

Passenger Trains of Yesteryear on the Minneapolis & St. Louis¹

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TODAY THE Minneapolis & St. Louis Railway is a modern and efficient freight road with relatively few passenger trains. Several years ago, however, it catered to commercial travelers, tourists and rural folk going from town to town. The heyday of the M&StL's passenger service brings back memories of through trains to many Midwestern points, excursions to lakes and watering places, and basket lunches sold in the coaches. The "Louie," as Minnesotans affectionately call the M&StL, serves Minnesota, Iowa, eastern South Dakota, and a small part of Illinois. But in earlier years it ran express trains, operated jointly with other companies, over connecting roads to many of the principal cities in the Middle West.

Take, for example, the "Cannon Ball Express." This train sped over the rails of the Minneapolis & St. Louis, the old Burlington, Cedar Rapids & Northern, and the Rock Island from the Twin Cities to Chicago. Its successor, the "North Star Limited," traveled between the same terminals on an accelerated schedule with a little more spit and polish. The "North Star" chuffed over Minnesota's own St. Louis road south to the state line, thence over Illinois Central tracks to the Windy City in thirteen and a half hours flat. That was fast timing from St. Paul to Chicago in 1902. And the equipment? To quote the yellowing timetable: "Trains Nos. 5 and 6—North Star Limited—Run through solid, are Broad Vestibuled throughout and consist of Compartment and Standard Sleepers, Free Chair Cars, Coaches . . . Buffet Library and Dining Cars, all just from the Pullman shops. The latest and most expensive equipment attainable."²

¹ This article is adapted from a chapter in the author's forthcoming history of the Minneapolis & St. Louis Railway, announced for publication in 1950. *Ed.*

² *Travelers' Official Guide of the Railway and Steam Navigation Lines in the United States and Canada*, December, 1902, p. 639.

To this day, if you mention Nos. 5 and 6 to any M&StL trainman whose hair is gray and whose face shows signs of veteran duty, you'll get a story. A few polite questions will bring a flood of reminiscences, a match, and more than likely a smoke. What legends of Lake Minnetonka are to oldsters out Excelsior way, stories of Nos. 5 and 6 (railroaders refer to trains by number, not by name) are to old-timers on the Minneapolis & St. Louis. Indeed, the importance of the role Minnesota's local road played in carrying trainloads of passengers to the East, the South, and the West was almost incredible for a line of its size.

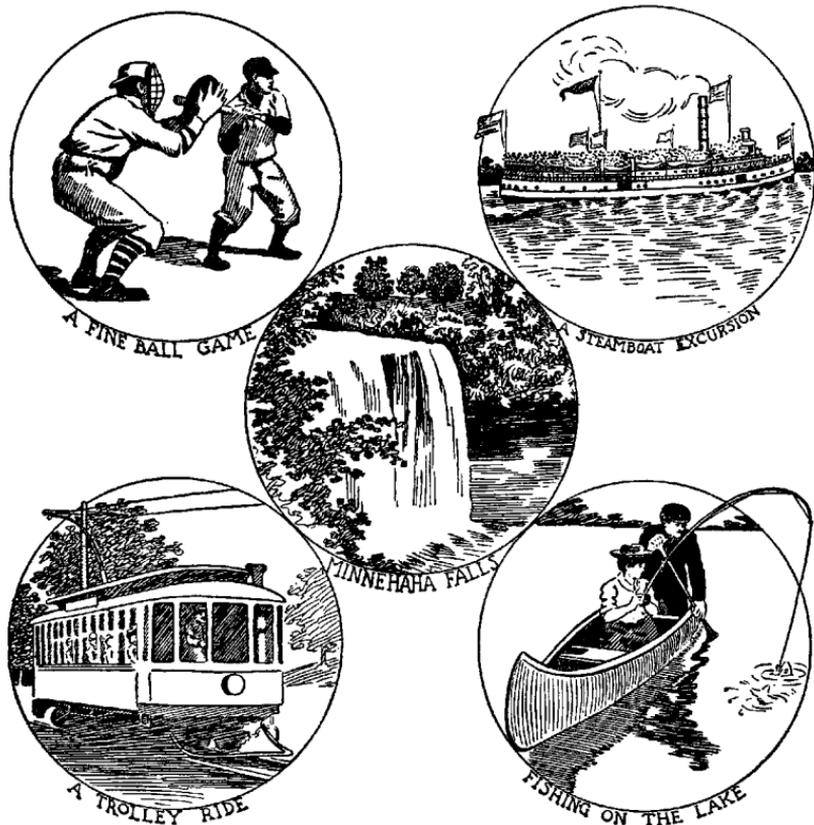
It is difficult to determine the exact date when the M&StL first ran through cars to Chicago or St. Louis. One of the earliest mentions of such service is featured in a full-page advertisement appearing in a *History of the Upper Mississippi Valley* of 1881; it stresses through equipment from Minneapolis to St. Louis and over the "new Chicago line." By the end of the decade of the 1880's Nos. 5 and 6 were crack trains to Chicago, with the "St. Louis Specials," Nos. 3 and 4, taking care of passengers to St. Louis. All M&StL service to the Twin Cities, by the way, used Northern Pacific tracks between St. Paul and Minneapolis. These limiteds operated over routes popular with Minnesotans for a score of years before 1902, when the Rock Island built its own line into St. Paul.

