

Train 501, the morning *Rocket* to Peoria, is at Englewood Union Station, the first stop out of Chicago's La Salle Street Station, in the early 1950s. Dazzling E6 No. 631 leads the train.
Robert Milner

The Rock's CAMELOT

Reflecting on that brief, shining moment when the Rock Island was among the best, and how its *Rockets* made it so

BY PETER A. HANSEN

The Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific was bankrupt. Again. On June 7, 1933, the company sought protection from creditors for the second time in its history. Granted, the CRI&P was hardly alone in this during the Depression years, as more than 20 other Class I railroads were in similar straits. What distinguished the Rock Island was that it had often been a hard-luck player, even when it was technically solvent. Moreover, as would be demonstrated in the late 1930s, “the Rock” was distinguished further by a new, audacious management team that did the unexpected and achieved undreamed-of results.

Like many granger roads, the Rock Island, whose first rails were laid in 1851, grew by mergers, leases, and new construction throughout its initial half-century, reaching its tentacles into seemingly every dale and creekbed of the rural Midwest. That the resulting network made for roundabout routes between major cities, and that the Rock reached some of those cities only by trackage rights, didn’t seem to be much of a problem, as long as the Farm Belt prospered.

During the Great Depression, it didn’t prosper. The entire Midwest was in the grip of an extended drought, and the southern Great Plains in particular suffered the ravages of the Dust Bowl. Agricultural traffic evaporated to a trickle.

It didn’t help that the Rock Island had been mismanaged for 30 years before 1933. Not once, but twice the railroad was bled white to prop up the ambitions of outsiders. A group of investors known as the Reid-Moore Syndicate turned their attentions from Nabisco and Diamond Match in 1901, thinking to use the Rock Island as the cen-

terpiece of a transcontinental railroad empire. While successful railroads were making the transition from shoddy initial construction to modern transportation systems, the Rock’s capital was being used as collateral for more acquisitions. Eventually the obligations outstripped income and RI filed its first bankruptcy petition in 1915.

The Reid-Moore Syndicate was out, but the reorganization scarcely reduced the company’s debt. By the 1920s, history was beginning to repeat. Frisco chairman Edward N. Brown began buying Rock Island stock for his own corporate treasury, and simultaneously, as a member of the Rock’s corporate board, he persuaded his fellow directors to approve dividends of up to 7 percent — good for Frisco, bad for Rock Island. Once again, money that could have improved the property was spent elsewhere, and when the Depression arrived, there was little left to see the Rock Island through hard times. In 1935, with the railroad’s books full of red ink and its tracks deep in Dust Bowl drifts, there was little to suggest that things were about to get better. Amazingly, though, they did.

PLANNED PROGRESS

Court-appointed trustees now were calling the shots, and even though one of them was Rock Island’s aging president, James Gorman, they concluded that new top management was needed. The trustees turned to Edward M. “Ned” Durham, a civil engineer by training but also regarded as a good operating man. A senior vice president with Missouri Pacific, he had previously worked



in the engineering departments of Chicago & North Western and Southern Railway. The Rock’s Durham era began on January 1, 1936.

Durham, in turn, hired 45-year-old John Dow Farrington as his chief operating officer. Farrington, the son of a Great Northern vice president, had made his own reputation as general manager of the Fort Worth & Denver City, the Texas operation of that Prince of Grangers, the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy. He brought in 12 good men, mostly from the Burlington, to fill out CRI&P management ranks and put a stop to the factionalism that had gnawed at the company and sapped its productivity.

If there was ever to be hope for the Rock Island, it had to start at the most fundamental level — with the track. As *Fortune* magazine observed, “Even if the road had been in perfect condition, it would have been a 1916 plant trying to produce a 1936 product.” Not only did the physical plant have to be improved just to bring it up to 1916 standards, it had to catch up on the modernization it had missed in the two decades since.

The new team didn’t have much to work with. When Farrington made his first inspection trips, he found a dispiriting succession of slow-speed track, out-of-service rolling stock, and just plain junk. He ordered a systemwide scrap drive that ultimately raised over \$5 million from old lightweight rail alone. Other scrap, including replacement of worn-out bridges and rolling stock, netted \$5 million more. It was a start.

