

# Memories of the 'Tootin' Louie'

**W**HAT'S IN A RAILROAD company name? Some, like Milwaukee Road, Burlington, Rock Island, or Santa Fe, had long corporate names but came to be known by one city. Others—Southern Pacific or Northern Pacific—asserted bold association of huge territories. Many more implied grandiose aspirations, usually unmet—Duluth, South Shore & Atlantic; Quanah, Acme & Pacific. Some were blunt about their intentions, and Minneapolis & St. Louis was one of these. Traffic from Minneapolis would flow to St. Louis, circumventing the avaricious lakeports of Milwaukee and Chicago and thwarting their aggressive policies of urban economic imperialism by avoiding the railroad tentacles they employed.



M&StL's earliest predecessor did not reflect those urges, rather was part of a plan in Minnesota Territory to link primary waterways and open large parts of the future state to agriculture. The plans were premature, however, suffering from the Panic of 1857 and being postponed by the Civil War. By that time, the landscape had changed, and the villages of St. Anthony and Minneapolis had matured with flourishing flour and lumber industries eager to expand marketing areas, yet jealous of the transportation advantages enjoyed by St. Paul and fearful of powerful Milwaukee and Chicago. Thus was born the concept of a Minneapolis-St. Louis rail outlet.

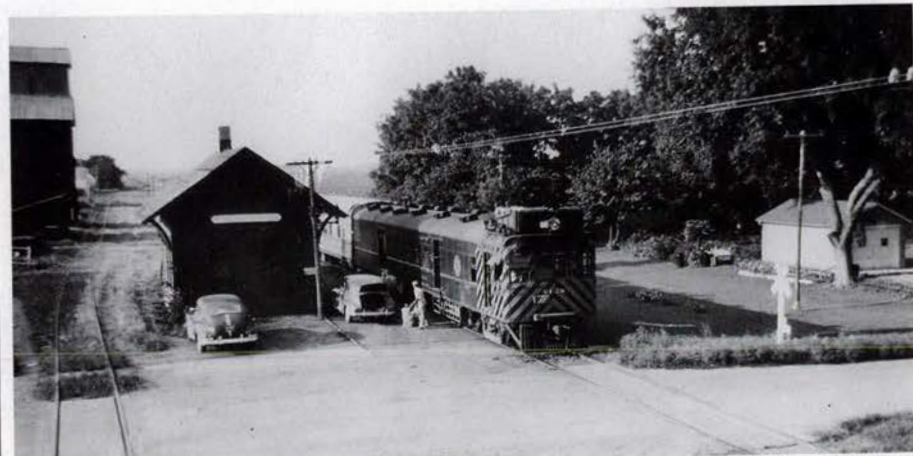
These instincts were shared else-

where. St. Louis had suffered economic calamity during the Civil War, had slipped in primacy in favor of Chicago, and looked for rail arteries to supplement its "natural highways"—the great Mississippi and its tributaries. One project was to drive a railroad across northern Missouri to Iowa. In this way, agricultural produce and coal could flow south, and products from St. Louis manufacturers or warehouses could tap markets in the Hawkeye State.

A north-south artery would provide competition, especially for Chicago. Wheat might seek outlet via St. Louis or Minneapolis. Iowa coal might move south, but more likely to the fuel-starved north. Minneapolis-milled flour and lumber would be welcome in Iowa. For shippers, a north-south railroad meant competitive options; for railroaders and investors, it meant loads in both directions.

In embryonic form, this north-south enterprise had three corporate components: Minneapolis & St. Louis on the north, predecessors of the Iowa Central in the middle, and the North Missouri (later part of the Wabash) on the south. Although M&StL would maintain a modest interchange with the Wabash in Albia, Iowa, in the end, M&StL wound up reaching not St. Louis but Peoria, Ill., hub of a dozen Class 1 railroads' secondary lines. M&StL gained

M&StL's small-town ambience is well depicted in this fall 1950 photo of motor GE-29 on Minneapolis-Des Moines train 2 calling in Callender, Iowa.



DON L. HOFSSOMMER

Peoria via the old Iowa Central, which Edwin Hawley—who had envisioned a Canada-to-the Gulf railroad—merged with the M&StL on January 1, 1912, to form a 1600-mile system.

For me, the M&StL (always pronounced “M and Saint L”) had an intensely personal connection because I grew up in Iowa, very near its track at Callender, Fort Dodge, and Spencer. I recall with great affection trips to Des Moines during World War II in elderly coaches, and later in splendid and shiny Budd-built coaches that seemed incongruous behind the railroad’s stalwart gas-electric motor cars.

I remember fondly the nicely manicured 2-8-0’s wrestling Albert Lea tonnage out of the Des Moines River valley with the D-842, a diminutive GE



ROBERT H. MILNER

Three-unit FT 445 arrives in Oskaloosa, Iowa, at 10:30 a.m., July 25, 1947, with time freight 19.

44-tonner, shoving valiantly in support. I was excited at the opportunity to finally visit M&StL’s “main line” and a chance to see famous time freight No. 20, which was carded as “First Class,” thank you, like passenger trains. It was drawn by spanking new FT diesels, resplendent in yellow and green with the road’s circular “Peoria Gateway” herald on the nose.

