



# A Mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century Phenomenon

FROM TROLLEY CARS TO ELECTRO-MOTIVE SDS, ILLINOIS TERMINAL LEFT AN IMPRESSION ON THIS PHOTOGRAPHER

**I** began writing this feature while staying with friends at the hamlet of Oakwood, Ill., a mere 8.5 miles from Danville, Ill., a major city in eastern central Illinois and in 1901 the birthplace of what became the Illinois Terminal Railroad — a railroad that would become one of primary interest to me.

In 1952 (when I was three), one could still board an IT passenger train at Oakwood and ride into Danville. In Oakwood today, all that remains are bike paths on vacant rights-of-way (including the Peoria & Eastern, which paralleled the east end of the IT) and bridge abutments. The post-World War II IT presented a particularly colorful transformation for an interurban railroad before it was merged with Norfolk & Western in 1982.



In fall 1980, train 203 ambles along ex-PRR rails south of Mackinaw, Ill. The man on the footplate is John B. Harrison, the train's engineer! He is about to jump off the train and into the photographer's car for the chase.





A new class C electric poses for the photographer outside the Illinois Traction System shops in Decatur. Illinois Traction Society collection



One does not usually associate a Mikado steam locomotive with an interurban, but here's Illinois Terminal 2-8-2 No. 30 with a tank train in tow on IT's former St. Louis, Troy & Eastern RR near Wanda, Ill. The train has just ducked under the Chicago & North Western. Mike Schafer collection



Decatur Shops were the heartbeat of the Illinois Traction System. They served the railroad into the diesel era as a secondary facility. Illinois Traction System, Illinois Traction Society collection

My first encounter with the IT came in summer 1965, when friend Jim Boyd and I were doing our routine blitz of various yards and interlocking towers in the bustling gateway of Peoria, Ill. Out of the corner of my eye, a brightly colored green and yellow GP7 slipped by us with a short freight.

"What was that?!" I asked. Jim was focused in the opposite direction to check out the Toledo, Peoria & Western yard, and simply muttered, "It's that old interurban line, the Illinois Terminal."

I recall having paged through an early issue of *Trains*, stumbling upon some photos depicting a late 1950s IT fan trip that involved an IT EMD switcher hauling old interurban cars as a fan trip — in the middle of a street. I became more intrigued by the Illinois Terminal than ever, and it became one of my all-time favorite railroads.



## SOME ANCIENT HISTORY

IT roots burrow way back to 1901, when congressman William B. McKinley purchased the Danville, Paxton & Northern Railway, which had a franchise to build south toward Westville, Ill. His idea was to bring up coal from the Westville mines to the Danville powerhouse and transport miners from Danville to the coal fields. The success of the DP&N prompted the building of other branches, and as well as city-to-city operations throughout central Illinois, linking Danville with Champaign-Urbana, Bloomington, Decatur, Peoria, Springfield, and eventually East St. Louis/St. Louis. As a whole it was referred to as the Illinois Traction System, a subsidiary of Illinois Power & Light, itself created in May 1923. An isolated section, the Illinois Valley line, linked Joliet with La Salle/Peru.

Sights turned northward to Chicago and eastward to Indianapolis, but the closest ITS came to Chicago was Joliet (38 miles southwest of Chicago), and the Indianapolis extension never made it past the Illinois/Indiana state line just east of Danville. At this point, ITS had become, in terms of width and breath, the largest interurban system in North America.

Despite the shortcomings in reaching Chicago and Indianapolis, McKinley's ITS had achieved some significant goals, most notably building its own bridge across the Mississippi to reach downtown St. Louis. (Beautifully restored, the bridge remains open only to road and pedestrian traffic.)