Additional funding came from the capital markets, but not without a fight. In April 1936, the trustees asked the bankruptcy court for permission to issue \$4.5 million in new debt for deferred maintenance of way and structures. Existing creditors, fearful that their position might be compromised, argued against approval, first before the bankruptcy court and then before the Interstate Commerce Commission. In the end, however, the judge and the ICC allowed the bond issue to proceed.

It was the beginning of a program called “Planned Progress” — and while Farrington would justly be given most of the credit for the Rock’s turnaround in subsequent years, it should be noted that the plan had begun to take shape several weeks before he arrived.



The Peoria Rocket was in its eighth year on October 11, 1945, when at 2 p.m. as train 504, the day’s second trip to Chicago, it called at Bureau, Ill., where the Peoria branch met the main line. By age 10, the twice-daily service had carried 2.3 million passengers.

Ira H. Eigsti



In a photo emblematic of small boys' fascination with trains everywhere, and of the steam-to-diesel transition era, a local freight powered by a 1906-vintage Consolidation waits in the siding at Hagen, Ark., for a TA to flash by with a Memphis-bound *Rocket*.

J. M. Gray

When the Rock Island hit bottom in 1935, the company estimated it would take \$18 million to address the deferred maintenance and position it for anything like normal operations. By 1941, Farrington could tell the court that his team had accomplished all but \$1.5 million of it. In so doing, they had set the stage for the *Rockets*, the road's fleet of modern passenger trains.

"THE HARDEST THING . . ."

Rock Island folklore tells of passengers who were so accustomed to late trains that they became indignant when operations started to be on-time. Chalk it up to the same "Iowa stubborn" attitude celebrated fondly in *The Music Man*. Change can be unsettling, and it must have been downright shocking to see fast, punctual, streamlined trains on the Rock Island.

"The hardest thing we had to do," Farrington recalled in 1944, "was to live down the Rock Island's reputation. After six

months, I recommended the purchase of six streamlined trains. We had to re-establish our identity with the public. I was sure the new trains would do it."

As important as it was to convince the traveling public, the employees also needed the morale-booster. The *Rockets* succeeded on both counts.

The first mention of the new trains in the bankruptcy court files is dated November 17, 1936. The court's permission was sought for the issuance of \$2,550,000 in bonds for the purchase of 350 automobile boxcars, 20 passenger cars, and 6 diesel passenger locomotives. The dry legalese of the petition belies the budding revolution.

What's not dry is the reaction of the creditors to the request. If some of them had had their way, the new trains might never have become a reality.

Although things had begun to look up after Durham and Farrington came on board earlier that year, the Rock Island was still

very much at the mercy of the court, its creditors, and its past. When the road declared bankruptcy, it was \$31 million in debt, and the court-appointed trustees realized there was no way to meet the obligations coming due. They asked for a three-year moratorium on payments, but now that period had almost run its course and still the Rock Island was vague about resumption. In fact, with \$11.6 million in obligations maturing on January 1, 1937, the trustees were asking to take on even more debt.

It's a tribute to the company's attorneys that they were able to make their case successfully. Counsel argued that most of the other railroads in bankruptcy had been allowed to renegotiate their debt down to lower rates, but that the Rock Island had not — and they implied they would withhold payment of any obligations due on January 1 unless the creditors played along.

Judge James Wilkerson asked the railroad's attorneys to be more explicit: Did they



Two miles east of La Salle, Ill., the Rock Island's westward main track went through Split Rock Tunnel while the eastward main skirted it. One of the six unique-to-RI TA diesels zips through the short bore with the morning *Rocket* to Peoria in September 1941.

Dan K. Peterson

intend to default, or not? When they replied that they wanted only to discuss various options, Wilkerson grew notably peeved, asking why the trustees, “an arm of this court,” had not come prepared with a firm plan.

Counsel for the creditors jumped in and argued they had shown good faith when they agreed to a moratorium three years earlier, and they didn't think they should be rewarded with default. Moreover, earnings had improved since 1933, and the railroad was actually paying less in debt service as a proportion of earnings than it had before declaring bankruptcy.

