



The Central pulls out of Pullman

Operating its own sleepers trimmed expenses for New York Central, but the 1958 changeover was not simple

By Theodore Shradly



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New York Central already had several years' experience operating its own sleeping cars when its flagship, the *20th Century Limited*, slowed for the Union Station stop in South Bend, Ind., October 7, 1962 (above), and left town (top) for Elkhart and points east on July 7, 1965.

NEW YORK CENTRAL QUILTS PULLMAN! Did that statement send shock waves through the railroad industry? Incredulity across the New York Central System itself? Confusion among the traveling public?

Probably not to that severity, but the declaration *did* get the railroad industry's attention. Did this mean NYC, the nation's second-biggest intercity passenger railroad, was distancing itself from a floundering passenger-service company, or that the railroad was in trouble because of its passenger business? The answer on both counts was "Yes," but to varying degrees. Central's decision was but a unique microcosm of the nationwide situation of declining passenger-train service, but the changeover was complex.

Pullman first learned of Central's decision in a formal communication on December 31, 1957, exactly six months prior to a pullout, as required by the Uniform Service Contract between Pullman and each railroad. Pullman President George W. Bohannon soon sent a teletype to his officials about the NYC decision, which was to be effective July 1, 1958. The decision hit the news media within a week. The gist of the message, in NYC's words, was "not dissatisfaction with the Pullman Company but to realize better economics by operating the sleepers ourselves."

Railroads had been struggling with passenger losses since the end of World War II. Passenger-service deficits for New York Central reached about \$53 million in 1957, which cut deeply into freight profits. At one point, its net operating annual income had nose-dived from \$39 million to just over \$8 million. Its 1958 Pullman pullout was just one strategy to stem the hemorrhaging, and for a few years thereafter, the same levels of service and equipment prevailed.

Canceling the Pullman contract was no simple process for either company. Pullman's involvement with each railroad was extensive, and intricate, and NYC and rival Pennsylvania were still the largest operators of sleeping cars. (Both the PRR and the New Haven had already pulled their extensive parlor-car operations from Pullman, in 1956.) At New York Central locations, Pullman posted notices of reductions or elimination of work forces, from superintendents to car cleaners. Major terminals in New York, Boston, Buffalo, Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago, and St. Louis had a complement of Pullman painters, electricians, mechanics, carpenters, and plumbers, each with a foreman and/or assistant foreman and union supervi-



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The *Knickerbocker* backs into St. Louis Union Station on December 30, 1955; its six sleepers, from New York (two), Boston, Buffalo, Indianapolis, and Detroit, are still run by Pullman.

diagrams. The railroad also took cases of ticket stock and local tariff manuals and instructions.

Pullman began methodically notifying the Central to cancel property contracts (rentals of rooms, offices, and storage facilities at NYC yards and stations) over the six months until July 1, 1958. At first, Pullman consolidated rooms and offices so it could release vacated space. By the turnover date, Pullman canceled 2,720 square feet of space in Grand Central Terminal, New York, for example, which realized an annual saving of \$8,513. At Mott Haven Yard six miles to the north, Pullman saved \$15,822 on rented facilities and “specialties” (refrigerators, elevators, loading ramps, etc.) needed for daily routines.

Pullman did not like the loss of business from the Central’s pullout, but it was able to offset some lost revenues by realizing some of the aforementioned savings.

NYC did remain under Pullman contract for several interline routes: Chicago-Toronto with Canadian Pacific, and from Chicago as well as Cleveland to Cincinnati for routes to the Southeast on the Chesapeake & Ohio and Southern Railway. NYC did drop the Detroit-Miami *Royal Palm* sleeper, via Cincinnati and the Southern.

Two international sleeper routes were different: New York-Montreal on

As No. 15, the *Ohio State Limited*, arrives at Cincinnati Union Terminal in August 1965 with NYC sleepers from New York, a Southern Railway consist (in distance) leaves the CUT balloon track.

sor. Smaller Pullman employee groups at NYC points were at Albany, Cincinnati, Columbus, Pittsburgh (on subsidiary Pittsburgh & Lake Erie), Montreal, and Toronto. Also affected were non-union-agreement employees including superintendents and assistants, supervisors, clerks, and agents.

Pullman had to cancel or alter its line numbers on all NYC routes. Local lines entirely on the Central totaled 93, when figuring departures from each major terminal; actually, about 67 lines were affected. Pullman retained 15 NYC lines run jointly with other roads.

