

# Chicago Railroading in a Dark Era at the end of a Golden Age

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In 1973 I left the UK, newly married, on a Fulbright Scholarship, to do research at Northwestern University, Evanston, a town about 10 miles north of central Chicago on the lakefront. With plenty of other interests going on, I'm not sure I was even aware that Chicago has good claim to be the 'Railroad Capital of the World', nor that I knew much more than the commonplace about American railroads. There had been an article in the 1972 'Railway World' about the high speed steam hauled expresses of the Milwaukee Road (MILW), and this must have registered, as I remember a slight frisson as we crossed their path at a crossing marked 'Chicago, Milwaukee, St Paul and Pacific' on the way from the airport to our new home.

Amongst the first things you need in a new location is to figure out transport options, and local geography. Evanston is connected to Chicago both by the 'El' – the elevated, electrified suburban railway<sup>1</sup>, and commuter services on the Chicago and North Western's (CNW) former passenger main to Milwaukee<sup>2</sup>. Purchase of a 'Chicagoland' map revealed a city criss-crossed by other railroads<sup>3</sup>, and a copy of 'Train Watchers Guide to Chicago' gave directions to and activities at all the major railroad intersections, as well as a potted history of the routes and services of the 14 major railroads plus local connections. So, all was set up to explore.



Westbound Rock Island trailer train at Joliet, Illinois, led by EMD FP7 406. Note the state of the Rock Island tracks which still carried the high speed Rock Island and Pretoria Rocket passenger trains; February 1974.

What emerged was a picture of railroading in crisis - a dark age. Many companies were bankrupt or teetering on the edge - overregulated by the Interstate Commerce Commission into a state of penury; dilapidated tracks were their hallmark. The golden age of intercity passenger

travel had finally been extinguished with the coming of Amtrak the year before - in Chicago 77 of the remaining 121 trains were cut at a stroke. Central, Dearborn and Grand Central stations were demolished, and CNW and La Salle Street reduced to commuter service, leaving only Union in intercity business. And yet there were afterglows of a golden age too. The railroads were like UK pre-grouping companies, each with its own livery, routes, history and proud traditions. The surviving passenger services may have been Amtrak's, but, initially at least, they looked a lot like the private operations they had replaced, with coaches and streamlined E unit diesels still in their original colours, until 150 new EMD SDP40F diesels delivered between June 1973 and August 1974 took over. Commuter trains on the CNW, Burlington Northern (BN), MILW and Rock Island (RI) also used hand me down E units.

The reason Chicago had such variety is that for reasons of economics, not politics, it has never made sense for railroads operating east of Chicago to extend west thereof and vice versa. So there were a bunch of fiercely competitive eastern railroads bringing in stuff into the City, for a bunch of equally competitive western roads to take out. Some consolidation had taken place since World War II. Table 1 shows the progress of this coalescence from that time to the present, when there are but two western carriers, Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF) and Union Pacific (UP), and two eastern ones, Norfolk Southern (NS) and CSX, along with intrusions from Canadian Pacific (CP) and Canadian National (CN). 1973 was a kind of mid-point.



Penn Central GE U25B 2565 (ex New York Central) leads westbound caboose hop along the Indiana Harbor Belt at Dolton, Illinois; February 1974.

The newly merged companies seemed to believe that brash liveries and snappy logos would bring rich rewards. Chessie System (moderately stable) replaced the regal blue and gold lettering of its forbears with bright yellow, lined in orange and black, with a big cat logo. The Illinois Central Gulf (marginal) went for bright orange and white with black lettering. Penn Central, a bankrupt basket case, had, in six years, managed to replace all trace of its New York Central (NYC) and Pennsylvania (PRR) forebears with a wash of unkempt black, but with a flash logo.

