chose to contract with Fred Harvey, a British newcomer to quality eating establishments, to operate station restaurants built by Sante Fe at major stations and every one hundred miles along its line. Harvey was engaged to provided crews for Sante Fe's first diners beginning in 1888. This collaboration lasted until 1968. The high standards for service, cleanliness, food quality, and consistency of Fred Harvey's system put it far ahead of other "beaneries" well into the 1950s as well as maintaining Sante Fe's superb dining car reputation for decades.



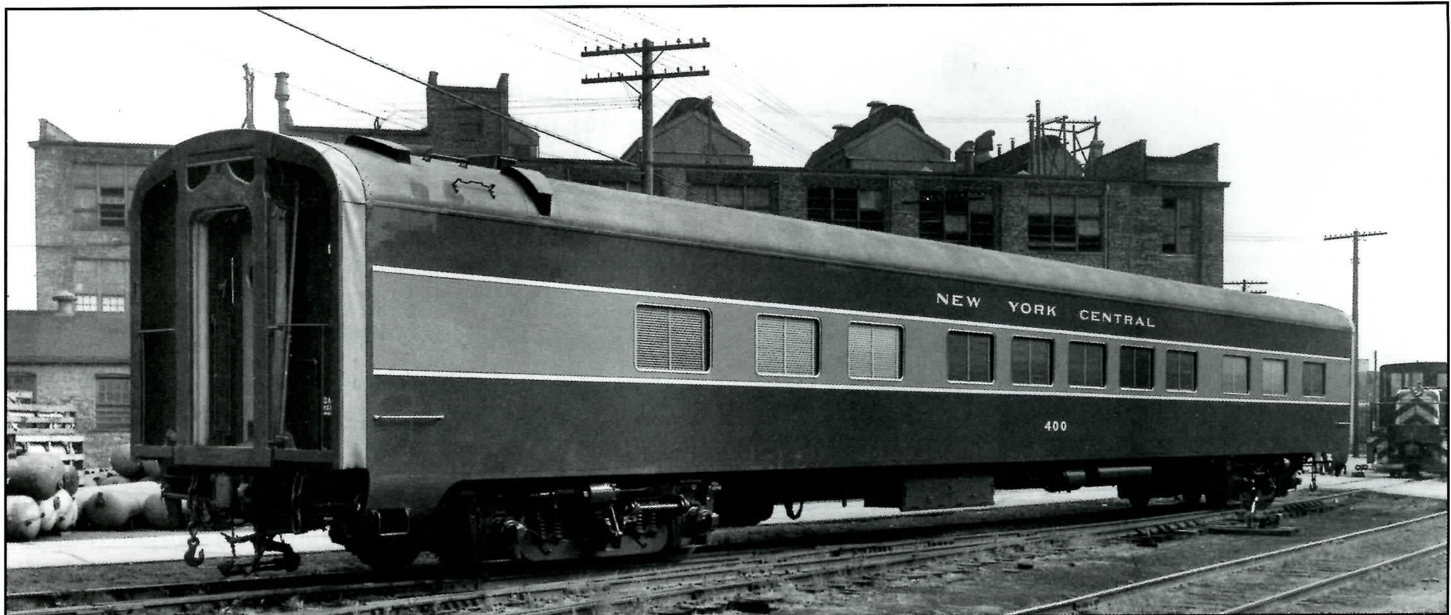
This cutaway drawing shows the interior layout of typical New York Central heavyweight dining cars. Notice the folks waiting to be seated. NYCSHS Archive Image WR330146.

A Car by Another Name Will Give Great Service Just the Same

By the early 1890s the dining car had established itself on most first-class passenger trains. The floor plans were relatively similar, with a kitchen and narrow, parallel hallway on one end and table seating at the other. Some cars had a small lounge area just inside the aisle door of the dining section. This served as a waiting area to facilitate seating patrons by the dining car steward. To maximize the throughput of the car, railroads could opt to purchase dining cars without this waiting area and instead locate a lounge or parlor car adjacent to that end of the diner. Passengers could have a drink before their meal in a convivial environment. It was efficient, enjoyable, and profitable for Pullman or the railroad, whichever operated the car.

As the Twentieth Century approached, it was obvious to the railroads and particularly to Pullman that regular or full dining cars seating 24 to 30 people were not economical on less patronized trains or schedules that did not fit well with regular meal hours. In 1892 Pullman owned and operated 2,239 cars in total, over 700 of which provided some sort of food and beverage service in addition to its fleet of rolling hotels. By 1905 the number had grown to 4,138. Club, parlor, buffet, and observation cars were staffed by porters (sometimes referred to as attendants) and usually carried waiters as well if the type of service included hot foods. Selling beverages, cigarettes, cigars, and playing cards was customary. Pullman's core business was selling sleeping space. All other business supported that mission.

