

Olympic Transcons of The Milwaukee Road

by Greg Stout

At the turn of the 20th Century, the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railroad was very much a company on the go. A look at its system map from 1903 indicates that “The St. Paul Road’s” rails reached from its corporate headquarters in Chicago to places as diverse (and commercially important) as Kansas City, Omaha, Fargo, Minneapolis/St. Paul, Duluth, and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. In short, it had woven a web of steel across the upper Midwest that was second to none. Its passenger trains reached all these destinations and more via its connections with the Union Pacific, Great Northern, Northern Pacific, and Soo Line/Canadian Pacific. Indeed, a \$33 ticket purchased at a CM&StP ticket office could take you all the way to the West Coast by way of connections at Omaha and St. Paul. And therein lay the rub.

As a regional carrier, the St. Paul was earning a good living. However, times were changing, and alliances among competing roads threatened to undermine the road’s competitive position, if not its very existence. In 1900, the Northern Pacific (which four years earlier had come under the control of the Great Northern) and the GN itself gained control of the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy, which gave the so-called “Hill Lines” direct access to Chicago, then and now the principal transportation hub of the Midwest. By contrast, the St. Paul’s western terminus was Evarts, S. Dak., not exactly a prime destination. (In fact the St. Paul did promote a West Coast service, but in each instance in conjunction with the GN, NP, or the SOO/CP.)

The company's other main lines faced fearsome competition as well. Between Chicago and Omaha shippers and travelers could choose from among the St. Paul, the Rock Island, the Burlington, the North Western, the Illinois Central, and even the Chicago Great Western. If the destination were Kansas City, there were the Rock Island, Santa Fe, Wabash, the Burlington, or the Chicago & Alton all eager to compete for the business. And so, as a means of securing its future, the St. Paul Road's management decided that westward expansion was the best way to ensure the company's future.



The Olympian and its companion train, the Columbian, were inaugurated on May 28, 1911, and were the first all-steel trains to operate to/from the Pacific Northwest. The trains' sleepers and observation cars were built by Barney & Smith. The obs cars—this one was probably photographed in the metro Chicago area—featured a library, buffet, men's smoking room,

and a ladies' tea room. Kaufmann & Fabry/Milwaukee Road, Milwaukee Road Historical Association collection

The Olympian
Chicago to Puget Sound

Traverses en route a new country where on every hand are seen masterpieces of western scenic splendor and engineering wonders unparalleled in railway construction.

Multicolored Montana and Silver Bow Canyons, beautiful Snoqualmie Falls in the Cascades are wonder spots worth crossing the continent to see. The "shadowy" St. Joe River and Lake Chatcolet, Idaho (the fisherman's paradise) will well repay an extended visit. At your journey's end there are all the wonders of the Sound country to see.

"The Olympian" leaves Chicago every day at 10:15 p. m.; "The Columbian," its companion train, at 10:10 a. m., for Seattle and Tacoma over the newest and shortest scenic line—the

**CHICAGO
Milwaukee & St. Paul
RAILWAY**

Low round-trip fares in effect daily to September 30th. Descriptive literature and full information upon request.

GEO. B. HAYNES, *General Passenger Agent*
CHICAGO

The Olympian became the premier train on the Milwaukee's route to the Northwest. As such, the train always seemed to receive the most publicity. Milwaukee Road, Milwaukee Road Historical Association collection

Construction of the Pacific Extension began in April 1906. By August 1909 the entire line to Seattle was completed, including 2,300 miles of track, five

mountain-range crossings that involved moving 60 million cubic yards of earth, drilling more than 10 miles of rock-cut tunnels, and constructing 20 miles of bridges. In the absence of land grants, however, the Pacific Extension came dearly. Originally, the cost was estimated to be in the neighborhood of \$60 million, itself a not inconsiderable sum in those days, but also a number that proved to be wildly off the mark. In the end, the tab came to a staggering \$234 million, an amount equal to about \$5.85 billion in 2012 dollars. Add to that the additional \$23 million (in 1915 dollars, about \$600 million today) cost of electrifying 656 miles of main line from Harlowton, Mont., to Avery, Ida., and from Othello to Seattle, Wash., including more than 3,000 miles of wire, line poles, substations and motive power and you have a very expensive—though very well engineered—piece of railroad, indeed. And so, with that as prologue, on May 28, 1911, the St. Paul Road (it was to become more widely known as the “The Milwaukee Road” following its 1925 bankruptcy) and its subsidiary the Chicago, Milwaukee & Puget Sound introduced two new passenger trains, the Olympian (trains 15/16) and the Columbian (trains 17/18), operating between Chicago and Seattle/Tacoma. From the get-go, the Olympian was the feature train, making limited stops over the 2,300-mile run from Chicago. The Columbian ran on a slower schedule and made numerous additional stops enroute.



