

**Pullman**

America's hotel  
chain on rails



Al Rung

In 1939, K4 Pacific 5433 stands next to *Rathbone*, a Harrisburg-Pittsburgh set-out 12&1 car that will go west on the *Pittsburgh Night Express*.

# Two hours at Harrisburg

Each evening in 1952, a Pennsylvania Railroad hub bustled with Pullman-switching activity

By H. Marshall Pomroy





Bert Pennypacker

**B1 electric No. 5687, a longtime Harrisburg resident, works the west-end depot leads in 1947. Juniata Shops built 50 of the 570 h.p. mites, 36 for PRR, 14 for the Long Island.**

I have often wondered why certain through passenger stations needed so many tracks. One in particular was the Pennsylvania Railroad's at Harrisburg, Pa., which had 10. A through station usually means that a train arrives; loads and unloads passengers, mail, and express; and then departs. Unless many trains arrive at the same time, why so many tracks? After studying a PRR public timetable dated June 30, 1952, as well as the *Official Guide* for that period, I now realize why Harrisburg had so many tracks.

My study involved—as an example of the activity there—westbound Pullman cars through Harrisburg during a 2-hour 6-minute period in the evening. The six trains involved were No. 1, the *Pennsylvania Limited* (New York-Chicago); No. 3, the *Penn Texas* (New York-St. Louis); No. 565 (Washington-Harrisburg); No. 575, the *Dominion Express* (Washington-Buffalo); No. 581, the *Northern Express* (Philadelphia-Erie, Pa.); and No. 645 (Harrisburg-Hagerstown, Md.).

Between 9:02 p.m. and 11:08 p.m. at Harrisburg, 9 Pullman sleepers were switched from one train to another, an average of one every 13 minutes! (In addition, nearly all trains changed locomotives at Harrisburg, west end of PRR's electrified territory.) These cars, a mix of heavy- and lightweights, were at least 80 feet long apiece and needed to be parked someplace until their departing train arrived from someplace else.

The diagram and tables on the fol-



Photo, Al Rung; timetable, H. Marshall Pomroy collection

lowing pages help explain it all, but let us look at all this activity chronologically. You will note that the PRR operated an extensive array of Pullman car configurations; all cars with sections are heavyweights, and all with roomettes are lightweights. Let's head down to the platforms:

- **9:02:** No. 1, the *Pennsylvania Limited* for Chicago, arrives from New York with ten Pullmans, six through for Chicago or beyond and four to be switched out for other destinations.

- **9:04:** No. 565 arrives from Washington carrying two heavyweight sleepers, one each for No. 1 and No. 581, the *Northern Express*, due to arrive in 36 minutes; 565 terminates here.

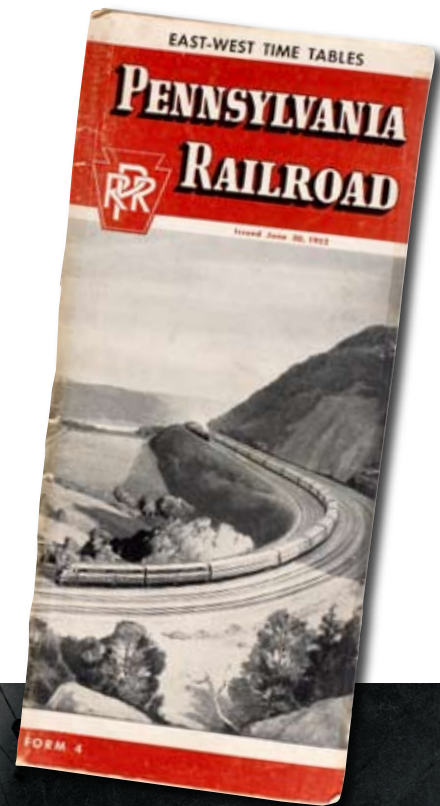
- **9:17:** No. 1 departs with seven sleepers: five New York-Chicago cars, the Washington-Chicago car from No. 565, and one car bound not just to Chi-

**Late on a winter's evening around 1940, a K4 is ready to leave Harrisburg with train 67, the St. Louis-bound American. A GG1 electric brought the train in from New York City.**