Dining cars serving hotel-style meals in an opulent setting were expensive propositions. Pullman dramatically reduced the number of dining cars it operated in the 1890s, selling off most of them to the railroads and completely exiting that service by 1902. After the death of George Pullman in 1897, Robert Lincoln, the son of President Lincoln, took over the leadership of the enlarged and newly named Pullman Company. His more austere tastes spelled the end for the building of craftsman-intense, Victorian-style car interiors. Coupled with the public outcry for steel cars to avoid the telescoping of wooden cars and the often ensuing infernos, all car builders simplified and less expensively constructed new passenger equipment. Pullman outshopped its last steel-underframe diner in 1910. Recently-built wooden diners often



Full dining car 400, one of four cars, NYC 400-403, built as Lot 2185 by Pullman-Standard in 1948. These cars mated with Lot 2186 kitchen-lounge cars or with Lot 2187 kitchen-dormitory cars, NYC 476-477 or NYC 474-475 respectively. NYCSHS Archive Image PB508139.

received steel center sills and steel sheathing for public appearance and appeal. Many wooden cars of all types survived in secondary, branch line, and work train service for decades. During the Roaring 20s, Pullman built thirty new and certainly less ornate steel diners while selling off dozens of older ones to railroads faced with record passenger counts. It did continue to own and lease diners for charters and surges in demand into the 1940s.

The Great Depression marked a dramatic downturn in the number of passengers. From the time of the crash in 1929 through the lowest point of ridership in early 1933, non-commutation passenger miles decreased 56% while Pullman traffic plummeted 62%! Overall depression-era ridership dropped 36%. This was a disaster for the economics of operating full-service dining cars. Both Pullman and the railroads embarked on a hurried retrofitting of sleeper, club, and parlor cars to include small kitchens to serve scaled-down, plated entrees. Table seating might handle anywhere from 8 to 24 persons. The result was a variety of multi-purpose equipment. These included classifications such as parlor-buffets, sleeper-diners, parlor-diners, and sleeper-buffet-observations – the group generally referred to as "restaurant cars." This was actually a throwback to the "hotel cars" of the 1800s. Restaurant cars immediately displaced the then-traditional 30-36 seat diners on more marginal passenger carriers. Even the big roads substituted these cars for full diners on secondary trains that had lost significant patronage. Contrary to this trend were the diners built for the streamlined flagships in the late 1930s. The novelty of twin-unit diners appeared early on with the launch of the NYC *Mercury* in 1936. Both re-equipped *20th Century Limited* and *Broadway Limited* consists featured them in 1938. Eventually five other roads would operate twin-unit diners in addition to the four triple-unit sets on the Southern Pacific. The post-World War II hope and investment in passenger equipment including full dining cars was strong. Seating in full diners was almost universally increased to 44 or 48. Railroads anticipated a resurgence of rail travel that never materialized. The trend to utilize and build restaurant cars was prevalent as well. In the 1960s, coaches were retrofitted to offer a minimal level of food and beverage service on trains whose consists and passenger counts had continually dwindled. By 1965 the number of full dining cars reported in service (excluding Canada and Mexico) had plummeted from the 1930 high of 1,732 to 459. Five years later in 1970, on the eve of the Amtrak takeover, that number stood at 272.

A Challenging Enterprise

Food service on the rails had been a complex and demanding undertaking from the start. Storage and preparation space on cars was always marginal considering the enormous variety of appetizers, entrees, side dishes, desserts, and beverages offered in full-service, elegant settings. Very few items were pre-prepared, instead made from scratch by the cooks. Soup stocks, dressings, sauces, and baked goods could be the exception. A typical standard dining car might carry as much as 1,000 china items, 700

(Continued on following page)

Restaurants... *(Continued from page 27)*

Intensive training was essential for waiters, who were on the front line in their dealings with dining passengers. Here, in a lightweight diner at Mott Haven on April 1, 1948, waiters practice proper table-serving procedures. NYCSHS Archive Image WR400209.

pieces of silver flatware and hollowware, 300 pieces of glassware, 900 linen tablecloths, and 1,500 matching napkins. Kitchen towels, uniforms, chef hats, and aprons were added to this. Holding places for glassware, china, holloware, silver service, and linens; both secure and convenient, added another level of logistics. The compliment of fine glassware and china reflective of the best hotels in the early days proved financially untenable due to excessive breakage. Heavier glassware and commercial-grade china soon followed. The railroad's name and logo were often displayed on china, sometimes in custom patterns.

