

# The Buffalo Shuffle

By Bob Chambers

The New York Central performed miracles at Buffalo Central Terminal, which hosted nearly four dozen passenger trains each night in 1949. In a little over 8 hours, switch crews juggled nearly 100 Pullmans, coaches, diners, and other cars among 30 trains. A diagram of all the moves takes up three full pages!



Sometime in the 1940's, a J-3a Hudson digs in with a train for the east. By '49, diesels were in command of the Central's top trains here, but lesser runs still got steam.

Oh, to be in Buffalo, at the New York Central terminal on, say, a night in 1949. Delivery of the Central's "Great Steel Fleet" of postwar passenger cars has just been completed, allowing the substantial re-equipping of the road's legion of east-west trains. Most run overnight between East Coast and Midwest cities, so sleeping cars figure large in the nocturnal operations at NYC's Buffalo Central Terminal.

Nowhere else in the U.S., in fact, do so many sleeping-car trains converge on a terminal in the middle of the night, get pulled apart by switch engines, have cars added and/or subtracted, and go on their way. NYC switching crews perform a miracle here each night, as 44 trains use the terminal, nearly all

of them with sleeping cars. Thirty-one of the 44 are through trains, 17 of which set out and/or pick up cars. An additional 13 trains originate or terminate at Buffalo, all but one with cars to or from the through trains. In all, 47 sleeping cars, dining cars, coaches, or lounge cars are pulled from the trains, and 50 of a similar assortment are added.

Four trains trade cars with three others, seven with two others, and the rest with one train. All this occurs in 8 hours 11 minutes!

Why is Buffalo so busy? It is a focal point on the New York Central System. From the southwest and west, trains arrive from Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Cincinnati, St. Louis, and Chicago. From the west and northwest they come through Canada from Detroit and from Toronto. From the east, trains come from Boston, New York City, and Syracuse (with cars from Massena, N.Y., and Montreal). Yes, Buffalo handles sleeping cars from Canada in both directions.

Adding to the terminal's congestion is the fact that it lies about halfway between New York and Chicago, which means that all trains, even the *20th Century Limited*, *Commodore Vanderbilt*, and others with no official Buffalo passenger stop, pause here for servicing.

Activity is heaviest between 11 p.m. and 1 a.m., when 20 trains use the facilities. During those hours, the Central's switch crews have to perform one of their best moves. The *Ohio State Limited* (train No. 16) drops two sleepers for Boston and picks up five bound to New York from Toronto—and does this in 14 minutes, shortly after midnight.

The action at Buffalo really begins at 9:15 p.m. with the arrival of the *Toronto-Buffalo Express* (No. 380) from Canada, with a sleeper for Boston and a coach for New York. Because it also terminates, crews must deal with a diner-lounge, coaches, and the road power. The crews can't dawdle, because in the next 45 minutes six more trains will use the

station. Next to arrive are three through trains, the *Interstate Express* (46), *North Shore Limited* (39), and *New York Special* (44), and all have cars to drop and to pick up. Nos. 46 and 44 even trade cars with each other!

Adding cars to the mix are trains that terminate from Pittsburgh and Niagara Falls. These first six trains drop a total of 13 cars and pick up 12 (not counting the cars that terminate). Buffalo is one of the rare NYC terminals also served by rival Pennsylvania Railroad, and in the middle of this action the PRR's overnighter to Washington, D.C., the *Dominion Express* (574), departs by backing westward to a trailing-point PRR connection at 10 p.m. This first flurry of activity is over when NYC's *New York Special* leaves at 10:25 after a 30-minute stop.

Another flurry of activity takes place toward dawn, after the 4:35 a.m. arrival of the *Pittsburgh-Buffalo Express* (272), with a sleeper and sleeper-buffet for Toronto. Another Toronto-bound sleeper has been sitting around the station for almost two hours since its 2:40 arrival on the *Knickerbocker* (24) from Cleveland. Then at 4:45, the *North Star* (21) from New York shows up with six more cars for Toronto: five from New York and one it picked up in Albany that came from Boston. These nine cars are assembled quickly for the *Ontarian* (371), departing for Toronto at 5:01. Not a bad 26 minutes of work!

