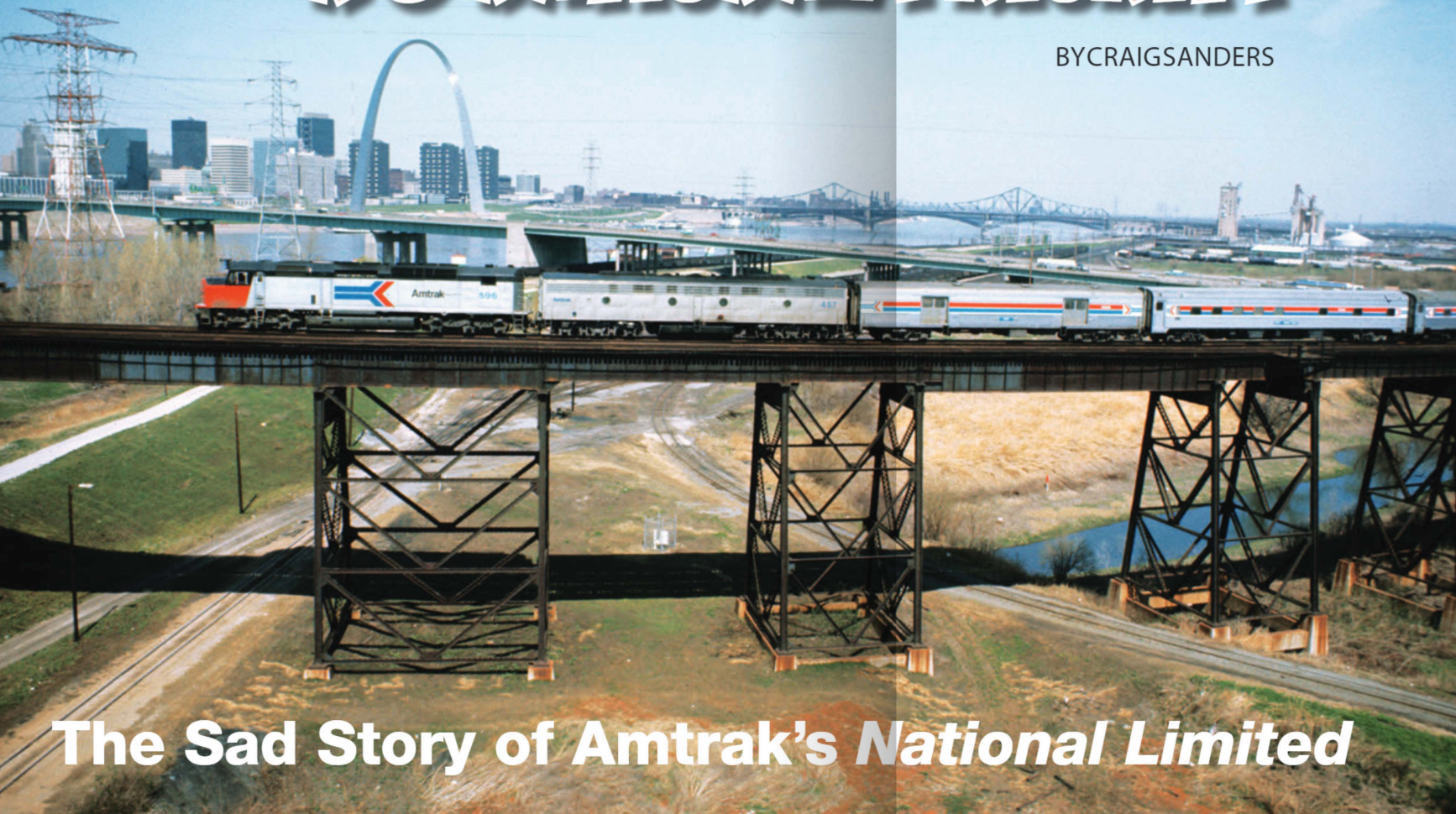


NO NATIONAL PRIORITY

BY CRAIG SANDERS



The Sad Story of Amtrak's *National Limited*

Amtrak's National Limited should have been a booming success. Its eastern terminus was New York City, the nation's largest urban region and a hub of rail routes serving the Atlantic Seaboard. Trains 30 and 31 served 10 urban centers, including the capitals of five states, and crossed four Amtrak routes west of Pittsburgh. But whatever

advantages it had were more than offset by bad track, high fares, chronic late running, and a market that was nearly comatose when Amtrak took over. The National Limited began its final trips on Sept. 30, 1979, a victim of a massive Amtrak route restructuring that left Columbus and Dayton, Ohio, without rail passenger service.

