

Ghost train to Cleveland



Si Herring

On the eve of Amtrak, a first-class farewell to the New York Central passenger legacy

By William Benning Stewart

Befitting the day's upcoming events, February 20, 1971, dawned drizzly and cold in Indianapolis. By mid-morning 22 pilgrims, part of a rare sect honoring the final weeks of private-sector American passenger railroading, had made their way to Union Station, where they were delighted to see a time machine awaiting them on Track 8. No matter that almost all the great limiteds had been annulled or faced an uncertain future—when these travelers saw the lights of Pullman car *Castle Valley*, absorbed its enticing exterior tang of wet

stainless steel, fresh running-gear lubricants, and sauna-like steam, stepped up into its muffled comforts and inhaled the unmistakable aroma of regulation New York Central sleeping-car disinfectant, they were home again.

A decade before its role as a PC “ghost train,” NYC 315 stands at Bellefontaine. The date is July 16, 1960, and the E7’s still wear lightning stripes, but the train is already all mail and express cars with a single coach.

In one of the most unusual and now least-remembered special movements just prior to Amtrak, these travelers had made arrangements with Penn Central management in Philadelphia to have privately owned ex-NYC 10-roomette/6-double-bedroom car *Castle Valley* move in mail trains 316 and 315 from Indianapolis to Cleveland and return on that February weekend. The cheerful mood on the car belied the grim realities of the host railroad, successor to the once-great NYC and its former Pennsylvania Railroad nemesis for three years but now bankrupt for eight months. Passen-



ger trains, the source of much of PC's monetary malaise, were not celebrated by the company, as they had once been by NYC; proponents could only look ahead to Amtrak for salvation of a few remaining limiteds and look back with nostalgia at those already lost.

While other passenger-train devotees were setting up farewell trips on famous limiteds that would vanish on May 1, this impromptu junket on *Castle Valley* honored the heritage of one that had died three years earlier. NYC had long advertised its top New York–St. Louis flyer, the all-Pullman, extra-fare *Southwestern Limited*, as having “service and equipment identical with that of the *20th Century Limited*.” Certainly it had been the premier train on the Central’s former Big Four Cleveland–Indianapolis “Bee Line” until its customer base eroded in the 1950s and it gradually shrank in the mid-’60s. (Bee Line was a nickname dating to the joining of 19th century predecessors Indianapolis & Bellefontaine and Bellefontaine & Indiana.)

While the final run of the last remnant of the *Southwestern* had occurred in early 1968, fate conspired to keep another vestige of better times on the Bee Line. Trains 315 and 316 were the bones of the old *Cleveland Special*, once sleeper and dining car-equipped but still decidedly secondary to the *Southwestern*. In their now nameless status, 315 and 316 normally had a pair of E units, several baggage/storage mail cars, a few mail-filled Flexi-Van container flats, and a coach—the latter along for the ride only because PC had been repeatedly vexed in its discontinuance efforts.

With a 9:35 a.m. departure from Indianapolis and an overnight return from Cleveland, these little-known trains offered the friends of *Castle Valley* a last chance to ride and sleep in a New York Central Pullman racing at track speed along a former Big Four main line. Thanks to Indianapolis station master Ben Wesselman and other PC passenger officials, the railroad agreed to handle the car for a minimum of 18 first-class fares. And so began the unlikely last trip of a Pullman on what had been a segment of one of America’s premier passenger railroads.

Our hosts that morning were five veteran Bee Line trainmen: conductor Ray Whistler, engineer R. A. Nichols, fireman D. L. Foreman, brakeman R. J. Hughes Jr., and flagman Shod H. Dellacca. Joining Whistler and Dellacca in ex-NYC coach 2908, a matching Budd Co. product that likely had shared consists with *Castle Valley* over the years, were about a dozen PC



John Fuller

Ghost train waiting: Pullman *Castle Valley*, coach 2908, and a baggage car await train 316’s locomotives at Indianapolis Union Station on the morning of Saturday, February 20, 1971.

trainmen deadheading to freight assignments. It wasn’t long before 2908 was filled with cigarette smoke, questions about who was working what job, reminiscences of the old days, and agreement that the railroad on which they had hired out had gone straight to hell under bad management in New York and Philadelphia.