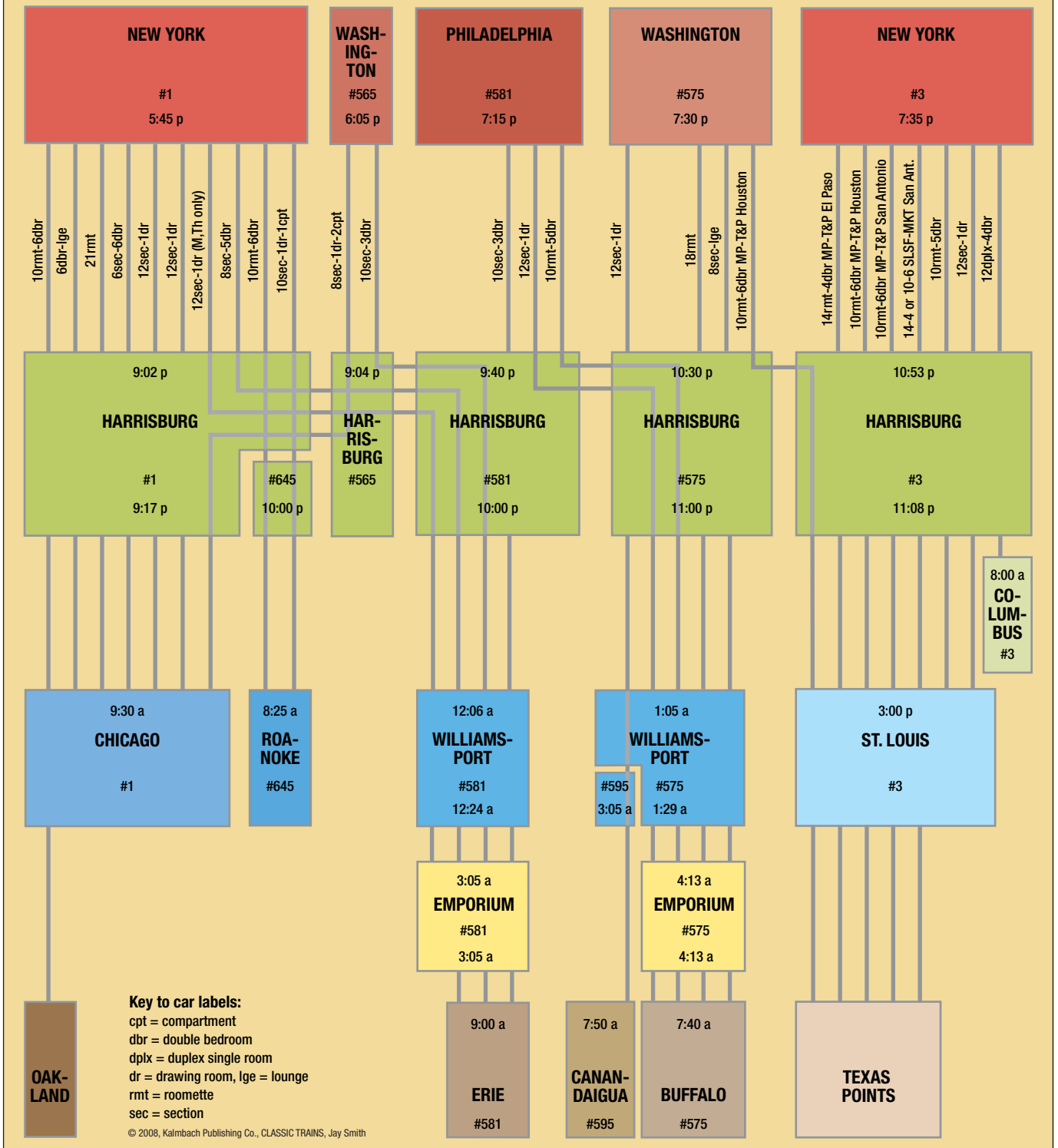
cago but ultimately Oakland, Calif., on alternating days via the Overland Route (C&NW-UP-SP) or on the *California Zephyr* (CB&Q-D&RGW-WP).

- **9:40:** No. 581, the Philadelphia-Erie, Pa., *Northern Express*, rolls in with three sleepers, two for Buffalo and one for Erie. The Buffalo cars are cut off and set over to await No. 575, the next train due in.

- **10:00:** No. 645, which originates here, leaves on PRR's former Cumberland Valley line for Roanoke, Va., with two of the Pullmans off No. 1; Norfolk & Western will handle the train beyond Hagerstown, Md. The depot shifter's crew has had 15 minutes to get the cars



# Westbound Pullmans through Harrisburg, 9:02 p.m.–11:08 p.m., summer 1952



off of No. 1 and 43 more minutes to put them on 645, which presumably was made up earlier and is standing in the station. This also means a run-around has occurred during switching, because to reach the former CV line No. 645 leaves from the east end of the station.

• **Also at 10:00**, but heading out in the opposite direction, the *Northern Express* departs for Williamsport, Empo-

rium, and Erie. In its 20-minute stop, No. 581 has gained two Pullmans from New York, set over from No. 1 almost an hour ago: a daily car for Erie and a Monday-and-Thursday-only car that terminates in Emporium, Pa., the small town where PRR's lines to Erie and Buffalo diverge. To summarize, 581 left Philadelphia with three sleepers, and at Harrisburg dropped two of them but

picked up three, two from New York and one from Washington.

