

The Alton: Even Uncle Dan couldn't save it

How an unwanted historic Midwestern railroad managed to survive

The Chicago & Alton Railroad in the 19th century was an envied property dominating its Chicago-St. Louis-Kansas City territory, yielding consistently solid earnings, paying generous dividends, and running famous and popular passenger trains. By 1931, however, when Daniel Willard added the property to his Baltimore & Ohio system, it bore little resemblance to its predecessor.

After the pre-World War I years, the C&A's books had shown red ink, which continued through a 1922 receivership. C&A had added no new locomotives since the early 1920's, no freight cars since the early 1900's, and, except for 18 heavyweight Pullman-built cars for the *Alton Limited*, no new varnish since 1924. Its shrinking revenues came largely from low-value coal. Although its mainline passenger trains remained popular, they were increasingly vulnerable to automobile competition.

A reasonable observer might ask, what was Dan Willard thinking?

The short answer: Cooperation and a new market. In 1920, Congress charged the Interstate Commerce Commission with devising a railroad consolidation plan. When the final draft was published in 1929, Chicago & Alton was little more than a footnote despite its strategic routes—it and 62 mostly Eastern coal roads were under a B&O umbrella.

Willard was a proponent of consolidation well before this. Although his B&O reached Chicago, Springfield, Ill., and St. Louis, Willard argued that the sickly C&A should be made part of the ICC's designated Wabash-Seaboard sys-



Al Chione collection

Pacific 5280 and two of Alton's pioneer E7's await assignments at the tiny engine terminal just south of Chicago Union Station in 1946. New owner GM&O adopted the red-and-maroon colors.

tem. Given his obvious hope that the C&A would become somebody else's problem, Willard's quick decision to embrace it surprised the industry. He decided a show of cooperation would help get ICC approval for takeover of the Eastern roads he did want.

It was a winning strategy. On December 11, 1930, with all parties satisfied, sale of the C&A was approved. ICC hearings were held the following April. They lasted only two days; Willard testified he sought the railroad only to gain simple control and had no plans for reorganization. B&O incorporated a new subsidiary, Alton Railroad, on January 7, 1931, which purchased the prop-

erty on July 18. H. B. Voorhees, a B&O vice president and president of subsidiary Baltimore & Ohio Chicago Terminal, was placed in charge.

His task would not be easy. Revenues had declined from \$28.7 million in 1929 to \$14 million in 1932, and while the C&A had spent \$3.4 million at the Depression's start on maintenance of way and \$6.3 million on repairing engines and cars, in 1932 it spent only \$1.6 million on either. With traffic drying up, and despite a major expense control program, Alton's net operating income plunged from \$3.3 million in 1931 to \$486,783 for 1932.

Half the Alton's tonnage was from interchange in Kansas City and St. Louis, not from on-line farms and industries. The other half was mostly coal from southern Illinois mines, which were declining fast. Except on Chicago-St. Louis trains, local passenger traffic was all but gone. Self-propelled motor cars easily replaced steam locals.

Alton locomotives were renumbered to conform with B&O's fleet, and in 1933 a major scrapping program began. Of 320 C&A engines on the roster in 1929, only 181 remained. In addition to two Mallets bought in 1910 to help freights over Atlanta Hill, the ruling grade on the Chicago-St. Louis line, what remained were 70 2-8-2 Mikados



Paul Slager

Alton 2-8-0 2661 heads east from Streator, Ill., toward Dwight, on a branch that once had been part of a through Chicago-Peoria passenger service route via Washington, Ill., and the TP&W.

(the newest 12 years old), 53 2-8-0 Consolidations (the latest from 1910), 5 2-6-0's (some from 1900), 15 0-6-0's as old as the Moguls, 2 1911 Ten-Wheelers, and 34 4-6-2 Pacifics from 1903-13.

C&A had 13,547 freight cars in 1929. By 1932, most were unneeded and one-third were scrapped, leaving 4,850 with C&A or Alton reporting marks. The passenger-car fleet also was downsized, from 231 in 1929 to just 86 (including 7 motor cars), almost half of them head-end cars.

Little integration of B&O and Alton facilities or functions occurred. Servicing of B&O engines at St. Louis was transferred to the Alton at suburban Venice, Ill., while in Springfield, operations were consolidated at Alton's Ridgely Yard and B&O's passenger trains moved to the Alton's depot. In Chicago, Alton passenger-train servicing was moved to the B&O's coach yard, but Alton trains remained in Union Station and B&O's in Grand Central.

C&A had been better known for its innovative passenger service than for freight. A string of firsts kept it ahead of rivals Illinois Central and Wabash in the competitive Chicago-St. Louis trade (their mileages were virtually equal): Pullman's first sleeping car and dining cars, reclining seats for coach passengers, on-board radios and libraries, and dedicated women's sections. C&A was an early carrier of Railway Post Office cars and held the contract for the lucrative Chicago-St. Louis mail run.