Hygiene and sanitation (including the water to go with it) were paramount to ensure passenger satisfaction and, not in the least, health! Federal inspection saw to that. Mechanical ventilation of kitchens even after the introduction of air conditioning in 1932 did not afford kitchen staffs ideal working temperatures particularly in hot weather.

The nature of the work on board diners, and the absolute perfection of service expected, posed a perennial problem for the railroads. Candidate suitability, rigorous training, and strict rules compliance were invariably adhered to. Waiters were almost always black men. Cooks were usually black men with some white 1st cooks. White stewards were the norm with a few exceptions.

Dining car services were indeed a loss leader for the railroads – always. Some roads spent $1.50 for each dollar of revenue. Only the New Haven could periodically boast a slim profit. This resulted not from dining department accounting magic, but from the large volume of alcoholic beverages sold on a wide array of club, parlor, and "grill" cars. The relatively short hauls and robust level of business travel were the keys. Generally, railroad management looked the other way in deference to fierce interline competition and the defacto marketing derived from outstanding service, value, and enduring remembrances. From Jim Porterfield's book, *Dining by Rail,* "Among experienced travelers, no other feature of passenger train service was so frequently praised or criticized as the dining car – via steward or writing management."

Attaining Swiss Watch Precision

Beyond the physical attributes of equipment and the rolling five-star restaurant appeal, dining car departments faced a herculean task to unfailingly deliver gastronomically teasing offerings, pamper patrons, and repeat the experience across the railroad's system. This required strategically located commissaries, top-shelf purveyors, train to commissary communications, and most of all well trained employees. Commissary managers as well as food vendors supplying the railroad were on call 24 hours a day. This was necessary in case a dining car came up short and the next commissary was closed for the night. Dining Department supervisors had to work directly with the passenger reservation offices. The stocking of diners, and to a lesser degree buffet, parlor, and lounge cars, was based on passenger counts with a small cushion for unanticipated demand built in. Peak traffic periods and large groups certainly changed the dynamics. Detailed records shed light on what was consumed in the past based on train

Three employees provide the needs of the gentleman in the overcoat, possibly the dining car steward or chef of a train soon to be departing from Chicago. This is the commissary at NYC's Root Street Coach Yard. The date is March 3, 1942. While Sunshine's Hi Ho crackers appear to be more prevalent, Nabisco's Ritz crackers are also present, and they are still popular almost eighty years later. NYCSHS Archive Image WR300318.

number, season, and holiday period.

On premier varnish, where all or the majority of travelers were availing themselves of Pullman accommodations and quite happy to pay extra fares or charges, carriers assumed that the vast majority would patronize dining cars. Economy-minded passengers were mixed in their choices whether packing provisions and/or purchasing items from buffet, lounge, or cafe cars. Some roads considered eighty Pullman passengers as the maximum compliment that could be easily handled by one standard diner. Above that, a second diner or diner-lounge would be added unless demand was sufficient to justify a second section.

The Front Line

The unseen aspect of rail food service was vast and comprehensive. Commissaries were the storehouse and preparatory foundation of the enterprise. Each had a manager and assistant managers, the number determined by need. They ordered, stocked, organized, and prepared for the loading of perishables, canned goods, condiments, flowers, baked goods or their ingredients, linens, uniforms, and replacements for broken china, glassware, and missing silver service. On the New York Central, a commissary head was known as a "storekeeper." Central records of where and how commissaries functioned are unfortunately scanty. Written and photographic evidence of these facilities exists for Mott Haven Yard in New York (moved to GCT in 1965), Buffalo Central Terminal (closed in 1964), Cleveland, and Root St. Yard in Chicago. Former NYC employees have indicated that Boston, Detroit, and Indianapolis were other locations. The possibility of commissaries at St. Louis, Cincinnati, and Pittsburgh is only speculation.

Dining cars and other food service cars were stocked at the originating terminal as completely as possible. Premier trains (even Western road trains with two overnights) did not frequently changeout diners in consists to avoid delays. Dining car crews worked through, end to end. Intermediate resupply was not encouraged as a cost saving measure, but was available. En route, only trash cans were routinely exchanged - full for empty, sanitized ones.

Commissary staff organized and loaded carts (man-powered and motorized) based on each train's menus and beverage needs. Dining car stewards along with the head or No. 1 cook checked each item to be put on board against the order list. This took place at least a few hours before the scheduled departure, after the diner had been set out at the servicing point. This restocking included replacement china, silverware, and service pieces based on the previous crew's end of trip inventory. Coal, coke, or Pres-to-logs to fire the stoves, and charcoal for broilers were included in this process. The rest of the dining car crew would stow supplies. Surprisingly, many loading areas at commissaries were open to the weather and not afforded high-level platforms. The most efficient and crew-friendly were under-roof, close to the source of supplies using battery powered carts and tow motors.

