

Nickel Plate Road: The classic rail underdog

Tenacious and enterprising, it rose from a spurious origin to be a case-study competitor



J. David Ingles

In-sight rivals: In a June 1960 view from a Cleveland rapid-transit platform, Geeps of NYC “race” an NKP RS11-GP9 duo west toward downtown.

The New York, Chicago & St. Louis Railroad was conceived for little other reason than to be a financial thorn in the side of the mighty Vanderbilt empire. Affirming its builders’ strategic vision, high-profile financial machinations would envelop the road through most of its 83-year corporate existence.

By 1869, following its acquisition by Cornelius Vanderbilt, the Lake Shore & Michigan Southern linked Buffalo and Chicago via Cleveland, and was destined for greatness as the western anchor of the powerful New York Central System’s Water Level Route. North of Lake Erie, Vanderbilt controlled the Canada Southern after 1876, giving him a second Buffalo-Chicago route in conjunction with his Michigan Central west of Detroit.

Enter financier George Seney, who in

1879 formed a syndicate to build the Lake Erie & Western Railway to link the improbable end points of Fremont, Ohio, and Bloomington, Ill. This proved to be a prelude to construction during 1881-82 by Seney’s group of a Buffalo-Chicago road connecting with LE&W and paralleling the “Lake Shore”—a feisty decision triggered by heir William H. Vanderbilt’s aversion to sharing any of the regional traffic pie.

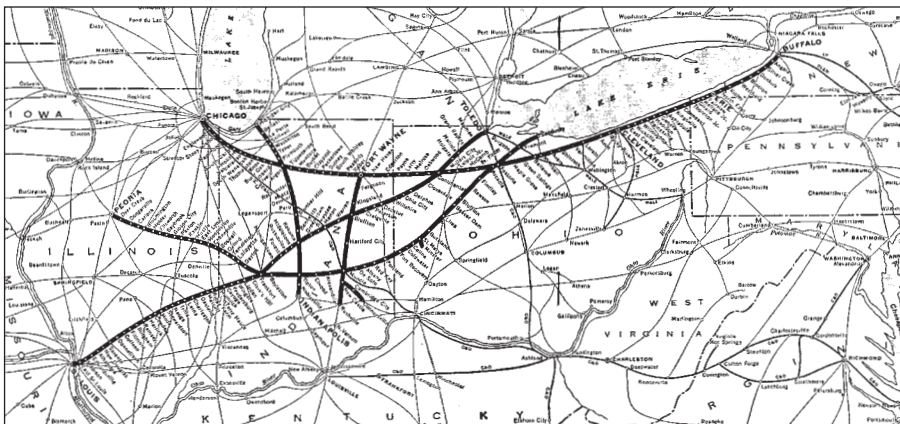
The New York, Chicago & St. Louis opened between Buffalo and Chicago on October 23, 1882, in many spots east of Cleveland just a stone’s throw from rival LS&MS. As Seney expected, the archly territorial Vanderbilt offered—without success—to buy the unfinished competitor. Persistence paid off on both sides, and the completed NYC&StL be-

came a Vanderbilt property in January 1883. Thus began 33 years of corporate neglect for the NYC&StL, which languished as an increasingly antiquated, single-track stepchild as LS&MS grew into a fast, multiple-track artery.

Although eclipsed by the Lake Shore’s plush limiteds, NYC&StL from 1893 fielded three unpretentious, reliable Chicago-Buffalo passenger trains, establishing a long-standing pattern of modest passenger service. In 1897, Delaware, Lackawanna & Western entered the picture, conveying NYC&StL cars from Buffalo to Hoboken, N.J.

When NYC&StL was being surveyed, Editor F. R. Loomis of Ohio’s *Norwalk Chronicle* waxed enthusiastically on the railroad coming to town (it built through rival Bellevue instead). Alluding to an industrial process equated with high quality, he referred to the endeavor on March 10, 1881, as “the great New York and St. Louis double-track, nickel-plated railroad.” Use of “Nickel Plate Road” proliferated, in newspapers and by the road itself. Numerous sources claimed credit for its origin, but this was the sanctioned version, and in recognition, Loomis received NYC&StL Pass No. 1 on October 17, 1882. The nickname stuck.

In 1914, LS&MS and Nickel Plate became wards of New York Central. Passage of the Clayton Act that same year was intended to bolster the earlier Sherman Antitrust Act, and left NYC with a dilemma. It was bound under the law to divest itself of competing lines by 1916,



This map from the April 24, 1949, public timetable depicts NKP’s 1,690-mile pre-W&LE system.

so Nickel Plate had to go—but where?

