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# When the crème de la crème soured: The end of the all-Pullman limiteds

Which was last? My personal experiences with three nominees—IC's *Panama Limited*, PRR's *Broadway Limited*, and Santa Fe's *Super Chief*—may help you decide

By Karl Zimmermann

For roughly a century, Pullman was synonymous with luxury train travel in America, and at the pinnacle of that stylish sleeping- and parlor-car service stood the *crème de la crème*—the best. These were the all-Pullman flyers, trains so special that coach passengers were excluded, being relegated to generally (though not always) humbler trains often running on similar, if slower, schedules, with less-elegant dining and lounge facilities.

All-Pullman trains were never numerous, and most served large population centers. New York Central's *20th Century Limited* and *Commodore Vanderbilt*, and rival Pennsylvania's *Broadway Limited* and *General* linked New York and Chicago.

NYC's *New England States* between Boston and Chicago carried no coaches, while Pennsy's *Pittsburgher* ran between its namesake and New York and its *Edison* between Washington and New York. Several Pennsy New York trains carried only Pullmans bound for points on connecting southeastern roads, though they had coaches south of Washington, D.C. One exception: Southern's New York-New Orleans *Crescent*, which carried no coaches north of Atlanta (to the south, it ran, with coaches, via Montgomery over West Point Route and Louisville & Nashville).

Baltimore & Ohio's *Capitol Limited* linked Washington, Pittsburgh, and Chicago, and its *National Limited* Washing-



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John S. Ingles



George Krambles; Peterson-Krambles Archive

ton, Cincinnati, and St. Louis. Pennsy countered with its Chicago-Washington *Liberty Limited* and the New York section of the *Spirit of St. Louis* (the Washington section carried a single Indianapolis coach). New Haven's afternoon New York-Boston extra-fare *Merchants Limited* was all-parlor car (with a dining car, of course), *i.e.*, all-Pullman and all-first-class.

Out West, the Santa Fe offered two all-Pullman trains on the same Chicago-Los Angeles route via Albuquerque: the *Chief*, and later the even posher *Super Chief*. Earlier, and briefly, in the teens, the road had fielded the *Santa Fe de Luxe*, arguably the most exclusive train ever in the U.S. On the Pacific coast, Southern Pacific ran the Portland-Oakland *Cascade* and the *Lark* between Los Angeles and San Francisco.

In the Midwest, the flagship of Illinois Central was the all-Pullman Chicago-New Orleans *Panama Limited*, with a section from St. Louis. Chicago & Alton's Chicago-St. Louis main line—on which George M. Pullman ran his first sleeping cars in 1859—hosted the all-Pullman, non-stop *Midnight Special* from 1923 until 1943, when wartime restrictions forced equipment assignment changes. The train name dated from 1905 and lasted until Amtrak on May 1, 1971; it last carried sleepers in December 1968, Alton successor Gulf, Mobile & Ohio's four unique 1950 ACF 4-section/8-roomette/3-double-bedroom/1-compartment Pullmans. On the East Coast in winter, the seasonal *Orange Blossom Special* and *Florida Special* connected New York and the Sunshine State.

Through the 1950's and into the '60's, of course, the American passenger train slid down the slippery slope that ended with Amtrak's inception. The National Interstate and Defense Highways Act was passed in 1956, and soon jet aircraft began linking more and more cities, becoming the businessman's

**Santa Fe's *Super Chief* (above left), minus the Hi-Level *El Capitan* cars during the summer, pauses at Las Vegas, N.Mex., in June 1967. At Central Station in Chicago in June '63 (top), an Illinois Central SW7 is coupled to the *Panama Limited*'s Pullman sleeper-observation-lounge car *Memphis*. The Pennsylvania's New York-bound *Broadway Limited* boards passengers at Fort Wayne, Ind. (above), on April 28, 1966.**

mode of choice. Fierce belt-tightening became the mode among passenger railroads, and adding coaches to all-Pullman trains was an obvious expedient.