**Table 1. US railroad consolidation 1945-2011**

<b>Post WWII railroads</b>	<b>1973 Railroads, and principal destinations from Chicago</b>	<b>2011 Railroads</b>
Chicago Burlington & Quincy (CBQ)	<b>Burlington Northern (BN)</b> Denver, Twin Cities, Pacific Northwest.	Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF)
Northern Pacific (NP)		
Great Northern (GN)		
Spokane Portland & Seattle (SPS)		
Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe (ATSF)	<b>ATSF</b> (Los Angeles, Bay Area, Texas)	
St Louis San Francisco (SLSF)	<b>SLSF</b> ( not present)	
Grand Trunk Western (GTW)	<b>GTW</b> , Toronto	
Soo (Canadian Pacific)	<b>Soo</b> , Winnipeg <sup>1</sup>	
Elgin Joliet & Eastern (EJE)	<b>EJE</b> (Belt line)	Canadian National (CN)
Illinois Central (IC)	<b>Illinois Central Gulf (ICG)</b> (New Orleans, St Louis <sup>2</sup> , Omaha)	
Gulf Mobile& Ohio (GMO)		
Chicago& Alton		
Milwaukee Road (MILW)	<b>MILW</b> (Omaha <sup>3</sup> , Kansas City, Twin Cities, Seattle <sup>3</sup> )	Canadian Pacific (CP)
Soo (Canadian Pacific)	<b>Soo</b> , Winnipeg <sup>1</sup>	
Baltimore& Ohio (B&O)	<b>Chessie System</b> (Detroit, Washington DC, Virginias)	CSX
Chesapeake& Ohio (C&O)		
Western Maryland (WM)		
Monon	<b>L&amp;N</b> (Atlanta, Birmingham, New Orleans)	
Louisville and Nashville (L&N)		
Atlantic Coast Line (ACL)	Seaboard Coast Line (not present)	
Seaboard Air Line (SAL)	<b>Penn Central</b> <sup>4</sup> (Detroit, Washington DC, New York, Boston)	
New York Central (NYC)		
Pennsylvania (PRR)		
Norfolk Western (NW)	<b>NW</b> (Detroit, Buffalo, Virginias)	
Nickel Plate (NKP)		
Wabash (WAB)		
Southern (SOU)	<b>SOU</b> (not present)	Union Pacific (UP)
Chicago and North Western (CNW)	<b>CNW</b> (Twin Cities, Omaha)	
Rock Island (RI)	<b>RI</b> <sup>5</sup> (Twin Cities, Omaha, Denver, Tucumcari, Texas)	
Missouri Pacific (MoP)	<b>MoP</b> (Texas, El Paso)	
Denver Rio Grande& Western (DRGW)	<b>DRGW</b> (not present)	
Missouri Kansas Texas (MKT)	<b>MKT</b> (not present)	
Southern Pacific (SP)	<b>SP</b> (not present)	
Union Pacific (UP)	<b>UP</b> (not present)	
Erie	<b>Erie Lackawanna (EL)</b> (Buffalo, New York)	Mostly abandoned W of Youngstown
Delaware Lackawanna and Western		

1. Some Soo line tracks sold to Wisconsin Central on MILW takeover; WC later sold to CN

2. St Louis line is now UP
3. MILW Omaha line, and Pacific extension W of North Dakota abandoned.
4. CSX got NYC Boston and New York-Cleveland, thence B&O to Chicago. NS got PRR Harrisburg -Cleveland, thence NYC to Chicago. PRR Chicago main is now short line across Indiana.
5. After bankruptcy, sold off piecemeal. Omaha line is now Iowa Interstate; KC line abandoned. UP operates KC-Tucumcari to ex-SP connection to El Paso and Los Angeles, also Texas line.