Another big problem in the separation was car parts and materials—NYC needed to acquire them from Pullman in order to keep its sleeping cars operating. The Central issued a thick purchase

order for thousands of parts totaling about \$686,600, which may have included \$26,968 in commissary items—mainly crockery, glassware, and silver specific to the NYC. Some of the materials were already on Central property, while others had to be shipped from Pullman facilities. Pullman imposed its usual policy: full price for new items, half for used material, shipping charges if from a Pullman shop, and a 15 percent surcharge (profit) on everything. Pullman told its employees which incidentals to strip from sleeping cars that NYC would be taking over; this included anything bearing the Pullman name.

Various papers and forms with New York Central indications on them were set aside and later sold to the railroad for \$456—as an example, 115,850 car



Two photos, J. David Ingles

The *James Whitcomb Riley*, with Pullman-operated sleepers to go onto C&O's *George Washington* at Cincinnati, crosses the Kankakee River at Aroma Park, Ill., on May 18, 1963.

the Delaware & Hudson and Canadian Pacific north of Albany, and between Toronto and New York, Boston, Cleveland, and Pittsburgh via joint (with CPR) subsidiary Toronto, Hamilton & Buffalo in southern Ontario. Because of their close association with NYC, both the D&H and TH&B also dropped out of Pullman and entered into sleeper agreements with the Central, which then provided all cars and porters on the routes. The only involvement of CPR for its Rouses Point, N.Y.-Montreal segment of the Montreal run and the Hamilton-Toronto portion of the New York-Buffalo-Toronto route was use of some CPR sleeping cars (and coaches) to balance car-miles with NYC.

For those interline moves, New York Central kept in Pullman lease 34 two-tone gray prewar sleeping cars in four series: 12 *Bridge*-series 4-double-bedroom/4-compartment/2-drawing-room cars, 12 *Cascade* 10-roomette/5-double-bedroom cars, 6 *River* 10&6's, and 4 *County* 13-double-bedroom cars. Use of personnel on the interline runs was mixed; NYC conductors ran only to the interchange points, while porters from the "off-line" road ran through, except on the two Canadian routes.

In the case of routine maintenance at an off-line terminal, agreements were in place for the other railroad to bill New York Central for routine services. If additional repairs or deadheading



Pittsburgh & Lake Erie 280—just an NYC combine and 10&6 *Pocono River*—passes Coraopolis, Pa., at 8 a.m. March 26, 1962. The sleeper rode four carriers on its 12-hour run from Toronto.

was required, only necessary work was performed to get the car home.

For the New York Central, pulling out of Pullman was just as arduous, but it felt it had little choice. By that time, most U.S. passenger railroads were battling the same major deficit causes: rigid Interstate Commerce Commission regulatory rates, high labor and maintenance costs, an eroding traffic base, and heavy taxes. NYC had already done some planning on how to lower the deficit before the July 1, 1958, deadline, and its changes went way beyond sleeping cars. Included were "realigning" of train schedules, selling most of its prewar lightweight cars, dropping the 1948-built Pullman-Standard *Bay*-series 22-roomette cars,

and eliminating about 70 dining cars.

Some accounts of the Pullman pull-out reported the service cuts in the April 1958 timetable to be "drastic." That was somewhat true, seen when one compares sleeping cars in the September 1958 timetable with the October 1957 one—a reduction from 248 to 231 (a 7 percent cut). This counts round trips as two movements and cars connecting to one or more trains to destination separately. As an example, a Boston-Cincinnati car would be counted as three moves: Boston-Albany on train 405, Albany-Buffalo on 41, and Buffalo-Cincinnati on 15. Sleepers that ran only on Saturday or Sunday were excluded.

Actually, a bigger change was from the April 28, 1957, timetable to the October 27, 1957, card, as sleeper movements



Two photos, J. David Ingles

Still listed as carrying four sleeping-car lines, the *20th Century* is on the last lap into Chicago's La Salle Street Station on October 30, 1966.



Typical of NYC sleepers which lost their "Pullman" identification was 10235 *Passaic River* (at Detroit in 1961), among 97 *River* 10&6's in lot 6790 delivered by Pullman-Standard in 1948-49.

declined from 346 or so to 248—meaning the reduction from spring 1957 to fall 1958 totaled 115 cars (33 percent). Also reduced were coaches, and observation cars (from nine round trips to five). Many diners were downgraded—twin units to single cars, then to grill-diner-lounges, and finally to buffet service in 6-double-bedroom/lounge and coach/lounge cars. All this also helped minimize terminal switching costs.

Some trains were consolidated or shortened. Secondary runs were truncated at Cleveland, Buffalo, or Albany, with the through cars switched onto and off New York-Chicago trains.