An Olympian diner of 1927, with 4-and-2 seating. It was always a treat to come in fresh from a sound night's sleep in a comfortable "lower" and smell the aroma of pancakes, sausage, and freshly brewed coffee. Immediately upon being seated by the steward, the waiter would place a "wake-up" demi-tasse cup of coffee (the equivalent of an espresso today) before the breakfast patron. Milwaukee Road Historical Association collection



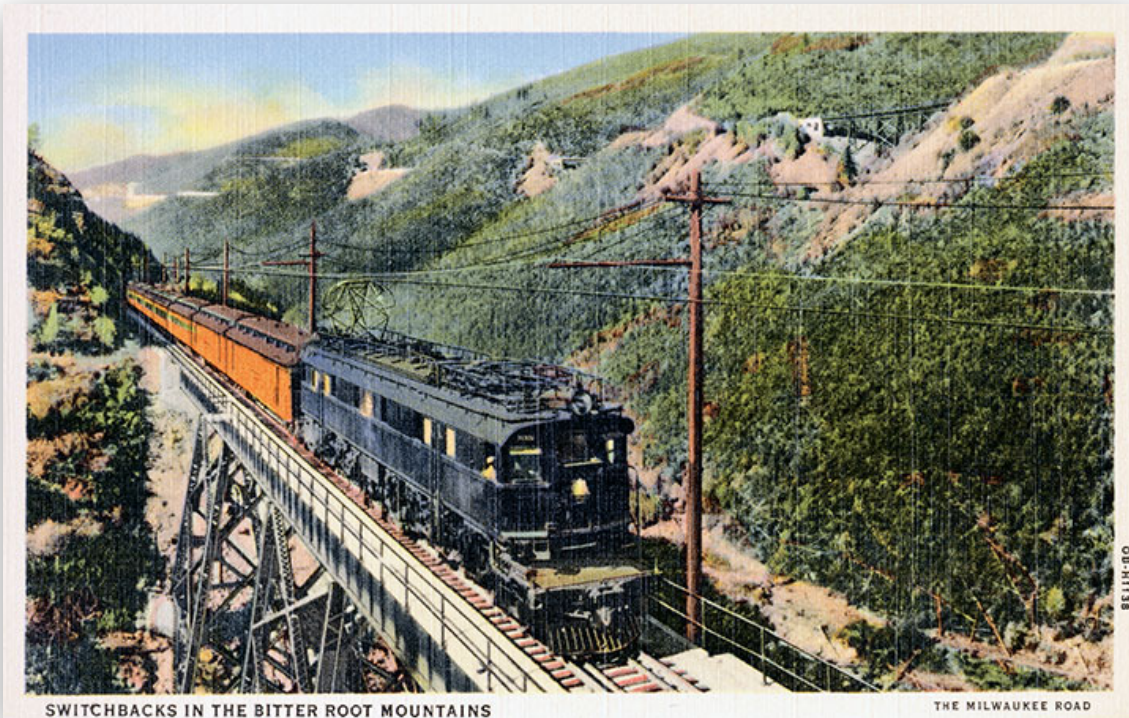
An interior scene of the Olympian's observation car. For a time, amenities included barber and bath service, a phone placed on the car while the train was being loaded at terminals, tailor service, and "Olympian-grams" with news and stock-market reports. Milwaukee road, Milwaukee Road Historical Association collection

Equipping the two new trains meant purchasing 20 complete all-steel trainsets all equipped with electric lighting, powered by a dynamo (generator) located in the baggage car—early head-end power (HEP), if you will. Interior appointments included hand-carved hardwood trim. Externally, the cars were finished in what became the company's signature orange with maroon trim. Consists of both trains included coaches, a full-service diner, a "tourist sleeper," a club-lounge-observation car, and head-end cars. The Olympian also handled "standard" 12-1 and 10-1-1 sleeping cars that included sections,

compartments, and drawing rooms. All the cars were railroad-owned and -operated.



Once Milwaukee Road completed the electrification of the Rocky Mountain Division (1917), box-cab "motors" began handling trains over the Belt, Rocky, and Bitterroot ranges. It was the modern way to deftly move freight and passengers effortlessly over rugged terrain. Ed Lynch collection



One of the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul's Westinghouse "Quill" motor electric locomotives effortlessly climbs through the Bitterroot Mountains with the eastbound Olympian in a postcard scene from ca. 1920. In a few minutes, the train will be gliding along the trackage visible at the top of the scene as it approaches the summit of the Bitterroots at St. Paul Pass Tunnel. Ed Lynch collection

In the early years, the Olympian and the Columbian ran behind steam over the entire length of the run. However, following tests in December 1915, both trains began operating behind electric locomotives over the Rocky Mountain Division between Harlowton and Avery. Electric operations were extended to the run between Othello and Seattle in 1920 following completion of the Coast Division electrification that year. The St. Paul was quick to exploit electric operation as a competitive advantage as the box-cab, "Quill" motor, bipolar, and "Little Joe" electrics that followed in succession emitted no coal smoke or cinders, thus providing a quieter, cleaner ride with quick acceleration.



The electrification that was synonymous with the Milwaukee's Pacific Extension was not in place at the time of the extension's opening in 1909, and in fact it was over a decade before the electrification project was completed. Until the wires were up and energized, steam locomotives labored through the mountain ranges crossed by the railroad. Here in this scene in the Cascades circa early 1913, the westbound Olympian approaches Laconia, Wash., near Snoqualmie Summit—on time, or close to it, judging by the apparent sun position. Leading the train is Milwaukee Road L-1-class 2-8-2 No. 8503, built at West Milwaukee Shops in 1912. Today, snow conditions like this would shut down a railroad for days.
White River Productions collection

Between 1918 and 1920, the St. Paul, like most other railroads in the country, came under control of the United States Railroad Administration (USRA), an agency created to coordinate rail transportation during World War I. Private control was returned following the passage of the Transportation Act of 1920.

However, operational abuses by the USRA coupled with the crushing debt load that accompanied the construction and electrification of the Pacific Extension led to the CM&StP to seek the protection of the bankruptcy court on March 18, 1925. The bankruptcy lasted until 1928, at which time the company emerged from receivership reincorporated as the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul & Pacific Railroad—The Milwaukee Road.



