

An office car finale

HOW THE C&O/B&O ENDED A CENTURY-OLD TRADITION OF RAILROAD BUSINESS CARS

BY JOE WELSH

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, much American railroad business was conducted aboard private railroad cars. Like many other railroads, the allied Chesapeake & Ohio and Baltimore & Ohio maintained fleets of these cars. Aboard them traveled the railroads' officers on missions of small or great importance, privileged customers, foreign dignitaries, and American statesmen — even some of presidential rank.

Despite the popular perception that such cars were playthings of the rich and famous, few private cars were really privately owned. Although the Association of American Railroads used the term private car for both personal and corporate-owned cars, in 1930, the high-water mark of the private car, Pullman estimated that of the approximately 1,500 cars of this type in service fewer than 50 were owned by individuals. The vast majority were railroad-owned.

Although the railroads took pains to stress to stockholders that their cars of this type were necessary tools, often referring to them as “office” or “business” cars, there was comparatively little office equipment on board. Desks, typewriters, and filing cabinets were in noticeably short supply; liquor cabinets, good china, and professional chefs were not.

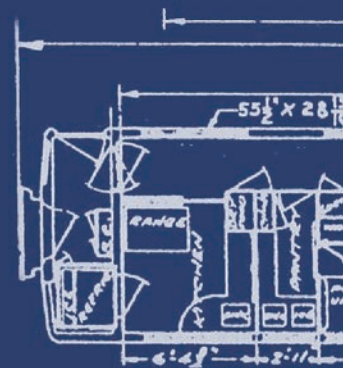
The railroad office car had three roles:

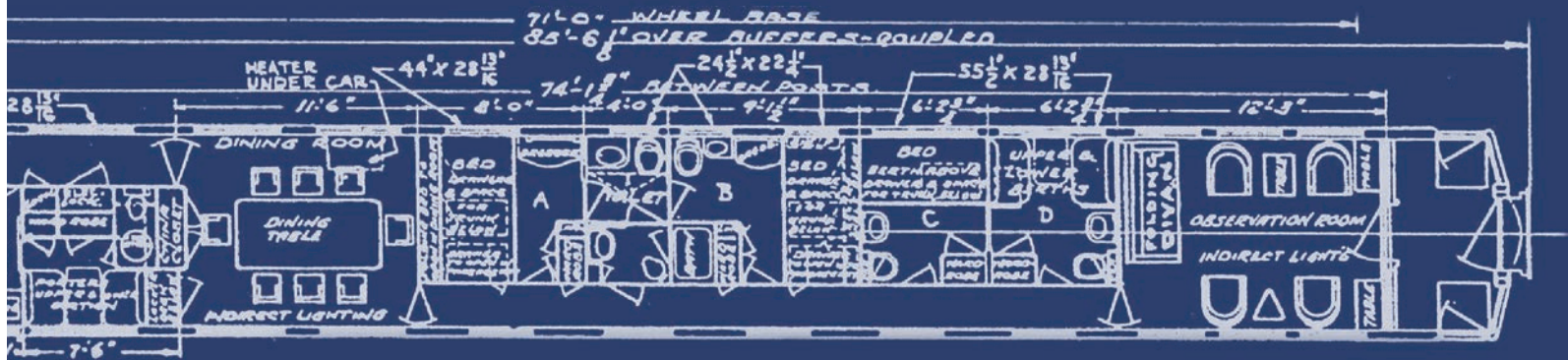
First, it was a home on the road. In the decades before improved highways, air travel, and chain hotels, traveling was an ordeal. On a railroad, reaching distant locations might be difficult, staying on site impossible. Holding working sessions out on the line required a place where officials could meet. Inspecting the property also required a vehicle that could go anywhere the rails did. The office car did the job.

Second, it was used for corporate entertainment. Many a thirsty legislator was entertained on an office car, as were countless shippers. The favors exchanged, or contracts inked, as a result of an office-car trip frequently outweighed the cost of maintaining the car.

Finally, it was a status symbol. Being able to provide a sparkling private car on request to visiting dignitaries distinguished the railroad as a successful American business. There was also the matter of perks for railroad officers. At one time, anybody who was somebody on the railroad had access to a private car. Few other mid-level management jobs in America came with a chef, wood-paneled conference room, stateroom, and brass-railed observation platform that could travel across the country. In today's terms it would be the equivalent of bank branch managers having access to a private jet.

The Great Depression had made the privately owned railroad car almost a thing of the past overnight. That left the railroads, and they too proved reluctant to continue to invest in the concept. Only a handful of office cars were produced after 1930. By 1940 the private car fleet had dwindled to 572 cars. Although the numbers stabilized after World War II, just 14 business cars were built new between





B&O car No. 100 departs Parkersburg, W.Va., in February 1967 on the westbound *National Limited*. Ahead of the office car is observation *Maumee River*. Bob Withers



C&O car No. 21, built in 1925 for the Nickel Plate Road, rests at Huntington, W.Va., in June 1968 with an unidentified car. Groomed office-car grounds were an extravagance. Bob Withers



Chesapeake & Ohio car RI-3, formerly office car No. 7 (closest to camera), and Baltimore & Ohio car No. 902 stand at Cincinnati Union Terminal in April 1971. Both cars wear C&O colors, a symbol of the roads' corporate alliance in the previous decade. David P. Oroszi

1949 and 1955. Railroads chose to rebuild older cars instead.