Battery-powered baggage trucks served as shopping carts to transport foodstuffs to diners. This one is exiting NYC's Mott Haven Commissary on July 28, 1943. NYCSHS Archive Image WR310664.

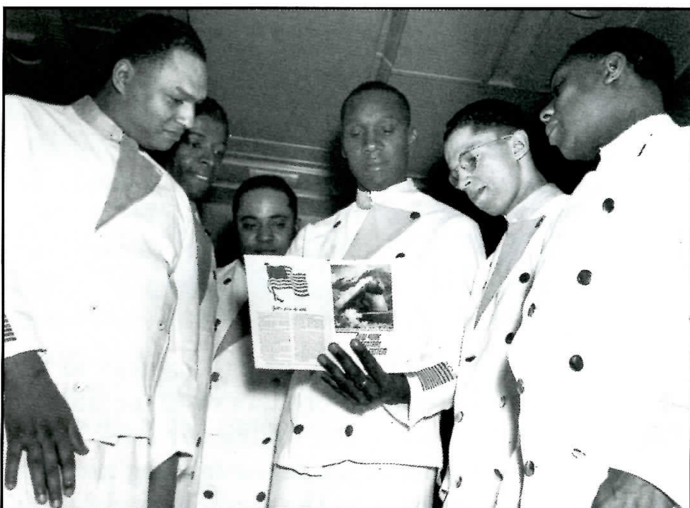
The 1st cook on certain trains was designated as a chef. The caption provided with this October 2, 1946 photo states that the man with the smile is "Milo Pavick, Chef on the *Century*, making a special dish in the kitchen." NYCSHS Archive Image WR370292.

(Continued on following page)

Restaurants... *(Continued from page 29)*

Dining car crews by union contract were guaranteed a minimum number of hours of pay per month. Often times the same men would work together over long periods of time on the same runs. Both cooks and waiters were given rank and duties commensurate with seniority. Cook ranks went from first to fourth. The first three ranks focused on food preparation on most railroads while the fourth cook customarily lit fires, helped with table setting items, peeled potatoes, and washed dishes. This man, humorously known as the "pearl diver" or "china clipper," might wash thousands of items on a three-day trip! By the early 1950s, relief in the form of automated dishwashers began appearing.

You've probably heard of travelling engineers, but did you know that the NYC employed travelling chefs? Here, at the Mott Haven Commissary, two of them direct the cutting of meats. NYCSHS Archive Image WR310665.



Waiter familiarity with the menu was essential. Here, before train time, six waiters review the day's offerings. Sleeve hash marks make it easy to tell who the most experienced waiters are. And they look it, too. NYCSHS Archive Image PB569004.

Waiter hierarchy went from the top at No. 1 designation to No. 6. Metal badges signifying rank were pinned to waiters' coats. The No. 1 waiter was also called a "pantryman" or "waiter in charge." During meal service, other senior waiters primarily attended to patrons checking menu selections and serving meal items, but each had specific ancillary duties as well. Servers were assigned a set group of tables. Middle ranks would focus on back-up tasks – changing table linens; filling water glasses; wiping spots off of dried glasses and silverware; filling salt and pepper shakers, cruets, and salad dressing jars; and general tidiness. The No. 6 waiter was the low man commonly referred to as "the mule," and generally assigned the most menial tasks. One of the lower-ranked waiters would be designated as the "upstairs man" on Pullman equipped trains. At the behest of sleeping car patrons, he provided menus, took orders, and delivered full meals to passengers in their private accommodations. The service charge was from fifty cents to one dollar. Passengers were made aware that this was available only if the diner was not very busy.

Dining car stewards were the onboard captains of the dining car. Their wages reflected their numerous responsibilities. The double checking of the requisition form and supervising loading their diner at the commissary was only the beginning of their work.

Tom O'Grady, a legendary *20th Century Limited* steward, poses in a new uniform on August 1, 1947. Truth be told, he doesn't look too happy with it. But we can be sure he will be warm, welcoming, and accommodating when passengers enter his car. Note the setting of a table for two. NYCSHS Archive Image WR390117.

The steward checked with the Passenger Department for last-minute requisition needs just before the diner was picked up by a switcher and placed in its train. He made sure that the crew knew what was on the menu for the next meal to be served. He told them of special guests and their particular wishes if known. He was the *maître d'*, order taker, bartender, cashier, and most importantly the face of the railroad. He handled problems, passed on complaints, offered *gratis* service at his discretion, and had authority to purchase supplies at locales if the train stopped in an emergency. He remained with the other crew members throughout the assignment.