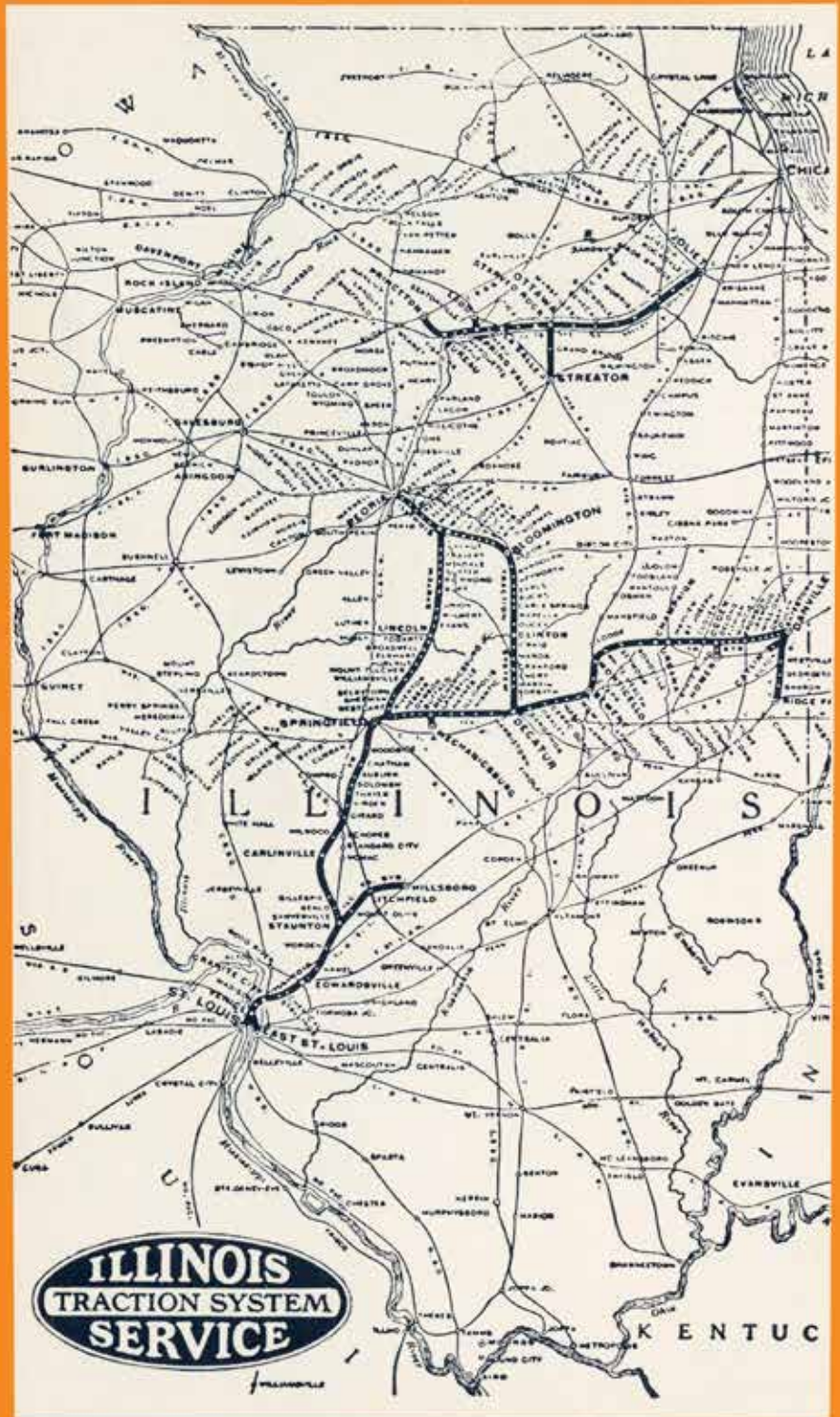
ITS had also fortified its ability to interchange with steam railroads, mainly by building belt lines around Decatur, Springfield, Edwardsville, and Granite City, avoiding the tight radii of city street trackage incapable of handling traditional couplers. About the same time, IT reached freight interchange agreements with several railroads, significantly boosting freight revenue.

## A NEW ERA

As post-World War I euphoria ushered in the "roaring '20s," ITS upgraded its passenger trains, applying new colors (mostly tangerine orange) to its passenger car fleet. Now IT had a rebuilt fleet of grandly named trains: the *Capitol Limited*, the *Peorian*, and the overnight *Peoria-St. Louis Owl*, complete with sleeping cars.

The boom of the 1920s ushered in a

# Illinois Traction System







**Train 200 has just arrived at the new Wilson Yard at Allentown, Ill., on the outskirts of Peoria in 1977. It lies partially on ex-PRR right-of-way.**



**Northbound train 200 is winning the battle in the climb up Union Hill in 1975. Still standing as of 2023, this substation-depot is one of several Spanish-style ITS structures that remain standing.**

new era for ITS. If you think mergers are something new, think again. ITS began buying up smaller carriers in the East St. Louis region, notably the Alton, Granite City & St. Louis; East St. Louis & Suburban; Alton & Eastern; St. Louis, Troy & Eastern; as well as a little all-steam switching railroad in east Alton — the Illinois Terminal. In this expansion, the “new” railroad emerged as ... the Illinois Terminal. Oh, the irony!