Olympic champion Gertrude Elderle and her party are aboard the Columbian about to depart the new Chicago Union Station in 1926—the year that she became the first woman to swim the English Channel. kaufmann & fabry/milwaukee road, milwaukee road historical association collection. Frank Williams/Pullman Company; MRHA collection



The Olympian crosses over the Mississippi River on the Short Line Bridge between St. Paul and Minneapolis circa 1912. Milwaukee Road passenger trains continued to use this bridge until Amtrak's start-up in 1971. Milwaukee Road was one of the few railroads of the early 20th Century that painted its passenger equipment in bright hues. Mike Schafer collection



Olympian passengers pass an unsettling scene that revealed the fate of the previous day's Olympian's at McLaughlin, S. Dak., in September 1926. The train's highly touted all-steel rolling stock hopefully reduced the trauma. Jim Olson collection



Interior of a coach on the Olympian, 1927. The car was equipped with both kerosene and electric lighting. Milwaukee Road was an early proponent of an early form of HEP (head-end power) and had baggage cars equipped with dynamos to supply electricity throughout the train. But not all trains had dynamo cars, nor were they as reliable as today's HEP generators, hence the need for kerosene lighting. milwaukee road, milwaukee road historical association collection. Frank Williams/Pullman company; MRHA collection

Despite the bankruptcy, on August 1, 1927, the Olympian was re-equipped with all-new Pullman-built, roller bearing-equipped cars. In contrast to the Pullman green cars of the GN and NP, the new equipment once more carried over the cheerful orange-and-maroon livery with gold-leaf lettering spelling out the train's name on the letterboard. The new cars included 10 section-1 compartment-1 drawing room and 8 section-2 compartment-1 drawing room sleepers plus an observation car with a men's barber shop, men's and women's lounges, and a 16-seat observation lounge. A timetable from the period shows the New Olympian, as the railroad called it, making the run from Chicago to Seattle in 59 hours, 15 minutes. By contrast, the "same old" Columbian covered the route in 72 hours, 30 minutes. Both trains required an additional hour and a half to reach Tacoma via a reverse move from Seattle Union Station, a facility Milwaukee shared with the Union Pacific. In both directions between Seattle and Tacoma, the train consists were hauled backward.



A precursor of Super Domes and Skytop sleeper-observation cars, special open-air observation cars gave Olympian passengers a perfect view of the Bitter Roots. This travel feature benefitted from electrification, especially considering the number of tunnels on the Milwaukee's Pacific Extension main line. Milwaukee Road Historical Association collection

As an added means of promoting the spectacular scenery the train traversed, between 1927 and 1941 the summer-season consist included an open-air observation car that ran between Harlowton and St. Maries, Ida. To further attract the tourist dollar, in June 1927 the railroad took a page from the Santa Fe-Fred Harvey playbook and opened a luxurious 42,000-square-foot Spanish-style resort called the Gallatin Gateway Inn, located at the entrance to Yellowstone National Park. Connections to the hotel from the Milwaukee's Three Forks, Mont., depot were made via a connecting train called the Gallagator that ran over the Three Forks/Salesville branch. The Gallagator was later replaced by a small fleet of motor coaches.

As was the case with every other railroad, the onset of the Great Depression in October 1929 hit the Milwaukee Road hard. Beginning in February 1931, the Columbian was rerouted between Chicago and Aberdeen via Elgin, Davis Junction, and Savanna, Ill.; Manilla and Sioux City, Iowa; and Sioux Falls and Mitchell, S. Dak. Perhaps this was a stopgap effort to save the train by keeping Illinois and Iowa travelers bound for the Pacific Northwest on Milwaukee rails rather than changing to UP's Portland Limited or Continental Limited at Omaha. Whatever the reasoning, the resulting rerouting and rescheduling caused the Columbian and Olympian to be combined west of Aberdeen. However, to maintain its mail contract as well as twice-daily service between Spokane and Butte, Milwaukee expanded the consist of unnamed trains 5 and 6 between Minneapolis and Aberdeen and extended trains 7 and 8, the Seattle/Tacoma–Spokane Washington, beyond Spokane to Butte. This also allowed for continued twice-daily service between those two points. Both trains operated with coaches and tourist sleepers, but little else in the way of amenities. Regardless, the revised service failed to improve the company's financial fortunes and the Columbian was discontinued May 3, 1931, after only three months on its new routing.



Milwaukee Road F-6-class Hudson (4-6-4 wheel arrangement) No. 6405 heads up a six-hour-late westbound Olympian at Minneapolis station on May 10, 1937. Extensive delays on Chicago–Seattle passenger trains are nothing new, but to be this late this early in the trip out of Chicago is somewhat of an anomaly. This situation may reflect a long-term problem of the Milwaukee Road main line between Milwaukee and Portage, Wis., which to this day suffers from springtime flooding in the Reedsville Marsh area. milwaukee road historical association collection

The postwar *Olympian Hiawatha*



Being tourist-oriented trains, the Olympian and Columbian offered “tourist” sleepers—essentially section sleepers with sections sold at an economy rate. Here a “news butcher” offers snacks and beverages to a tourist-class patron in 1941. Frank Williams/Pullman company; MRHA collection



The Olympian Hiawatha is shown in October 1956 near Eagle Nest Tunnel, Mont. This scene, taken by the railroad, was recorded during the transition years—1955–58—of Milwaukee Road’s switch from orange-and-maroon passenger colors to the Union Pacific-inspired yellow and gray with red trim. Though the Olympian Hi was often saluted as the best of the Chicago–Pacific Northwest postwar streamliners—including Great Northern’s *Empire Builder* and Northern Pacific’s *North Coast Limited*—both in terms of equipment and scenery, its fall from grace was early (1961) and was a chilling omen of Milwaukee’s Lines West operations as a whole. Art Danz collection

Following the end of hostilities in 1945, the Milwaukee wasted no time setting the stage for yet another “new” version of the Olympian, this time a streamliner to be called the Olympian Hiawatha. Initial preparations included laying new, heavier rail and updating its signal system, including ABS (automatic block signaling) and CTC (centralized traffic control) on its more heavily trafficked lines. The company had something of an advantage over its

competitors regarding the acquisition of new rolling stock in that much of it was ordered from its own West Milwaukee shops. This allowed Milwaukee to escape waiting in long lines at Pullman, Budd, and American Car & Foundry, all of which were swamped with wartime and postwar orders for new equipment.