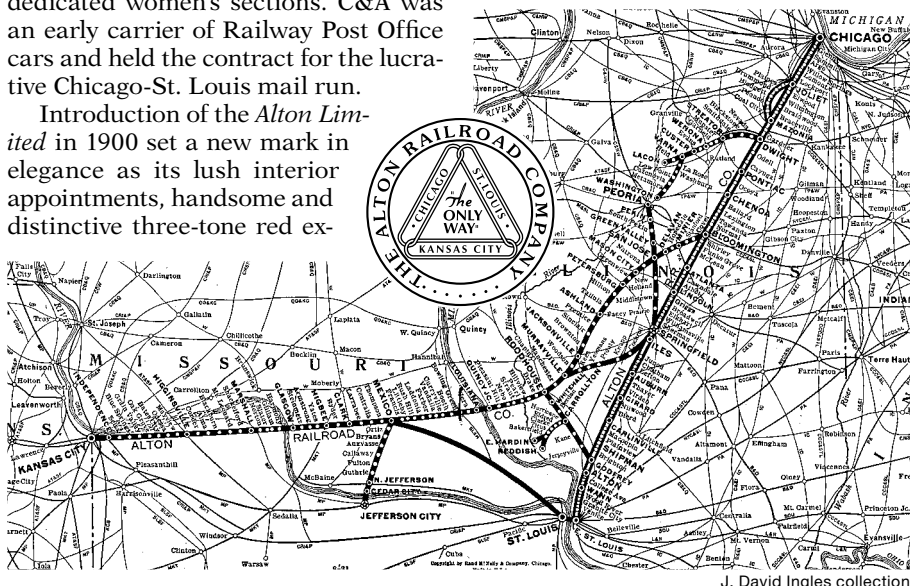
Introduction of the *Alton Limited* in 1900 set a new mark in elegance as its lush interior appointments, handsome and distinctive three-tone red ex-

teriors, and fast schedule made it first choice in the Chicago-St. Louis corridor. In 1932 it became the first air-conditioned Chicago-St. Louis train.

Parent B&O, competitive with the Pennsylvania Railroad on the New York-Washington run, in 1934 ordered a pair of experimental lightweight, air-conditioned, streamlined eight-car trainsets from American Car & Foundry. For power, B&O's Mt. Clare Shops built two distinctive engines: 4-4-4 *Lady Baltimore* and 4-6-4 *Lord Baltimore*; B&O also ordered an 1,800 h.p. Electro-Motive Corp. box-cab diesel, No. 50.

At the same time, IC ordered a diesel-powered, lightweight, streamlined articulated train for its Chicago-St. Louis run and announced a fast schedule. Alton's mainline passenger service was its one continuing success, and since the road had nothing with which to contest IC, B&O shipped over one of its new ACF trains. On July 1, 1935, a train with the 4-4-4 debuted on a schedule an hour faster than any before. Named *Abraham Lincoln*, the train not only stole IC's thunder but began turning in the highest passenger revenue per mile of any U.S. long-haul train.

Just before introducing its *Green Diamond*, IC announced an even faster schedule. The *Lady Baltimore* 4-4-4 was fast but required water and coal stops,



"The Only Way": Alton's 1933 timetable contained this system map. The line west from St. Louis to Francis, Mo., represents the Burlington's part of their joint route to Kansas City.

Fallen Flags Remembered



Tom Mohr

B&O box-cab diesel 50 rolls Alton's northbound *Abraham Lincoln*—one of two streamliners the parent supplied—over a new highway underpass near Carlinville, Ill., on August 17, 1937.

which B&O's diesel didn't, so another call went to Baltimore, and in April 1936, a month before IC's train debuted, "the Abe" had the first diesel in the corridor, making an unheard-of 4-hour 55-minute schedule. Months later, B&O sent its other new train, with *Lord Baltimore*, to the Alton, which named it *Ann Rutledge*. With two streamliners and the elegant heavyweight *Alton Limited*, the Alton had three good competitors.

Alton's Kansas City-Chicago passenger service was down to a slow heavyweight train, the *Hummer*, plus an all-stops K.C.-Bloomington motor car, but the picture brightened in 1937 for K.C.-St. Louis riders when Burlington and Alton joined forces on their 1904 "short-cut route" with two streamlined, articulated diesel trains, the *Ozark State Zephyr* and *General Pershing Zephyr*.

World War II temporarily boosted the Alton's fortunes. By the end of 1942,

freight train-miles and ton-miles jumped 21 percent. Tonnage was evenly divided among tanks of oil from Texas, Louisiana, and Oklahoma; boxcars of ammunition and bombs from the new arsenal at Elwood, Ill. (today's Logistics Park on BNSF); and flatcars carrying half-tracks and tanks out of Peoria and Springfield. Yards that had been virtually empty during the Depression were full of cars bound for seaports on both coasts. Passenger-miles increased only 2 percent, but ridership swelled 28 percent.