When we lived in Spencer, my parents always knew where to find me. They simply asked the telephone operator for “287.” The voice on the other end of the line would answer, “Saint L. (pause) Yes, he’s here.” It was, of course, the station agent, for I spent more time at the depot (or in cabooses and locomotive cabs) than I did at school—a reality often reflected on report cards. M&StL had become “my” railroad, and a summer’s labor on the local section gang only reinforced my

proprietary attachment.

All I wanted to do with my life at that point was work for the M&StL, but I soured on that when President Lucien Sprague was unseated by Ben Heineman in 1954. Then I became otherwise distracted—girls, cars, athletics, and thoughts of college being among the impediments to clear vision.

Sprague had been appointed as receiver of the bankrupt M&StL in the mid-1930's, and he saved the railroad. In those Depression years, M&StL had become a woebegone property, ridiculed as the "Midnight & Still Later" or the "Maimed & Still Limping." Sprague sent a shot of adrenaline into the property. He ordered derelict and obsolete equipment scrapped, and used the proceeds to lease new or used equipment and spruce up and modernize elderly locomotives.

His timing was propitious. M&StL shuddered and took on new spirit. Rains returned to chase away the "dust bowl," national economic recovery was near, and record-breaking demand for transportation during World War II was just around the corner. M&StL dodged the bullet and was finally reorganized during the early 1940's.

Sprague continued to improve the property, pouring money into track and structure, especially on the 488-mile trunk to Peoria. More improvements were made to the newer steam power, the 2-8-2's especially, plus a few 2-8-0's and No. 502, the sole surviving 4-6-2 and Sprague's favorite engine. Depots saw paint for the first time in ages. Sprague promised that M&StL now stood for "Modern & Streamlined." The company had a serious flir-



M. L. POWELL; J. DAVID INGLES COLLECTION

Numbered for their delivery months, SD7 952 and RS1 446 pose in Peoria in 1955. The RS1's wore nine schemes, but the two SD7's were identical.



ROBERT F. COLLINS

Spiffy M&StL Mikado 626 parallels the CB&Q main line as it nears Monmouth, Ill., from the east.

tation with new 2-6-6-4's, but instead bought a few diesel switchers. In 1944, it began an aggressive acquisition of Alco RS1's—35 of them, painted in nine different color schemes. In 1945 came two 3-unit EMD FT's to whisk daily time freights 19 and 20 between Minneapolis and Peoria on schedules calculated to save the road a day's per diem (car rental) charges.

M&StL's "time in the sun" was brief, though. Under Sprague, the railroad had been revitalized and improved. It was fully dieselized in 1950. Its reputation was solid, it paid dividends, and it had no bonded indebtedness. But in the postwar environment, competition for the transportation dollar was more intense than ever, and the market share for American railroads was deteriorating. M&StL was not immune, and soon Heineman raided it.

Thus M&StL during the last half of the 1950's was not quite the road it had been in my formative years. RDC's put in a brief and abortive appearance before all passenger service ended. Red and white replaced green and yellow and all those RS1 schemes on the diesels, and the new management even had the audacity to renumber the locomotives in a logic that was foreign to M&StL's almost-unique habit of month and year of delivery.

Nevertheless, the road's ample stable of burbly-gurgly Alcos still toted tonnage up and down the railroad. Trains 19 and 20 still expedited impressive lading on the main line. Telegraph instruments continued to chatter in small-town depots. And there remained an abundance of now-graying men (and a few women) able and will-

ing to share recollections of commuter service to Minnetonka, annual wheat rushes and livestock extras on the "west end" in South Dakota, bucking snow on the Belmond branch, wartime troop trains, unforgettable personalities, and endless humorous incidents.

Ton-miles on M&StL had peaked in 1947, and then gradually tilted down. In the coming era of merged railroads, there was no hope for a medium-size one like the Minneapolis & St. Louis, and the end came quickly in 1960 when its assets were acquired by Chicago & North Western, effective November 1. In retrospect, one can only marvel that M&StL lasted as long as it did. Perhaps surprisingly, though, over 400 route-miles of the old "Louie"—more than one-fourth of its final mileage of just under 1400—exist today. Most lines are part of Union Pacific's network of former C&NW Iowa grain routes, but BNSF, DM&E, and several short lines have other pieces.

Before 1960, or shortly thereafter, I managed to ride over most of M&StL's lines, and ultimately visited every one of its stations and facilities. I was picking about for bits and pieces of history and lore, and in the process I met a marvelous cadre of people who, like the old road itself, live on in delightful memory. M&StL is still "my" railroad. Long live the "Tootin' Louie!" ■

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## M&StL fact file

(comparative figures are for 1929 and 1959)

**Route-miles:** 1628; 1391

**Locomotives:** 218; 74

**Passenger cars:** 122; 10

**Freight cars:** 6581; 4178

**Headquarters city:** Minneapolis, Minn.

**Special interest group:** Chicago & North Western Historical Society, P.O. Box 1270, Sheboygan, WI 53082-1270

**Source:** *The Historical Guide to North American Railroads* (Kalmbach, 1999). For more on the M&StL, visit CLASSIC TRAINS online at [www.classictrainsmag.com](http://www.classictrainsmag.com).