After two hours of sometimes acrimonious arguments, the court adjourned with no resolution in sight — and the *Rockets* hang-

ing in the balance. Sometime before court convened the next day, however, the attorneys for both sides struck a compromise, and Judge Wilkerson agreed: the Rock Island would make a payment equal to 10 percent of the \$11.6 million about to come due, and the company would be allowed to borrow more for the new passenger trains. The *Rockets* would be ordered a month later, following the formality of Interstate Commerce Commission approval.

A STUDY IN EVOLUTION

The trains were an interesting evolutionary step in the still-new art of streamliners, borrowing from the trains that had gone before and foreshadowing some changes to

come. Like the Burlington's *Zephyrs*, the *Rockets* were built of “18-8” stainless steel, an alloy with 18 percent chromium and 8 percent nickel, resulting in high tensile strength and extraordinary shine. Also in common with other Budd-built passenger equipment, the *Rockets*' car sides were fluted for more rigidity. Like many early streamliners, the trains were articulated, with each pair of cars sharing a common truck.

Articulation saved weight, made for better tracking, and reduced aerodynamic drag, but it also hampered operational flexibility. The Rock Island was among the last railroads to order such cars, and it, too, found the arrangement was more trouble than it was worth — subsequent cars would each be



The *Texas Rocket*, first of the *Rocket* fleet, was just over half a year old when it pulled out of Houston (top) on March 13, 1938. Note its unique lettering: TEXAS ROCKET on the TA's nose emblem, and (above, also at Houston) BURLINGTON-ROCK ISLAND on the cars.

Two photos: Harry Heaney, Joe R. Thompson collection

separate vehicles with two trucks. The cars were also built with underbody skirting, and many kept this feature until the end of their service lives more than 20 years later.

The initial order of 20 cars made for six trainsets: two with 4 cars each, and four with 3 cars each. These were day trains — each had a baggage-dinette-coach, a 76-seat coach, and a round-end observation-lounge; the 4-car trains had an additional 60-seat coach. On 3-car trains, the lounge car seated 52, half in a conventional coach configuration at the forward end of the car and half in the lounge at the rear; a bar was between the sections. Observation cars for the 4-car trains seated 36 in two lounge areas separated by a bar, and they also contained a 5-seat drawing room.

The interiors were just as striking as the

flashy exteriors. Each type of car was decorated in a different scheme: the dinettes in shades of green; coaches in gray, purple, and blue; observation cars in blue, brown, and gold. It's hard to overstate the effect of such cars on Depression-era Americans who had despaired of ever again having anything new.