An innocuous 1913 encounter led to a solution that reshaped a city and an industry. Brothers Oris P. and Mantis J. Van Sweringen were self-made Cleveland real-estate developers who, in acquiring land for their Shaker Heights suburban enclave, purchased acreage from NYC Vice President Alfred H. Smith [“Van Sweringens Reach for the Stars,” Spring 2005 CLASSIC TRAINS]. “The Vans,” as the brothers were known, planned a rapid-transit line connecting Shaker Heights with downtown Cleveland, where their plans would culminate with the 1930 opening of Cleveland Union Terminal and the Terminal Tower complex. In 1916 the Vans approached Smith, by then NYC president, to discuss their plans involving land owned by the Nickel Plate.

As the Clayton Act’s divestiture deadline loomed, Smith engineered a sale to the Vans of not only the land they sought, but—on good terms arising from his admiration for the brothers—of the entire Nickel Plate Road. Guided initially by Smith’s insight, the Vans parlayed their investment into a highly leveraged empire that, through their Alleghany Corp. holding company, included control of six other big railroads: Chesapeake & Ohio, Pere Marquette, Erie, Wheeling & Lake Erie, Chicago &

Eastern Illinois, and Missouri Pacific.

In an irony that would haunt the New York Central in the decades to come, the gaunt NYC&StL was ripe for re-equipping under its new owners. Addressing the Vans’ lack of railroad experience, Smith orchestrated John J. Bernet’s move from an NYC vice-presidency to be Nickel Plate’s president. Neglected physical plant and obsolete motive power received needed attention under Bernet, who reincarnated the road into a lean and aggressive contender.

Acquisition of two roads in 1922-23 tripled Nickel Plate’s mileage. The first was a homecoming, of sorts, when 713-mile Lake Erie & Western, by this time reaching Peoria and Indianapolis, was merged. The second permitted Nickel Plate to finally make good on its “St. Louis” claim, as it bought the 450-mile Toledo, St. Louis & Western (the “Clover Leaf Route”), a former narrow-gauge linking Toledo and East St. Louis with a half-interest (with Grand Trunk Western) in 48-mile Detroit & Toledo Shore Line. Around this time, NYC&StL adopted “NKP” as its reporting marks.

The Advisory Mechanical Committee, formed by C&O, NKP, Erie, and Pere Marquette in 1929, acted as a clearing house to develop and implement equipment specifications and designs. AMC’s first project was C&O’s T-1 2-10-4



Jim Shaughnessy

As an eastbound clears in the distance, NKP 779, Lima’s last 2-8-4, and a sister placed five cars back because of bridge weight restrictions, leave NH Tower near North East, Pa., March 1957.

Fallen Flags Remembered



Mert Leet

With two of the ten 1950 P-S coaches visible, NKP train 8 eases into Chicago's Englewood Union Station behind Hudson 170 in June 1951.



R. J. Wilhelm

"Bluebird" PA 182, with NKP's unique notched-nose bell, and a sister are ready to leave Englewood with train 7, the *Westerner*, in 1959.

of 1930, followed by the first of NKP's legendary 2-8-4 Berkshires in 1934. The "Berks," and the manner in which they were employed, enabled NKP to surmount much of the 1930's economic adversity and find its calling as a high-speed conveyor of overhead freight. NKP would order an eventual 80 of the AMC-designed 2-8-4's.

Following the Vans' deaths, financier Robert R. Young gained control of Alleghany Corp. in 1937. Under his charismatic direction, C&O gained stock control of Nickel Plate in December 1937.

During John W. Davin's presidency, NKP embarked on a comprehensive postwar rehabilitation. More Berkshires had arrived, and between 1943 and Davin's death in 1949, NKP invested over \$60 million in equipment and physical plant. The famous "Nickel Plate High Speed Service" slogan debuted, and Centralized Traffic Control began on a main line that was already mostly single-track (another ironic benefit from the lean LS&MS years). Piggyback service, radio, and unit trains were other efficiencies championed by the postwar NKP.

Young's abortive attempt to consolidate C&O, NKP, W&LE, and PM in 1945 led to C&O relinquishing NKP control in November 1947. The ICC then authorized Nickel Plate to acquire all of C&O's holdings in the 506-mile Wheeling & Lake Erie ["Fallen Flags Remembered," Spring 2003]. Rich in coal and ore traffic, "the Wheeling" was leased by Nickel Plate Road in December 1949.