Selecting superlatives can be an irresistible challenge—first, last, longest, shortest, best, worst—and can be difficult. Consider “the last all-Pullman train.” Would identifying such be simple, just a matter of browsing through timetables and the *Official Guide of the Railways*? No. There are subtleties, and sometimes contentious matters of definition—Chesapeake & Ohio's all-Pullman Washington-White Sulphur Springs (W.Va.) *Resort Special*, for example, lasted until November 10, 1968, but it ran only twice a week, and not during the winter. Keeping all that in mind, I nominate three daily-service contestants: IC's *Panama Limited*, PRR's *Broadway Limited*, and Santa Fe's *Super Chief*. Only the *Broadway*'s last day as an all-sleeping-car train is unambiguous: December 13, 1967, when Nos. 28 and 29 ended their runs in New York and Chicago, respectively. (“All-Pullman” is another issue, to be considered later.)

In the last lovely, if compromised, days in the run-up to Amtrak, I had personal experiences with all three of those trains, two after they had clearly lost their all-Pullman cachet, and one that may or may not have had it when I rode. Was I just in time, or just too late? That question haunted me



**Still all-Pullman from end to end, IC No. 6 roars north in June 1960, ready to brake for its south suburban station stop at Homewood, Ill.**

back in 1969 and 1970 when my forbearing wife, Laurel, and I scrambled to experience the last of America's great surviving passenger trains.

### **Panama Limited: "Wayne's baby"**

The *Panama's* credentials as "last of the last" may be the flimsiest, though browsing *Official Guides* through 1968 might lead you to a different conclusion. "The Panama Limited," you'll read, "All-Pullman Streamlined Train—Radio—No Coaches."

Paul Reistrup, who in 1974 would become Amtrak's second president, was vice-president, passenger services, for Illinois Central in the *Panama's* final years. In that role he had something of a tightrope to walk.

"When I moved over from B&O/C&O in 1967," Reistrup recalled recently, "William B. Johnson, IC president since early 1966, gave me an ultimatum: Within a year and a half, I was to eliminate half the intercity passenger trains, which were responsible for out-of-pocket losses of about \$35 million annually. As it turned out, in 18 months I got rid of 18 trains."

While ridership on IC's daylight Chicago-New Orleans coach streamliner *City of New Orleans* remained strong, the all-Pullman *Panama Limited's* patronage was slipping (on one 1966 trip, the passenger count was 16), putting the train deeply in the red. On the other hand, coach traffic on the

"Main Line of Mid-America"—Chicago-Memphis-Jackson, Miss.-New Orleans—remained robust, much of it families who had migrated north returning home for visits. "The City" typically ran 18 cars long and often in two sections, the first (sometimes 12 to 14 cars) going only as far as Memphis, or occasionally Jackson. With jets eating into Pullman patronage, the stopgap solution for the sagging *Panama* was obvious: add coaches.

There was, however, a hitch. The *Panama* had at least one friend in a high place . . . IC's headquarters. Wayne A. Johnston, chairman of the board, loved the *Panama*.

"It was his baby," Reistrup recalled. Promoted to president in 1945 upon the unexpected death of his predecessor, John L. Beven, Johnston ran the Illinois Central until 1966, when Bill Johnson (no "t") took over

the presidency and Johnston stepped up to the chairmanship. "Each morning," Reistrup recounted, "Wayne Johnston would get up from the desk of his office in Chicago's Central Station, go to the window overlooking the tracks, and pull his gold watch from his vest pocket. When it read nine o'clock, if the nose of the *Panama Limited's* lead E unit was not sliding under

his window, he'd buzz Otto Zimmerman, vice-president, operations.

"Zim," he'd say, "Where's the *Panama*?" In an era less fastidious about pushing speed limits a bit, Zimmerman would do anything to keep No. 6 on time. He was an old-line, cigar-smoking, traditional operating man who would say to Johnson, as Reistrup remembers, "Bill, you think that the railroad



**In 1970, the Panama was "still a fine train where standards are maintained."**



Four photos, J. David Ingles



For a few winters a half century ago, the *Panama* (top, in 1960) carried a Pullman dome sleeper off Northern Pacific's *North Coast Limited*. On June 11, 1969 (above), 28-year-old E6 4003 led No. 6 at Homewood, Ill.

is just a real-estate bonanza encumbered by tracks." (In fact, when "W.B.J."—as Bill Johnson was known—stepped down as IC president in 1969, he continued to lead parent Illinois Central Industries, a holding company rich in real estate and Chicago air rights.)