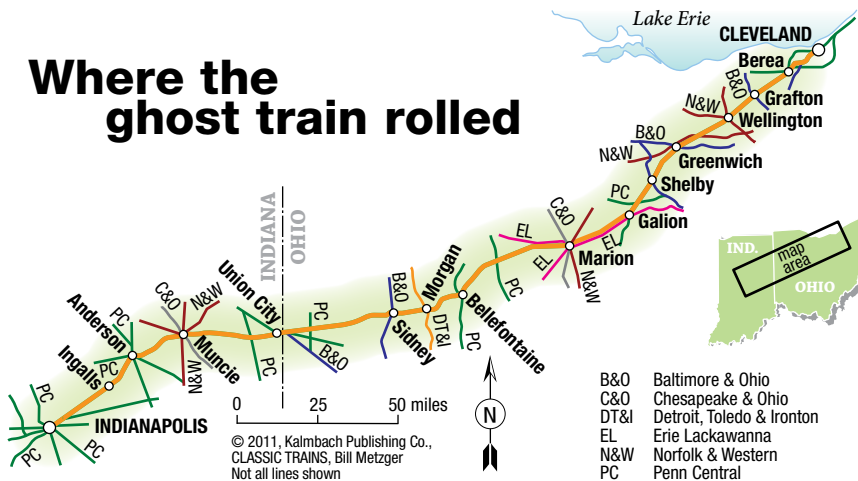
The mood on *Castle Valley* was brighter, at least at the beginning of the trip. When the vestibule end door closed with a reassuring *whoomph*, all fell silent around passengers suddenly surrounded by Pullman traditions. The hush was broken only by muffled conversations down the hall and an occasional *clank* from the steam heating. There was still the pleasant bounce provided by the burgundy fern-pattern carpeting, as well as the opportunity to freshen up at a polished stainless-steel sink and pat oneself dry with a starched towel proclaiming itself PROPERTY OF

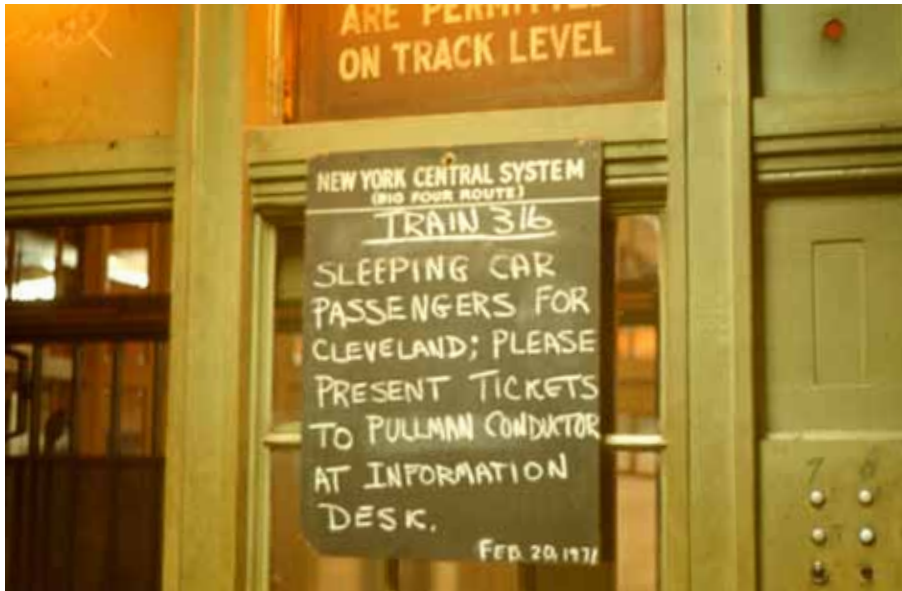
THE PULLMAN COMPANY before settling into an overstuffed seat in anticipation of the journey ahead.

The vehicle providing these sensory experiences was one of 40 *Valley*-series sleepers built during NYC’s flurry of postwar passenger optimism, when the railroad spent almost \$60 million re-equipping its “Great Steel Fleet” with new lightweight cars. This series carried names ranging from the carrier-appropriate (*Mohawk Valley*), to the geographical (*Missouri Valley*), to the pastoral (*Meadow Valley*), to the light-hearted (*Happy Valley*). *Castle Valley* honored the mansion-lined Hudson River valley, arguably the most scenic part of NYC’s famed Water Level Route.

Valley-series cars were regularly assigned to the *Southwestern Limited*; *Castle Valley* was no stranger to the Bee Line. But the car almost missed a happy ending: retired in 1968, it was stored without its water tanks being drained,

Where the ghost train rolled





The ancient Big Four gate sign at Indianapolis Union Station was an authentic artifact, but the message chalked by one of *Castle Valley's* patrons was strictly tongue-in-cheek.