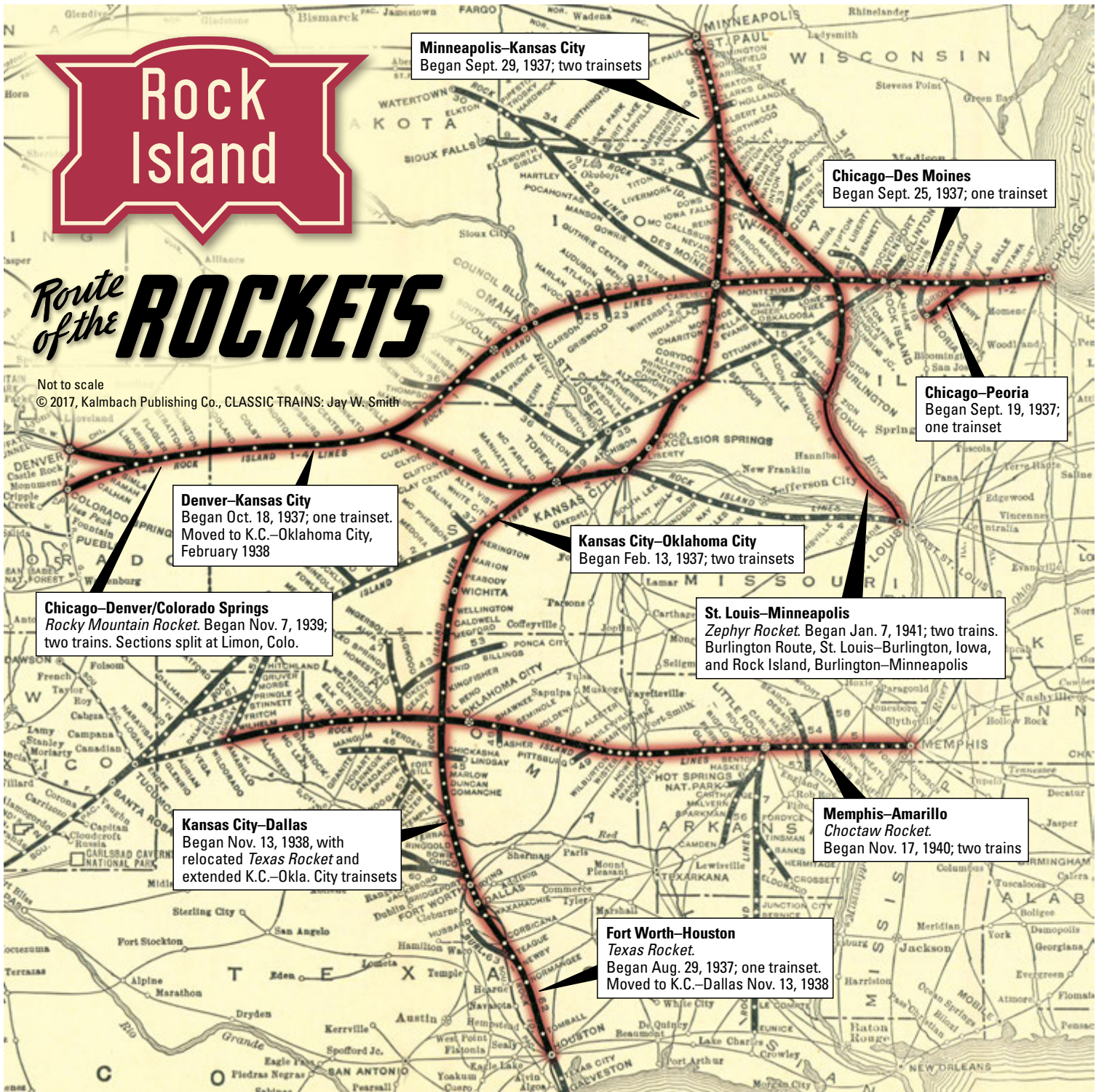
Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the first *Rockets* was their motive power. Whereas the earliest Burlington and Union Pacific streamliners had only a powered leading truck, with the trailing truck articulated with the first car, the Rock Island went for a separate locomotive. Forsaking the turret cabs and *Zephyr*-style shovel-noses of earlier trains, the *Rockets* were among the first to be powered by what came to be known as cab-unit locomotives. With elegant, deeply raked prows, the locomotives looked like baby brothers to the slightly earlier E1s that powered the Santa Fe's 1937 *Super Chief*.

Built by Electro-Motive Corp., the *Rocket* locomotives were designated as model TA (twelve-hundred horsepower, A unit), and Rock Island had the only six ever built. They

had a B-B wheel arrangement (vs. A1A-A1A for the 1,800 h.p. E1s), and their single 16-cylinder Winton 201A diesel engine sufficed for the short trains they were built to pull (the E1s each had two 12-cylinder 201As). The TAs were a forerunner of Electro-Motive's F-unit series, launched with the FT of 1939. Although the TAs would prove unequal to more demanding assignments in later years, they were more than adequate to the task of pulling the initial *Rockets*, and their 52:25 gearing was good for 110 mph.

EMC's famous design shop also gave the TAs the paint scheme that would be the base for RI's image for over two decades: a striking application of the "bow wave" theme, rendered in scarlet and crimson. The rear half of the carbody was stainless steel, providing a smooth transition to the cars behind. Gleaming under a coat of wax for their early publicity tours, the TAs were indeed eye-catching.

More important, the *Rocket* streamliners would turn a profit and help restore their owner's tarnished image.



LAUNCHING THE ROCKETS

The *Texas Rocket* was the first to debut, on August 29, 1937. Ironically, it was somewhat anticlimactic, being the second diesel streamliner on the Fort Worth–Houston route. The Burlington’s *Sam Houston Zephyr* had entered service on October 1, 1936, using a trainset bumped from the Chicago–Minneapolis *Twin Zephyrs* when that route demanded a longer train.

