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The Railway Report

Robert I. Oliphant

Interstate Commerce Commission Docket 34733, considering the adequacy of Southern Pacific Company passenger services, may be the beginning of steps to save a minimal network of national railroad passenger service (see map), through federal, state and local authorities as well as the railroads themselves.

ICC Hearing Examiner John S. Messer went beyond just SP's passenger operations to berate the railroad "establishment" for its "lemming-like" rush to discontinue remaining passenger services, and at the same time he challenged his bosses to stop acting like a "county coroner" in issuing "death certificates" under Section 13a(1) petitions. We have all heard or read similar "opening lines" but (perhaps too late) Mr. Messer goes on to detail several steps to stop the continuing demise of rail passenger service and if possible to upgrade it.

Messer's recommendations for improved legislation include the abolition of Section 13a(1) and the imposition of Section 1(18) on train-off petitions (this section deals with railway line abandonments, providing a definite affirmative or negative decision); use of Section 1(15)-Emergency Powers (ordering viable carriers to temporarily operate a financially-poor road's services); passage of a bill currently in the Senate making it unlawful for a state to assess property taxes on an interstate carrier in a higher ratio than on private property in the same tax district; the invocation of Section 12(1) (which Examiner Messer believes grants to the ICC the power to investigate the quality of passenger train service); and under Section 1(4) the exercise of jurisdiction relative to the control of equipment and service in interstate operations.

Mr. Messer also recommends that by the use of the above legislative processes the Commission should require the railroads to operate all trains with clean and fully-operational equipment (including heat, air conditioning, lighting, rest rooms and drinking fountains); that services operated over distances of greater than 250 miles must include meal facilities of a type at least equal to SP's Automat service; that trains operating between the hours of 10 PM and 8 AM must have sleeping cars; that trains whose runs extend more than 12 hours must have both diner-lounge and sleeper cars; that no train may operate at an average speed of less than the road's fast-

THE COVER -- North America's newest rapid transit extensions were opened on May 11 in Toronto. Here, a TTC Hawker-Siddeley train speeds westbound at the new Victoria Park station. Photo from the Toronto Transit Commission.

est freight run; that no "freight" equipment except that commonly known as "head-end" may be added to the consist without ICC approval; and that no consolidation of trains may be effected without ICC approval except when the separate runs were operated less than 60 minutes apart. None of these standards are to be considered absolute, and may vary with Commission approval.

Finally, Messer recommends that the Brotherhoods should re-examine present work rules and (at the very least) apply a new set of rules to passenger service specifically involving work by the hour as opposed to the mile; that governmental agencies should take over terminal and depot facilities and lease them back to the carriers (releasing the roads from paying taxes on those facilities); that the railroads discontinue the annual ICC cost accounting procedure, replacing it with quarterly passenger operation (only) reports including patronage and on-time performance data; and that, as a last resort the carriers be afforded subsidies in the form of tax reduction in the amount lost on passenger service.

In the case of the Southern Pacific, Mr. Messer found the carrier to be practicing a number of passenger-discouraging methods, including the removal of sleepers, lounges and diners; the imposition of an extra fare in violation of Section 1(5) as no extra accommodations were provided; and the operation of services that broke connections and were generally unreliable. (While SP has not formally answered the above charges, they have in effect affirmed them by petitioning the Sunset Limited, the primary cause for the investigation in question).

The proposed network for a national rail passenger service should be based on recommendations and suggestions from the Department of Transportation, the Bureau of the Census, and state and local governmental agencies as well as the railroads themselves, but the final determination should be made by the Interstate Commerce Commission. The map itself should not be interpreted literally because of its straight-line construction, having been used as a proposal, not a recommended final network. One can, of course, identify several existing operations to be retained, but there are too many "air lines" to exactly pinpoint other routes.