The Albert Lea Route, as the M&StL was known, became synonymous with speed and comfort; it was the best line south, and a favorite to the East. We have seen the "Cannon Ball" operating over the M&StL, the Burlington, Cedar Rapids & Northern, and the Rock Island, switching from one road to another at Albert Lea and West Liberty south of the Iowa boundary. In bygone years, Albert Lea was a passenger gateway of considerable importance, with a hotel and a station all in one and extensive dining facilities to boot. The "St. Louis Specials" also used the Albert Lea Route, but they ran over the Burlington, Cedar Rapids & Northern to Burlington, and thence on the Keokuk & St. Louis to the southern destination. Incidentally, the route south of Albert Lea is the same as that over which the "Zephyr Rockets" travel today.

Before the century ended, fast-stepping limiteds of the M&StL, pulled by high-wheeled "standards"—locomotives with four pilot wheels and four large drivers—were heralded all over Minnesota. Drummers found the smoking cars much to their liking, tourists noted that the Albert Lea Route made connections in all directions, and excursionists eagerly looked for the road's cut-rate specials. Much of the road's popularity was due to good service, and not a little was traceable to aggressive publicity. In the 1890's there were no stringent regulations governing the issuance of passes, and mileage books or free transportation were given in exchange for advertisements.

Newspapers on and off the line, many published a long way from M&StL rails, carried notices of the road's service. If the company's advertisements were naive, they were at the same time uninhibited and "pulling." Here is a typical example, culled from the *Excelsior Cottager* for January 3, 1896: "The Minneapolis & St. Louis R. R. Company. A New Train to Omaha and Des Moines. It is a Hummer! Look out for it! Through Cars. Pullmans & Coaches. Great! It will run through on quick time, reaching Des Moines, Omaha, Denver, California and all points in the West." The new train consisted of through cars to Fort Dodge, where they split, one section going to Omaha via the Illinois Central, and the other continuing south on the M&StL to Angus, and thence running over the historic Des Moines & Fort Dodge Railroad to the Iowa capital. Another advertising technique frequently used was the question-and-answer method. In the *Cottager* for January 17, 1896, under the title of "Going to California?" queries were volleyed at the reader: "What line will get you there seven hours quicker than any other?"; "What line operates Phillips Celebrated Tourists Car Excursions?"; etc. The answer was, of course, the M&StL.

During the Republican national convention at St. Louis in 1896 the road's advertising leaflet caricatured the five presidential candidates—McKinley, Reed, Davis, Harrison, and Allison—all sketched by the inimitable Charles L. Bartholomew. Beneath likenesses of the nominees, "Bart" depicted a host of people boarding a train. "Poli-



FROM A HANDBILL ADVERTISING EXCURSIONS TO THE TWIN
CITIES ON THE M&StL, June, 1914

ticians are Divided as to the Candidates," said the caption, "But are Agreed on the M. & St. L. Road."

The through trains with vestibules, gas lights, and "reclining chair cars (seats free)" were indeed "modern" about the turn of the century. Not so the coaches on the locals. Yet, what they lacked in refinements they made up in hospitality. Fifty-seven-foot cars, with red plush, low back seats, coal stoves at either end, and kerosene lamps giving a dim, flickering light—that was standard equipment. The "combine"—a half express, half passenger unit—with its cuspidors, tobacco juice stains, and informal good fellowship, was as

much a part of the accommodation train as the tall fluted stacks of the engines.