Diesels—Alco and EMD switchers—arrived in 1942, but NKP stayed committed to Super Power steam out on the

road, as 2-8-4's replaced 2-8-2's and smaller power. An order for four long-delayed EMD BL1 road-switchers was canceled in July '47; also that month, 11 Alco PA1's were ordered for passenger service, replacing 4-6-2's and 4-6-4's. After assessing CB&Q F3's and two F7A demos—which EMD presumptively sent painted in blue and gray—in 1948-49, NKP surprised the industry by ordering 10 more 2-8-4's from on-line Lima Locomotive Works. No. 779, delivered in May 1949, was Lima's last steam locomotive [Spring 2000 CT]. With 25 C&O GP7's leased to expedite dieselization, NKP's last mainline revenue steam run occurred on July 2, 1958, behind Berk 746; 0-8-0 212 closed out all steam in the Conneaut, Ohio, yard on July 18, 1959.

NKP owned 440 diesels (including four ex-W&LE NW2's), all black with yellow stripes except the PA "Bluebirds." EMD, Alco, FM, Baldwin, Lima, and GE all were represented. GP7's, GP9's, RS3's, and RS11's dominated road service, with six-motor RSD12's and SD9's hauling mineral traffic on the Wheeling. The second generation began in 1962 when the PA's went to Alco toward 11 RS36's, 2 for passenger service (joining nine 1956 GP9's). Ten GP30's and solitary GP35 and C420 wreck-replacement units finished NKP's diesel purchases.

Augmenting its modernized heavy-weight coaches and diners, plus two 18-roomette ex-demo Pullmans, NKP in 1950 re-equipped its six passenger trains with 25 Pullman-Standard lightweight cars: 10 52-seat coaches and 15 City-series sleepers, (13 10-roomette/6-double bedroom cars [see "Second Section"]

and two 5-double-bedroom/lounge cars. Each Buffalo-Chicago train rated two Bluebirds and the Cleveland-St. Louis *Blue Arrow/Blue Dart* one each.

After fending off advances from new majority shareholder DL&W during 1952-56 ["Last 11 Years of the Lackawanna," Summer 2007], NKP began merger talks with the Norfolk & Western. Fresh from its 1959 Virginian acquisition, the N&W was eager to grow, and NKP+N&W was in part a reaction to the NYC+PRR talks then under way. The merger plan presented to the ICC in March 1961 was approved in June 1964. It called for N&W (as surviving entity) to merge with NKP, acquire control of Pittsburgh & West Virginia, and lease the Akron, Canton & Youngstown and the PRR-controlled Wabash to create a 7,800-mile system. Purchase of PRR's Columbus-Sandusky, Ohio, line was included to link N&W with NKP (at Bellevue) and thus the other partners. Merger day was October 16, 1964. Various portions of NKP subsequently were downgraded,



John S. Ingles

This ex-W&LE caboose, at Cleveland in July 1959, displays NKP's "high speed" slogan.

sold, or abandoned, but the Buffalo-Chicago trunk has remained a vital link in N&W's (after 1982, Norfolk Southern's) network.

Even as N&W's influence advanced, three mid-1960's events laid the foundation for NKP's immortality, and its pivotal role in the development of the rail-enthusiast world we know today.

First was Kalmbach's publication in 1965 of John A. Rehor's 483-page *Nickel Plate Story*, a seminal work in the rail history field. Next, in 1966, came the formation by Tony Koester and Glenn Pizer of the Nickel Plate Road Historical & Technical Society, progenitor of all today's single-railroad interest groups. Third, a significant piece of NKP history was revived in 1968 when Ross Rowland's High Iron Co. restored 2-8-4 759 to operation. One of the first examples of retired "big steam" to be reactivated, 759 garnered headlines in 1969 when it led Rowland's "Golden Spike Centennial Limited" over much of the train's cross-country mileage, including a return on the old NKP from St. Louis eastward.

In the late 1970's, a number of ex-Nickel Plate diesels shed enough N&W paint to let their old stripes and lettering show through. Former Nickel Platers invariably smiled at the sight of these shabby survivors, symbolizing a tenacious and enterprising railroad, gone but far from forgotten. ■

NICKEL PLATE FACT FILE

(Comparative figures are for 1949 and 1963)

Route-miles: 2,322; 2,170

Locomotives: 486 (414 steam); 411 (diesel)

Passenger cars: 89; 60

Freight cars: 29,107; 22,305

Headquarters city: Cleveland, Ohio

Notable passenger trains: *Nickel Plate Limited* and *New Yorker/Westerner* (Buffalo-Chicago)

Special interest group: Nickel Plate Road Historical & Technical Society, P.O. Box 381, New Haven, IN 46774-0381; www.nkpths.org

Recommended reading: *The Nickel Plate Story* by John Rehor (Kalmbach, 1965); *Nickel Plate Road Diesel Locomotives* by Kevin Holland (TLC Publishing, 1998)

Sources: Author's collection; John B. Corns; Allen County Historical Society