Moreover, the *Sam Houston Zephyr* and

Texas Rocket ran on the same track, in reality being two halves of the same service on the jointly owned Burlington–Rock Island Railroad, a marriage of convenience for the grangers between Fort Worth/Dallas and Houston (and a route with no large intermediate towns). The Rock’s train, with TA No. 602 and three cars, was unique among the *Rockets* for its BURLINGTON–ROCK ISLAND lettering, and because 602’s nose logo had the train name instead of the road name.

More typical of the trains to follow, the second RI streamliner became the *Peoria Rocket*, linking Chicago with what then was Illinois’ second-largest city, 161 miles down the Illinois River. Service began on September 19, 1937, with TA No. 603 and its four-car train in full Rock Island regalia. More substantively, the service shortened the running time on the route by a full 55 minutes. A 2-hour 35-minute schedule, including four stops, made for some fast running (frequent-

ly topping the 90 mph mark), and it also allowed the trainset to cover two daily round trips. The route was important to the Rock Island, and a rarity for it, because it had no significant rail competition.

The network continued to expand, with a Chicago–Des Moines *Rocket* and a Minneapolis–Kansas City *Rocket*, both of which debuted the following week. The latter train slashed 5 hours 50 minutes on its 493-mile route, an impressive performance that turned a plodding 14-hour overnight run into a daytime market for the Rock Island. Two of the three-car sets were assigned to this run, providing a daily trip in each direction. The Des Moines train had a four-car set, and together with the *Peoria Rocket* provided a third round trip on the eastern portion of its route, RI's busiest corridor.

The sixth and last of the original *Rocket* trains entered service between Kansas City and Denver on October 18, 1937, and once again, its speed turned an overnight market for Rock Island into a day trip. The three-car trainset lasted in this service for only four months, however, before being shifted to the Kansas City–Oklahoma City run effective February 13, 1938.

One factor was the relative lack of population on the 635-mile distance between K.C. and Denver. The seeds for the abrupt change, though, had been sown before the Denver train entered service. As first conceived when the *Rockets* were ordered, the K.C.–Denver route was to have been protected by two trainsets, providing daily service in each direction. When one of those sets was assigned to the *Texas Rocket*, the Denver service became a triweekly operation, and the Rock Island learned how tough it is to build a market without daily service.

Notwithstanding the Kansas City–Denver misstep, the *Rockets* made a splash with employees, railroad officials, and the traveling public. Just as Farrington had predicted, the trains were helping the railroad live down its bad reputation, and in those terms alone, the *Rockets* earned their keep. They also happened to be profitable, returning all of their initial \$2.2 million investment within three years. There was clearly a market for such trains in 1930s America: Farrington's intuitive hunch was confirmed, without benefit of any marketing studies.

There could be little doubt that the Rock Island was coming back from the dead. Incredibly, it hadn't even been two years since Durham and Farrington came on board.

SECOND GENERATION

Success for the initial *Rockets* bred an appetite for more. The Rock Island's trustees again petitioned the bankruptcy court for permission to acquire more new cars and locomotives, and this time, creditors didn't protest. Not only had the first trains paid for themselves, but everyone now understood



After launching its sixth *Rocket*, between Denver (top) and Kansas City, RI diverted the second train intended for the run to Texas, and the resulting triweekly schedule soon died. The train migrated to a K.C.–Oklahoma City run, and later in 1938 was joined by the former Houston train to provide daily K.C.–Dallas service. Oklahoma City, now off the *Rocket* route, was served by a motor-car shuttle to El Reno, where it is shown (middle) with the northbound *Rocket* and a Memphis–Tucumcari steam train. In 1948 (above), motor 9090 left Oklahoma City for El Reno, towing a through coach for Dallas.

From top: William Moeding, C. A. Emry, Preston George



There's lots of activity at the joint RI-Katy station in McAlester, Okla., on a fine day in 1949 as the westbound *Choctaw Rocket* loads and a Katy train stands at the right.

Robert A. Hadley



The overnight *Zephyr Rocket* from St. Louis arrives at St. Paul Union Depot. The train ran on the CB&Q as far as Burlington, Iowa, where it switched to the Rock Island.

Ben F. Cutler, Robert A. Le Massena collection

their symbolic importance as the most visible sign of a Rock Island revitalization that also included better track, modern signaling, and rebuilt bridges.