Happy and carefree were the throngs in the wooden, open-platform coaches, off for a day at Waterville, Waconia, or Excelsior. The M&StL was handy for the folks in Minnesota. In many instances it took picnickers and fishermen right to the banks of the lakes. Waterville had a half-mile spur to Tetonka Lake; Waconia, an extension to Clearwater Lake; and Excelsior, the popular Tonka Bay Branch, which almost reached the piazza of the Lake Park Hotel and the waters of Minnetonka. One car or eighteen, it made no difference; the M&StL would take members of a Sunday school group, a lodge, or a club, en masse, safely, if not swiftly, on a ride which gave everybody a lot of fun.³

When the Rock Island constructed its line to St. Paul in 1902, the M&StL routed its Chicago trains over the Illinois Central south of Albert Lea. To celebrate the occasion a new train fittingly called the "North Star Limited" replaced the somewhat shabby "Cannon Ball." But railroad men still referred to Nos. 5 and 6. According to Mr. A. B. Cutts of Minneapolis, who was the road's passenger agent at the time, a contest was held and the sum of twenty-five dollars was offered for the best name. Vice-president L. F. Day and Mr. Cutts selected "North Star Limited" out of approximately a thousand entries. The train split into two sections south of Albert Lea, one going to Chicago, the other over the Iowa Central to Albia, and thence on the Wabash to St. Louis.

For a quarter of a century the M&StL-Iowa Central-Wabash route from the Twin Cities to St. Louis was well-nigh invincible. It was the shortest route, it offered the fastest service, and it was the only line that could boast of dining service between the two destinations. Through trains to Chicago were cut out about the time of the First World War, but the "North Star" to St. Louis continued operating until 1935.

In an era before the widespread use of the automobile, a through-car route would appear without much provocation. For a time the

³ A former passenger agent for the road, Mr. D. E. Ransburg of Minneapolis, recalls having seen several eighteen-car excursion trains.

road had Pullmans from the Twin Cities to Aberdeen, South Dakota; to Peoria, Illinois, in conjunction with the Iowa Central; and to Kansas City via Omaha over the Illinois Central and the Missouri Pacific. A through sleeper even was routed to Hot Springs, Arkansas, by way of St. Louis during part of the year.⁴ From that city it was shunted to the "Iron Mountain" (now the Missouri Pacific) for the Springs.

But the road's crowning achievement took the form of through tourist sleepers to California. They had, to quote the advertisements, "carpets in the aisles, upholstered seats, clean linen and blankets for berths, cooking ranges in separate compartments, gentlemanly conductors and careful porters."⁵ Such service had long been an institution on the M&StL. By December, 1900, a popular tour had a car leaving the Twin Cities every Tuesday morning for the West Coast. The route? The M&StL to Fort Dodge, the Illinois Central to Omaha, the Kansas City, St. Joseph & Council Bluffs (now the Burlington) to Kansas City, and the Santa Fe to Los Angeles and San Diego. Three and a half days en route — and then sunny California. Or if one preferred the "Scenic Route," one could leave Thursday evening and, barring snow in the Rockies, arrive in Los Angeles the following Tuesday shortly after noontime. The car went over the above-mentioned route to Omaha, where the Rock Island picked it up for Pueblo; the Rio Grande, for Ogden; and finally, the Southern Pacific, for romantic San Francisco and balmy Los Angeles.

The M&StL, of course, meant many things to many people. To Mr. James F. Waite, who "commuted on the Louie from Excelsior from August 18, 1898, to May 5, 1935" (what a memory that man has!), it stood for local color: Conductor Alex Campbell, a full-blooded Sioux; Billy Watson and his dog up in the cab of engine No. 7; and the roomy, sixty-passenger suburban coaches that greeted commuters one memorable morning. Others recall the era when the road proudly advertised high-back seats and electric lights on its limited trains.

⁴ *Travelers' Official Guide*, June, 1891, p. 476; June, 1901, p. 625; December, 1902, p. 639; December, 1907, p. 758.

⁵ *Excelsior Cottager*, January 17, 1896.

Anyone who rode on the road's western line shortly after the turn of the century will remember "Smitty," the news butcher. No one apparently recalls his full name—it was just Smitty. Had Smitty been in his prime when the radio appeared, Charlie McCarthy might have had stiff competition. Yes, Smitty was a ventriloquist, clever, resourceful, mischievous. A favorite trick of his was to open the ventilators to the roof of an old wooden coach and shout, "Hey, what are you fellows doing up there?" Immediately all eyes would be focused on the ceiling. Then a retort would come back: "It's none of your damn business!" The parrying would continue until the train stopped at a station and Smitty alighted to chase the "free riders" from the top of the smoker. A cluster of people usually gathered, with everyone peering up on the roof; but, alas, no one was there.