Dining and Restaurant Cars on the NYC

Several predecessor roads operated full-service dining cars by 1885: Cleveland, Cincinnati, Chicago & Indianapolis (2 cars), Michigan Central (5 cars), New York Central & Hudson River (2 cars), and New York, West Shore & Buffalo (3 cars). Public demand, an excellent reputation for quality, and the addition of the dining cars operated by affiliates Boston & Albany, Lake Shore & Michigan Southern, and Toledo & Ohio Central pushed those numbers to 33 by 1900. In addition, 32 club, parlor, and buffet cars were rostered. As previously mentioned, at the peak of rostered food service equipment in 1930, 1,732 full diners and 385 other meal service cars were operated by 63 railroads. Of these the Central and affiliates fielded 173 and 22 types respectively, ranking first in the nation. After the massive, post-World War II, 233 million dollar investment in equipment and infrastructure (which included 746 passenger cars), the Central boasted 191 full diners and 45 various meal-capable or restaurant cars by 1950. Only the Pennsylvania Railroad operated more of each category, but only by a slim margin. Oddly, the Central did not operate a significant number of parlor cars (individual seat, beverages service, without plated foods) as compared to its competitors.

By 1952 with passenger operation deficits over 50 million, the Central was white-lining numerous heavyweight cars as ridership slipped from late 1940s peaks. Some of these diners would remain serviceable for standby duty into the late 50s, and still in use though the 60s as part of work and wreck trains. By 1958, however, with the desperate purge of trains, onboard services and passenger cars, 70 more diners were stricken from the roster, including the 1936 *Mercury* and 1938 *Century* twin-unit types. Thirty-three full diners and a still robust combination of 35 lounge, buffet, parlor, and diner-lounge cars were reported in 1960, but by the time of the Penn Central merger those numbers were thirteen and four respectively. It is interesting to note that diner-lounge service survived on the relatively short, 128-mile, three-plus-hour runs from Grand Central Terminal up the Harlem Division to Chatham well into the 1950s. A unique combination of long-distance commuting, well-to-do families with country homes, and year-round, weekend getaway destinations on the line warranted the service.

Ironically, it was during the difficult days of the Depression that a revolutionary modernization in passenger equipment came from the usually conservative Central. With the sensational launching of the diesel-powered, streamlined Union Pacific *M-10000* and Burlington *Zephyr* streamliners in 1934, railroads with a large stake in the passenger business felt compelled to react. The renewed interest in rail travel spawned by these and other streamlining projects could not be ignored. Henry Dreyfuss was contracted to design a new train from steam locomotive to observation car, inside and out, the following year. His designs were approved, but the high bid prices from the major car builders left the idea dead on the table. Dejected, Dreyfuss took a day off and boarded a Central train for the country. On the way he passed by Mott Haven and saw numerous cars apparently stored in the yard. Later, after learning that these were surplus commuter cars, he suggested to the Central president that they might be converted into the consist for the *Mercury*. The plan was agreed upon using the original designs. The Central was not interested in the diesel technology, only the streamlined, visual appearance of the consist. The Beech Grove shops would do the entire makeover. The July 15, 1936 nine-car *Mercury* debut between Cleveland and Detroit featured a singular vision in medium gray with brushed aluminum trim from end to end. The interior style, car configurations, and spaces were both contemporary and novel, foreshadowing the new equipment of the 1938 *Century* and *Commodore Vanderbilt* trains and much of what would follow post-War.

Despite the claim that the Union Pacific's 1937 *San Francisco Challenger* was the first train to introduce a twin-unit diner, the *Mercury* appears to hold that distinction. The *Mercury* featured a coach-kitchen car attached to a 56-seat diner. The latter included a six-person lounge at the far end. The seating was divided into three sections, two on the ends with standard four person tables and a center one with tables for two persons seated side by side, facing the aisle. This was repeated not only with future twin-unit orders, but also with Central's "grill" and "thrift" diners. Also ahead of their time were the exceptionally large, semicircular vestibules with

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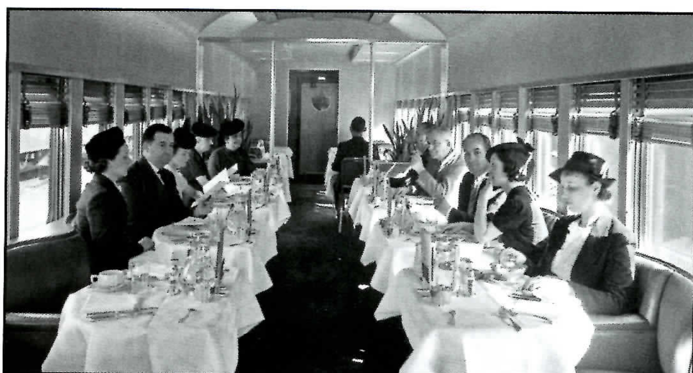
It's mid-morning in Detroit, and No. 750, *The Mercury*, rolls into a platform track with a nine-car train that originated, as No. 75, at Cleveland Union Terminal a little less than three hours earlier. The power is one of two K-5b Pacifics, largely concealed beneath a streamlining cowl born on the drawing board of famed industrial designer Henry Dreyfuss. Photo by G. Grabill, Jr., NYCSHS Archive Image PB405012.