The NW, reasonably strong, was all black too; their board believed that smart liveries were a waste of money. Good taste on the eastern front was provided by the bankrupt Erie Lackawanna, light grey with a maroon stripe, and yellow nose. The L&N was smart in grey with yellow lettering, the MoP dark blue that weathered dull. To the west, the new BN quickly smothered its components' liveries in a wash of bright 'Cascade' green. The bankrupt RI was maroon but most all units were waiting for fresh paint that never came. Other western railroads of longer standing retained more refined schemes; the CNW was yellow with dark green detail, the MILW dark orange and black, and the ATSF deep blue and yellow lettering - its famed 'Warbonnet' silver and red passenger scheme having left town with its EMD passenger units. EMD was the dominant builder at the time, with the current leader, GE, a long way behind. Alco, the second largest steam builder quit building diesels in 1969, the largest steam builder, Baldwin, in 1956, and Fairbanks Morse in 1958, its demise hastened by the unreliability of its opposed piston 'Deltic' like engine. All builders' products were still to be seen, including 'first generation' cab units eg. the EMD E and F series, second generation 'Hood' units eg. the EMD GP and SD series and GE U series, and switchers (shunters) of all makes.



Chicago and North Western freights cross at Elmhurst, west end of Proviso Yard, westbound led by EMD SD45 945; 6 April 1974.

The bankruptcies of eastern railroads (NYC, PRR, EL), built for passenger and general merchandise freight, were also related to the rapid decline of heavy industry in the north east.

The Chessie and NW were kept afloat by Eastern coal, the L&N served the rapidly growing south. To the west, access to the Pacific was key. ATSF had both passenger and freight lines to California, and was in reasonable shape, albeit not a Wall Street star. The MILW had built an extension to the Pacific Northwest in the early part of the century, a visionary move, but being the last to arrive it was the first to leave in 1980, rather like the GC in London. Its heartland, like the CBQ, CNW and RI was the farmlands roughly circled by Chicago, the Twin Cities, Omaha, Kansas City and St Louis - the four were known collectively as 'grangers'. However, the price of shipping corn was a hot political potato, so they all had thousands of miles of rickety, unprofitable farmland branches. The CBQ was absorbed into its Pacific Northwest connections the NP and GN to address this. The MILW, CNW and RI fought for scraps of profitable traffic to Omaha, whence the mighty and profitable UP headed west, and Kansas City, for onward connections, including Kansas City Southern, independent to this day. The Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific, to give it its full name, actually made it as far as Tucumcari, New Mexico, to an end on connection with the SP, which also gave the MoP access to Southern California at El Paso.

To exchange cars, the eastern and western railroads were linked by a series of belt lines circling the City, owned by individual or groups of railroads, the Baltimore and Ohio Chicago Terminal (BOCT), the Indiana Harbor Belt (IHB), and the Belt Railway of Chicago. Thirty to forty miles from the centre, out in the cold like Pluto, ran the Elgin, Joliet and Eastern.

So, a scene of great diversity and history, but an industry fallen on hard times through wilful political neglect; no matter they still carried a third of the nation's freight; no thanks for their superhuman efforts moving millions of men and equipment to and from the Pacific and Atlantic Coasts in WWII. They were whipping boys, who had made no friends by their desperate attempts to rid themselves of hopelessly unprofitable intercity services in the 1950s and 60s. Their fundamental problems were unaddressed and remained so until their deregulation with the 1980 Staggers Act.



Amtrak EMD E8A 216 (ex Richmond, Fredericksburg & Potomac Rail Road 1007) departs Union station, Chicago with 16.15 to Detroit. This view taken from the Roosevelt Road bridge. Grand Central station, demolished, was behind the locomotive, near the billboard. The dome coach is in latter day Great Northern livery still; 8 June 1974.

Still, the scene was there to be observed and enjoyed, so I did. The best observation points were the southern approach to Union Station from Roosevelt Road Bridge, and crossings in the

suburbs with high density and diversity. By and large the western carriers diverged from the Centre like spokes from a wheel, so in the north and west, busy crossings other than with Belt lines were rare. The most interesting places were perhaps the CBQ three track main piercing the hearts of Western suburbs, where once Zephyrs had flown, at La Vergne or La Grange, Elmhurst at the west end of the CNW Proviso yard, and Joliet, where the ATSF and ICG ran in parallel across the RI. The eastern railroads curved in a bunch round the southern shore of Lake Michigan, and interwove endlessly on their way into town. However, they passed through deserted heavy industrial areas, and the most dangerous neighbourhoods on the south side of the city - white people simply don't go there, I was told.