The stories about Smitty are legion. Veteran trainmen still chuckle over an incident involving the late Governor Theodore Christianson of Minnesota. He was traveling in the chair car of the "Watertown Express" when Smitty started an altercation, seemingly between the conductor and a lady whose child had been left at a station.

"But madam," the conductor said, "we can't stop this train for your little girl."

"My child, I must get off and get my child!" the lady shouted distractedly.

"I'm sorry, madam," replied the conductor firmly, "we'll stop at the next station and not before."

"I must get off, I . . ."

With that, Christianson, so the story goes, leaped up and shouted: "By God, you *will* stop this train!"

It took quite a while for Christianson to regain his composure and his temper when neither the distraught lady nor the conductor could be found.

Sometimes a student brakeman would rush to the lavatory in response to a voice shouting, "Lemme out of here; I'm locked in; lemme out, I say"; or a new agent would come running to break up a cat and dog fight he thought he heard in the waiting room. Near by

stood Smitty, serious as a parson. So clever was the amateur ventriloquist, he sometimes fooled the older trainmen who thought they knew all his tricks. Nobody liked the newsboy's foul-smelling



stogies with bands taken from imported cigars and offered from boxes that once held expensive smokes, but everyone liked Smitty. As Arthur Kingsbury, a former baggageman on Nos. 1 and 2, put it: "Smitty enjoyed life to the full; he was just as much a tradition on the Louie as Sammy Dunn in the company's ad."

Sammy Dunn and the company ad!

All Minnesota and a good part of the Midwest knew the "little man" on "The Road That Runs." Folks who had ridden with Samuel Dunn when he was a brakeman on the M&StL, and then

looked at Bartholomew's clever caricature depicting a little man on the run saw the resemblance at once. Actually the resourceful Cutts suggested to "Bart" the idea for the advertisement and the artist carried it out. Since Bartholomew commuted on the train on which Sammy worked, the similarity between "Bart's" man and the brakeman may or may not have been purely coincidental. For several years he was the informal symbol of the M&StL. Sometimes the little fellow carried a suitcase; on other occasions his arms and legs protruded from a big circle, having "Minneapolis & St. Louis Railroad Co." near its periphery and the "Albert Lea Route" in the center. On calendars, in newspapers, and on timetables the little man of "The Road That Runs" popularized the M&StL passenger service in a way which was quite unlike that of any other railroad in America.

There was something very human and appealing about the St. Louis road; a warmth and friendliness pervaded its operation. Most of the division points and many of the terminals had lunch counters where everyone from the engineer to Aunt Mary stepped off the local for a "cup of Java," a sandwich, and a generous cut of pie. Albia, Oskaloosa, Marshalltown, Albert Lea, Waterville, Fort Dodge, Winthrop, Morton, Conde, and Aberdeen were, and some still are, depots where passengers could "pick up a bite" between trains or during a lunch stop. No matter what train one took on the "Louie," one could bank on a funny little mark or a suggestive "e" on the timcard. On close inspection one found that it stood for meals or, as the youngsters said, "eats." M&StL trains have been known to pass up coal and water, but to skip a lunch stop—never!

Sometimes when it was time to eat, a train pulled into a town which had no restaurant in the station. Such was the case of No. 2, the "St. Louis & Kansas City Mail," on its arrival at Grinnell, Iowa. There was an "e" on the timetable, however, and long before that college town was reached a brakeman would come through the cars very solicitously inquiring how many wanted supper. Then, upon ascertaining the number, he would wire ahead to the station agent, who thereupon contacted the Hotel Monroe on the west side of the

tracks. When No. 2 pulled into Grinnell, the passengers walked across the street to the inn and a hot meal. The brakeman, for his bit of salesmanship, was given dinner on the house.

But, it may be asked, suppose there was no hotel or restaurant near the railroad? This contingency, too, was provided for at such stops as Livermore and Hampton, Iowa, and St. James, Minnesota. Trainmen merely wired ahead, and lo, when the coaches came to a grinding halt at the respective communities, there would be a townsman with plate dinners all prepared and packed in market baskets. The meal might consist of roast beef, pork, or fried country chicken, vegetables, a salad, rolls, and hot bottled coffee. Price: fifty cents.

The First World War, however, brought changes, and the late Henry Ford still more. During the fiscal year of 1915 the Minneapolis & St. Louis Railroad carried a little better than two and a half million passengers. After that date improved roads and Model T's made an alarming dent in the road's coach and Pullman traffic. Then came the concrete highways, six-cylindered automobiles, and the motor bus. Passenger revenue melted like a snowbank under a hot sun. The era of short-haul passenger traffic was ending; the day of heavy time freights on express-train schedules had begun.



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