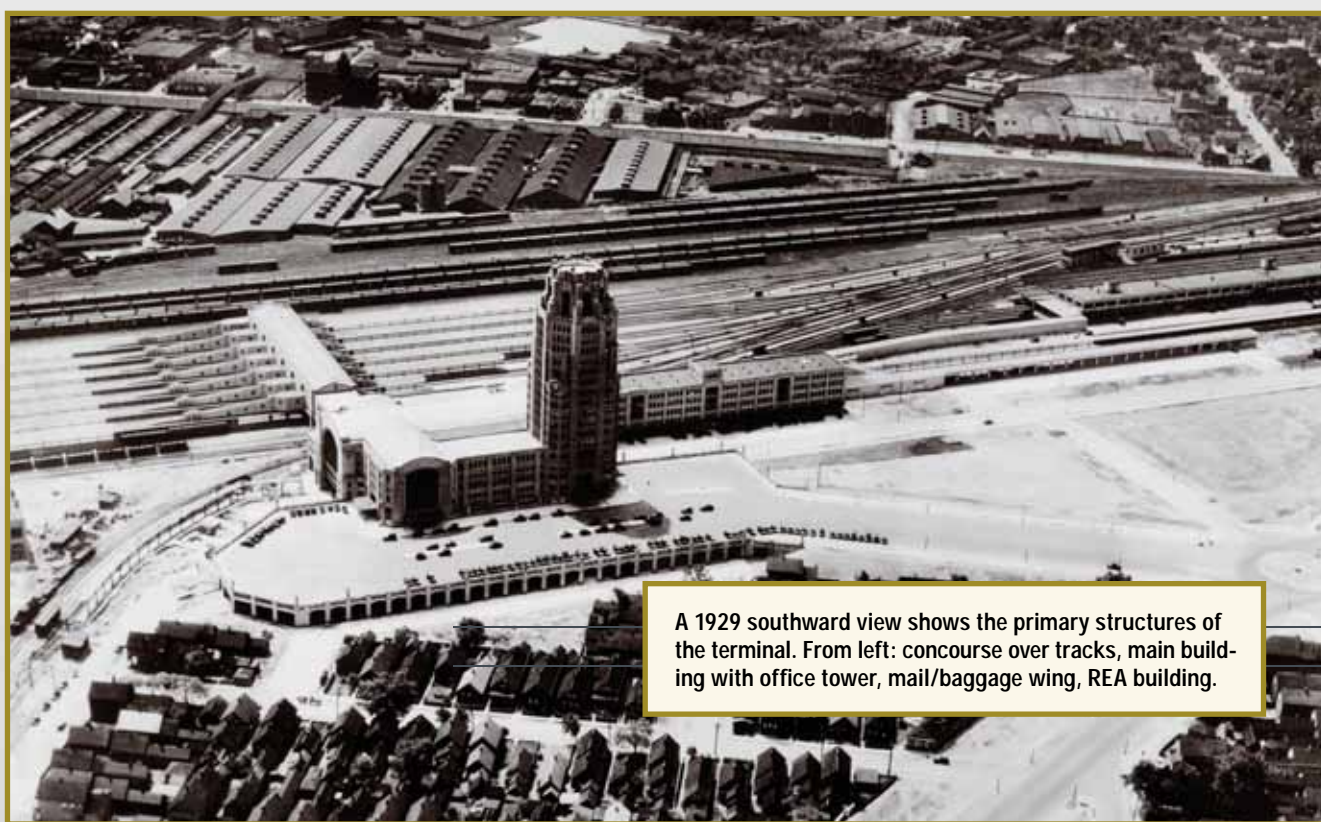
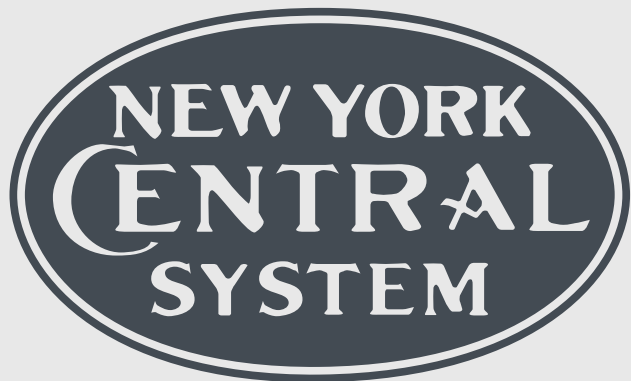
With all of this switching of cars going on, we can only assume that, no matter how careful they are, a switching crew can make a mistake. A car put on the wrong train could have you waking up in Cincinnati instead of Boston, for instance. Worse yet, if you are in the wrong car at the wrong time . . . well, just how would you explain to your spouse why you were in Pittsburgh, not Detroit, with only your pajamas? Things like that must happen sometimes.