Roosevelt Road crossed the approaches, west to east, of Union station, then Grand Central, La Salle Street and Dearborn stations. Rock Island EMD E7A 641 leads an evening commuter service out of La Salle Street; 6 July 1974. In the background above the second unit is the by then closed Dearborn Street station. On a special track adjacent to the old station stands the maroon liveried stock of the daily Norfolk Western commuter train to Orland Park.

I did go however, and without trouble, save for one incident high on the El platform above, I think, E 58<sup>th</sup> street on my way home one dreary winter afternoon. On the street below was a bar with a flat roof, covered in a sea of beer cans - a great photo. I took aim with my trusty Canon, only for an irate customer to emerge from the bar brandishing a gun. I negotiated in my best Prince Charles accent, which I think saved the day. The scale of heavy industry on the southern Lake Shore was simply breath-taking; the scenes from a viaduct near East Chicago on the sole surviving electric interurban, the Chicago, South Shore and South Bend, unforgettable. From its stop in Hammond, one could head to Hohman Avenue, the main shopping street (now demolished), where, right in the middle of an intersection, the main lines of the Monon, EL and NKP came together, and crossed the IHB, a main freight artery of the NYC into the city on the flat, all making for interesting shopping. Another good spot was in Dolton, 5 miles to the west, where the BOCT and IHB ran parallel, and crossed the shared L&N and MoP line into the city, and a now defunct PRR line.

All this led to thoughts of what lay beyond the City. By chance, I met noted railway author Jim Scribbins one freezing Saturday at Joliet station. Jim spoke lovingly and enthusiastically about the delights of long distance US passenger rail travel, and gave a run-down of the high spots. The die was cast. The American passenger train had been 'the Grand Conveyance'. 'There's no walk quite as exhilarating as that stroll down the platform past luxurious bright-windowed lounge cars and cosily curtained Pullmans to the porter who says, 'Right in here sir'.' wrote one. The departure of the Santa Fe's 'Chief' was likened to the sailing of a great landfaring hotel. These days were gone, but we could try to relive them on what remained. Figure 1 shows the routes of the long distance passenger trains at that time<sup>4</sup> - a skeleton of mostly once daily trains. Our first trip was to a Fulbright Conference in Washington DC, a chance to swing through eastern and southern states. To fit in Niagara Falls, we had no choice but the overnight Greyhound bus to Buffalo - a thoroughly unpleasant experience. After a day at the ice bedecked falls, we headed for New York the following morning from the towering Buffalo Central Terminal, once home to the pride of the NYC passenger fleet, including the passage of the grandest of them all, the red carpet '20th Century Limited'. It now had but two return trips a day. The monumental ticket hall felt like a set from a horror film. I left my wallet briefly on the ticket desk and never saw it again. The ride to New York along the Hudson/Mohawk valleys in heavy rain gave no sense of past glories, nor did a PRR GG1 electric hustling us on to DC in the dark.



The power for the Amtrak 'Floridian' is new EMD SDP40F 616 and E8A 4020 in Illinois Central passenger colours as they head into Union station past the ex-Pennsylvania Rail Road carriage yards. The train backed out of the station to gain its route southwards; 6 July 1974.

After the conference we headed south to Williamsburg VA, before heading west, on Jim's recommendation, to the C&O's Blue Ridge Mountain resort of White Sulphur Springs on the Chicago bound 'James Whitcomb Riley'. We arrived at the station to head back east the following morning to find the return train was 3 hours late. Its path from Chicago across Indiana,