An April 1946 article in *Railway Age* proclaimed that the Milwaukee had ordered a number of new cars from Milwaukee Shops, including six each of mail-express, baggage-dormitories, 40-seat diners and lounges, plus 24 52-seat coaches, six Falls-series 8 section-24 coach seat “women and children’s cars” (eliminated after about a year) and 12 Mount-series 14 section Touralux sleepers. In addition, ten 10-6 sleepers and six 8 bedroom-lounge-observation cars were ordered from Pullman-Standard. However, the new equipment from P-S did not arrive until late 1948, so that when the new Olympian Hiawatha entered service on June 29, 1947, its consist included new Shops-built Touralux sleepers, coaches, diners, “lunch-lounges,” mail-express cars and baggage-dormitories, but with heavyweight sleepers and observations left over from the prewar roster.



An artist's rendering of the Fairbanks-Morse Erie-built locomotives that Milwaukee Road ordered for Olympian Hiawatha service. Peter Riese



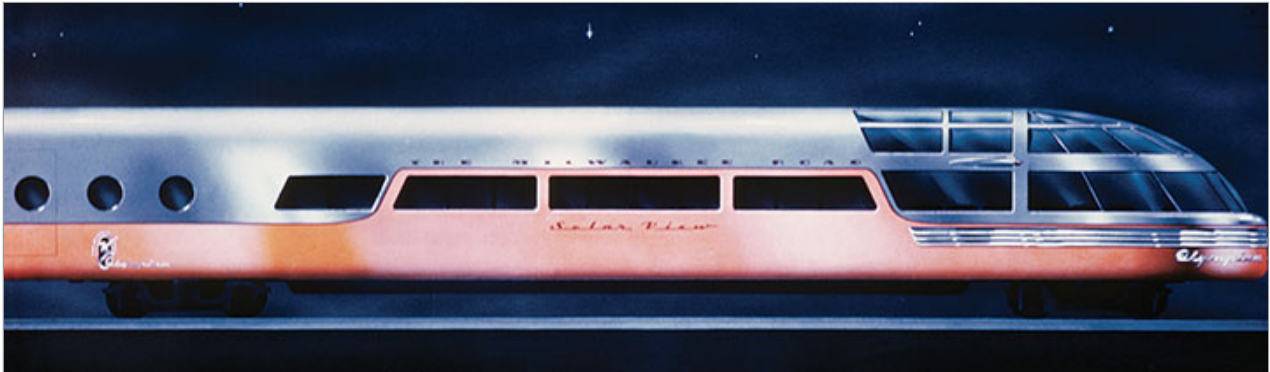
It's 7:50am at Seattle's Union Station in this scene from circa 1954. The westbound Columbian, reinstated upon the introduction of the new Olympian Hiawatha in 1947 after having been discontinued in 1933, has arrived from Chicago and shortly will depart the depot on the last lap of its journey to Tacoma. The brick tower at left is that of King Street Station, today used by Amtrak. Bipolar E-2, which today stands restored at the Museum of Transportation at St. Louis, will tow the train backward to Tacoma. Wade Stevenson, Milwaukee Road Historical society collection



A General Electric bipolar lifts the Olympian over Snoqualmie Pass in the 1920. Built in 1918, Milwaukee's five articulated bipolars were assigned to the Coast Division electrification, which extended between Tacoma/Seattle and Othello, Wash., 216 miles. These locomotives were gearless, their traction motors directly mounted on the driving wheels, making the units virtually noiseless. Milwaukee Road, Milwaukee Road Historical Association collection

New motive power was acquired as well, in the form of seven 6,000-hp. Fairbanks-Morse locomotives (seven A-B-A combinations). Initially these ran all the way through from Chicago to Tacoma, but were cut back to Chicago–Harlowton during the coal strike of 1949 to reduce the company's reliance on steam power at the east end of the system. The train then moved behind box-cab electric locomotives between Harlowton and Avery. Steam took over in “The [non-electrified] Gap” between Avery and Othello, at which point electric bipolar electric power once again was on the point for the remainder of the run to Seattle/Tacoma. In 1950 steam was replaced in The Gap by A-B-A combinations of EMD FP7A-F7B-FP7A units. These were replaced in 1954 by

boiler-equipped GP9s. Finally, in mid-1959, E9A-F7B-FP7A combinations began handling the train all the way from Minneapolis to Tacoma. The Olympian Hiawatha ran on a 45-hour schedule, competitive with the Great Northern's *Empire Builder* and the Northern Pacific's *North Coast Limited*.