• **10:30**: No. 575, the *Dominion Express*, arrives from Washington with five Pullmans. Three go through to the train's destination of Buffalo; the fourth goes as far as Williamsport, where it will be set out to go north on No. 595 to Canandaigua, N.Y.; and the fifth is bound for St. Louis in No. 3, the *Penn*



Harrisburg car count		
Time	Event	Pullmans in station
9:02	1 arrives	10
9:04	565 arrives	12
9:17	1 departs	5
9:40	581 arrives	8
10:00	645, 581 depart	2
10:30	575 arrives	7
10:53	3 arrives	14
11:00	575 departs	8
11:08	3 departs	0

Texas, and ultimately Houston via Missouri Pacific and Texas & Pacific.

- **10:53:** No. 3 arrives from New York bound for St. Louis carrying seven Pullmans. Its name, *Penn Texas*, is descriptive because it has both coaches and four sleepers destined for El Paso, Houston, and San Antonio. MoPac and T&P forward three of the Texas sleepers beyond St. Louis in the *Texas Eagle*, while the Frisco-Katy *Texas Special* handles the fourth. No. 3 also has two Pullmans for St. Louis only, plus a daily-except-Saturday car to Columbus, Ohio.

- **11:00:** No. 575, the *Dominion Express*, which has lingered the longest, for 30 minutes, departs for Buffalo with six sleepers, four that it brought in from Washington and two off No. 581 from Philadelphia.

- **11:08:** No. 3 leaves for St. Louis with eight Pullmans, having received a Washington-Texas car from 575 (the employee timetable permitted No. 3 to depart as early as 10:53 if its station work was completed). Ready to head home now?

Remember, these were just the moves involving sleeping cars on westbound trains, and only for two hours! It seems obvious that the cars to be switched would have been placed on the rear of each train so they could be easily removed. None of the trains carried an observation car, which simplified switching. And those sleepers had people in them, so the shifter crews had to make their couplings as gently as possible.

I try to imagine what it must have been like on the ground in the Harrisburg station, on the dimly lit platforms and tracks, as a quiet class B1 electric box-cab shifter eased up to the rear of a train. The carmen would uncouple the knuckles, air hoses, and communication and steam lines. The shifter would then move back with the car or cars to clear a switch, then ease ahead to spot the cars on an adjacent track until the connecting train arrived.

After that train was in, the process would be reversed: fish the cars gently

Sleeping-car routes involved			
Origin-destination	No. of cars	Train No(s).	Switched at Harrisburg?
New York-Oakland	1	1	No
New York-Chicago	5	1	No
New York-Emporium	1	1 and 581	Yes
New York-Erie	1	1 and 581	Yes
New York-Roanoke	2	1 and 645	Yes
Washington-Chicago	1	565 and 1	Yes
Washington-Erie	1	565 and 581	Yes
Philadelphia-Erie	1	581	No
Philadelphia-Buffalo	2	581 and 575	Yes
Washington-Canandaigua	1	575 and 595	No
Washington-Buffalo	2	575	No
Washington-Texas	1	575 and 3	Yes
New York-Texas	4	3	No
New York-St. Louis	2	3	No
New York-Columbus	1	3	No



Gary Sunday

**A B1 shifter jockeys a coach at the east end of PRR's Harrisburg station in March '55. In the background, beyond the head-end cars, a Reading Baldwin diesel switches its owner's depot.**

out of one track and have the switchmen couple them up on another, join the air, steam, and communication lines, then signal the conductor that the joint had been made.

All the while, up at the head end, baggage, mail, and express cars were being switched, loaded, and unloaded. In addition, the sleek GG1 electric motors would uncouple and move away, quickly replaced by diesel or steam locomotives.

These Harrisburg movements seem too complex and difficult to have kept some of the trains to schedule. Moreover, these particular moves were being made after dark. A later PRR timetable shows less of all this transferring of cars

from one train to another. No coaches or diners seem to be involved, although a café coach was pulled from No. 575 to return east at 3:40 a.m. on No. 86, the *Philadelphia Night Express*.

The very first known U.S. sleeping car run took place in 1838, between Harrisburg and Chambersburg, Pa. In 1952, during the 2-hour 6-minute period examined here, 26 sleepers passed through Harrisburg bound for points west; for 23 minutes, between 10:30 and 10:53, there were 14 sleepers in the station at once. In 2008, except for the occasional special movement, there are no sleepers in Harrisburg at any time of any day. ■