Declining fortunes

The Pennsylvania Railroad and its successor Penn Central had since the middle 1960s actively sought to kill the remnants of Pennsy's Blue Ribbon Fleet between New York and St. Louis. By 1969, the Interstate Commerce Commission described these trains as dilapidated, dirty, consistently late, and lacking such basic comforts as

working restrooms, water coolers, reclining seats, and operable heating and air-conditioning. Yet the Commission gave Penn Central a pass, saying the wretched conditions were a result of the company's shaky financial health.

Although PC kept seeking regulatory approval to end its remaining four trains serving St. Louis, it was rebuffed by the

ICC and the courts. In the timetable, the "Spirit of St. Louis," appeared to offer good service, with a sleeping car, one to three coaches, a lounge that operated the length of the route, and a dining car between New York and Indianapolis. But patronage became progressively smaller as the Spirit made its way west, slumping to an average of 20 passengers dis-

LEFT: Go! to Kansas City, the westbound *National Limited* is in East St. Louis, Ill., on a bright late morning in April 1976 making the climb up to MacArthur Bridge to cross the Mississippi into St. Louis (background). Once out of St. Louis Union Station, the train will be on the last leg of its journey to Kansas City. MIKE SCHAFER

embarking in St. Louis and 17 boarding there to go east.

Breaking the wall again

The U.S. Department of Transportation on Nov. 30, 1970, named St. Louis-Washington as one of Amtrak's initial routes, later combining it with a New York-Kansas City route. The thinking was to offer a bypass of Chicago, which was to become the hub of Amtrak operations in the Midwest. Secretary of Transportation John A. Volpe recommended using the former Pennsylvania Railroad route.

Amtrak's incorporators sought to break the St. Louis "wall" by combining trains of Penn Central and Missouri Pacific. There was precedent for this. On July 7, 1946, Pennsy and MoPac launched the Sunshine Special, a New York-Texas through train that became the first to operate through St. Louis. That arrangement lasted less than two years.

To create the New York-Kansas City route, Amtrak combined the westbound "Spirit of St. Louis" with Missouri Pacific's unnamed train 15 from St. Louis to Kansas City. The former MoPac Missouri River Eagle was consolidated with the eastbound "Spirit of St. Louis", with the Spirit name applied to the entire route in Amtrak's first two 1971 timetables.

Initially, the Washington cars were conveyed via connecting trains at Harrisburg, Pa. Amtrak's first timetable also had the "Spirit of St. Louis" combining with the Chicago-New York Broadway Limited between New York and Pittsburgh. The pair began separating at Harrisburg on July 12, 1971, and east of there on April 30, 1972. Effective with the November 14, 1971, timetable, the New York/Washington-Kansas City train had a new name: National Limited.

Only cosmetic changes

In pre-Amtrak days, the National Limited had been Baltimore & Ohio's premier St. Louis-Washington/Baltimore train. It had ceased operating west of Cincinnati on September 7, 1965, when St. Louis-Washington/Baltimore cars began operating via an interchange in the Queen City with Chesapeake & Ohio's George Washington.

The idea behind reviving the National Limited name was to avoid the negative reputation the "Spirit of St. Louis" had developed under Penn Central management. The National Limited name also



conjured something grander. On June 11, 1972, the National Limited began carrying New York-Los Angeles through sleepers and coaches that were conveyed west of Kansas City by the Chief, a little-known summer-only train that operated briefly between Chicago and Los Angeles.

It looked good in the timetable, but in practice Amtrak's National Limited was plagued by the same conditions that had earned the "Spirit of St. Louis" its bad rap. William F. Howes Jr., the director of passenger services at B&O/C&O, had

given Amtrak permission to use the National Limited name but soon regretted it, describing the Amtrak operation as a "national disgrace."

The National had the dubious honor of posting the worst on-time performance in the Amtrak system. Between November 1, 1973, and March 31, 1974, trains 30 and 31 and Washington-section trains 530 and 531 never arrived on time at their three terminals.

The average delay in 1973 was two hours. Amtrak attributed the tardiness to

bad PC track, freight-train interference, and station servicing. Timetables carried a notice that due to "operating conditions" the National Limited was subject to delay, particularly between Pittsburgh and St. Louis.

To compensate, Amtrak lengthened the scheduled running time by two to three hours, making the New York-St. Louis running time five hours longer than that of PRR in 1941.