Mercury diner seating was efficient in that tables could easily be served without fear of a lurch that might dump hot soup into a passenger's lap, but it certainly didn't encourage face-to-face conversation. There were also some traditional tables, probably preferred by railfans. This is a staged company photo at Detroit, using professional models. It is undated, but was probably taken early in the 1940s when hats for ladies, and for some even veils, were a social obligation. Jeffrey Moreau Collection, NYCSHS Archive Image PB507023.

wide passageways on all cars. The 1948 twin-unit diners copied this concept to a degree between the kitchen car and dining area to facilitate both waiter and passenger traffic. The *Mercury* dining cars were so successful that they remained in regular service until 1950 and after that on standby duty until 1957.

Not of lasting significance, but curious were the 1956-1957 "Trains of the Future" promoted by Chairman Robert Young aimed at recapturing passenger business. The GM *Aerotrain* and the Baldwin *Xplorer* were mechanical headaches and were also rough riding. Food service was what we would know

For most passengers, perhaps the most unpleasant part of any long train trip was passing from car to car. In the heavyweight era, platforms were noisy and the passage through two narrow diaphragms was for many a thing to be endured. And in winter it could be very cold. But tightlock couplers and full-width diaphragms were more friendly. On *The Mercury*, adjoining half-circle enclosures made the transition from one car to another even friendlier. This view of the end of NYC 1012, a steel coach converted from a lowly suburban coach in 1939, demonstrates the arrangement. Photo taken during shopping on April 9, 1942. NYCSHS Archive Image PB303025.

Baldwin's short-lived *Xplorer* pauses for a company photo westbound in the Hudson Highlands. Food service about the ultra-light train was provided, airline style, by "Cruisin' Susans," difficult to control as the train's notoriously rough-riding coaches bounced along. *Xplorer's* "exploration" in mainline passenger service lasted for less than two years. NYCSHS Collection.

today as airline style – precooked, heated on board, and served at your seat. Rolling carts known as "Cruisin' Susans" carried the meals through the cars while damaging the sides of seats at an alarming rate. This was not the Central's first attempt at precooked meal service, however. In 1954, 28 secondary trains briefly featured precooked foods on diners and other restaurant cars until the public vehemently protested. Perhaps signaling what would become common a decade later, paper placemats and napkins appeared on the tables of the *Empire State Express* diners briefly in 1953. The rail traveling public was not ready for such indignities – yet.

The commercial use of microwaves was not lost on the railroads. In 1948 the New Haven experimented with early models, rejecting the technology not because of efficiency, but due to resulting food textures and flavors. In 1957 the Southern Pacific began placing Raytheon "Radar Ranges" in their automated buffet cars as a cost-saving measure. New York Central took up the challenge in September 1963 experimenting with microwaves in diners on the *North Shore Limited* and *Mohawk*, both daylight runs. For the *World's Fair Special* in 1964, two modified buffet-lounges became "Meal-A-Mat" automated restaurant cars in which passengers placed money in vending machines, pushed the proper buttons, the meal was removed, and placed in a microwave oven. This required only one attendant to restock items. Even the vaunted Lobster Newburg was available for $1.25. A true case of sacrilege! These cars briefly augmented dining car service on the *Empire State Express* in late 1964 and then were reassigned to the *Cayuga*.

The final act in providing a semblance of food and beverage service as inexpensively as possible on the Central played out in New York State. After the elimination of most long-distance trains by 1967, there was still a persistent demand for intrastate rail travel between Buffalo and New York as indicated by public surveys. The long-haul varnish had handled a good bit of this. Thus was born Empire Service. Due to state regulations requiring at least rudimentary beverage and light meal service on runs over five hours, it was decided to remodel the end of several coaches into cafes rather than assign more robust restaurant cars. This was the situation of the struggling New York Central, a company that had not reported a passenger deficit of less than $20 million for the previous twenty years despite every imaginable cost-cutting measure.