In a steamy view from *Castle Valley's* vestibule at Morgan Tower, 316 crosses to Track 2 and clatters over the DT&I behind a long-hood-forward passenger GP9 and an E8, both ex-NYC.

resulting in extensive freeze damage to its plumbing. Rescuing the car a year later, its new owners spent weeks removing the concrete aisle floor and replacing the ruined plumbing. Now repaired and thoroughly cleaned inside and out, with a fresh air-brake-test stencil on its underside, the car was ready to resume its intended role. At 9:35 a.m. conductor Whistler waved a highball to the head end and *Castle Valley's* last dance across the Bee Line's steel ballroom floor began.

As 316 gained speed on the largely tangent, double-track main, most of its NYC regulation 127-lb. Dudley rail still good for 79-mph running, a hardy few

passengers took up posts in the vestibule. Ahead were a GP9 and an E8, a baggage car, and the ex-NYC coach; behind, an assortment of mail and express cars. Soon our train was roaring through towns with the velocity, if not the elegance, of its forbears, but no one seemed to notice. For those who knew what had passed before over these rails, No. 316 was now only a specter of trains departed—a ghost train to Cleveland.

The legacy of the *Southwestern Limited* dated to a consolidation of railroads that in 1889 created the Cleveland, Cincinnati, Chicago & St. Louis Railroad, popularly the “Big

Four.” By 1895, the original *South-Western Limited* was carded as Nos. 11 and 12, magical digits whose mere mention would bring Big Four employees to attention for seven decades. By the World War I era, the service and equipment parallels with the *Century* had been established; when Nos. 25 and 26 received new cars, so did 11 and 12. In the 1920s that meant top-of-the-line steel heavyweights. In the late '30s it meant some of the *Central's* early, elegant streamlined equipment, including, in acknowledgment of Depression-era economics, coaches. In addition to its primary New York–St. Louis trade, the *Southwestern* also carried Boston–St. Louis Pullmans and coaches, making for lengthy consists west of Albany, N.Y.

The scale of the *Southwestern's* daily operations would be more than enough first-class service for many railroads, but in its heyday, passenger traffic on the Bee Line supported an entire fleet of trains. The *Knickerbocker* moniker of the Big Four's next-best train between Cleveland and St. Louis may have required explanation to some outside New York, but there was no misunderstanding names like the *Missourian*, the *Gateway*, and the *Cleveland Special*. All went about their business with an assortment of Pullmans, lounges, diners, coaches, and head-end cars. Still another tier of trains carried copious amounts of mail, express, and local passengers.

In its streamlined configurations, the *Southwestern* boasted teardrop observation cars like the prewar *Wabash River* and the postwar *Wingate Brook*; between them and the Hudsons or E units (and an occasional Alco PA) on the head end were such exotica as Budd twin-unit dining cars, *Harbor-series* 22-roomette cars, *Stream-series* sleeper-lounges, the regular *Valley 10&6's* and 2900-series coaches, even a streamlined Railway Post Office. Passengers dined from an extensive menu, relaxed in the lounge seating of attractive club cars, stretched lazily in reclining coach seats, and slept well in the care of attentive Pullman porters. Surely these were the *ne plus ultra* editions of Nos. 11 and 12, chic and refined conveyances that connected Grand Central Terminal and St. Louis Union Station through culture as well as commerce.

Years later, when I heard Frank Sinatra's performance of the famous Nelson Riddle arrangement of Cole Porter's “I've Got You Under My Skin,” I made the comparison between the swinging cadence and smooth lyrics of the song and the sophisticated *Southwestern Limited* of my youth (love, after all, comes in many forms). The recording



Jay Williams

begins with a rolling saxophone-bass-piano track suggesting a long limited accelerating away from a running air test. Listening to Sinatra voice the core message of the song—"I've got you under my skin/I've got you deep in the heart of me/So deep in my heart that you're really a part of me"—I pictured myself at age 10, again departing Indianapolis Union Station on the *Southwestern* for New York, staring through a picture window aboard a *Valley*-series sleeper, watching the trio of lightning-striped E units ahead leading our train through the curves and switches at IU Tower. *This seat is where I want to sit and watch forever*, I thought at the time. "I'd sacrifice anything come what might/ For the sake of havin' you near . . ."