Some of the cars have to be exchanged very quickly, which could be a cause of a switch crew's mistake. The fastest switching is the 10-minute move of two Detroit-Boston sleepers arriving at 9:55 on the *New York Special* (44), that must be put on the *Interstate Express* (46) for its 10:05 departure.

There are also car moves that take an extremely long time. Consider the Pittsburgh-Albany sleeper that arrives at 9:35. It will not leave until 2:50 a.m.—5 hours 15 minutes later—on the *Knickerbocker*. Other Pullman patrons who have a lot of time without *clickety-clack* are those on the Cleveland-bound sleeper off the *Ontarian*. Between their 11:45 p.m. arrival at Buffalo and their 4:25 a.m. departure on the *Cleveland Limited*, they have 4 hours 40 minutes to sleep, or perhaps watch all that switching just outside their window.

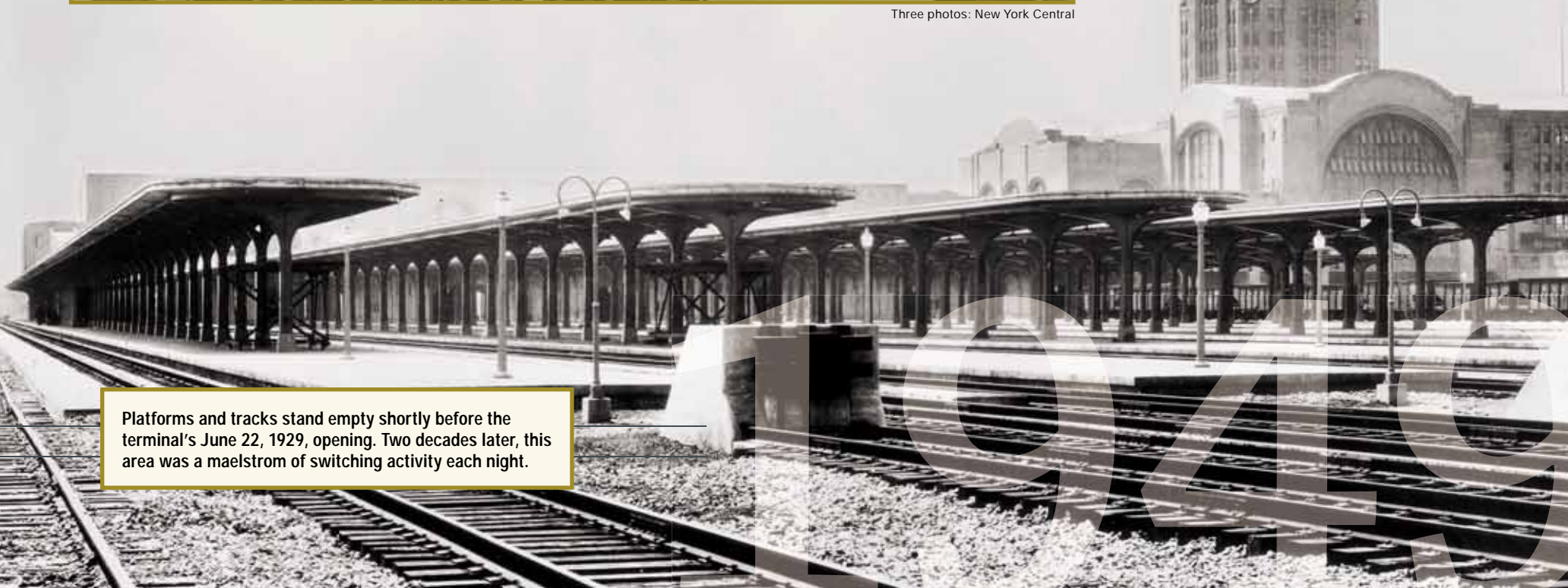
Despite the chance for error or missed connections, operations must have proceeded smoothly most nights. The Central's sched-