Designer Brooks Stevens (1911–1995) provided this concept drawing proposing the outward appearance of new, boldly futuristic “Skytop” observation cars for the Olympian Hiawatha. Pullman-Standard delivered Skytop sleepers that closely followed the glassed-in car end as shown here, but forward from that, the cars were pretty much traditional P-S lightweight design. White River Productions collection



The more well-to-do might travel in a double-bedroom, such as this Olympian passenger is doing in 1937. With high-tech equipment like the typewriter, this man could work en route. Frank Williams/Pullman company; MRHA collection

At the same time the new Olympian Hiawatha took to the rails, the Columbian, which had been an early casualty of the Depression, came out of retirement to resume its career as second banana to the Olympian Hiawatha, operating with what had been the consist of the “old” Olympian. As before, the Olympian was the better-equipped train, especially after the ten new 10 roomette-6 double bedroom Lake-series sleepers arrived from Pullman-Standard in October and November 1948. The 10-6 cars were more or less off-the-rack sleepers, but the six Skytop Creek-series 8 double bedroom-19 seat lounge-observation cars arriving at the same time were anything but.



The interior of the lounge section of the Olympian Hi's Skytop sleeper. jim neubauer, white river productions collection.

Unique to The Milwaukee Road when they were built, the Skytop lounges were the Olympian Hiawatha's signature cars, giving riders a view of the passing scenery not available since the retirement of the open-air cars that

were mothballed at the beginning of World War II. A typical Olympian Hiawatha consist from the late 1940s would have included an express-dormitory car; four coaches; a “lunch-lounge” car; a 40-seat full-service diner; a 14-section Touralux economy sleeper; a 10-6 Lake-series sleeper; and a Skytop lounge-sleeper (lounge space reserved for first-class passengers). Of course, additional cars were added during the heavy summertime travel season.



The new type of bedroom on the Olympian HIAWATHA has circulating icewater and a fully enclosed lavatory.

Luxurious Bedrooms in the **Skytop Lounge car**

The distinctive signature of a great train, this unique car is exciting to look at, delightful to ride in. The smoothly rounded rear end illustrated on the back cover, is almost wholly enclosed in glare and heat-resistant glass to provide a perfect observation room for crest-to-canyon scenic views of a mountain wonderland. With ample room for twenty passengers, the Skytop Lounge is reserved for those holding space in the private-room sleeping cars.

Double bedrooms on the Olympian HIAWATHA conform to one of the two floor plans illustrated in the diagram. Each style has two large, comfortable berths with foam rubber mattresses. There is a full length clothes closet and individual heating, lighting and air conditioning controls. The decorative scheme is in beige and rust or light green.



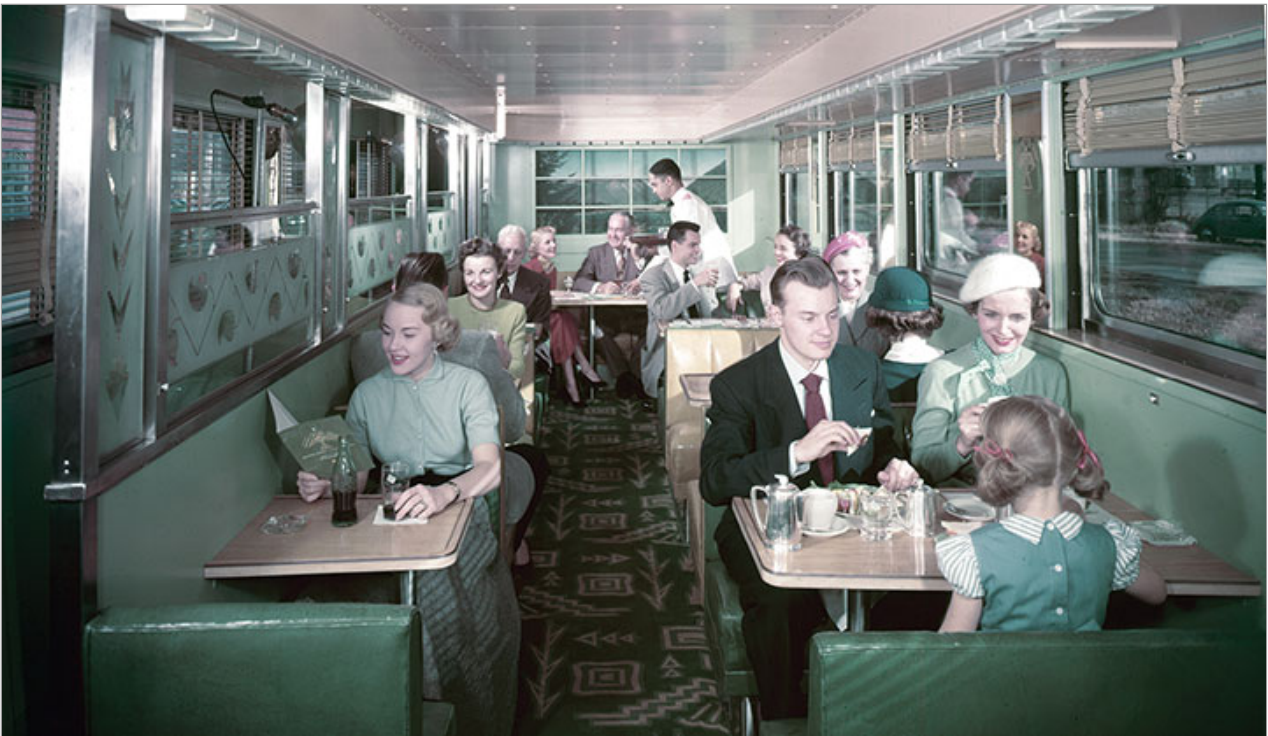
A promotional brochure for the new train included a floor plan of the Skytop sleepers. Kevin J. Holland collection