In the midst of the recording the tempo picks up, suggesting a *Southwestern* engineer pulling back on the throttle, just as a hard-charging trombone solo replicates the effect of a freight slamming past on the other main. At its end the song eases to a perfect stop, as if arriving at a Grand Central bumping post. The hallmark of this mental meta-

Castle Valley conjures the spirit of the *Southwestern Limited* as train 316 rumbles over the big viaduct on the approach to Cleveland Union Terminal. Lattice towers were for CUT catenary.



John Fuller

As it had so many times before, *Castle Valley* awaits its guests at a CUT platform—but this time will be the last. The train's regular coach, also built by Budd, was a perfect match.



CLASSIC TRAINS collection

In 1925, during its all-Pullman heyday, the *Southwestern* poses behind two Big Four Pacifics northeast of Indianapolis. The lead engine, No. 6500, carries the train name on the tender.



William Benning Stewart collection



Jay Williams collection

Brochure cover notwithstanding, standard Hudsons were regular *Southwestern* power in the 1930s and '40s. Capping the postwar edition were sleeper-obs cars like *Singing Brook*, the ideal vantage point for inspecting the Big Four speedway one day and the Hudson Valley the next.

phor is the timely association of a splendid musical performance (recorded by Sinatra in January 1956, for his *Songs for Swingin' Lovers* album) with the disciplined transportation performance and lifestyle lessons offered by the *Southwestern Limited* that I came to know in the same era. Like the record itself, it all came to an end far too soon.

In 1930 no fewer than 14 daily passenger trains patrolled the Big Four between St. Louis and Cleveland; by 1961 there were only 4. In the postwar years Cleveland–St. Louis proved to be one of NYC's weaker passenger routes. Increasing numbers of St. Louis and Indianapolis travelers didn't see the point of going via Syracuse and Schenectady to midtown Manhattan, choosing instead either the Pennsylvania's more direct route—or much-faster air travel. Improved highways and automobiles began taking the remaining short-haul traffic. As early as 1957, NYC petitioned to end all passenger service west of Indianapolis, citing a 76 percent decline in

patronage since 1946 and an estimated annual loss of \$1.2 million. But another decade would pass before the *Southwestern* finally died of malnutrition.

That left Nos. 315 and 316, by then equally unloved by their owner but still running because of their daily consignments of mail, the source of 94 percent of their 1969 revenues of \$665,542. Passenger receipts amounted to a paltry \$34,484; the total count of paying riders was 4,736, a daily average of 5.3 aboard overnight No. 315 and 7.7 on daytime No. 316. After subtracting revenues from operating costs of \$962,731, the two trains represented an out-of-pocket loss in 1969 to Penn Central of \$297,189.

From our speeding vestibule perch that morning, we studied such intriguing sights as the paralleling, abandoned right of way of the Union Traction/Indiana Railroad interurban line, weaving in and out of lineside towns between Indianapolis and Muncie; the sleepy village of Ingalls, named

for onetime Big Four president Melville Ingalls but whose only remaining railroad structure was the former interurban station; and the sturdy red-brick Big Four depots at Anderson and Muncie. Another highlight was the dozen-plus Big Four towers on steel stilts, where operators still manhandled ancient interlocking plants, handed up orders, and stomped on company-telephone treadles to “OS” passing trains. At Morgan, semaphores that had known the smoke of fast-flying Big Four Pacifics still guarded the crossing of the Detroit, Toledo & Ironton. Hammering the B&O diamond at Shelby, we recalled the 1955 performance of NYC Extra 3005 East that gave rise to the classic David P. Morgan-Philip R. Hastings saga “The Mohawk that Refused to Abdicate” . . . first in September 1956 *TRAINS*, then in a 1975 Kalmbach book, and most recently, in 2009, in Volume II of *CLASSIC TRAINS' IN SEARCH OF STEAM* series.

The saddest sights of the day came at the desecrated division point of Belle-

fontaine, once an operations nerve center of the Big Four and home to three freight yards. Most of its former railroad property now sat idle. There was much more to be seen at Marion, 40 miles east, where the Bee Line crossed both Chesapeake & Ohio's Columbus-Toledo coal artery and Norfolk & Western's ex-PRR Columbus-Sandusky line before joining Erie Lackawanna's main line for 21 miles of joint trackage to Galion. During a brief stop at the boarded-up Big Four station in Galion, we examined an arrivals/departures chalkboard still lettered for the defunct *Southwestern* and *Knickerbocker* but, in an ironic twist, restenciled for Penn Central. At Grafton, No. 316 made an unscheduled stop, to check a warm journal on one of the Flexi-Van cars.

