

Still reliable after all these years

GATHER 'ROUND, if you will, for a birthday celebration. We have a large cake decorated with some candles—150 to be exact. The year 2000 marks the sesquicentennial of one of the South's truly classic transportation enterprises, the Louisville & Nashville Railroad Company.

It was on March 5, 1850, that the Kentucky legislature approved a charter for the L&N. The first through train operated between L&N's namesake end points in 1859. Had it not been for dynamic leadership, vision, money, and some luck, the L&N might not have matured beyond this original route and three branches. But in fact, through acquisition and construction, key routes to Memphis, Birmingham, New Orleans, Atlanta, St. Louis, and Cincinnati were added to the fold in the three decades following the Civil War. By 1969, the company flag was planted in Chicago through acquisition of a portion of the Chicago & Eastern Illinois (with a second route in 1971, when the Monon was added). Unlike several railroads whose corporate names were exaggerated statements of their true geographic reach, the L&N greatly eclipsed the limits of its original end points. (The railroad briefly flirted with the more imposing name of "Louisville & Nashville & Great Southern,"

but stuck with its chartered title.)

L&N was conservative, and profitable (it would continue to pay stock dividends, even through most of the Great Depression). Always a Kentucky road at heart, its huge system shop complex at South Louisville and 11-floor downtown general office building were icons. L&N's memorable nickname, "The Old Reliable," was in popular use by the last two decades of the 19th century (and continued, except for a period when "The Dixie Line"—inherited in L&N's 1957 acquisition of Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis—was used instead).

The L&N wasn't immediately thought of as a coal road, but bituminous was a major factor in the company's success. Its dining cars served up scrumptious Southern fare, ranging from country ham to seafood. A rather nondescript locomotive fleet included home-built engines and USRA designs with bulbous headlights and the road number painted on the lens—a company tradition observed even on some early diesels. Except for 42 M-1 ("Big Emma") 2-8-4's of the 1940's, L&N's roundhouses were devoid of Super Power. Dieselization was consummat-

On L&N's Cumberland Valley Division in 1954, "Big Emma" 1984 brings an eastbound into Lynch, Ky.



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ed on January 28, 1957, when Mike 1882 steamed into history.

L&N's fame spread far beyond its territory, thanks in no small part to longtime TRAINS Magazine Editor David P. Morgan, who made no bones about it: the L&N held first place in his heart. As a youth in the Louisville suburbs along the road's double-track main to Cincinnati, Morgan soaked up L&N's big steam show during the late 1930's and the early war years. Later, his journalism credentials allowed him closer access during the transitional years of the late '40's and '50's.



L&N

Although my own L&N experience came a bit later, it was just as mesmerizing as Morgan's. L&N steam officially expired in January 1957, but I was old enough to remember Big Emmas in full stride, the bark of a J-4 Mike getting tonnage under way, and the three-note diminished 7th chord of an L&N passenger whistle. My infatuation with the Old Reliable led to a "museum," of sorts, in an extra room in my grandparents' railroad rooming house in Loyall, Ky. In 1961, L&N's long-time p.r. man Charlie Castner did a story on my collection of oilcans, marker lamps, and even large clinkers ("direct from the firebox of a J-4," I noted). The story appeared in a 1962 edition of *L&N Magazine*, the road's house organ. That lifelong friendship with Charlie also gave me access to a greater L&N "world" than the coal-hauling Cumberland Valley Division in my Appalachian home.

The following years brought more exposure to and appreciation for a great railroad: the lip-smacking experience of breakfast on the *Pan-American's* streamlined diner-lounge *Dixie Traveler* (is that a great car name, or what?); rides behind the restored Civil War-era 4-4-0 *General* in 1962; a seat at the throttle of E7 790 as it rolled with E6 772 through the trackwork of Cincinnati Union Terminal in 1966; the



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Twenty-four-year-old E6's 775 and 772 rest on the servicing tracks at Louisville in October 1965.

sound of three F's working wide-open in the rain behind a coal train on the EK Sub's Elkatawa Hill; pacing, in my grandmother's well-used '56 Caddy, four gray-flanked U25B's north of Corbin on a "TOTE" (Trailer On Train Express) train; the thrill of visiting the opulent office of the company president (he was out at the time); the many visits to South Louisville Shops; or the smell of the morning dew from the rear vestibule of 6-6-4 sleeper *Yellow Pine* as the *Georgian* rolled through the northern part of its namesake state behind three fast-stepping E's. These were just a few of the vignettes that endeared the L&N to me.

Years later, with the 1983 founding of the Louisville & Nashville Historical Society, I would meet many more folks whose experiences were similar. Their own fascination with the Old Reliable was as widespread as its system map. Today, more than 1100 members share this common bond of affection for a railroad that, like far too many, is often remembered only for an embossed logo on a highway overpass or the memories of a retired employee.

What became of the L&N? South Louisville Shops was closed, and later razed. Today the site hosts the University of Louisville's football stadium. Downtown, the 11-story office building now belongs to the Commonwealth of Kentucky, although the huge neon "L&N" atop the its east side (installed in the mid-'50's) is still illuminated at night. The classic depots at both Louisville and Nashville still stand, adapted for uses as a transit system headquarters and hotel, respectively.

With some notable exceptions, most of L&N's key routes are either still

operated by CSX or have been spun off to regional roads. The few that are gone include the western portion of the Evansville-St. Louis line, made redundant by CSX's ex-B&O line; the middle portion of the former Monon; a northern-Tennessee portion of the Memphis line (L&N cobbled half its route with half the NC&StL's); and the Lebanon Branch across east-central Kentucky.

Looking for a little of what the L&N was like in its heyday? I suggest a visit to the Kentucky Railway Museum at New Haven, Ky. There, one can still ride one of the railroad's oldest lines behind restored L&N Rogers-built Pacific 152, and aboard L&N heavy-weight passenger equipment. On special occasions, KRM even brings out L&N office car 363, and a diner serving genuine Old Reliable cuisine. A country ham breakfast or Gulf Coast seafood platter, with an occasional whiff of Kentucky coal smoke from 152's stack, is an intoxicating combination.

So, happy birthday, L&N, even if you're hiding behind a cover of CSX blue, gray, and yellow. Your admirers know you're still there—and still Reliable after all these years. ■

RON FLANARY, of Big Stone Gap, Va., has written numerous books and articles about the L&N.

L&N fact file

(comparative figures are for 1929 and 1982)

Route-miles: 5250; 10,396

Locomotives: 1350; 1086

Passenger cars: 1006; 113 (1970)

Freight cars: 64,134; 53,095

Headquarters city: Louisville, Ky.

Special interest group: Louisville & Nashville Historical Society, P.O. Box 17122, Louisville, KY 40217; www.rrhistorical.com/lnhs

Notable postwar passenger trains:

Georgian, Humming Bird, Pan-American, Crescent Limited, South Wind

Major merger acquisitions, 1930-1970:

Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis (1957); half of Chicago & Eastern Illinois (1969); Monon (1971)

Source: *The Historical Guide to North American Railroads* (Kalmbach Books, 1999).

For more on the L&N, visit *Classic Trains* online at www.classictrainsmag.com.