(Continued on following page)

Restaurants... *(Continued from page 33)*

Dining Particulars on the NYC

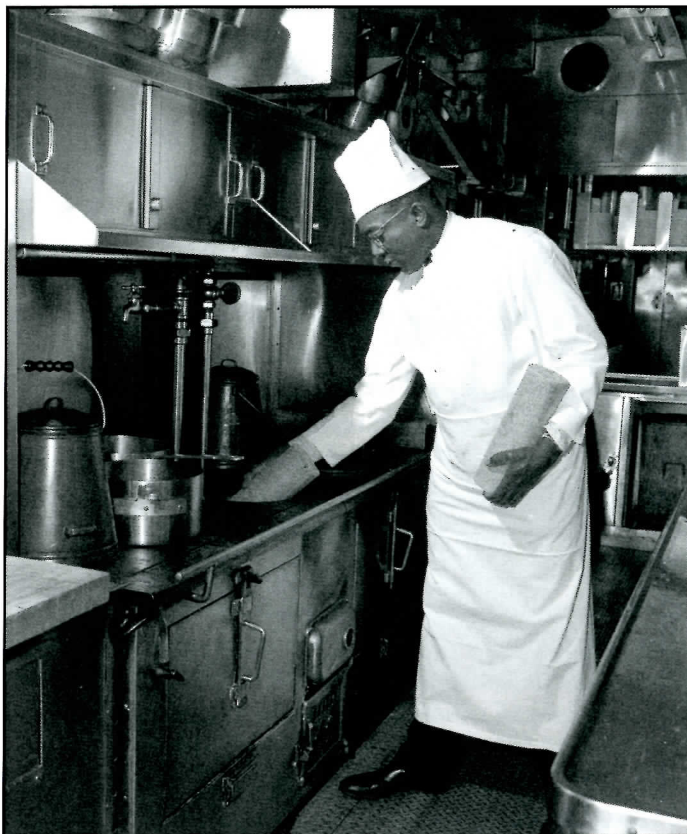
Unlike diners, food and beverage service on a car that also had sleeping accommodations was customarily provided by Pullman. This lasted until April 1958 when, as a cost-savings measure, the contract with Pullman was terminated. All sleeping car services (with or without food and beverage facilities) including car reservations, maintenance, cleaning, supplying linens, towels, and especially porters came under the direct control and employment of the Central. Sleeping cars had been purchased by a large consortium of carriers in 1948 after a court action separated contracted on-board services from ownership by Pullman in a Sherman Antitrust suit. Cars such as parlors and observation-lounges owned by railroads had been operated in a dual fashion for years. All attendant and porter services on premier trains without coaches were operated by Pullman. An onboard secretary, stewardess, barber, manicurist, or valet was always railroad employed. "NYC operated" cars, as commonly noted in public timetables, had long been featured on mixed consists on secondary trains. This became the standard in 1956 when the Central joined the Rock Island and New Haven in cancelling Pullman operating contracts on parlor cars.

The "restaurant cars" in some ways were smaller-scale versions of a full dining car. They usually carried a cook, although very limited service cars might only have just one or two waiters who prepared as well as served. Waiters were attired similarly to those in diners. Linen, china, and silver service was comparable although reduced in number. If operated by Pullman, their own service patterns and markings were evident. Menu items were fewer, but often based on the selections in the dining car if railroad operated. The kitchens had smaller stoves and often charcoal broilers.

Documentation as to the operation of dining and various food service cars, station restaurants, and commissaries can be found for a number of railroads in company reprints or scholarly publications. It is unfortunate that in the case of the New York Central very little such material survived the Penn Central merger and the closing of the 466 Lexington Avenue main office. Photographs, equipment rosters, car diagrams, menus, and certainly original china and silver service items are readily available. On the other hand, documentation regarding dining employee regulations, department notices, duties by position, recipe books for cooks, table settings guidelines, plating, and serving instructions are rare or non-existent.

It is known that no Central car carried bottled gas for cooking, coffee makers, or hot water. A disastrous explosion in a tunnel in Manhattan in the early 1900s had resulting in a ban on the use of gas on trains entering the city. New York Central diners and restaurant cars as well as Pullman-owned cars in such service were designed to burn soft coal as a result. At some point Pres-to-logs, a compressed sawdust log similar to today's Duraflame, replaced coal on the Central. These were developed in the 1930s and adopted by some western roads soon after.