By now it was mid-afternoon, and a pleasant weariness had overtaken those of us who had spent most of the trip in the vestibule. After acknowledging the 1876 Berea depot and nearby BE Tower, junction with the NYC main line from Chicago, we reluctantly concluded the open-air portion of the eastbound journey and headed inside to freshen up. Through the gathering gloom we sped, the view outside now a blur of illuminated signs, congested highways, and busy businesses as urban scenery replaced rural on the last lap into Cleveland.

Union Terminal, as magnificent as ever, welcomed us as if we had just disembarked from the *Southwestern* itself. The sight of a tennis court in the concourse was unsettling, but the overall hustle and bustle of the place—travelers still in a hurry to be somewhere else—hadn't changed. As if we hadn't spent enough time above flanged wheels already, our evening plans called for further travel on a rapid transit PCC car, followed by dinner at a well-appointed restaurant in Shaker Heights. Afterward, a few of us got some unexpected exercise running to catch a trolley leaving for downtown. *Castle Valley*, turned and serviced, awaited our return in the depths of CUT. After making a cross-platform transfer from the trolley, most of our group retired to beds made up with authentic NYC linen and pillows and Pullman blankets.

Now it was late—and cold. Our conveyance back to Indianapolis, No. 315, was scheduled to depart at 11:50 p.m. But, in one final wrench of present-day reality, we learned that a connecting mail train from Buffalo was running behind schedule. More than an hour passed before the handoff of mail cars from it had been made, steam and air lines connected, and the highball fi-

nally given to the last sleeper-equipped train to traverse the Bee Line.

For some, though, the delay was a gift in disguise, because in contrast to its position in No. 316, *Castle Valley* now was the last car on the train. Those few of us still up and occupying the rear-facing vestibule soon would enjoy a magnificent nighttime panorama of downtown Cleveland as 315 slipped away from the platform. The floodlit tower of CUT stood watch as bursts of orange and red flashed from the third-shift workings of mills and factories lining the Cuyahoga River below. Catenary bridges from the former electrification sailed above our accelerating train, marking cadence as we marched toward the conclusion of our adventure.

Past Berea our speed picked up, and *Castle Valley*, hurtling through the night, offered its patrons the sensation of floating above the silver ribbons shining below. The last of the vestibule riders became absorbed in the experience, savoring it for mile after mile as we rushed through the early morning mists of northern Ohio. What had it been like, two decades earlier, to hear a hard-charging Hudson ahead, splitting the winter night with its chime whistle and rhythmic exhaust?

Somewhere around Wellington exhaustion overtook those last connoisseurs of the Bee Line legacy, and we retired to the Pullman accommodations that were one of the principal reasons for this odyssey. Oblivious to events between there and first light around the edges of my roomette shade near Fortville, about 20 miles short of Indianapolis, I can only report that *Castle Valley* succeeded in carrying us home in traditional Pullman safety and comfort.

Thirty minutes later we were again

alongside the Track 8 platform. *Castle Valley* quickly emptied its human cargo as passengers offered hasty good-byes. Minutes later, all was silent save for the menacing roar of a Boeing 727 passing overhead on final approach to the Indianapolis airport.

Porter and Sinatra had summed it up perfectly: "Don't you know, little fool, you never can win?/Why not use your mentality?/Step up, wake up to reality . . ." Pleasant though our 14-hour round-trip journey aboard *Castle Valley* had been, it was also proof that simply reutilizing historic hardware could recreate neither the high level of personal service once provided aboard it by the Pullman Company nor the distinctive, confident tone of the New York Central's first-class operations in which it once performed. The proud institution that was the source of some of the greatest memories of my life had now undeniably reached the end of its life, far too quickly for either of us.

As the depot switcher whisked *Castle Valley* away to its coachyard home, my thoughts turned to the span of the car's 21-year career. How many celebrities and near-celebrities had shared these rooms with everyday folk? What sorts of *Orient Express*-like mysteries had touched their lives? Beyond its normal assignments, to what special trains had this car been joined and to what other destinations had it traveled? How many times had its wheels been replaced, its interior paint freshened, its linen restocked?

For *Castle Valley* and countless other cars and trains from passenger railroading's proud past, those discussions had become inconsequential in the gray winter of early 1971. Now only the unknowns of Amtrak lay ahead, the glory years gone forever. ■



William Benning Stewart

On a September 1970 morning along the Bee Line in suburban Indianapolis, the E7's of Penn Central train 316—a ghost of long-vanished Big Four varnish—loom out of the fog.