Book Reviews


That the Monon Railroad has a special attraction for historians and dedicated rail fans alike would be indicated by the fact that for the second time in less than a decade it is the subject for a book-length study, complete with text and magnificent pictures. It is doubtful if there is another railroad in this country so closely identified with a single state as is the Monon with the state of Indiana. This is not all that surprising when one remembers that except for a twenty-mile stretch over the Chicago and Western Indiana Railroad (which provided the entrance into Chicago's Dearborn Station) and a similar nine-mile linkage over the tracks of the Kentucky and Indiana Terminal (which included the bridge over the Ohio River) all of the Monon's modest mileage was in Indiana. Perhaps only a Hoosier can fully understand and appreciate the special kind of love affair which seemed to flourish between Indiana natives and the Monon Railroad, but all “true believing railroad buffs” can surely enjoy the affair vicariously.

One of the most interesting ways in which “the Hoosier Line” identified with its region and endeared itself to its constituents was through the special attention it seems to have paid to the Indiana colleges and universities which lay along its route. With its Chicago-Louisville line serving the home communities of both Purdue University and Indiana University the railroad for years fanned the lively flames of football rivalry between the two. Many will recall the special trains with appropriately decorated locomotives and cars which operated on “football Saturdays” as the “Boiler-makers” and their Bloomington-based rivals strove on the gridiron for the beloved traveling trophy, the “old oaken bucket.” In a similar fashion the Monon donated a beautifully polished locomotive bell to serve as a football trophy for highly regarded Wabash College in Crawfordsville and DePauw University in Greencastle. These were public relations activities at their very best.

The authors, Gary W. Dolzall and Stephen F. Dolzall, make it very clear at the outset that theirs is an adventure down memory lane. Chapter one, for example, is a sentimental journey into the not-so-distant past as the reader is treated to a series of vignettes
depicting passenger and freight operations on the Monon as they were “only yesterday.” Drawn from the minds and the memories of the authors (as well as from their cameras) these memories enable one to sit back and savor the nostalgic aroma of steam locomotive coal smoke especially when contrasted with the foul odors of diesel fuel.

No effort is made to treat in depth the corporate history of the Chicago, Indianapolis and Louisville Railway Company, the Monon's official title until the 1950s. Nevertheless, in bold strokes the vicissitudes of the Monon's history are outlined in chronological fashion. The Monon had its origin in 1847 in the fertile mind of James Brooks of New Albany, Indiana, and the opening of rail service between New Albany and Salem in 1851 began the history of this unusual regional carrier. During the century which followed (1847–1946) the railroad was able to realize its ultimate destiny with lines from Chicago to Indianapolis and from Michigan City, Indiana, to Louisville intersecting, of course, at Monon, Indiana.

Although the corporate history of the Monon in the years prior to World War II could be described as routine and inconspicuous, that was soon to change. American railroads emerged from the war with spirits high in the knowledge of a tremendous transportation job well done. Onto the Monon scene in 1946 came John Barriger, who would leave his name and influence etched permanently on "the Hoosier Line." The authors focus major attention upon what are called the Barriger years.

Barriger had developed a reputation as a miracle worker with bankrupt and moribund railroads during his service with the depression-era Reconstruction Finance Corporation, and for the next seven years he would undertake to work his brand of magic on the Monon. In the short term he was remarkably successful, but there were longterm, although perhaps less spectacular, gains as well. During what must have been the golden age of Monon railroading, Barriger presided over the modernization of his railroad. The rapid transition from steam to diesel power, the improvement and expansion of passenger service, improved freight schedules and service, line relocations, structural improvements, and efforts to catch up with deferred maintenance all followed in rapid succession. In this fashion, Barriger did his best to encourage the Monon to live up to his well-publicized philosophy of super-railroading.

In the wake of Barriger's departure from the company in 1952, the Monon shared in the successes and failures of American railroads generally throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Before he left, Barriger had been advocating a merger, either with another nearby regional carrier or with a larger, stronger partner as the key to long-term Monon prosperity. Unsuccessful in all of its feeble overtures looking toward consolidation, the Indiana company fell victim to the merger mania of the 1970s. In 1971 all 573 miles of the
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS & LOUISVILLE ENGINE about to couple with Hoosier Line Flatcars at the Perry, Matthews & Buskirk Quarry, New Bedford, May 23, 1900

Seaboard System Railroad Collection
Courtesy of the author
Monon fully merged into the Louisville and Nashville Railroad upon which the company had been dependent for years. In the following year the L & N, in turn, became a wholly owned subsidiary of the Seaboard Coast Line which used the unusual title of the Family Lines System. More recently, the Seaboard System Railroad has been absorbed into an eastern transportation giant called the CSX Corporation which includes the old Baltimore and Ohio, Western Maryland, and Chesapeake and Ohio railroads in addition to the Family Lines. Thus the Monon had become another of the “fallen flags,” as Trains magazine likes to refer to railroads which have lost their identity.

As far as the technical aspects of bookmaking are concerned, this volume sets a very high standard. Quality paper, large easy-to-read print, and firm construction back up the superb illustrations and the entertaining narrative. Most of the pictures are black and white and with a few exceptions, are sharply reproduced and carefully identified. An eight-page section of colored photographs precedes the useful locomotive roster (both steam and diesel), a post–World War II passenger equipment roster, and an adequate index.

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