Examples include St. Louis/Cincinnati-New York, Chicago-Detroit-New York, and Boston-Albany. Most train numbers were also changed—secondary runs on the New York-Cleveland-Chicago main line got 200-series numbers, those on Big Four and Michigan Central lines 300 series, and Boston-Albany trains 400 series. Previously, these lines all had a mix of the three series.

The consolidations substantially reduced the number of required operating employees. Train crews on the New York-Cleveland-Chicago route, encompassing seven crew districts, could total 42 per one-way train. Combining the

20th Century Limited and *Commodore Vanderbilt* in 1958 saved 42 employees—and introduced coaches to the *Century's* consist for the first time. A mainline train of 12 to 15 cars required up to 20 on-board employees (excluding engine and train crews): porters, attendants, and dining-car staff. One dining car with two kitchen employees, four waiters, and a steward could be reduced to five people, or to just one if a buffet car provided the only food service. Pullman conductors were eliminated completely as NYC train conductors took charge of the entire train.

According to memos between Pullman and NYC, about 437 Pullman employees transferred over to the railroad, mostly porters and attendants. The "new" sleeping-car operation came under NYC's dining-car department, all spelled out in a thick manual that gave detailed instructions on all facets of the passenger department, including the flexibility to occasionally use porters and waiters interchangeably.

The Central did not have much of a parlor-car operation after World War II. Its premium parlor train was the *Empire State Express* on the New York-Buffalo-Cleveland/Detroit route, which included six parlor cars and two parlor-observations. Round-trip *Mercury* service, started in 1936 on some of NYC's Midwestern routes, mixed "streamlined" rebuilt commuter

coaches and newer stainless-steel cars, including several parlors. NYC also ran parlors on the Chicago-Detroit *Twilight Limited*. During the 1958 changeover period, trains that required extra parlors were assigned 10 *Falls*-series 6-double-bedroom/lounges, noted in timetables as “sleeper as parlor.”

NYC also lowered its deficit by other means. It sold whole fleets of prewar sleeping cars—for scrap, to other railroads and countries (mostly Mexico and Canada), as well as to individuals. This brought in needed revenue, eliminated maintenance and storage charges, and reduced the crushing taxes on rolling stock. Car utilization to protect daily service improved, once the practice of operating smooth-side and stainless-steel cars together replaced matched consists. Now, many sleepers could be turned the same day without waiting for a set of similar equipment.

The innovative transcontinental sleepers, between New York and Los Angeles and San Francisco, spearheaded by Santa Fe [“Transcontinental Trains—Close, but No Cigar,” *TRAINS CLASSIC* 1999], had become expensive. In 1950 the service required six cars daily, or 36 a week, as it took six days for one car to return to New York. By 1957, daily “transcon” departures had dropped to just three, all to L.A., but that soaked up 18 sleepers a week. The cars were trapped in the dedicated service and not available in the daily pool. The last transcon car, via the *20th Century* and *Super Chief*, ceased on April 26 1958.

One innovation that interested the Central was Budd’s introduction of the Slumbercoach, an economy sleeper accommodating 24 passengers in staggered-level single rooms and 16 in double rooms—40 passengers instead of the usual 22 or 24. Starting in 1959, the road leased four Slumbercoaches for the *20th Century Limited* and *New England States*. Ever economy-minded, though, the Central returned the cars to Budd two years later and rebuilt 10 of its own sidelined 22-roomette *Harbor*-series sleepers to “Sleepercoaches” with 16 single and 10 double rooms. The Budd-built cars found work on other lines including Burlington and Northern Pacific.

Did the New York Central pullout cause a domino effect for contracting railroads to opt out of Pullman sleeping-car operations? Not really. Rock Island, a smaller Pullman contractor and NYC’s Chicago La Salle Street Station neighbor, quickly followed NYC, withdrawing its intraline sleepers effective November 1, 1958 (interline cars on the *Golden State* remained Pullman),



Two photos, New York Central

After trying Budd’s Slumbercoaches in 1959, NYC created its own budget “Sleepercoaches” by rebuilding 22-roomette cars with 26 rooms, two of which posed for this publicity photo.

but there was no mass exodus. Lehigh Valley quit all passenger service, including 10 sleeper moves, in 1959, and St. Louis Southwestern canceled its one sleeper round trip, while the Canadian National pulled out in 1962. Most other railroads operating sleepers, however,

stayed with Pullman until all contracts were dissolved in August 1969. Mexico followed in November 1970. Then, it was just a matter for the railroads still running what few sleeper lines were left to hang in there until the creation of Amtrak on May 1, 1971. ■



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On July 21, 1962, the sleeping cars on Rock Island’s *Rocky Mountain Rocket*, getting orders at Bureau, Ill., were in their fourth year of being operated by the railroad rather than Pullman.