Not all of the operating problems occurred on Penn Central. Missouri Pacific

ABOVE The photographer has poised himself on the U.S. Highway 1 bridge spanning the Susquehanna River and Conrail's ex-PRR Columbia & Port Deposit Branch at Conowingo, Md., for this shot of the final eastbound Washington section of the *National Limited* on Oct. 28, 1978. On the point is Amtrak GG-1 4935 which in 1977 was restored to its original PRR livery thanks to Amtrak president Paul Reistrup and Department of Transportation economist Howard Serig. The locomotive made its last revenue run in 1980 on a Silver Service train between New York and Washington. Amtrak donated the locomotive to the Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania at Strasburg, Pa. STEVEN J. SALAMON

LEFT The eastbound *National Limited* is poised at Harrisburg, Pa., on February 4, 1978, after having traded its diesels for one of Amtrak's red-nosed GG-1s. Unit 909 will handle the main section of the train to New York/Penn Station, with stops at Lancaster, Paoli, North Philadelphia, Trenton, and Newark. STEVEN J. SALAMON

restricted the National Limited to a top speed of 60 mph on track that Amtrak believed could support faster speeds. Amtrak also accused MoPac of delaying 30 and 31 for freight trains, in violation of federal law.

Under attack

Less than a year after Amtrak's inauguration, the carrier began seeking to scale back the National Limited by ending the lightly patronized Kansas City-Washington through cars in favor of a connection with a Metroliner in North Philadelphia. That plan was scrapped after rail passenger advocates pointed out Amtrak was legally obligated to offer direct service between Washington and St. Louis because

it was one of the carrier's basic routes. Citing low patronage, the U.S. Department of Transportation recommended the National Limited be discontinued in 1973. Patronage was an average of 34 per trip. Amtrak dutifully notified the Interstate Commerce Commission of its plans to end trains 30 and 31, saying the trains had lost \$5 million in 1972 and were expected to lose \$4.9 million in 1973. It cited a consultant's report that concluded the "current volume of traffic appears to be far from supporting break-even operation and total market potential [is] too limited to justify continued operation."

The ICC stayed the discontinuance until December. In the meantime, an avalanche of support emerged for continu-

ing the train with proponents saying Amtrak had ignored evidence that ridership was rebounding, having begun to grow in late 1972. Some political officials, including Missouri Gov. Christopher S. Bond, groused that Amtrak failed to take into account that some segments of the route were doing well. Bond said patronage of the St. Louis-Kansas City segment had risen by 143 percent during a five-month period ending in September 1972 when compared with a similar period of a year earlier.

The pleas of the train's supporters were answered on Aug. 31, when Amtrak announced it would keep the National Limited. Although Amtrak cited increasing patronage as its reason, there was little doubt that the carrier had given in to political pressure.

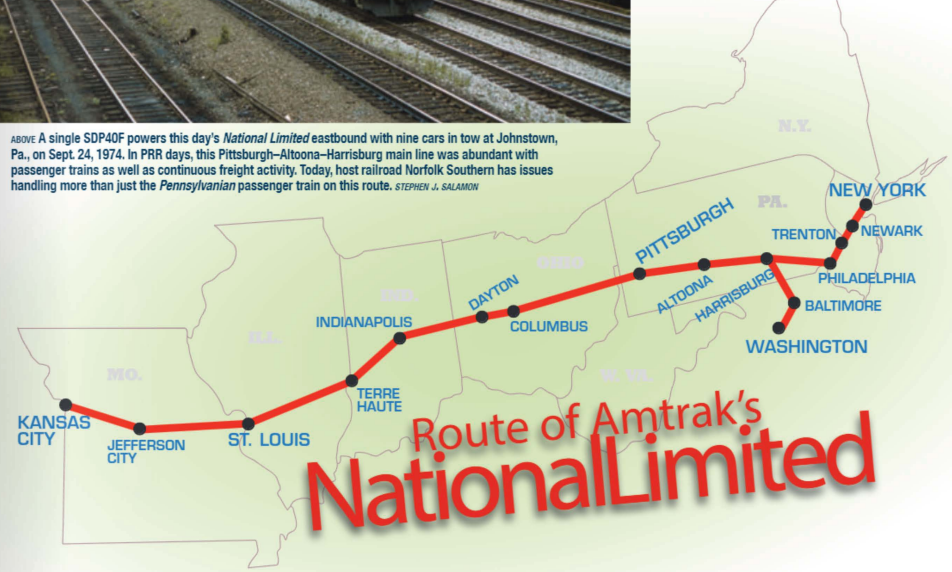
Train of contrasts

Many of the problems hindering the National Limited were present on other routes, including old steam-heated equipment prone to malfunctioning. Amtrak had little money to market specific routes, particularly in regions where the railroads had actively sought to discourage business in the years before Amtrak's arrival.

