

Santa Fe All the Way

by M.E. Singer

Remembering the *Super Chief* in its final decade of consistent, excellent service



Those of us born as Baby Boomers in the 1940s could not help being saturated in every aspect of life by the familiar "Warbonnet" paint scheme and Southwest Indian motifs projected by Santa Fe Railway.

In the post-World War II era, Lionel introduced O27 and O-gauge replicas of the *Super Chief*. Santa Fe was a staple for S-gauge American Flyer trains, and later, to this day, HO productions. Growing up in Chicago, one witnessed Santa Fe advertising nightly on the CBS 10:00PM news with anchor Fahey Flynn and weatherman P.J. Hoff. The commercials featured speeding *Chiefs*, narrated by a smooth pitchman. The jingle accompanying the commercials

was, "It's fun to ride the train today when the train you ride is Santa Fe. Santa Fe all the way." The emphasis was usually on the posh, extra-fare *Super Chief*. Fortunately, I would experience Santa Fe's *Super Chief* a number of times, as well as the very early Amtrak version that was run by Santa Fe at Amtrak's behest, upholding Santa Fe's traditions.

Trip 1, July 1962: Chicago-Williams Jct., Ariz.

My first opportunity to ride the *Super Chief* finally arrived in summer 1962, when my mum, a Chicago public school teacher, and her older sister decided to

take a 14-day Cartan Tour to the Grand Canyon, San Francisco, Yosemite, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas, via train. Those were the days when bundled tours, including meals, lodging, bus transfers, and sightseeing, were still popular for touring the West, and were particularly appealing to unescorted women. Frankly, I was more excited to finally travel on the *Super Chief* than having an entire day in Disneyland.

Upon arrival on a sultry evening, Chicago's Dearborn Station, encased with diesel fumes, evidenced a multiple line-up of sleek, silver Santa Fe trains as far as the eye could see, including the *Texas Chief*, *El Capitan*, and *Super Chief*. Some rail writer have opined

Santa Fe Train 17, the westbound *Super Chief/El Capitan*, chases the setting sun at Edelstein, Ill., in 1970.
JIM BOYD; KEVIN E. O'LY COLLECTION | DRUMHEAD SIGN INSET, ROGER PUTA

that the *Super Chief* was not the last all-Pullman streamliner. I beg to differ. New York Central's *20th Century Limited* added coaches in 1958 and Sleepercoaches in 1961. Baltimore & Ohio's *Capitol Limited* combined in 1958 with its running mate, the *Columbian*, while PRR's *Broadway Limited* lost its status and name in 1967 when it was combined with the *General*. Illinois Central's *Panama Limited* added a coach section called the *Magnolia Star* in 1967.

Only Santa Fe maintained the exclusivity of its dining and lounge services for only *Super Chief* Pullman passengers, even when combined, off-season, with the *El Capitan* starting in 1958. The key to this all-first-class distinction was

always the separate dining and feature cars, emphasized by the sign in the vestibule between the sections stating: "All First Class Cars Ahead."

With respect to the longstanding hands-on, pro-passenger commitment of Santa Fe management, when the baton was passed between CEOs from Ernest Marsh to John S. Reed in 1966, Santa Fe already exuded an understanding of how to maintain, market, and build upon its *Chiefs* branding in advertising and distinctive train brochures.

As well, Santa Fe appreciated how to distinctively segment its market beyond the combining of the *Super* and *El Cap* during the off-season, by adding a sep-

arate coach section to the all-Pullman *Super Chief* during the high summer season between June and September. This coach section of four 44-seat chair cars, with their own full dining and lounge cars, ran forward of the *Super Chief*'s first class section, and had its own special fare surcharge. In contrast, Union Pacific operated separate coach and Pullman sections of the *City of Los Angeles* during summer and winter holiday seasons, but coach passengers on the *Challenger* were relegated to a coffee shop/lounge car, without any attempt to build loyalty by providing a full diner with white linen service, or a separate lounge car — on a much longer schedule.

As passenger trains operated then on Daylight Saving Time (until 1966, when times were standardized), that meant our departure was actually at 7:30PM, not the 6:30PM time listed in the timetable. According to operating procedures, the *El Capitan* departed at 7:30, with the *Super* following 10 minutes later. The trains would meet the next morning at La Junta, Colo., where the *Super* would take the lead from there into Los Angeles. At La Junta, I walked our consist until the last sleeper, where I came upon the drumhead announcing I was on the *Super Chief*.

Not aware how the dining service could possibly be more improved when I later made my travel via Pullman on the *Super*, I never understood why the fried chicken dinner, breakfast of eggs and bacon, and the hamburger lunch could taste so much better looking out the dining car window as we sped en route to our first destination, the Grand Canyon. As the *Star Trek* television character Mr. Spock would say four years later, "Fascinating."