where once had flown NYC Hudsons, was unfit for freight, never mind passengers, so trains lost hours as they wobbled along at 20mph. I stood, camera poised to photograph freights on the double track C&O main on a beautiful spring morning. None came, but eventually the onward ride through the mountains made it all worthwhile. We missed our connection in Charlottesville, so took a one coach Southern Railway local to Lynchburg - (the SR had refused to join Amtrak, so still had to provide previous service levels) - where we killed time at the cinema - 'The Sting' had just been released - before heading south on the pride of the SR, the 'Southern Crescent'. This offered clean but dated southern hospitality, including grits for breakfast riding through the peach blossom of Georgia. A bus from Birmingham took us to New Orleans, where after a slick day's sightseeing, we headed to the station to take the 'Panama Limited' home. We had seen much evidence of rural poverty across the south, but the wood built shacks on stilts above Lake Pontchartrain took the biscuit - our friends in Chicago could not deal with the photographed reality.



French built 'Turboliner 60' on a service from St Louis on the ex-Gulf Mobile & Ohio Rail Road near Corwith Yard, Illinois; 15 June 1974.

In mid-August we set off for the Pacific with a group of friends, starting on the 'North Coast Hiawatha'. This followed MILW tracks to the Twin Cities, thence mostly the NP main to Seattle. We were seated in an NP dome coach - grubby, but who cared - domes are the way to see the sights, and we scarcely left the upper deck. On the MILW, I was riding with C.J. Allen behind a MILW F7 Hudson. 'Over the flat crossing at Rondout, the sign read 'Speed not to exceed 100mph'. 'We eased to 90mph round the curves at Lake Oconomowoc'. 'The scheduled average speed of 81mph from Sparta to Portage was a world record for steam'. Well, not quite - I doubt our two brand new SDP40Fs exceeded 80mph! The dome ride along the Mississippi was unforgettable, as was dinner racing through the forests and lakes of Northern Minnesota. We awoke the following morning in the weirdly spectacular North Dakota badlands, and then up the unspoiled Yellowstone Valley, to our first stop at Livingston, Montana, to visit Yellowstone Park. President Nixon resigned that night. A few days later we headed on to Seattle, crossing the

Bozeman (5700ft) and the sunflower lined Homestake (6300ft) Passes in the first couple of hours, before plunging into Butte, home to a hole in the ground of amazing proportions - the copper mine that was once the world's largest, then past the once electrified MILW Pacific extension yards. The late afternoon was spent heading for Paradise - the journey and destination lived up to the billing, before an overnight crossing of the Rockies on the GN to our destination. Sadly, the 'North Coast Hiawatha' was discontinued in 1979. There is talk of restoring it - a pipe dream I fear, but if they did I would be on the first flight over to ride it again.



An ancient Santa Fe Fairbanks Morse H-12-44 switcher 620 stands at Corwith Yard, Illinois; 13 July 1974.

We stepped bleary eyed straight onto the 'Southbound Coast Starlight' to Oakland, with a stopover in Klamath Falls to visit Crater Lake. More stunning scenery on the BN line along Puget Sound, past Mount St Helens, still with its top on, and then winding endlessly upwards through forests south of Eugene on the SP. A week later found us tired but happy at Los Angeles Union Station, to catch the 'Southwest Limited' home. This was 'come home to mother' time - Santa Fe Bilevel stock groomed in the Santa Fe yards to their old standards; or so I thought - the Santa Fe had withdrawn the use of the 'Super Chief' name in March on account of perceived deterioration of service. We eventually arrived back in Chicago after stopovers in Flagstaff (Grand Canyon) and Gallup (Mesa Verde, Durango and Silverton). The whole trip was a transforming adventure - we had to do this again! And, three times, we have. I fear the day will come when these relics of a past age will disappear. In the absence of the 'North Coast Hiawatha', the 'Southwest Chief' is my preferred way west, despite the rival attractions of the unmissable ride through the Rockies on the DRGW on the 'California Zephyr'. The 'Chief' route is less spectacular; you start across endless farmed prairie. You wake the following morning to breakfast with the front range of the Rockies in prospect across the desolate high plains. You then climb the 1 in 28 and 1 in 30 of the Raton and Glorieta passes, even now with Santa Fe semaphores. ATSF used to send freight this way, but have now abandoned this part of the route in favour of the easier grades of its more southerly one - surely it cannot survive much longer.