Indeed, Examiner Messer's recommendations came at a very late stage in the game. They call for policies that should have been effected while most trains still had sleeping and dining facilities, say, as late as 1960. They also come at a time when most railroads have unequivocally "thrown in the towel", and the vast majority of the riding public (including those who prefer trains) are all too aware of the fact. The much-needed "head-end" revenue has all but disappeared; the decline in patronage has not levelled off (as many spokesmen had predicted) but actually accelerated in the past year and the generally poor fiscal performance of the entire railroad industry has made the passenger deficit a heavy burden on freight revenues. At the same time, a vast segment of the public (along with many governmental agencies) seems to feel the railroads "owe" them passenger services like some utility, hence support for public assistance subsidies does not appear too strong. Likewise, the continued refusal by the operating unions to modernize their work rules has forced the carriers to be frugal in their wage offers, further perpetuating the uneasy stalemate between them. This writer feels quite pessimistic over the prospect of favorable action on Mr. Messer's recommendations, but he has made some interesting and unique proposals (local governmental assumption of terminal facility fixed costs, and the offering of tax rebates to offset passenger revenue losses) that could provide a means of reducing the deficit to a manageable level. I see no hope for any system to make money on the long-haul passenger train in this era.

Transit Journal

--Paul M. Weyrich

Can a taxicab company find happiness running buses in a medium-sized city? Perhaps it is still too early to tell, but preliminary indications are that the answer to that question is "yes".

The city is Racine, Wisconsin, with a population of approximately 100,000. The company is the Racine Flash Cab Company, Inc., which for many years has operated the city's only taxis and which for the past two years has also operated school buses for the Unified School District, extending far beyond Racine's city limits. Flash Cab on June 10th began what is in this day and age surely to be regarded a bold venture in private urban transit. It took over the city's bus franchise from Lakeshore Transit, Inc., which had operated service in the city through a long series of predecessor companies since 1883. Not only was the franchise new, but so were the buses, the service, the fare structure, the routes and the attitude of the management.

The story really begins in 1962 when Madison (Wisconsin) Bus Lines Vice President John Holcomb purchased Racine Motor Coach Lines, Kenosha Motor Coach Lines and an interurban bus operation between the two cities from the Susquehanna Corporation (which was trying to unload its bus operations in Racine, Kenosha, Waukegan and Rockford at the same time it was attempting to abandon the Chicago North Shore & Milwaukee electric interurban railway). Holcomb renamed the entire operation Lakeshore Transit, and subdivided it into three separate divisions--Racine, Kenosha and the interurban. He had ambitious plans, but decreasing ridership and increasing wages made his operation not unlike those in dozens of other cities across the nation--declining and marginal. By 1967, with no new buses on the property (his fleet mainly consisted of GMC TG-3207's and TDH-3610's and White 798's, all from the 1940's), and with ridership since 1963 down by 300,000 annually Holcomb had about reached the end of the line.

On September 21 of last year, he and the Amalgamated Transit Union appealed to the Racine City Council for help. It was their contention that unless the Council would be willing to subsidize evening and weekend service, operations at these times would have to be discontinued. Holcomb hoped by raising this threat that the Council would respond to his other suggestions, which included formation of a transit authority to obtain matching funds from the federal government with which to purchase new equipment. He also made the same proposals in Kenosha. They were talked about and studied and talked about again, but in the final analysis no action was taken, and Holcomb made good his threat, receiving permission from the Wisconsin Public Service Commission to discontinue night and Sunday service in both cities.

Many residents were angered and protested to the Councils vigorously, but the bodies were unmoved. Holcomb had hardly revised his schedules when he announced that he had applied to the Public Service Commission to abandon his Racine operation entirely. He did not make a similar move in Kenosha because he still operates school buses there, and because he does draw heavy rush hour patronage on the lines serving American Motors plants.

Racine, however, was to be without bus service. Holcomb had no more than spoken when Flash Cab President Jack Taylor revived an earlier idea he had to obtain the city's franchise to operate local buses. The Racine City Council's inactivity following Taylor's offer prompted him to withdraw it as fast as he had made it claiming lack of interest and support on the part of the city government. That move at last got the wheels turning, and the

Council at last unanimously supported Flash Cab in its application before the Wisconsin Public Service Commission.