For the Olympian's first 18 months of operation, the train carried heavyweight Pullman sleeper-lounge observation cars, as "placeholders" for the Skytop sleepers that were still under construction at Pullman-Standard owing to the boom in postwar car orders. One of the cars is shown trailing the eastbound Olympian Hiawatha at Milwaukee on July 16, 1948. Jim Scribbins, Milwaukee Road Historical Association collection

Compared to the Olympian Hi, the Columbian was a much more modest affair. In addition to a Railway Post Office and two express cars (one for Seattle and one for Tacoma), trains 17/18 included a dormitory-coach; two or three pre-war lightweight coaches; a 40-seat diner; a mix of sleepers (heavyweight and Touralux), and a Pullman-owned heavyweight buffet-lounge-solarium observation. With some regularity the Columbian also handled an additional heavyweight express car carrying "classified" cargo that originated at Oak Ridge, Tenn., and was bound for the Hanford, Wash., Nuclear Facility. As opposed to the 45-hour carding for the Olympian Hi, the Columbian covered the distance in a more leisurely 61 hours and 10 minutes.

The Super Domes



In 1952, the new Super Dome lounge cars replaced the Tip Top Tap lounge cars on the Olympian Hiawatha, which bumped them into Columbian service. The Super Domes provided lounge and buffet service on the lower level, as shown in this squeaky clean publicity photo of the era. Note the not-well-hidden floodlamp at upper left. milwaukee road photo, milwaukee road historical association collection

In December 1952 Milwaukee took delivery of ten full-length dome cars, Nos. 50–59 (surprisingly, these cars were never individually named, but were referred to collectively as “Super Domes”). Once on the property, six were assigned to the Olympian and four to the Chicago–Minneapolis Morning and Afternoon Hiawathas. The Super Domes remained part of the Olympian’s consist for its entire life; however, none ever ran as part of the Columbian, a further indication of that train’s down-market status.

As built, the Super Domes seated 68 on the upper level and 28 below decks in a buffet-lounge section. The dome section was accessible by a staircase at either end of the car. Interior décor included turquoise seats, dark blue tile below the seats, and light blue-and-white tile in the center aisle. The lower

lounge area was decorated in light green and tan and accented with gold-tinted mirrors. The booth seats were upholstered variously in green or gold leather.



The Olympian Hi featured dining cars with an unusual “staggered” seating arrangement for 40, providing considerably more room than in more traditional diners. Aside from the regular sleepers and the Skytop sleepers, all new, lightweight rolling stock for the Olympian Hiawathas was built at The Milwaukee Road’s Milwaukee Shops. Milwaukee Road photo, Milwaukee Road Historical Association collection



Now that's a reclining seat! All of Milwaukee Road's lightweight coaches were built at its own shops. The Olympian Hi legrest coaches featured famous "Sleepy Hollow" seating from Heywood-Wakefield Company. Milwaukee Road photo, Milwaukee Road Historical Association collection

At 112 tons, the Super Domes were among the heaviest passenger cars ever built and rode on six-wheel trucks from General Steel Casting. Because of the large area under glass, each car carried a 16-ton air-conditioning unit, which was roughly double that required by a conventional car. Once in service, the Super Domes, which cost an eye-popping \$320,000 each, replaced the original flat-top lounges (which were then reassigned to more humdrum duties back east). As a footnote, tragedy overtook Super Dome 50 on May 31, 1953, when it was wrecked and incinerated in a derailment near Superior, Mont. A

replacement car 50 was subsequently built using some salvaged parts, restoring the fleet to its original complement of ten.

Milwaukee invested considerable effort in promoting the Super Domes, which were open to both coach and first-class passengers. Prior to entering service on their assigned routes, the cars toured the system, turning up in such diverse locations as Sioux Falls, Des Moines, Kansas City, Green Bay, Chicago, and Milwaukee. Despite their impressive dimensions and appearance, however, the Super Domes were at best a mixed success. On the one hand, they provided a much better view of the spectacular mountain scenery the Olympian traversed. On the other, they reportedly were somewhat rough-riding, and the forward view was limited, due to the height of the forward bulkhead on the upper level.

Yellow and gray and decline

The year 1955 brought a major change to Milwaukee's passenger operations. In October, Union Pacific dissolved its 75-year-old agreement with the Chicago & North Western and shifted its renowned City fleet of passenger trains to The Milwaukee Road for the portion of the run between Chicago and Omaha. (Though publicly stung by the change, the North Western was quietly happy to see the City fleet go, regarding it as an unaffordable expense at a time when the company could ill afford it.) For its part, the Milwaukee was gratified by the expression of confidence shown by the UP toward it, thinking that the prestige would be a benefit unto itself and that it might also bring a more favorable division of through traffic from the Omaha gateway. Interestingly, the Southern Pacific, UP's other partner in the Cities operation, was less than impressed with the Milwaukee. In a telegram, SP agent D. J. McGanney informed President Donald Russell that he had checked out the Olympian Hiawatha in Chicago and found it a "poor example" of a transcontinental passenger train. His gripes included dirty windows, soiled upholstery, no legrest seating, and so-so service in the diner. Sniffed the SP man, "All in all, it is not a very pretty picture."

Still, Milwaukee did its best. With the arrival of the City fleet, Milwaukee sailed in for 12 new E9A and six E9B locomotives (some of which would eventually turn up on the point of the Olympian). Under the terms of the agreement, Milwaukee was also obliged to repaint the equipment assigned to the Cities operation into UP Armour yellow and harbor mist gray.