After Albuquerque, you plunge through desert canyons into the setting sun, still (Bless you, ghost of Santa Fe) at 90mph, dodging a tidal wave of containerised freight. But, above all, it is the route of the 'Chief'.



Grand Trunk Western 4-6-2 5629 stands at the south end of the Amtrak coach yard, Chicago on 31 August 1974. The locomotive was owned by Dick Jensen but was cut up for scrap by the local commuter train agency, on whose property it then was, to pay off debts. A similar fate had befallen Jensen's Chicago Burlington & Quincy 4-8-4 5632 eighteen years earlier.

Back in Chicago, it was time to head home. Professionally, I had learned a great deal, but had a barren year - the Research muse which had flown so freely in London was silent. I could have stayed on, but it was time to cut losses. We headed home on the Broadway Limited to New York, on the tracks of the once mighty PRR. We made reasonable speed on the former racetrack across Indiana - though not a patch on that of K4s and T1s - but by Crestline Ohio were lolling along at no more than 40mph on account of the track. A trip on the New Haven to Boston took us to our flight home.

Of the railroads and liveries mentioned here, there is now little trace. Deregulation and merger created healthy businesses with glass smooth tracks that are now able to repay the cost of the enormous amounts of capital they need to prosper. This is maybe as well, for there has been no public investment in Interstate roads in the last 40 years, and the congestion this leads to, the spiralling price of oil, and the unsociable hours of truck driving means traffic is flooding their way. Tens of thousands of miles of lightly used branch lines, particularly in granger territory have gone. Duplicate trunk routes have disappeared - the EL is mostly abandoned west of mid Ohio, the PRR west from Pittsburgh is a few trains a week with a local operator, and the NYC to St Louis is no more. As well as losing its Pacific extension from North Dakota west, the MILW's line to Omaha is gone as is the Rock to Kansas City; the Rock's Omaha line is coming back to life as regional Iowa Interstate.

Against all the odds, a handful of long distance passenger trains survive - surely irrelevant in the modern transport market, perhaps hanging on until a sensible reincarnation of passenger rail

travel can take place. I always think that the fact that their route map stakes out the borders of the country helps. The Northeast Corridor from Washington to Boston is a vital transport artery, and beginning to sprout shoots north into New England, south into the Virginias, and west through Pennsylvania. There seems to be a slow fightback of short and medium distance trains in California, Washington state, and around Chicago. But with a federally mandated 79mph speed limit where there is no special signalling, and the need to mix with a rising tide of heavier and longer freights, growth will surely be limited. The Democrats would like to re-regulate the railroads, and appearing sympathetic towards passengers is one card the freight railroads can play to resist this. Some of them, BNSF in particular, seem to go out of their way to provide good long distance service, even though prioritising passengers may cost them money. Keeps the operators on their toes, I suppose.



Ex-Pennsylvania Rail Road GG1 electric – fine example of the 1930s Raymond Loewy design – relieves SDP40F and E unit power on the ‘Broadway Limited’ at Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; 15 September 1974.

As for Chicago, its major routes and intersections remain pretty much as I remember them. It is busier than ever. Only the names and colours have changed. If anyone wants to visit, I am happy, through the Editor to offer tips for an enjoyable time there.

### Useful Websites

1. Full El network and bus links shown on [WWW.transitchicago.com](http://WWW.transitchicago.com)
2. All heavy rail services now run by METRA- for map and schedules see [www.metrarail.com](http://www.metrarail.com)
3. Download Google Earth from [www.google.com/earth](http://www.google.com/earth). This shows aerial photos of City; Under ‘layers’ go to ‘more’, then ‘transportation’ and then ‘rail’; check this box and all lines are highlighted in black, commuter lines in blue. [www.trains.com](http://www.trains.com) has a link to a map showing traffic densities on the principal freight lines in 1971 and 2000
4. [www.amtrak.com](http://www.amtrak.com) has current system map and timetables.