While Taylor had been open and frank about what kind of service he was willing to provide, it was not until the morning of June 10th (when Flash buses began revenue service) that Racine residents were actually aware that a major transportation change had occurred in their city. First of all, Flash had replaced the million-mile-plus gasoline and diesel twenty-year-old fleet of "growling hogs" (as one city government official called the buses) with air-conditioned 19-passenger mini-buses (each bus can also accommodate 16 standees). Where under the old system bus routes began in outlying areas, ran through downtown and continued on to outlying areas in another direction Flash doubled the number of bus routes by cutting the previous lines in half and terminating all runs downtown. In addition the new Flash lines were rerouted to service newly-developed and previously-unserved areas. One Flash bus route was not designed to terminate downtown, but rather loops around major outlying shopping areas and makes connections with the downtown-bound routes.

The fare structure was changed too. It cost the rider a quarter (or \$1.00 for four tokens) to ride the old Lakeshore buses while students paid 15¢ and children under twelve 12¢; all transfers were free. Flash eliminated tokens, raised the adult fare by a nickel to 30¢ and upped student and children's fares to 20¢. Transfers now cost a nickel; thus a ride from an outlying point via downtown to another part of the city was raised from a quarter to 35¢. Further, a change of buses is now necessary. Flash service is not operated evenings (except on Fridays for shoppers) or Sundays.

Starting out with a half - page newspaper advertisement and ample media publicity, the Flash management attitude was obviously a positive one, so contrasting with the negative one acquired over the years by Lakeshore and previous owners that the public was encouraged and turned out in surprising numbers to try the service.

At first, there were many problems. Buses broke down. They ran late. They didn't make connections. But, by the end of the first week of operation many of these difficulties had been corrected and the public was happier with this service than it had been with the old smoking GM's and Whites. What is considered significant and surprising is the fact that Flash is now carrying from 300 to 500 more passengers a day than was Lakeshore during its last month of operation, despite the fact that the hours of service are nearly identical. So many riders used the service on the first Friday night that extra trips were necessary, and the lines operated an hour later than had originally been anticipated.

The only major complaint still to be resolved centers around the transfer point which the buses use in downtown Racine. Lakeshore had used part of one block on both sides of Main Street and had had spaces for six or seven buses on each side. Because all of the new routes terminate at one point on one side of the street, Flash sought and received permission to move the transfer point a block further down on Main to unsheltered Monument Square, a park-type area. Older residents complained that they will not be able to tolerate waiting for buses (service is half-hourly on each line, in contrast to 12 or 15 minutes for most Lakeshore service) in winter with no shelter, and with the cold breezes of Lake Michigan only two blocks away, while others asked "what happens when it rains?"

By and large, however, the service must be viewed as a success. By

the end of the first week of operation Taylor had already applied for and received permission to start service on a brand-new route, this one to serve major industries with transfer points to downtown-bound lines. The fact of the matter is that Racine residents had to choose between a tax-supported bus system, a private system offering limited service or no system at all. They chose the private approach, and, because Flash Cab must make a profit or go the way of Lakeshore, they cannot expect the kind of service they received during World War II. From an outside point of view, Racine can count itself as being very lucky that it had a private firm willing to run buses in 1968. From the point of view of Flash Cab, it can be thankful that there are still enough Racine residents who need and want a bus system to pay the increased fares and swallow the reduced service.

The final chapter in this interesting transit story has not yet been written. Flash deserves time to prove itself, and, if it does not, Racine will either have to go municipal or go without. But if Flash can provide good service, Jack Taylor's initiative may start a whole new trend in medium-sized cities with urban transit problems (and who can name a city without some?). Indeed, Flash Cab may well prove General Motors' claim that all cities must have at least a fleet of medium-sized diesel buses to be an erroneous one.

T. C.

Ask someone if he's ever heard of the borough of Richmond in New York City and chances are he'll look at you with something more than a quizzical expression. Even today, Richmond exists, but most people know it by the somewhat more familiar name of Staten Island. Jutting peninsula-like into the mouth of the Hudson River, Staten Island presents a rural contrast to the metropolitan atmosphere of its fellow boroughs. In these pastoral surroundings, the city of New York advanced and proved a revolutionary theory of local transportation science.