Much remained to be done on the physical plant, and in coming years, curves would be straightened, grades would be leveled, and new river bridges and freight yards would be built. None of this might have happened without the confidence that the *Rockets* engendered in the financial community.

After the first *Rockets* were in operation, new services were instituted between Kansas City and Dallas, Chicago and Denver/Colorado Springs, Memphis and Amarillo, and St. Louis and Minneapolis. All were remarkable for their own unique quirks.

The stage was set for K.C.-Dallas service when the Burlington-Rock Island assigned a second *Zephyr* trainset to the Fort Worth-Houston market in November 1938. Headed



by shovel-nose unit 9902, the train had been built for *Twin Zephyr* service and then operated as the Kansas City–St. Louis *Ozark State Zephyr* before going to Texas. Upon No. 9902's diversion to Texas, the former *Texas Rocket* train was assigned to the K.C.–Dallas run, opposite the set that had been running from Kansas City to Oklahoma City since February.

In a bizarre twist, CB&Q 9902 kept the *Texas Rocket* name on its rectangular nose emblem, not the familiar BURLINGTON ROUTE lettering.

The *Rocky Mountain Rocket* was the first train to deviate from the abbreviated consist of the originals. Drawn in its earliest days by a single 2,000 h.p. E3A (No. 625 or 626), the non-articulated, seven-car consists included the first sleeping cars in *Rocket* service. Each consist made a daily one-way trip on the 1,073-mile route.

Each consist had an 8-section 2-double-bedroom 2-compartment car for service between Chicago and Colorado Springs, and a 10-section 4-roomette car for the Denver



The *Rocket Mountain Rocket*, first in the fleet to exceed four cars, accelerates out of Bureau, Ill. At Limon, Colo., it will split into sections to Colorado Springs and Denver.

Ira H. Eigsti

section. In addition, the round-end observation-lounge car had 5 double bedrooms. The sleepers and obs cars were built by Pullman-Standard, the others by Budd.

The Colorado train was also noteworthy for a 1940 motive-power experiment unique to the Rock Island — the AB6. Essentially an E6B unit with a cab, baggage compartment, steam generator, and only one engine, it was intended to handle the Colorado Springs section. In that infancy of dieseldom, it seemed like a good concept: two units to handle the combined sections from Chicago to Limon, Colo., where they'd split. Although the train would run regularly with the AB6 (later, as middle unit of three powering a longer train), in practice, the switching maneuvers necessary at Limon to get the Colorado Springs cars behind the AB6 weren't really any simpler than the alternatives. The only thing the experiment saved was a little wind resistance and the smooth appearance of a B unit behind the leading A unit on the portion of the trip east of Limon.

Nevertheless, the *Rocky Mountain Rocket* was a success, turning a \$90,000 annual deficit on earlier trains into a \$289,000 profit. Rock Island had heavy competition in the Chicago–Denver market, from the Burlington and Union Pacific. Each offered 16-hour streamliners years before the *Rocky Mountain Rocket* was introduced in November 1939, but the Rock was competitive again in terms of equipment if not schedule.

In addition, the *Rocket* was the only way to get from Chicago to Colorado Springs without changing trains, important to the well-heeled clientele who patronized the Broadmoor and other Springs-area resorts. As John D. Farrington later observed, "Prior to the establishment of this service, we had

practically lost all our business to Colorado . . . we have recaptured our standing as a Colorado line."

The next *Rocket* to enter service was the *Choctaw Rocket*, in November 1940 between Memphis and Amarillo. It sported a Pullman-built consist of a coach, an 8-section 5-bedroom sleeper, and a dining-observation car. A lone E6 usually held down the daily run in each direction on the 762-mile route.

The *Choctaw's* coaches were interesting. The Jim Crow era is usually associated with heavyweight cars, but the *Choctaw* had "separate but equal" facilities in a streamlined package: two vestibules, two sets of restrooms, and two seating areas with a partition in between. If something can be both beautiful and ugly at the same time, these cars qualified.

The prewar era ended for the *Rockets* the same way it began, in another collaboration with the Burlington Route. In January 1941, the *Zephyr Rocket* entered service between St. Louis and Minneapolis on a 14-hour overnight schedule. Northward, the Burlington handled the train as far as its namesake Iowa city, and the Rock Island took it from there, via Cedar Rapids and Waterloo to Minneapolis.