These acquisitions added considerable

trackage and traffic sources (including connecting railroads and local passenger operations) to IT’s grasp on the east side of the Mississippi, serving East St. Louis, Granite City, Edwardsville, Troy, Wood River, Roxana, Alton, and other burbs and industrial locations. IT became a powerhouse in serving this heavily industrial area, second only to the Terminal Railroad Association of St. Louis. IT’s boom prompted the railroad to build a huge terminal/warehouse building on North 12th

Street in St. Louis. It served as a freight and passenger terminal, warehouse, and office center. It remains in place today, still proudly displaying an interurban car in cut stone above the main entrance.

North of the St. Louis metro area, IT was in good shape as well, particularly at the Peoria Gateway, a hotbed of railroad interchange (Pennsylvania, Rock Island, Chicago & North Western, Chicago & Illinois Midland, Toledo, Peoria & Western, Burlington, Illinois Central, Peoria & Pequin Union, Santa Fe) and industry second only to Chicago. Decatur, which had become the home base for IT as the location of the railroad’s major shop and the junction of three of IT’s main lines, was also a good interchange location. For passenger service, only the IT provided direct service between Peoria, Springfield, and St. Louis.

## TRANSFORMATION

World War II changed everything, of course, and the IT was no exception. Freight and passenger traffic exploded, especially freight at the munitions center at Illiopolis. But the post-World War II boom unfortunately led IT — and dozens of steam railroads throughout the U.S. — to energize passenger service. As a result, IT in 1948 introduced three new streamliners, the *City of Decatur*, *Creve Coeur*, and *Mound City*. Although built by St.



Alco and EMD units repose at the Illinois Terminal's Federal Yard at Alton, Ill., in March 1970. Note the Flexicoil truck on the SW1200 at right.

Louis Car Co. — builders of North Shore Line's successful *Electroliner* trains in 1941 for Chicago-Milwaukee service — IT's new streamliners were rolling disasters.

The automobile boom put the nail in the coffin for interurbans throughout the country, and on March 3, 1956, IT inter-city passenger service came to an end. All that remained were IT streetcar operations between St. Louis and Granite City. That ended June 22, 1958, and thus the IT became a freight-only carrier.

IT was transfixed with the economy of dieselization after having tested Alco diesels beginning in 1946, mostly for the steam lines that IT had acquired. The railroad acquired a fleet of Alco S2 and RS1 units to dieselize the steam lines and eventually a fleet of six EMD GP7s to power road freights to Peoria and Decatur.

In 1956, ownership of the IT was transferred to a group of 11 railroads, all of which relied on the IT to one degree or another: Baltimore & Ohio; Chicago & Eastern Illinois; Chicago & North Western; Chicago, Burlington & Quincy; the Frisco; Gulf, Mobile & Ohio; Illinois Central; Nickel Plate Road, Peoria & Eastern, Rock Island; and Wabash. This arrangement made it easier for IT to abandon electrified trackage and move its freight trains via trackage rights on parallel lines. It allowed for the removal and scrapping



In its heyday, the railroad built this new passenger station in downtown Peoria, shown in 1978. Passenger trains entered from the rear, an arrangement that allowed IT to quit street operations.

of duplicative trackage throughout much of the system north of Edwardsville. A notable section of interurban mainline track to survive almost to the end of the IT was that between Lincoln and East Peoria, Ill. It was upgraded to standards that allowed a trio of SD39s to haul a 70-car freight up 1.95% Union Hill.

This was fine until the interurban-era trestle across the Mackinaw River at Mackinaw, Ill., collapsed under north-bound freight train No. 200 on Aug. 7,

1977. Yet IT marched on.

On the day Penn Central morphed into Conrail on April 1, 1976, PC's ex-Pennsylvania Railroad Vandalia line between Decatur and East Peoria emerged as an alternate route between Springfield and Peoria. The Vandalia was purchased as is, and that wasn't very good. Madison, Ill. (East St. Louis)-East Peoria freights were limited to 10 mph on the newly acquired line as work crews hastily attempted to upgrade the line.





Three SD39s head up this day's train 200 operating between Madison, Ill. (St. Louis) and Allentown (Peoria) on a bright summer 1976 morning.

I rode the cab of IT train 200 in 1976, and the 176.8-mile run to the Peoria Gateway took nearly 24 hours!

Of all eight railroads that co-owned the IT, Norfolk & Western benefited the most, largely on metro-St. Louis-Decatur/Peoria traffic. On Sept. 1, 1980, IT became a division of Norfolk & Western; on May 1, 1982, N&W acquired total ownership of the IT, forever wiping the historic and ambitious railroad out of the *Official Guide of the Railways* forever.