The second evening outbound from Chicago, I talked my mum into taking a risk by going through the Pullman section to the Pleasure Dome lounge, where we took our seats upstairs to admire the stars of a perfectly clear night. Unfortunately, the Pullman conductor spotted us and politely inquired, "Are you folks Pullman passengers?" With that challenge, we slunk back to our coach to finish the trip until Williams Junction was called out.

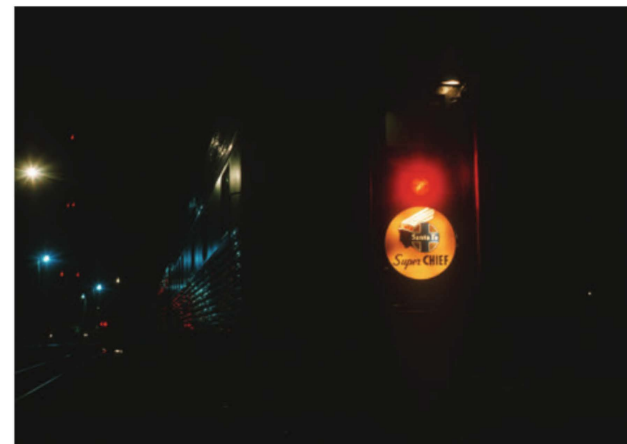
Trip 2, August 1966: Los Angeles–Chicago

Perhaps due to the relief of my having survived extensive abdominal surgery earlier that year, my dad consented for my mum and me to travel back to Chicago on the "real" *Super Chief* days after he flew back to Chicago to tend to his factory. I had already researched and placed our request for a double bedroom in the 11-bedroom cars rebuilt from 24-duplex roomette cars in 1964. For some inane reason I do not now remember, the head bell captain at

TOP The westbound *El Capitan* and *Super Chief* pass at La Junta, Colo., in May 1965. From here, the two trains will run a few minutes apart, with the *Super Chief* leading, all the way to Los Angeles. Delivered by Pullman-Standard in 1947 as 24-duplex-roomette sleepers, Santa Fe's dozen *Indian-series* cars were rebuilt in 1964 with 11 double bedrooms, keeping their original names. **JIM NEUBAUER; KEVIN EUDALY COLLECTION**

RIGHT Two new FP45s have the combined westbound *Super Chief/El Capitan* in tow at Wootton, Colo., on Santa Fe's line over Raton Pass in 1968. **JIM ASPLUND; KEVIN EUDALY COLLECTION**

FAR RIGHT A glowing signature, at Galesburg, Ill. **ALAN BRADLEY; KEVIN EUDALY COLLECTION**





ABOVE Service with a smile on the lower level of the *Super Chief's* Pleasure Dome car in March 1971. HERMAN PAGE; KEVIN EGADLY COLLECTION

our Beverly Hills hotel kept incessantly pushing alternative trains we could take back, apparently unaware of the impact of the recently imposed national airline strike.

As I would claim in future correspondence to friends and writers on rail affairs, summer 1966 should be referred to as "the last hurrah for the American passenger train," due to the many significantly expanded passenger trains created by the airline strike. I remember reading how Seaboard even restricted consists to 18 cars, so as not to overburden the dining and lounge cars.

With great glee and anticipation, my mum and I walked under the tracks of Los Angeles Union Passenger Terminal until we came upon the signs pointing to the *Super Chief*, and walked up the ramp and along our consist until ushered aboard by our friendly porter. I had convinced my mum to begin the trip with dinner upon departure, which we enjoyed as Train 18 eased out of LAUPT, leaving behind its running mate, the *El Capitan*, and a sad, eviscerated-looking Southern Pacific combined *Sunset Limited* and *Golden State*. After dinner we retreated to the Pleasure Dome to admire the stars east of Los Angeles, where my mum excitedly proclaimed this was her first trip in a Pullman, let alone the famous, extra-fare *Super Chief*. Due to the airline strike, five or six F-units pulled a consist of at least 10 Pullmans, the first class dining car and lounge, four or five coaches along with their own diner and lounge, plus a baggage car and mail car.

Trip 3, August 1972: Los Angeles-Chicago and back

Traveling during the peak month of summer more than a year into Amtrak, gone from the *Super Chief* was the seasonal coach section and the separate *El Capitan*. Traveling with my six-year-old nephew, I was headed for a meeting in Chicago, where I would drop him off with his grandparents. Having heard me speak so often about how fancy the *Super* was, he insisted on wearing a tie and dress shirt to board in Los Angeles.

Thankfully, Amtrak had not yet imposed its classless concept, so the *Super*

After enjoying a breakfast of Santa Fe's famous *Super Chief* French toast, we agreed to jump off at Albuquerque to walk off our meals and check out the curio shops. Later, I insisted mum enjoy her favorite cocktail, a Grasshopper, as we sped across New Mexico. Soon a waiter came through the Pleasure Dome playing his xylophone to announce, "First call for dinner, dining car forward." It's amazing how speed and great scenery can build up an appetite so quickly.