(Interestingly, neither the North Western, the Southern Pacific nor the Wabash, UP's other Cities fleet partners were required to repaint their motive power, though all contributed passenger cars painted in UP yellow and gray.) Initially, this involved only a handful of cars; however, Milwaukee was soon to discover that the UP hues were more durable and easier to maintain than its traditional orange and maroon, and so in short order just about its entire fleet was repainted, to the dismay of many of its fans.

Other changes were already underway, and not for the good. Beginning in 1953, the Columbian, which was suffering from a downturn in its mail and express volume as well as a decline in ridership, began to undergo a state-by-state sequence of cutbacks. As a first step, effective with the Sept. 27 timetable, Trains 17 and 18 were combined with trains 1 and 4, the Pioneer Limited between Minneapolis and Chicago, effectively killing the train as a separate operation in Illinois and Wisconsin. However, the coaches and Touralux sleeper continued running through. In January 1955 Columbian service was discontinued outright west of Avery, Idaho (getting the train out of the state of Washington). At the same time, it became nameless in the timetable. On March 7 it was cut back a second time, to Marmarth, N. Dak. (getting out of Idaho and Montana), and lost its through cars to Chicago via the Pioneer Limited combination. On May 21 it was shaved yet again, this time west of Aberdeen, S. Dak. (vacating North Dakota in the process). Two years later, time ran out for good. On Feb. 18, 1957, it was cut back out of South Dakota to Minneapolis–Ortonville, Minn., and was finally discontinued altogether on April 1, leaving the Olympian as the last passenger train on the route.



In this circa 1957 scene, an all-yellow westbound Olympian Hi stands ready to depart Othello, Wash., having traded its E-units for box-cab set E-23. The E-23 and sister set E-22 were modernized for passenger service in 1953 by Tacoma Shops, which reprofiled them with a more-streamlined look. When the CMStP&P began handling Union Pacific's Overland Route passenger trains between Omaha and Chicago in October 1955, the Milwaukee provided some of its locomotives and rolling stock to the equipment pool; the UP-MILW agreement required that the Milwaukee's pool cars be painted to match UP's yellow/gray livery. Eventually, the Milwaukee decided that the UP scheme was easier to maintain, cheaper to apply, and didn't show road grime as much as orange and maroon, leading the railroad to begin repainting all its passenger equipment. wade stevenson, milwaukee road historical association collection

Meantime, the Olympian Hi was having troubles of its own, and, in fact began traveling down the same path as the Columbian. Beginning Feb. 18, 1957, it was combined with the Afternoon Hiawatha between Chicago and Minneapolis, and with the Morning Hiawatha in the reverse direction, leaving it as a stand-alone operation west of Minneapolis only. The consist of Nos. 15

and 16, however, remained intact, and still included coaches, Super Dome lounge-cafe, 40-seat diner, Touralux sleeper, 10-6 Lake-series sleeper, and a Skytop double bedroom-lounge-observation. Upon departure from Minneapolis eastbound or Chicago westbound, except for head-end equipment, the Olympian was simply attached intact onto the appropriate Hiawatha.



In its second incarnation, the eastbound Columbian is shown greeting the morning sun in the Bad Lands as it passes under U.S. 12 near Marmarth, S. Dak. It's circa 1954, and the Columbian is nearing the end of its second life. It's down to an FP7/F7B pulling an RPO-express car, two express/baggage cars, and only two coaches, its Tip Top Tap grill-lounge and tourist sleepers having recently been removed. Passengers now had to take their meals at the railroad-operated Interstate depot restaurants.

wade stevenson, milwaukee road historical association collection

Beginning in 1958, Milwaukee eliminated intermediate-class fares applicable to the Touralux cars, meaning that sleeper accommodations could be secured for the price of a coach ticket plus a sleeping-car space charge. The idea was to make sleeping-car travel available at a rock-bottom price, thereby attracting additional business. The move was also made to compete with Northern Pacific, which had introduced “Slumbercoaches” (which, despite the name, were economy sleeping cars) on its competing *North Coast Limited*. Also available were reduced “Family Plan” fares and one-price prepaid meal tickets, which covered the cost of 11 meals enroute for \$16.05, about the cost of dinner in an Amtrak diner today (though obviously at much-inflated dollars).

Further changes were in the offing. In a cost-cutting move, in March 1959 the Skytop double bedroom-lounges were withdrawn, although the trains were still shown in public timetables as having Skytop accommodations available. However, these were the Skytop parlor cars assigned to the Morning and Afternoon Hiawathas with which the Olympian Hi ran in combination, so Skytop lounge seating was only available between Chicago and Minneapolis. Happily, the Creek-series Skytop lounge-sleepers did return west of Minneapolis for the summer season, when vacation travel picked up again.

None of these incentives proved effective, however. The train that once earned better than \$2 per mile was now losing almost the same amount, or an annualized \$2 million on a direct-cost basis. And so on Dec. 6, 1960, the Milwaukee petitioned the Interstate Commerce Commission for permission to discontinue trains 15/16, effective Jan. 8, 1961. Perhaps the company’s conscience was eased a bit by the fact that it did offer an alternative service between Chicago and the Pacific Northwest via its joint City of Portland operation, or more likely, it didn’t matter in the face of hard economic reality. In any event, the ICC as was its custom dithered a bit and then decided that the train could be discontinued west of Butte, but that sleeper and dining-car service would have to remain available.