With W.B.J. perhaps out for the *Panama's* scalp, at least as an all-Pullman train, and Wayne Johnston ready to act as its protector, what to do? The answer was the *Magnolia Star*. Effective October 29, 1967, this was an "all coach, streamlined train" which commanded a "special service charge from Chicago to New Orleans" of \$5. It was, of course, a phantom. The initial consist was simply one café club car and one deluxe coach, designated MS-1 and MS-2.

"Please arrange to show the new MAGNOLIA STAR on all arrival and departure boards in stations," read a circular to superintendents, stationmasters, and ticket agents. "Also, all train arrival and departure announcements, both recorded and otherwise, should be corrected. Gate signs should also show both the PANAMA and MAGNOLIA STAR." The circular was issued by W. A. Johnston Jr.—IC's assistant vice president for passenger operations, who was Wayne's son.

From its inception until it was quietly dropped from the timetable in early 1969, ending the sham, it was really just a coach portion of the *Panama*. Except on the rarest of occasions—Christmas Eve, perhaps—the two names ran as one train, with a single crew, even sharing the same train numbers, 5 and 6. But was that such a terrible thing?



Illinois Central

"Where's the *Panama*, Zim?" IC boss Wayne A. Johnston would ask, eyeing Central Station tracks each morning from his office. In this publicity view looking north, the train pauses north of the platforms before pulling in to load passengers, as an NYC 4-6-4 Hudson looks on.

"We were dedicated to keeping the trains totally separate," Reistrup recalls. "Only the conductor and trainmen could go through from one section to another."

Although aficionados bemoaned the loss of purity, the coaches boosted the bottom line, just as Reistrup had predicted. In the fiscal year ending June '68, the *Panama's* Pullmans averaged about 50 passengers, with a low of 15 and a high of 198, while the *Magnolia Star* added an average 46 coach passengers, with a low of 10 and a high of 203.

More compromises would be needed to bring down the *Panama's* costs, however. Its long, illustrious history offered no protection. The train dated from 1911, when IC's premier service, the *Chicago and New Orleans Limited*, was renamed to honor the work going forward on the Panama Canal (for which New Orleans was the main supply point). Although the train originally carried coaches on the southern end of its journey, it became all-Pullman in 1916.

When the *Panama* was streamlined in 1942 with cars from Pullman-Standard (becoming one of the last great pre-World War II trains), its signature cars were 2-compartment/1-drawing-room/2-double bedroom/lounge-observations *Memphis* and *Gulfport*. These were unusual, and especially stylish,



in displaying the train's name in boxed yellow neon signs on their sides, below the windows.

By the *Magnolia Star* era, those cars were gone. *Memphis* had been wrecked on July 4, 1965, and effective September 1, 1966, *Gulfport* was removed from Pullman lease and became nameless parlor-observation 3312, with the sleeping rooms no longer used and the lounge seats numbered for parlor sale. The former *Gulfport* continued on the *Panama* until June 9, 1968; its running mate was parlor-observation 3310, built in 1947 for the Chicago-St. Louis *Green Diamond*. They offered parlor-car service between New Orleans and Memphis and between Chicago and North Cairo, Ill. One or two standard mid-train parlors also ran between Chicago and Carbondale, Ill., where business was most brisk. By this time, Illinois Central was operating the parlors, so the train was neither "all-Pullman" nor "all-sleeper," but it was "all-first-class." As I said—subtleties.

The twin-unit diners that had been *Panama* regulars since they were bought from Chesapeake & Ohio in 1950 (unused—intended for *Chessie*) remained for a time, but soon they too had vanished (along with the steward), replaced by single-unit cars. This was the *Panama Limited* Laurel and I encountered in March 1970—"a shadow of its former self" being the appropriate cliché, though a decent train that would last until Amtrak.