### A PERSONAL ODYSSEY

When I was born in the late 1940s, the IT, like so many railroads, was looking forward to a bright new postwar future. New electric streamliners and new, heavy duty Class D freight motors plied the rails between St. Louis and central Illinois. Diesels had arrived on the so-called Steam Lines and in fact were also invading the electric lines.

In the late 1950s, I became mildly aware of the IT while flipping through a *Trains Magazine* and seeing a photo series showing an IT fan trip comprised of "retired" interurban cars hauled by a diesel. My lifelong passion for passenger trains filed this in the back of my brain.

As described earlier, my first encounter with the IT in 1965 at Peoria, sparked my interest in this intriguing railroad — and my focus on all matters IT solidified. There was relatively little information on what had by then become what today

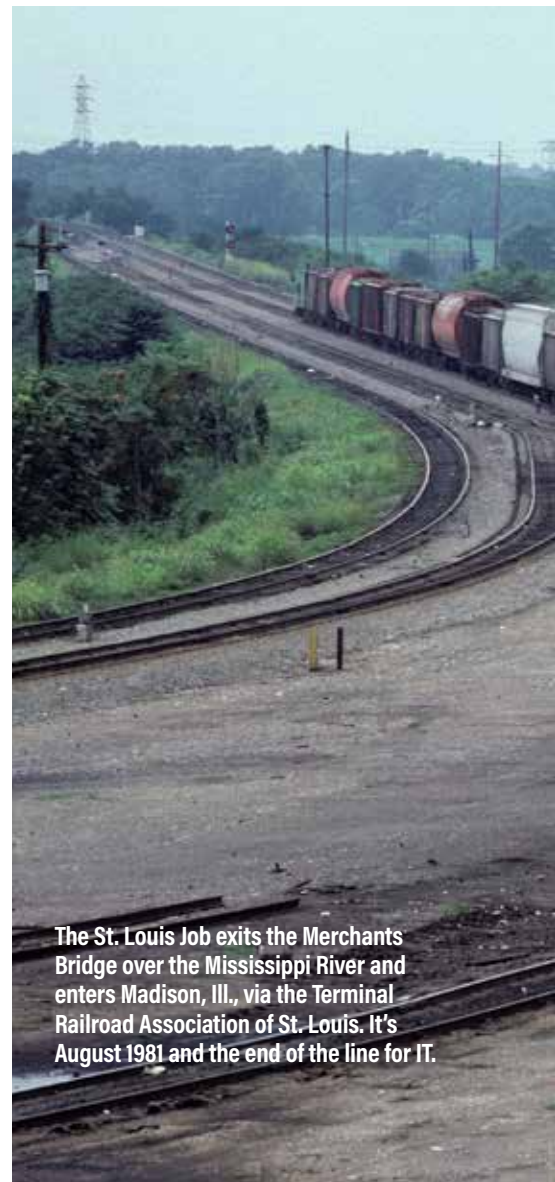
would today be called at regional railroad, so learning about the railroad meant actually exploring it.

In 1968, while a couple of us were exploring IT's East Belt Yard at Springfield, IT employee John B. Harrison approached us and a friendly discussion followed. A couple weeks later, I sent him color photos of IT action I had taken. Bingo! A critical door had opened in my growing interest in the IT. From that point on, I was welcome to do cab rides with him anywhere he was on duty. We became friends, and I was invited to stay with him and his wife and kids during field trips south. John also took me to the railroading complex that dominates Madison, Granite City, and East St. Louis, Ill.

This all led to my two-part IT feature in the May and June 1981 issues of *Trains*. John somehow had it set up for me to meet with the IT president and his assistants at the railroad's headquarters. President Walter Cassin insisted I take a 24-hour trip on the railroad's premier freight train, number 200 from Madison to East Peoria.

During this project, I met "Mr. IT," Dale Jenkins, serving as a cop. We became close friends, and when Dale formed the Illinois Traction Society, I eventually handled production of the group's magazine, *The Flyer*, of which Dale was the editor.

Today, Illinois Terminal remains my Number One favorite railroad — and I even have a book in the works! 📖



The St. Louis Job exits the Merchants Bridge over the Mississippi River and enters Madison, Ill., via the Terminal Railroad Association of St. Louis. It's August 1981 and the end of the line for IT.





Two GP7s have just delivered a coal train from Monterrey Mine to the power plant in Alton, Ill., in March 1970.

