

In the winter of 1970 - 71, I was a senior at Ohio State University in Columbus Ohio. At that point in my college education I had the luxury of access to independent study course work. I was majoring in fine arts and minoring in photography and film making. This was too good to be true, I could actually write my own ticket - so to speak. The winter and spring of 1970 - 71 was also the time when the end of passenger railroading in the US (as I had come to know it) was fast approaching. What better subject for an independent study class in photography?

Columbus Ohio was never known as a major rail destination. In fact today it has no passenger rail service at all. The town never possessed heavy industry like it's neighbors Chicago, Cleveland, and Pittsburgh. Aside from a number of industrial businesses like Buckeye Steel Castings, Columbus Bolt Works, and a few others, it was more of a white collar town than blue, being home to several major insurance companies and the seat of state government.

Instead, Columbus was a place that people passed through. This fact was reflected in the city's railroad station - Columbus Union Station - that had little visual presence at street level. Indeed, it really had no presence at all. Columbus' major north south artery - High Street - took a leap over the tracks of the Pennsylvania RR, New York Central, and Baltimore and Ohio that was lined with blank brick walls on the west and anonymous store fronts on the east. The station entrance itself, was buried at the end of a small parking area just off of the street. The 'grand' entrance was dominated by a low canopy, an altogether unremarkable entrance for three major railroad systems, five if you count the Norfolk and Western and Chesapeake and Ohio that attained the passenger platforms through a trackage rights agreement with the Pennsylvania Railroad.



Train time at Columbus Union Station. The connecting train from Cincinnati has arrived in advance of the 9:30 p.m. arrival of the eastbound National Limited. At this late date of February 1970, few patrons use this service. Instead, cheap gas and north/south Interstate 71 have all but erased intercity passenger services in Ohio.

NIGHT & DAY



Passenger trains weren't the only visitors to Columbus Union Station. Here an eastbound B&O freight clatters through turnouts along the north platform headed for the joint B&O/Penn Central (former Pennsy) mainline east to Wheeling West Virginia.



Night existed even in broad daylight among the nooks and crannies of the station platforms and workrooms. Dark recesses held the lairs of 'old heads' who traded tails of the 'good times' when the current reality of ragged track work and crumbling brickwork and concrete were unthinkable.



Deteriorating track work is the rule rather than the exception on the Penn Central of 1971. The 'puzzle' switches at the east end of the station platforms have seen better days. Meanwhile, a westbound mail train approaches the station and brings with it a good hour of switching.



For most of every day, this was the state of affairs. No trains, no personnel, no nothing. Just memories of better times and a vague apprehension for things to come.



A sign of impending action, a resident brakeman heads down one of the platforms in anticipation of an arriving mail train. Things will come to life within minutes.



A reason to rejoice, a westbound mail train - now the hottest thing on the division, picks its way through the 'puzzle' switches at the east end of the station. Home forces are now poised for flurry of switching activity.



In the throws of cutting cars in and out of the mail train, a station switchman rides a Flexi-Van car with an ex-Pennsy GP9 in charge of propulsion. Several more pitches to and fro and all will be in order for the westbound sprint to Dayton and St. Louis.



Hidden in the shadows of the Union Station complex, High Street Tower was not well known to local railfans. The few who ventured there usually were met with a terse warning to 'get the hell out of here'. And for good reason - to the left was St. Louis and the right Chicago. Both lines were busy with freights that could sneak up quickly.



Activity with non-priority trains - like the National Limited - was relaxed at best. Here the eastbound 'National' waits in the quiet of the platforms while carmen go through the ritual of filling water tanks and servicing leaking steam lines.



The station switcher, under the careful gaze of the mail train road power in the background, prepares to reach down Track 2 and grab two Flexi-Van cars full of local mail. One of several station switchmen throws a 'puzzle' switch in preparation for the move.



On another day, a westbound mail train creeps down Track 3 and yet another round of switching will occur. Tight times on the PC are evident in the missing MU cables on the lead unit - undoubtedly scavenged for use on other units.



With the mail train on its way, and the station switcher safely tucked away, a switchman makes his way through the platform shadows.



The fuss and flurry of the day is past. The station is all but empty and the last train of the day is an hour away. A lone figure looks out on the platforms and into a dark Ohio winter evening. That passenger's gaze may be only looking for a distant headlight but to me is seeking the not too distant past and better times of travel by rail.