My notes on that trip are skimpy, possibly reflecting some level of disappointment, or perhaps there was just not much to say about a train that left Chicago at 5 p.m. and arrived in New Orleans at 9:50 the following morning:

"The *Panama Limited*, IC No. 5, Chicago-New Orleans. Bedroom D in *Cynthia*. This is still a fine train where basic

standards are maintained, even if the paint and upholstery could use renewal. The full-length lounge is comfortable and attractive, and the bartender/steward very helpful. The diner was good in all respects, although we chose not to sample the 'King's Dinner,' still on the menu. The train ran on-time all the way."

That lounge I liked was one of two heavyweight coaches IC rebuilt in 1952 for the *Panama*. Why did we pass up the King's Dinner? On the menu, which I saved, the centerfold has a boxed come-on: "Adventurous tonight? Ask your waiter about the 'King's Dinner' —\$9.85." The menu didn't list particulars, but in fact the meal included a Manhattan or martini cocktail, fresh shrimp cocktail or crab fingers (with special sauce), a Rosannay Cabernet d'Anjou, a fish course, charcoal broiled boneless sirloin steak with buttered mushroom slices, potatoes, and vegetables, a "special salad created by your waiter," and a "heady cheese with apple slices" or a dessert from the regular menu, coffee, and a liqueur.

Did the cost make us hesitate? The most expensive of the *table d'hôte* offerings (all of which included soup, juice, or fruit cup; potatoes and vegetable; salad; dessert; and beverage) was roast prime rib of beef for \$5.40. Filet of sole, fresh Gulf Coast shrimp, fricassee of young chicken, or smoked sugar-cured ham cost less.

I wish I had another crack at the "King's."

### **Broadway Limited: Out of the shadow**

Although the *Pennsylvania* was an old hand at stealthily combining trains (and in 1967 was again doing so), the *Broadway Limited's* death as an all-sleeper train was the cleanest of the three contenders for "last of the last." One day it was



William D. Volkmer



J. David Ingles



John Dziobko

Chicago's Englewood Union Station sees the eastbound *Broadway* arriving (top right) on May 19, 1961, and ready to leave (top left) in mid-1963. At Harrison, N.J. (middle right), in the early '50's, a Santa Fe transcontinental Pullman is behind No. 28's RPO as its GG1 meets a *Clocker*.

there, pulling out of Chicago's Union Station and New York's Pennsylvania Station, with all amenities: twin-unit diner, *View*-series sleeper-lounge-observation, and *Imperial*, *Creek*, and *Rapids*-series sleepers. The next day—December 13, 1967—it was gone. According to the *New York Times*, a PRR spokesman “said the *Broadway Limited* was the last all-sleeper train in the country.”

Of course, the name lingered on—well into the Amtrak era, until 1995. But beginning on that 1967 day, the designation “Broadway Limited” went from trains 28-29 to 48-49, the old *General*, which for many years had been a classy running mate and for a time also was all-Pullman. Gone was the *Broadway*'s long-standing 6 p.m. westbound departure and 16-hour running time, replaced by the *General*'s 5:05 p.m. Manhattan exit and 40-minute-longer timing.

When it was discontinued, the *Broadway* was actually making a small profit on an avoidable-cost (rather than fully allocated-cost) basis, but the *General* performed slightly better and had the added utility of a Washington section, via Harrisburg. Along with its all-sleeper status, numbers, and schedule, the *Broadway* lost its signature cars: 2-master-room/1-double bedroom/lounge-observations *Mountain View* and *Tower View* (both preserved, at the Railroaders Memorial Museum in Altoona and Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania in Strasburg, respectively).

Not too many months later, in August 1968, I caught up with the *Broadway* again (I had made earlier trips, but with no written record or specific recollections), and my sketchy notes from it paint a sad picture:

“The *Broadway Limited*, PC No. 49, Newark-Chicago, Bedroom A in *Tippecanoe Rapids*, a car in only fair repair. The half-lounge for sleeper passengers was full with passengers from New York City by the time we boarded, so we had drinks in our room while the five carloads of Four Winds Tour participants filed past us to the twin-unit diner.

“About 9:30 we tried the diner ourselves and, after abominable service, finally were given a very creditable meal. Later that evening, by dodging a persistent porter, we managed to view Horseshoe Curve from our sleeper's Dutch door.”

Half a year into the Penn Central era, things were not great. And I knew what we were missing, since the previous March, Laurel and I had occupied Bedroom A in *Mountain View* from New York to Delray

Beach, Fla., in seasonal use on Seaboard Coast Line's *Florida Special*. My parents rode in Master Room B.