The attire of stewards, waiters, and attendants changed over the years. Before the trends of the late 30s and 40s, stewards on the Central like most other roads sported dark blue jackets, gray trousers, a white shirt, a white or cream colored vest, a dark bow or neck tie, and of course highly polished black shoes. Photographs indicate that *Century* stewards were the most dapper of all. Some appear to wear tuxedos, double breasted jackets, or stylish sport coats – with dark gray trousers – depending on the era. Waiters invariably wore black trousers, white shirts, black bow ties, and white tunics or lapelled, short-waisted coats, single- or double-breasted. White, waist-to-floor aprons were worn as well. After the changes in 1958,



Bottled gas was forbidden on trains entering New York City, so NYC originally depended on coal-fired stoves on its trains. Developed to recycle sawdust in sawmills, Pres-to-logs replaced coal in NYC diners in the mid-1930s. In this November 5, 1947 company photograph, Chef Willie Franklin stokes a stove with two Pres-to-logs. NYCSHS Archive Image WR390278.

yellow waiter and attendant coats were used for several years. The *Hickory Creek* operators today have five different styles of NYC porter jackets in their onboard collection. All 1938 and 1948 *Century* uniforms had the Dreyfuss-designed logo affixed to a sleeve.

Table service items went through an evolution over time. Many silver and china patterns were used on the Central over its history. For silver, the "Century" pattern designed for the 1938 *Century* by Henry Dreyfuss had the most use and fame. It was the standard pattern until the very end, but interestingly not unique to the Central, as ten other railroads used it as well. Besides more than a dozen pieces of flatware, a remarkable 45 other service pieces were designed if not actually manufactured from Dreyfuss' designs.

China patterns were even more numerous. Ten patterns were used after 1914. The Central, like other major roads, had china designed specifically for premier trains. Century, Mercury, Mohawk, and Pacemaker patterns are in that category. For all other trains, the DeWitt Clinton pattern, debuted in 1925, became the standard lasting until the end in 1968.

What is evident concerning New York Central Dining Car Department operations was the quality of the service. This reached a pinnacle on the flagship *20th Century Limited*, but was closely followed on the other premier varnish such as *The Commodore Vanderbilt*, the *Southwestern Limited*, and the *New England States*. Despite the staggering $52 million passenger deficit inclusive of a near $3 million loss attributed to dining services alone in 1952, dramatic cuts to menu selection, amenities, and staffing did not occur until after the deep recession of 1957. The dining car experience was practically unchanged before then.

With the April 1958 timetable, the *Century* was combined with the *Commodore*. In doing so, coaches entered the consist, the schedule included stops at Gary, South Bend, Elkhart, and Toledo for passengers, and the Pullman Standard twin-unit diners were replaced with Budd equivalents. The *Shore*

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The "DeWitt Clinton" china pattern, displaying a replica of the first locomotive of NYC's earliest ancestral road, and the year 1831, when it began operation, was used from 1925 until the end of dining service. Here are just three of the many china pieces displaying this pattern. Collection of Nancy Stoving.

Restaurants... *(Continued from page 35)*

series lounges were removed and sold, replaced with tavern-lounge cars for coach passengers. The unique amenities disappeared – complimentary corsages and Lanvin perfume for the ladies, boutonnieres for the gents, hors d'oeuvres, wine, and champagne. With the removal of the *Shore* cars, so went the barber, train secretary, and valet service. Dinner selections were still impressive, but reduced from sixteen to eleven. Side dishes, desserts, and beverage choices were basically unchanged. With the loss of its former glow, *Century* regulars left "The World's Greatest Train" in numbers to patronize the rival, still all-Pullman *Broadway Limited*. The Pennsylvania spiffed up the train and welcomed the new patrons with open arms, filling accommodations that were too frequently vacant.

Less august trains lost full diners and/or food service cars or were assigned ones with fewer seats and staffing needs. Menu selections became fewer. Diners and other restaurant cars that were previously carried end-to-end began to be switched in and out at intermediate division points with commissary facilities to match peak service hours. More buffet, parlor, and lounge cars were set up to offer "buffet breakfast service" before overnight trains made morning arrivals at their destination cities. This trend continued as trains came off or were consolidated, and patronage declined.

Last Call for the Diner

The proud tradition of excellence that the New York Central achieved over decades may indeed be remembered best by reflecting on the perfection achieved in the golden age of rail travel. There is no better means to personally connect to that feeling than having been there, but for those of us not so fortunate we can imagine the sights, sounds, service, and theater of a busy diner, a fabulous meal, and great conversation – all as the scenery flashed by at 80 miles per hour.

In the next issue of Central Headlight, *the author will take you on a pre-Christmas, 1952 trip aboard the* 20th Century Limited, *all the way from Chicago's LaSalle Street Station to New York City's Grand Central Terminal. All you need to bring is your imagination.* (NYC)

It seems strange, now, to see a man "lighting up" in the presence of folks enjoying a fine meal, but there were no "No Smoking" signs in the full diner of the 1948 *20th Century Limited*. Surely every era has its failings to balance the good stuff. And chances are that many a present-day railfan would be willing to inhale a little second-hand smoke if given the opportunity to experience now the splendor of "The Greatest Train in the World." Photo by Ed Nowak, NYCSHS Collection.