Some of the on-paper advantages of the National Limited turned out to be impractical to implement in reality. Chief among those was offering connections with other Amtrak trains at Indianapolis, St. Louis, Kansas City, and Effingham, Ill. For example, the initial eastbound sched-



ABOVE A single SDP40F powers this day's *National Limited* eastbound with nine cars in tow at Johnstown, Pa., on Sept. 24, 1974. In PRR days, this Pittsburgh-Altoona-Harrisburg main line was abundant with passenger trains as well as continuous freight activity. Today, host railroad Norfolk Southern has issues handling more than just the *Pennsylvanian* passenger train on this route. STEVEN J. SALAMON



A pair of gritty E-units eases across famous Rockville (Pa.) Bridge on Feb. 4, 1978, west of Harrisburg. Completed in 1902, the famous bridge remains the longest stone-arch railroad viaduct in the world. It crosses the Susquehanna River about five miles north of Harrisburg and is still used by Amtrak's *Pennsylvanian*. The short consist suggests this was a day when through-car service to/from Washington was down to thrice-weekly and was not available on this day. STEPHEN J. SALAMON



uled departure from Kansas City missed a connection from the eastbound Super Chief by five minutes and did not connect with the City of New Orleans in Effingham or the James Whitcomb Riley in Indianapolis. There was a connection in Indy with the South Wind and with The Limited, a Chicago–St. Louis train.

Schedule changes enabled the National to connect with the Super Chief in both directions, but changing schedules of other trains that crossed the route of trains 30 and 31 offered no convenient connections, a dilemma Amtrak was never able to solve and, indeed, couldn't because of its efforts to optimize the needs of individual routes.

As bad as its operating conditions could be, the National Limited also enjoyed some seemingly unlikely successes. It didn't operate on time for a single day in July 1973, yet made an operating profit of \$74,000 that month. In August and December 1973, the National Limited was the train about which Amtrak received more letters of praise than criti-

cism. Many who praised it lauded the food and beverage service, and on-board personnel.

A 1974 congressional investigation concluded that among the many issues facing the route that Amtrak lacked the ability to resolve were overcharges by the host railroads and high St. Louis terminal costs. The coming of Conrail on April 1, 1976, offered some relief to the National Limited as the government-funded company began rebuilding well-worn PC tracks. But Amtrak President Paul Reistrup complained about poor dispatching that Amtrak received from Conrail. For its part, Conrail said the delays Amtrak trains were incurring were due to trackwork and malfunctioning Amtrak equipment.

Doing what it could

Amtrak and MoPac reached an agreement raising the unfavorable operating conditions. After the dispute with Missouri Pacific reached Capitol Hill in 1977, Amtrak and MoPac reached an agreement to raise the top passenger train speed to

75 mph. In return, Amtrak agreed to ask the U.S. Department of Justice to drop a freight train interference complaint against MoPac.

The passenger carrier reduced terminal costs in St. Louis and Columbus by ceasing to use the union stations in those cities in favor of new modular stations. An April 24, 1977, schedule change that had number 31 leaving New York five hours later resulted in better times at Columbus and Dayton. At the same time, the eastbound train began leaving Kansas City in early vs. late morning. Although tweaked a few times, this schedule pattern remained in place for the duration of the train's existence.

On Aug. 13, 1978, Amtrak outfitted the National Limited with Amfleet equipment. The Kansas City–Washington coach temporarily ended in favor of a connection at Harrisburg.

Direct Kansas City–Washington service resumed on Oct. 30, 1978, when the New York and Washington sections began splitting at Philadelphia's 30th Street Sta-

tion. That meant Amtrak no longer used the Port Road branch between Middletown, Pa., and Perryville, Md. Amtrak's use of this route had been one of the few instances of passenger service being restored to a freight-only line when Amtrak began in 1971.

A shortage of sleeping cars wired for head-end power meant that sleeper service on the National Limited operated only between New York and Indianapolis. Operation of the sleepers was extended to St. Louis in November 1978 and to Kansas City on April 29, 1979. But by then a political storm was raging in Washington that would end the National Limited five months later.