Ironically, the *Broadway* enjoyed perhaps its finest hour in the decade before being stripped of its all-Pullman cachet. Prior to that, in its first half-century, the train had sailed in the shadow of its direct rival, NYC's *20th Century Limited*.



**Ironically, the Broadway enjoyed perhaps its finest hour beginning in 1958.**



Train photo, J. David Ingles; Turquoise medallion photo, Robert P. Schmidt

After April 1958, however, when NYC combined the *Commodore Vanderbilt* (already with coaches) and the *Century*, PRR's all-Pullman *Broadway* finally had its day in the sun.

This had been a long time in coming. From its inauguration in 1902 as the *Pennsylvania Special*, through its first streamlining in 1938, to the first decade of its final re-equipping in 1948, the *Broadway Limited* played second fiddle. NYC's *Century* had more cachet, carried more passengers, ran longer consists, and operated many more extra sections. For a brief time beginning in 1958, then, PRR jumped on the opportunity to get the *Broadway* a little respect, upgrading maintenance and enhancing service. Aboard the twin-unit diners, where waiters wore smart uniforms with keystone patches reading "The Broadway" on their sleeves, menu choices were upgraded. Marketing became more aggressive, capitalizing on the train now being the only all-Pullman New York-Chicago service. In the first year, *Broadway* ridership jumped 14 percent, reversing a downward trend.

By this time, however, Pennsy was focused on discontinuing trains and downgrading services to shrink its debilitating passenger-operation deficit, and studies on combining the *Broadway* and *General* were afoot as early as 1961. The all-Pullman *Pittsburgher* perhaps was a harbinger. In 1956 PRR had renamed 22 Pullman sleeping cars assigned to this train—on which U.S. Steel was said to have space routinely reserved—to honor industrialists and merchants of the "Steel City." By the early '60's, though, the train (which never did lose money on an avoidable-costs basis) was in management's crosshairs.

In September 1964, with the blessing of the Pennsylvania Public Utilities Commission, the *Pittsburgher* made its last run. The very next month PRR was back to the PUC with a similar termination request for the *Broadway*. PUC sent the railroad to the Interstate Commerce Commission, but the die was cast—it was only a matter of time, which came in December 1967.

On August 1 of that year, almost a decade after rival NYC did, Pennsy had ended its relationship with Pullman, taking over operation of its sleeping cars (except on routes involving other railroads). For its last four and a half months, then, the *Broadway* was not "all-Pullman" but "all-sleeping-car." Then it was neither, and by February 1968 the PRR itself was gone, into Penn Central and the nightmare to come.

Even when combined with *El Capitan*, as here rolling into Joliet, Ill., in November 1960, the *Super Chief* stood out, marked by its signature car, the *Pleasure Dome* lounge, whose 12-seat dining room's wall displayed the legendary Navajo Turquoise medallion (below).

### Super Chief: Dignity, style, luxury

At the end of August 1969, Laurel and I had the good fortune to ride Santa Fe's *Super Chief*. Here my notes are more expansive, reflecting no doubt my happiness at being aboard that still-splendid train:

"The *Super Chief*, ATSF No. 18, Los Angeles-Chicago, Bedroom F in *Palm Arch*. That this train is the best in the country is beyond argument. We boarded at Los Angeles Union Passenger Terminal and headed immediately for the lounge in the 'Pleasure Dome' car, which was staffed by both a bartender and a waiter. In that handsome room we sipped delicious, hand-mixed old-fashioned as No. 18 left the city.

"When we decided to dine, the regular diner was full, so we were escorted to a table for two in the 'Turquoise Room,' adjacent to the diner in the *Pleasure Dome* car. Here we had a true gourmet meal served impeccably in the grand manner by an incomparable waiter. After dinner we retired to the dome of the lounge car, which is furnished with revolving, parlor-car-style seats, to watch as we passed through Cajon Pass. The entire evening was characterized by quiet, dignity, style, and luxury.

"On our trip, as all summer, No. 18 ran in two sections: the first the all-Pullman *Super Chief*, the second the Hi-Level coaches-only *El Capitan*. Thus during a good part of the year the *Super* brings back the tradition of the all-Pullman train."