ules in Buffalo changed only in minor detail for many years, indicating that this level of activity was achievable every night. Just imagine: 44 trains, eight hours, hundreds of switching moves—and that's an ordinary night. Throw in a Buffalo snowstorm, trains with two or more sections, additional cars to switch because of holiday travel and, well, you get the picture. As the car-routing chart on the following pages shows, NYC crews performed miracles doing their Buffalo Shuffle.



A 1929 southward view shows the primary structures of the terminal. From left: concourse over tracks, main building with office tower, mail/baggage wing, REA building.

Three photos: New York Central



Platforms and tracks stand empty shortly before the terminal's June 22, 1929, opening. Two decades later, this area was a maelstrom of switching activity each night.





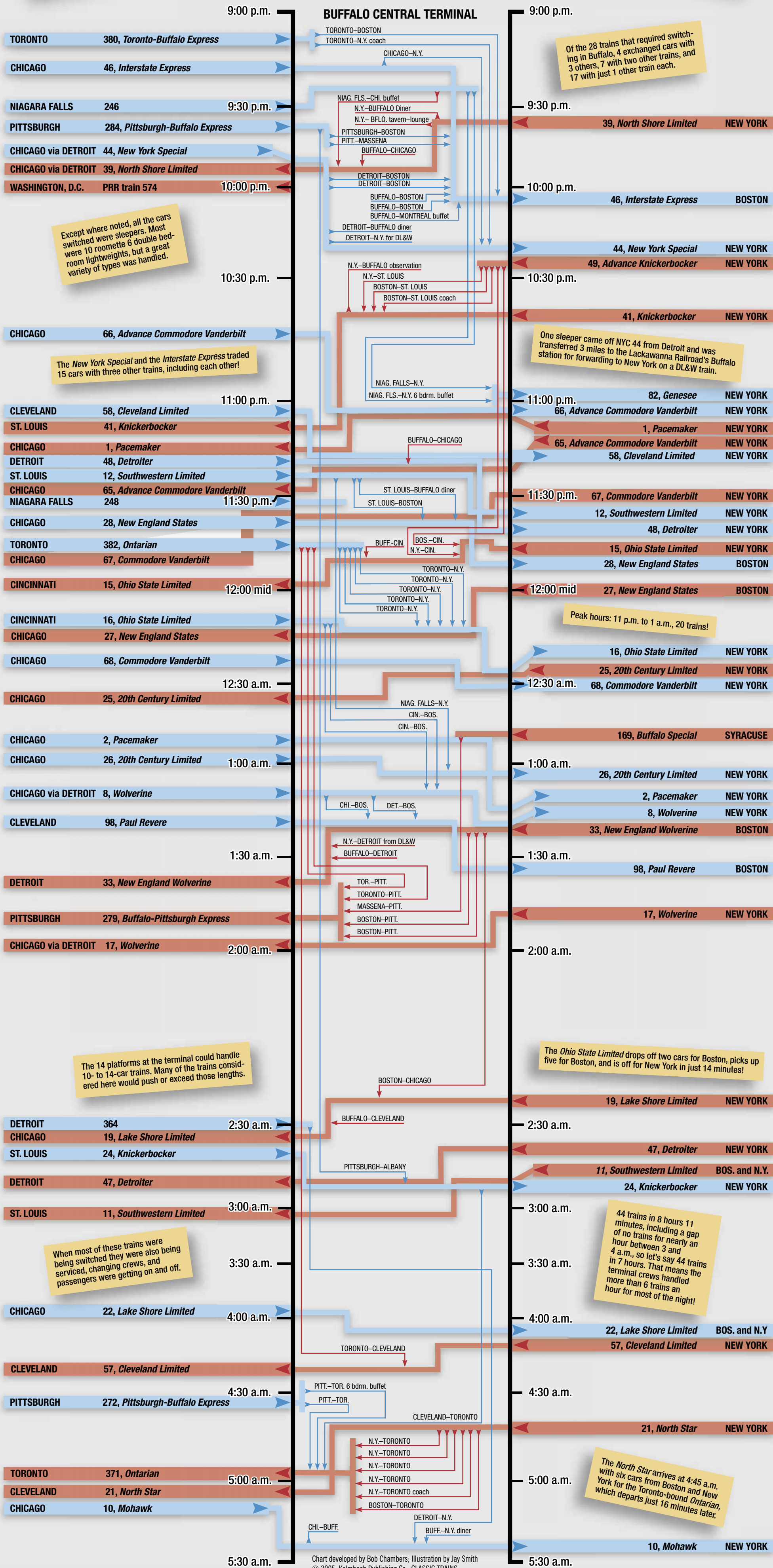
# Shuffling in Buffalo

The following note appeared in every NYC timetable of this era. "IMPORTANT NOTICE: New York Central System passenger trains are frequently operated in two or more sections." Now wouldn't that make the Buffalo Shuffle even more interesting?

This chart shows 8½ hours on a typical night in early 1949 at New York Central's Buffalo Central Terminal. Thirteen trains terminated or originated there, and an additional 31 trains went through the station during this period. Seventeen of the through trains dropped off or picked up cars during their station stops. The remaining through trains all stopped in the station for crew changes, servicing, or inspection for periods ranging from 7 to 16 minutes.

Buffalo was a hot spot on the New York Central. Eastbound trains came from Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Cincinnati, St. Louis, Chicago, Detroit, Toronto, and Niagara Falls. Westbounds rolled in from New York City, Boston, Albany, and Syracuse.