Doomed

A number of forces converged in the late 1970s to take down the National Limited. A 23-mile section of the train's route in Indiana east of Indianapolis was not conveyed to Conrail in 1976. Although the freight carrier agreed to lease it as part of a federal freight subsidy program, that lease

expired on Nov. 1, 1977, and Conrail tried to force Amtrak to pay \$900,000 annually for track maintenance.

When Amtrak balked, Conrail said it would reroute 30 and 31 to a different route between Indianapolis and Columbus via Muncie, Ind., thereby bypassing Dayton. Political pressure kept the National Limited in place via Dayton, but Conrail did remove a track from the route and the remaining track received minimal maintenance. It had a top speed of 50 mph and numbers 30 and 31 limped along at 20 mph in places due to mud spots and low joints.

In the meantime, Congress had set in motion a review process, to be conducted by USDOT, of Amtrak's route network that was designed to restructure it to slash the railroad's losses. Inherent in this process was the likelihood that some long-distance trains would be discontinued or have their routes shortened or consolidated with other trains. The National Limited made every hit list issued by Amtrak or DOT.

Numbers 30 and 31 had lost \$15.3 million in fiscal year 1977 and were among 11 routes that accounted for 21 percent of Amtrak's \$536 million deficit in 1977. Even among the 11 worst-performing routes, the National Limited was a bottom feeder, losing 18 cents per passenger mile, \$16.38 per train mile, and \$81.06 per passenger. The latter two figures were the third and fourth highest among the "losing 11."

As they had in 1973, the train's supporters argued that patronage was on the rise, averaging 250 a day in April 1979. They would later point out that the National Limited had performed better in terms of its operating ratio and passenger train-mile to train-mile ratio than some trains that survived the 1979 restructuring. Passenger train advocates accused Amtrak of torpedoing the train by limiting its capacity so that it could not possibly meet the criteria set by Secretary of Transportation Brock Adams for a train to survive the restructuring process. The National Limited could be sold out and still not meet the DOT criteria, they said.



ABOVE Here's a 10-car westbound *National Limited* on the morning of Jan. 29, 1978, approaching Dayton Union Station (out of photo to the photographer's right). The White Tower restaurant below the locomotives was a Dayton landmark until the chain went out of business. DAVID P. OROSKI

RIGHT Photos of Amtrak's *National Limited* at Pittsburgh, Pa., and Columbus, Ohio, tend to be scarce because of their nighttime and/or early morning schedules at those locations. Fortunately, Dayton-area photographers were more diligent in photographing the *National* at Dayton. This is the eastbound *National* at Dayton Union Station in December 1976. Into the post-World War II years, this station was used by PRR, New York Central, and Baltimore & Ohio. ALVIN SCHULTZE, DAVID P. OROSKI COLLECTION



Ultimately, though, supporters of the National Limited failed to save the train because the political climate in Washington strongly favored ending some Amtrak routes. Those who sought to save trains 30 and 31 lacked the political clout to do so in the free-for-all in Congress that followed DOT's release of

its Amtrak restructuring plan in early 1979 that recommended axing the National Limited.

By late summer, the politics of Amtrak funding had been resolved and the National Limited was set to begin its last trips on Sept. 30. The cities of Indianapolis and Dayton, along with

Ohio Congressman Tony P. Hall, went to court to stop the discontinuance. A federal appeals court ordered the National Limited to continue running until Oct. 12, but that order was overturned by Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger on September 30, just in time for the final trips to begin.



LEFT With the Dayton skyline serving as a backdrop, the westbound *National Limited* is shown easing away from Union Station on May 15, 1977. Dayton Union Station was eventually razed and the site is now a forest of trees. DAVID P. OROSKI

BELOW At South Charleston, Ohio, in April 1979, a southbound Detroit, Toledo & Ironton freight on Conrail trackage rights is "in the hole" for the westbound *National Limited* to overtake it. At this point, the *National* had become an all-HEP (Head-End Power) train, with mostly Amfleet equipment. MIKE SCHAFER

Failed revival

Two segments of the former National Limited route are still served by Amtrak today. Pennsylvania funds the New York-Pittsburgh Pennsylvanian, and Missouri pays for the St. Louis-Kansas City Missouri River Runners. But the middle of the former National Limited route—with its notably large cities of Columbus and Dayton, Ohio—remains bereft of intercity rail passenger service except in Indianapolis and Effingham, which are served by other Amtrak trains—though Indy now only has triweekly service in each direction.