For many years, one of the major purveyors of transportation on the island had been the Staten Island Midland Railway. Its financial base was none too strong, however, and its physical condition was far from satisfactory. For an unknown reason, the city of New York obtained an injunction against the company on January 16, 1920, and on the same date the competing Richmond Light and Railroad Company seized 32 cars they claimed had been loaned to Midland. This left but five serviceable units on the SIMR property, along with a barnful of obsolete and unusable equipment. For three days, the Midland was unable to operate any service, and the situation was brought to a head by the Richmond company's discontinuance of electric power it had furnished SIMR. Acting on complaints of island residents, the city brought in 50 buses and began operation over the car lines on January 19, 1920.

Partial rail service was resumed by the Midland receiver on May 21, but the Richmond company claimed three of the four cars in service, and the company was forced to shut down again. Following a court order, the three cars were returned by the RL&RR and operation began again May 24. At that point, the Department of Plant & Structures of the City of New York assumed control of the Midland system and began a program of rehabilitation. New and used cars were brought in, others were overhauled and much trackwork was done. Soon cars were back in service on all lines.

By 1921 the city was ready to extend the system with motor buses. However, a few legal questions arose, as a law was on the books prohibiting a municipality from operating motor buses and as the cost of extending the trolley lines would have been prohibitive, the use of trolley coaches was suggested as a means of resolving the impasse.

To quote from Bus Transportation, January 1922:

"The municipal trolley - bus system on Staten Island was officially opened October 8, 1921, by Grover A. Whalen, Commissioner of the Department of Plant & Structures, city of New York. This department has charge of the development and operation of all municipal transportation of the city of New York. Its activities cover street railways, trolley buses, gasoline motor bus routes, ferries and bridges."

On that day, service was inaugurated on two routes radiating from a connection with the Midland cars at Meier's Corners (Victory Boulevard and Bradley Avenue) to Sea View Hospital on the south and to Bull's Head on the west. An extension to the west line from Bull's Head to Linoleumville (now Travis) was completed and placed in service within a few days, forming a link between the Midland cars and the Carteret ferry. Reported the Staten Island Advance of October 20: "Linoleumville is on the map!"

The new Atlas Truck Company vehicles were 23 feet long, 7 feet 2 inches wide, and boasted a 140 inch wheelbase, 36 inch cushioned solid rubber tires and a weight of just 11,500 pounds. There were six cross seats, two longitudinals, and a circular rear seat, all upholstered in genuine green leather. 28 people could be accommodated in the luxurious cushions, and 15 standee positions were provided. Each of the seven vehicles had two 25 HP, 600 volt motors arranged for series-parallel control. Each car cost \$8000. Crude and boxlike in appearance, they were numbered 1 to 7 and lettered for the Department of Plant & Structures.

Trackless trolleys had been decided upon by the city because of their economy, both in construction of the line and in operation of the vehicles. Single rail construction cost from \$37,000 to \$60,000 per mile depending on terrain; trackless trolley construction cost a mere \$400 per mile. Then, there was the cost of operation:

Standard Safety Car	24.30¢ per mile
Gasoline Bus	29.55¢ per mile
Trackless Trolley	20.95¢ per mile

(To Sea View Hospital from Meier's Corner was a distance of 2.6 miles; the line to Linoleumville measured out to 4.4 miles).

As ERA's Headlights reports, city and county officials occupied the first cars to operate over the two lines, including Commissioner Whalen and Mayor Hyland. The system's first accident occurred a few days later, when Whalen, while teaching a new operator how to drive the vehicle, lost control of the car. It crashed into a pole just west of Willowbrook Road on Victory Boulevard, injuring several passengers. Generally, however, the two lines compiled a satisfactory record of operation, and gave residents and visitors to the island quick and dependable service on a 5¢ fare.

--RICHARD R. KUNZ

NEXT: History repeats itself

PROPOSED NATIONAL RAIL PASSENGER SERVICE NETWORK