Unlike the earlier Texas collaboration, however, the two railroads didn't supply complete trainsets for the service. Rather, each contributed to a pool of cars, and the resulting consists were thus a mongrelized combination. Heavyweight sleeping cars were included, too, although they had been modernized with air-conditioning, rolled roofs, and underbody skirting. Still, the overall appearance of the train didn't approach the elegance of either a *Zephyr* or a *Rocket*. It would be a harbinger of change.



Diesel 624, the prototype for Alco-GE's line of "DL109" 2,000 h.p. passenger units, nears La Salle Street Station, Chicago, with the daily *Rocket* from Des Moines in fall 1946.

Tom Harley

STATUS QUO NO MORE

The planes of Pearl Harbor torpedoed the Rock Island's little streamliners just as surely as they sank the ships in Hawaii. Wartime traffic swelled far beyond the trains' modest capacity, which left the Rock, like most other railroads, scrambling for solutions. The *Rocket* consists were sometimes broken up, often reassigned, and frequently augmented with different equipment. The TAs became troublesome, too — their 1,200 horses weren't enough for bigger trains, their multiple-unit capability with other locomotives proved problematic, and their front draft gear was insufficient to pull a trailing load while running in reverse. The original *Rocket* equipment served in many assignments throughout the system for more than 20 years, but the concept of designing locomotives for specific consists had been lost. Such trains simply proved too inflexible.

Before the war, though, the *Rockets* did exactly what they were designed to do, both on the road and in their employer's profit-and-loss statements. On the eve of America's entry into World War II, Ned Durham and John Farrington were called to testify before yet another reorganization hearing. (It wasn't the first and it wouldn't be the last — legal wrangling kept the company in bankruptcy until 1948.) "Our results have been most satisfactory," Farrington said, and Durham agreed, citing a return of nearly 40 percent on the first six trainsets since 1937.

In nearly two hours of testimony, Farrington rattled off an impressive litany of statistics for the reborn Rock Island: everything from the productivity of track gangs to the savings for roller-bearing-equipped steam locomotives to the cost of future improvements. He even knew the crop yields for various regions of the Rock's empire — year by year. It was a *tour de force*, not only of his knowledge, but of his understanding and vision.

It was not to last. Farrington became president upon Ned Durham's retirement in 1942 and retired himself in 1956. Farring-

ton's tenure at the helm coincided with the Rock's best years. That's not to suggest his successors were less competent — the estimable Downing Jenks followed him as president — but it is to say that even Farrington's improvements weren't enough, in the end, to save the Rock Island.

The company was a prisoner of several factors. The vagaries of farming were omnipresent, of course, but other granger roads survived because they had more diverse traffic and generated more of it on-line. The Rock Island reached the hearts of too many big cities via trackage rights, thus limiting access to urban shippers. As a result, RI's non-agricultural tonnage was largely bridge traffic, which put it at the mercy of friendly connections. The company was ever the victim of its history, as when it built southwest to Leavenworth, Kans., instead of Kansas City, or bypassed Oklahoma City on its north-south route in favor of El Reno, Okla. Even Farrington and Jenks couldn't play such a hand forever.

In its death throes, the company was the subject of an agonizing 10-year struggle to merge with the Union Pacific. By the time the ICC approved, as one wag put it, "the bride had lost her looks," and UP withdrew its petition. Meanwhile, the Rock had slid into bankruptcy for a third and final time, and it finally ceased operations in 1980. It was the biggest abandonment in U.S. railroad history up to that time.

The *Rockets* weren't the first of the prewar streamliners, and others drew a more celebrated clientele. But no other carrier of the era started with so little and achieved so much. The Rock Island came from hard luck, and to hard luck it returned. But in between, its *Rockets* reached for the stars. ■

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Chicago's La Salle Street Station was the launchpad for legions of Rock Island suburban, intercity, and long-haul trains, including several *Rockets*. Here, an E8 waits to leave with either the *Rocky Mountain Rocket* or the *Golden State* in fall 1952. At left, a Santa Fe RS1 has come over from Dearborn Station on a transfer run.

Frank and Todd Novak collection