On arrival day, Train 18 was running about 90 minutes off the time card. The conductor came through the Pleasure Dome inquiring who was transferring east, in order to radio ahead to hold the *Capitol Limited*, *20th Century Limited*, and *Broadway Limited*. Amazingly, during that summer's airline strike we never experienced a dirty accommodation, soiled public areas, or any sold-out food or drink orders.

Chief still operated with a first class dining car and Pleasure Dome lounge and continued to offer the same superb menu selections as the former Santa Fe *Super Chief*. Meals were well crafted by the Santa Fe galley crew and overseen by the friendly steward. As this was still the pre-computer reservations era, I had to order in advance a room in the 11-double bedroom car. At Albuquerque, the Passenger Service Representative took my nephew up to the forward diesel to be invited into the cab. The next day, it was a different feeling arriving at Chicago Union Station instead of Dearborn Station, and being the only *Chief* in the depot.

Returning to Los Angeles a week later became a Pepto Bismol moment, as I was dragging a stuffed trunk and arrived less than five minutes before departure. I asked the gateman to hold the train, and as we rushed along the consist I saw crew looking out windows and Dutch doors to see why the train was being held. Someone from Hollywood, perhaps? As soon as we boarded, the train started to move and as we picked up speed I heard the melodic sound of the xylophone and the waiter announcing, "First call for dinner..."

We were already in the dining car as the train made its first stop at Joliet. I jumped off to quickly shoot some film, and when I returned I wondered what happened to my shrimp cocktail that started the Champagne Dinner. The galley crew was laughing as the steward brought me another shrimp cocktail, to replace the one my nephew had gobbled down. Our return to Los Angeles went too fast, and little did I know the *Super Chief* was about to disappear forever. It was also my last use of the Rail Travel Card, a credit card once offered by the railroads.

Trip 4, February 1973: Los Angeles-Chicago

This trip was to be my last journey on the *Super Chief*, and one that I had plotted to be my first transcontinental sleeper trip by continuing to Washington, D.C., on the *Broadway Limited*, then finishing the trip on a Metroliner from there to New Haven, Conn. I chose not to use the transcontinental sleeper that Amtrak had reintroduced via Kansas City and the *National Limited*.

Saving the Champagne Dinner for my second night out, to my horror I learned on the morning of the second day that the first class diner on our westbound counterpart had derailed the night before. The plan was to give our diner to the westbound train and pick up the re-railled diner for our breakfast and lunch on arrival day. Dinner was to be in a former *El Capitan* Hi-Level diner, featuring a coach menu. Making up for the

loss of a Champagne Dinner, I joined the party environment in the Turquoise Room until the wee hours. As I was slow to rise, the train had already departed Joliet, less than 40 miles remaining, yet the steward graciously had the fires relit in the galley to cook me a burger and fries. Upon arrival in Chicago I noticed we had been pulled by several Santa Fe F45 freight units in their familiar blue and yellow. Everything was changing.

Final Thoughts

Until the end of most privately operated intercity passenger trains with the introduction of Amtrak in 1971, Santa Fe's consistent, high-quality operation of the *Super Chief* without question set the benchmark for other passenger trains in America.

I could not disagree with John S. Reed, Santa Fe's CEO, when he withdrew permission for Amtrak to use the *Super Chief* and *Texas Chief* names on March 7, 1974, due to Amtrak not meeting the standards associated with those Santa Fe names. The *Super Chief* became the *Southwest Limited* and the *Texas Chief* became the *Lone Star*. It was not until after the introduction of Superliner equipment that Santa Fe allowed the train to be called *Southwest Chief*, effective with the October 1984 timetable change. (The *Lone Star* had already been discontinued by that time.)

Beyond decorating my office walls with *Super Chief* framed menus, bar menus, and photos, as well as having an actual *Super Chief* drumhead from the late 1930s, I relied on my Santa Fe



ABOVE The last Santa Fe *Super Chief*, about to depart Chicago's Dearborn Station on April 30, 1971, the eve of Amtrak. Starting the next day, Amtrak's *Super Chief* and *Texas Chief* will call at Union Station. KEVIN EGADLY COLLECTION

knowledge and experience to request oysters be served at my hangout in Chicago, Joe's Seafood.

I discussed with Richard Mellman, owner and developer of the Lettuce Entertain You restaurant group, how Santa Fe appealed with its marketing efforts to segment and brand the *Super Chief* to stand out from its other trains

and those of competing railroads, citing oysters as an example. Later, voila, oysters appeared on the bar menu and were wildly received. From that point forward, my first martini would toast Santa Fe, the *Super Chief*, and former CEO John Reed for steadfastly maintaining the traditions of this premier train, the *Super Chief*. 🍷

BELOW Amtrak's eastbound *National Limited* (at left, behind a former Penn Central E8A) and *Super Chief*, being readied for departure from Kansas City Union Station in June 1973. JIM ASPLUND; KEVIN EGADLY COLLECTION