Well, probably. The verdict might hinge on how observant I was about our consist. In immediately prior summers, 1967 and '68, when the *Super* and *El Cap* ran separately, this notice for the *Super Chief* appeared in the *Guide* and in Santa Fe timetables: "June 5 to September 2, Reclining Seat Leg Rest Cars . . . also separate Dining Car and Lounge Car will be operated for Chair Car passengers." So in peak seasons, when the plebeian (though stylish in its own right) *El Capitan* ran on its own, in snuck some plain-vanilla, single-level coaches to spoil the *Super's* claim to all-Pullman purity. Though not a secret, I suspect this consist detail is not widely known.

In summer 1969, that changed again. Year round, through



### In August 1969, were we aboard a legitimate all-Pullman Super Chief?



Monty Powell



**No combined consist here as an all-Pullman “Super” drifts downhill from Edelstein, Ill., on July 22, 1962, toward its stop at Chillicothe.**

the April 1971 issue, the last before Amtrak, *Official Guides* and Santa Fe timetables contained in boldface headlines: “Super Chief—All Private Room Sleeping Car service Chicago, Kansas City and Los Angeles.” More important, the notation about “Reclining Seat Chair Cars” is absent. My guess is that my August ’69 trip was indeed aboard a legit all-Pullman train. Looking back across 40 years, I suspect that business had slipped to where coach patronage could be handled by *El Cap’s* Hi-Levels, so the *Super Chief* was “reduced” to all-Pullman status again. How odd, if declining patronage indeed created the last true all-Pullman train in America!

Plus, in the off-season, so what if it was coupled with *El Cap*? Weren’t the two sections kept totally discrete? Didn’t the *Super* portion retain all the amenities of its all-Pullman days, save a round-end observation car? I’m sure I wasn’t the only one who deemed it the nation’s finest train, and John Reed, then Santa Fe’s president, was determined to keep it so.

In the 1950’s and ’60’s, with the American passenger train approaching and then in its death throes, Santa Fe remained staunchly pro-passenger. Remarkably, then-president Ernest Marsh as late as 1962 ordered 24 Hi-Level cars for the *San Francisco Chief*, adding to the 55 cars his predecessor, Fred Gurley, had ordered to re-equip *El Capitan*. After Marsh came Reed, and on his watch Santa Fe prevailed in several contentious train-off battles, the most notable involving the *Chief*. But Reed believed what passenger trains Santa Fe ran, should be run well, and the *Super Chief* surely was, right to the end.

Reed came close to keeping Santa Fe out of Amtrak. He



J. David Ingles

**Whether combined or not, a drumhead brought up the *Super Chief’s* markers, as here on 4-4-2 *Regal House* at Joliet, Ill., on July 25, 1965.**

studied the economics of that option closely; had Santa Fe been allowed to run only those trains that Amtrak eventually did—the *Super Chief/El Capitan*, *Texas Chief*, and *San Diegans*—the railroad might have stayed out. So seriously did Reed take the public relations value of the name “Super Chief” that in 1974 he would withdraw from Amtrak permission to use it when he judged standards aboard his once-prized train to have become unacceptable.

In any case, in August 1969, Laurel and I were the direct beneficiaries of John Reed’s positive attitude toward his railroad’s flagship.

### Upon further review

So, here’s my scorecard for the “last” all-Pullman limited: The *Panama Limited* was truly all-Pullman until November 1967 and sneakily so, on paper, for a time thereafter, carrying *Magnolia Star* coaches on virtually every trip. The *Broadway* was totally pure until December 1967 and unambiguously impure thereafter. The *Super Chief* offers the most complexity. On the one hand, it was the earliest of the three to compromise, running combined with the all-chair-car *El Capitan* off-season beginning in 1957 and later slipping single-level coaches into summer consists. Still, for uncompromised quality, all-Pullman in style, substance, and effect, right into Amtrak, my vote goes to the *Super Chief*, hands down.

In prize-fight terms, the winner on a TKO has to be the *Broadway Limited*, but it was the *Super Chief* that remained, to the very end, the real knockout. ■