Epilogue



The No. 9 A-B-A set of Fairbanks-Morse Erie-builts (“Erie-built” because they were assembled at General Electric’s locomotive facility in Erie, Pa., rather than F-M’s plant in Beloit, Wis.) passenger diesels are shown on the westbound Olympian at Butte, Mont., circa late April 1947 about two months before the Olympian Hiawatha was inaugurated. At this time, heavyweight cars still populated Nos. 15 and 16; the new diesels were running for break-in and crew familiarization purposes. Initially, Milwaukee Road’s plan was to assign its Erie-builts to Olympian Hi service all the way between the Twin Cities and Tacoma, running through electrified territory without a locomotive change—an arrangement that was relatively short-lived. wade stevenson, milwaukee road historical association collection

The last Olympian Hiawathas departed from Tacoma and Chicago on May 22, 1961. The next day they were replaced by nameless Minneapolis–Butte (actually Deer Lodge, where they were serviced and turned) trains 15/16. Although the Chicago through cars were abolished, westbound train 15 still

connected with both the Morning and Afternoon Hiawathas, though the Morning Hi connection involved a two-and-a-half-hour layover. Meanwhile, train 16 connected with the eastbound Morning Hi as well as mail and express train 58, which departed a short time later. Public timetables of the period show a consist that included coaches, a café car and a Touralux sleeper; no Super Dome (these were reassigned briefly to the Cities streamliner pool) and no Skytop. Eventually all the surplus Olympian feature cars were sold to the Canadian National.

From 1962 on, the inevitable took its course. On Jan. 31, 1964, the western terminus was cut back to Aberdeen, and with the end of overnight service came the end of sleeper and dining service, leaving trains 15 and 16 coach-only and running on a graveyard-shift carding. The end came on April 16, 1969, when the trains made their final trips.



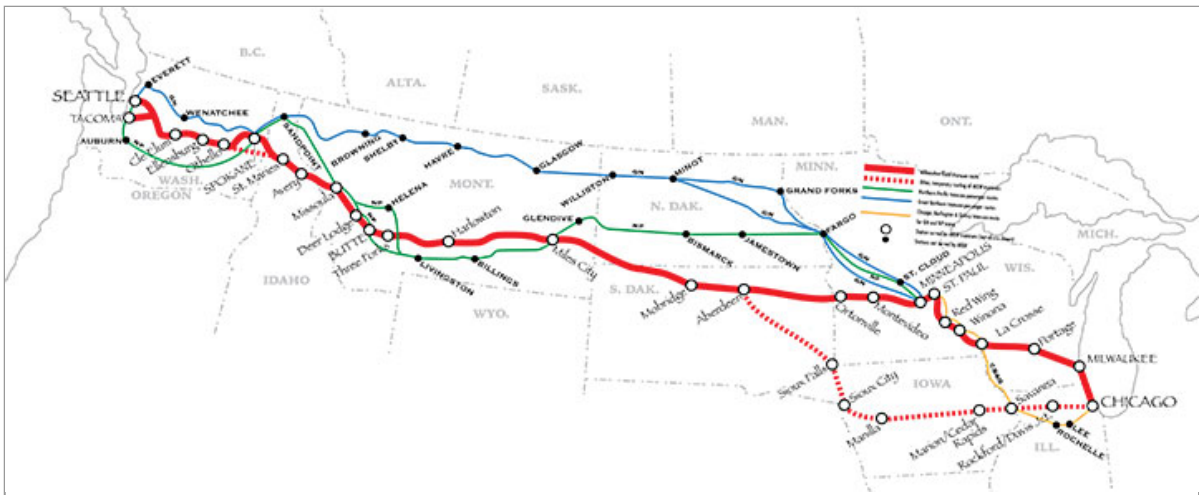
The Olympian Hi is shown at its pinnacle circa 1953 after the Super Domes came on line in 1952 and before the UP-inspired yellow-and-gray livery began creeping in. With the Cascade Range as a backdrop, eastbound No. 15 streams past the substation at Cle Elum, Wash., behind a bipolar. Trailing are a baggage-express car, two coaches, Super Dome lounge, diner, three sleepers, and Pullman Skytop lounge sleeper Coffee Creek. Wade Stevenson, Milwaukee Road Historical Association collection

With thanks to James Murrie, Otto P. Dobnick, Art Jacobsen, and the Milwaukee Road Historical Association for their assistance.

By Milwaukee Road to the Pacific Northwest




Behind a “Little Joe” electric, the eastbound Olympian Hi exits Deer Creek Tunnel in Montana’s Sixteen Mile Canyon. The presence of a Super Dome in the consist and the still-matching orange-and-maroon livery throughout the train dates this scene between 1952 and 1956. milwaukee road photo, milwaukee road historical association archives



map: White River Productions, Mike Schafer, Tom Hooper



Milwaukee Road's Pacific Extension main line bypassed Spokane, Wash., some 30 miles to the south, so initially Spokane passengers had to use Northern Pacific trains to/from Rosalia, Wash., to access CM&StP's flashy new transcontinental trains. When the Milwaukee completed its Plummer Junction (Wash.)–Spokane branch in 1913, it introduced the “Baby Olympian,” trains 215 and 216, on the branch to connect with Nos. 15 and 16 at Plummer. The following year, the Milwaukee entered into an agreement with the UP that allowed the



Milwaukee to operate its transcons through Spokane. Here at Spokane Union Station one morning circa 1953, Milwaukee Road 4-8-4 No. 267 is in the depot with the eastbound Columbian, about ten minutes late at this moment, judging by the clock on the Spokane, Portland & Seattle/Great Northern depot clock tower in the distance. Number 18 is sharing the sheds with a very late—more than seven hours—westbound Olympian Hi. wade stevenson, milwaukee road historical association collection