When he reached age 80 in 1941, Willard retired and passed the presidency to Roy White, who decided Alton's war-swollen traffic would not be sustained in peacetime. In late 1942, a reorganization petition was filed. Henry Gardner, a Chicago attorney, was appointed as receiver. Voorhees remained as president, and both men started rebuilding the railroad.

They struggled to match too little power and too few cars with demand. In 1937, after B&O received its EMC EA passenger diesels, it found its Jersey City-St. Louis *National Limited* schedule had enough slack in it to permit the units to make a St. Louis-Chicago round trip on the *Ann Rutledge* and *Fast Mail*. This put diesels on three good Alton trains. To help, the best Alton 4-6-2's were modernized.

A 1942 decision to dieselize the Alton was delayed when the War Production Board suspended EMD's production of passenger units, but Alton received seven E7's in 1945, including the first two produced. Alton had diesel switchers, too, giving Alco in 1943 an order that eventually totaled 15 1,000 h.p. units.

The first new freight cars in 20 years and the first steel boxcars—1,100—started appearing in 1943-44, as did 150 steel and 850 composite hoppers to serve reopened mines. In 1945 came 10 aluminum alloy boxcars, with steam and signal lines, for high-speed mail-storage duty. Alton's passenger ridership rose from 740,054 in 1940 to 2.2 million in 1945, a level not seen in decades.

During three years of reorganization, virtually no one expressed interest in the Alton. One exception was Isaac B. "Ike" Tigrett, president of the Gulf, Mobile & Ohio, a 1,948-mile, Mobile/New Orleans-to-East St. Louis line he created five years earlier in the merger of Gulf, Mobile & Northern and Mobile & Ohio. Tigrett initially balked when a board member suggested the GM&O take over the Alton, because of the line to Kansas City. All Tigrett wanted was a



Wayne Bridges

Motor cars helped Alton trim losses on branch trains. Car 2504, at Delavan, Ill., circa 1949, is running as Bloomington-Roodhouse train 29.



EMD illustration: R. R. Wallin collection


Alton ordered 20 F3's, which would've looked like this but for the GM&O merger; instead they came in red and maroon as 800's.

Chicago route to better compete with IC. After a friend and business associate, Burlington's Ralph Budd, proposed to take Alton's Kansas City-Francis, Mo., line, Tigrett charged ahead. In September 1945 after quick hearings, Tigrett had his route to Chicago ["Fallen Flags Remembered," Spring 2005]. The K.C. line deal never went through, but the route hung in there ["GM&O's Western Division: A Survivor," Summer 2000].

Assimilation was not immediate. As World War II ended, Alton added 10 Alco RS1's, the same road-switcher type already serving GM&O. Alton also ordered 20 EMD F3's, which arrived in 1947 lettered GM&O, in Alton's red-and-maroon but with a slogan, "The Alton Route." ACF got an order for 19 cars that eventually included 11 lightweight coaches, 4 parlor cars, and 4 sleepers.

Although both GM&O and Alton got to East St. Louis, they did not physi-

cally connect. The Terminal Railroad Association of St. Louis' Front Street track became their only link.

On May 31, 1947, 100 years and three months after the February 27, 1847, charter of C&A ancestor Alton & Sangamon, the Alton ceased to exist. Tigrett's buyout proved a success. Even though he wound up stuck with the Kansas City line, he figured out how to make the property a paying proposition. In 1972, IC and the profitable, parallel GM&O implemented long-held plans to merge. Today, the old Alton main lines are split among three Class 1's. Canadian National, through its 1998 purchase of the IC, has Chicago-Joliet; Union Pacific, from its 1996 Southern Pacific merger, has Joliet-East St. Louis; and Kansas City Southern, through its 1997 purchase of Gateway Western, has the K.C. line. Wonder what Dan Willard would say. 

ALTON FACT FILE

(Comparative figures are for 1929 and 1947)

Route-miles: 1,053; 985

Locomotives: 320; 91

Passenger cars: 231; 112

Freight cars: 13,547; 2,752

Headquarters city: Chicago, Ill.

Notable passenger trains: *Abraham Lincoln, Alton Limited, Ann Rutledge, Hummer, Midnight Special*

Special interest group: Gulf, Mobile & Ohio Historical Society, P.O. Box 1753, Marion, IL 62959, www.gmo.org

Recommended reading: *History of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad*, by John F. Stover (Purdue University Press, 1987); *Gulf, Mobile & Ohio*, by James H. Lemly (Richard D. Irwin, 1953); *Chicago & Alton Railroad*, by Gene V. Glendinning (Northern Illinois University Press, 2002).

Source: Author's collection