RED indicates westbound trains      ▼ Car added to train  
 BLUE indicates eastbound trains      ▲ Car removed from train



Except where noted, all the cars switched were sleepers. Most were 10 roomette 6 double bedroom lightweights, but a great variety of types was handled.

The *New York Special* and the *Interstate Express* traded 15 cars with three other trains, including each other!

Of the 28 trains that required switching in Buffalo, 4 exchanged cars with 3 others, 7 with two other trains, and 17 with just 1 other train each.

One sleeper came off NYC 44 from Detroit and was transferred 3 miles to the Lackawanna Railroad's Buffalo station for forwarding to New York on a DL&W train.

Peak hours: 11 p.m. to 1 a.m., 20 trains!

The 14 platforms at the terminal could handle 10- to 14-car trains. Many of the trains considered here would push or exceed those lengths.

The *Ohio State Limited* drops off two cars for Boston, picks up five for Boston, and is off for New York in just 14 minutes!

When most of these trains were being switched they were also being serviced, changing crews, and passengers were getting on and off.

44 trains in 8 hours 11 minutes, including a gap of no trains for nearly an hour between 3 and 4 a.m., so let's say 44 trains in 7 hours. That means the terminal crews handled more than 6 trains an hour for most of the night!

The *North Star* arrives at 4:45 a.m. with six cars from Boston and New York for the Toronto-bound *Ontarian*, which departs just 16 minutes later.

Information from 1949 New York Central system public timetables and April 24, 1949, NYC Employee Timetable.

Chart developed by Bob Chambers; Illustration by Jay Smith © 2005, Kalmbach Publishing Co., CLASSIC TRAINS