Following the discontinuance of the National Limited, there were efforts to revive it. Senators representing nine states once served by 30 and 31 signed a statement calling for its reinstatement. One idea was to create a section of the Broadway Limited that would diverge at Pittsburgh or Crestline, Ohio, and operate to Columbus via a former New York Central Cleveland-Cincinnati route and then continue westward on the former National Limited route via Dayton and Indianapolis.

Reportedly, the revival proponents met in April 1980 with Amtrak to discuss what was needed to restart the service. The short answer was state funding. Then-Ohio Gov. James Rhodes was receptive, but stopped short of committing state funding. A sticking point was a clause in Ohio's constitution prohibiting the state from lending aid or credit to a for-profit railroad corporation.

Indiana Gov. Robert Orr, who served on Amtrak's board of directors from



1982 to 1989, said during a Congressional hearing years later that the efforts to revive the National Limited failed because the states could not agree on a schedule. However, lack of funding commitments from the states probably played a role in thwarting the comeback.

Another significant hurdle was that Conrail had downgraded the train's former route in Ohio and Indiana. Less than a month after 30 and 31 made their final trips, Conrail took out of service the track between Dodson, Ohio, and Glen interlocking at the east end of the yard in Richmond, Ind. It already had diverted

through freight traffic off the former PRR route between Pittsburgh and Indianapolis to other routes.

Amtrak faced a Dec. 1, 1979, deadline to request that the line between Columbus and Indianapolis be "railbanked," possibly for intercity rail passenger service use. It is not clear if Amtrak did that, but Conrail did little in the months after the discontinuance of the National Limited to significantly change the physical plant of the route. Within a year of the National's discontinuance, though, Conrail had obtained Federal Railroad Administration approval to remove the

RIGHT Shortly after leaving Ohio, the westbound *National* pauses at Richmond, Ind., once a busy junction point for PRR. Richmond was crossroads for PRR Cincinnati–Chicago and Pittsburgh–St. Louis passenger trains, with a shuffling of through cars handled at this station. The depot building is quite dilapidated in this 1979 scene but has since been nicely restored (with PRR markings intact) and repurposed. JOHN P. BAIKUS




BELOW Viewed from a vestibule of the westbound *National* in 1978, we see the train sheds of Indianapolis Union Station, another once-busy big city station serving a multitude of trains. In earlier days, this station was served by PRR, NYC, B&O, and Monon. Today it sees only the Chicago–Washington–New York *Cardinal*, triweekly in each direction plus several Greyhound runs. RICHARD BALDWIN



BELOW Passengers boarding the *National Limited* during its last summer of service in 1979. Amtrak sometimes posted this train sold out even when it wasn't. RICHARD BALDWIN



block signals and soon it had regulatory approval to abandon most of the former Pennsy main line between Columbus and Indianapolis.

In the late 1980s, Amtrak studied making Kansas City the western terminus of the Chicago–New York *Cardinal*, thus restoring service to the former *National Limited* route between Indianapolis and St. Louis. Amtrak thought the route could pay for itself, particularly if it landed a mail contract. But the latter never happened and Amtrak never revived service west of Indianapolis on the former *National Limited* route. Forty-two years later neither Columbus nor Dayton has passenger trains. 



LEFT A pair of Penn Central E-units rolls into Terre Haute with the westbound *National Limited* in late summer 1971. Union Pacific sleepers were deemed to be in the best condition for service on the newly born Amtrak and began showing up on several Amtrak trains operated by Penn Central. MIKE SCHAFER

RIGHT Sixty-seven miles west of Terre Haute, the *National Limited* served Effingham, Ill., on Illinois Central Gulf's Chicago–New Orleans main line. Here in September 1979, the westbound *National* arrives at the joint ICG/ex-PRR station. It was possible to make connections here between the *National* and Chicago–Carbondale, Ill., trains. CRAIG SANDERS



BELOW It's the early hours of New Year's Day 1976 at Kansas City Union Station. At left is the *National Limited* equipment, which arrived a few hours earlier on December 31, 1975, and its through New York–Los Angeles sleeper conveyed to the *Southwest Limited* (today known as the *Southwest Chief*) out of Chicago. At right is a set-out sleeper out of Chicago, chartered by the North Western Illinois Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society as a New Year's celebration outing. It will return to Chicago on this day's eastbound *Southwest Limited*. In those days, chartering cars for groups was an easy proposition. MIKE SCHAFER