By the 1960s railroads were questioning the usefulness of the remaining office-car fleet. Such cars were too slow for the senior executive, too expensive to waste on just any officer, and redundant as offices or hotel rooms in all but the most remote locations. A tradition almost as old as railroading itself was slowly being extinguished.

OFFICE CARS ON THE C&O/B&O

The affiliated Chesapeake & Ohio and Baltimore & Ohio railroads were not immune to this change. Established in 1827, the proud B&O had already rostered its first two office cars by 1854. Through the years its lavish official cars, such as President John W. Garratt's opulent *Maryland*, had hosted several American presidents and countless other dignitaries. But over time the B&O, which had struggled for solvency for much of its life, focused more

closely on cost control — especially during the administration of Jervis Langdon Jr. (1961–64). His focus on trimming the fat was designed to make the merger of the C&O and the B&O attractive to government regulators. During his tenure the B&O sold three office cars.

By contrast, C&O, which gained control of B&O in 1963, was a rich, patrician coal hauler. C&O officers were used to the best of everything, including annual physicals complete with three or four days at the railroad's lavish Greenbrier Hotel in White Sulphur Springs, W.Va., and regular lunches in Cleveland's Terminal Tower.

Despite his affinity for the airplane, C&O President Walter J. Tuohy liked to entertain, and he understood the value of the office car for doing so. The regular coal shippers' "rodeo" at the Greenbrier saw a gathering of office cars. Use of the cars for personal trips by railroad officers was tolerated, too.

In 1966 the two railroads rostered a

total of 15 cars. C&O had seven heavy-weight cars and one lightweight, while B&O maintained seven heavyweights. There were still a few passable excuses for why the cars were needed. For example, the railroad retained multiple headquarters. The Executive HQ was in Cleveland. Baltimore hosted Transportation, Merchandise Traffic, and the former B&O Coal Traffic Department. The Engineering and Mechanical departments as well as the former C&O Coal Traffic Department were in Huntington, W.Va. Regional offices still existed at Detroit; Richmond, Va.; Cincinnati; and Pittsburgh. Officers who had cars assigned and had been shifted away from their roots might use the cars to inspect new turf or to travel "back home."

But 1966 would prove to be a turning point for the office-car fleet. In May of that year Walter Tuohy died suddenly. His replacement as C&O/B&O president, Gregory DeVine, had less interest in the fleet than Tuohy. Below him was Hays Watkins, vice president of finance. Watkins was a self-described "numbers man" who not only saw the office-car fleet as an unnecessary expense but as a perk reserved almost exclusively for the operating department. His opinion was borne out by the numbers. Of the 15 cars on the roster, 13 were assigned to the operating folks. Watkins also lacked Tuohy's confidence in the cars' real entertainment value and benevolent attitude about perks for officers.

LIFE ON BOARD

C&O/B&O office-car practices reflected the parent company's traditional ap-

proach. Locations on the line such as Huntington and White Sulfur Springs had carefully landscaped parking areas for the cars. Life aboard had changed little since the turn of the century. Rich wood paneling lent a classic look to the cars. Their interiors often reflected the decorating tastes of the officer to whom they were assigned.

The cars either had an assigned chef or one available from a pool. Depending on the circumstances, a waiter/attendant, and a secretary (always male) might be aboard as well. The secretary, often a member of the officer's staff, handled most administrative matters regarding movement of the car and accompanied the officer to handle paperwork. The actual movement of the cars was the responsibility of the passenger office.

Stocking the cars was done either from a dining-car department commissary or from local markets. Baltimore's famous Lexington Market was a favorite haunt of office-car chefs in search of seafood such as fresh crab meat or choice cuts of meat.

Despite the perception of office-car life bordering on baronial splendor, meals on board were surprisingly mainstream, reflecting the tastes of their conservative male occupants. Often, local railroaders, businessmen, or politicians would be invited on board the car for dinner while it was spotted awaiting inclusion in a scheduled passenger train. Good steak and southern fried chicken were staples, while delicacies such as Maryland crab cakes would sneak onto the menu, too. After dinner there was time for a cigar and conversation while the car rolled down the line, sometimes illuminated for viewing by the car's track lights. It was a way of life few would voluntarily forgo. But serious business was also conducted on board. Many a mid-level officer was subjected to a withering cross examination while he rode with the "boss" in the car's observation area inspecting the line. On more than one occasion a train was stopped and an officer was put off the car to take care of a problem on the spot.

ECONOMICS OF OFFICE CARS

The railroad's industrial engineering department conducted a study of the office-car situation in 1966. The company spent \$65,000 per year per car to operate the fleet — nearly \$1 million in all. The need for the cars as field lodging and

transportation had nearly vanished in the age of jet airplanes, automobiles, and motels. By virtue of their design and their lack of self-propulsion, the office cars were not ideal for observing the railroad. In 1954 the New York Central bought a Chrysler automobile to operate on rails as an executive inspection car; the New Haven used a Cadillac.

The traffic department used its office car for the entertainment of prospective customers — a worthwhile function. But as a status symbol, the question had to be asked, was the individual officer worth a \$65,000 annual status symbol at a time when a yearly salary rarely exceeded that? The conclusion was that the railroad could live with as few as three office cars and as many as eight — about half the fleet size the railroad was maintaining.

As part of the study, field reviews revealed the subculture of the office car on the C&O/B&O. First there was the matter of personal trips. One car made 109 moves in just one year. Although the individual to whom it was assigned had systemwide operating responsibilities, the car was rarely used to inspect the railroad and never ventured west of Akron, Ohio, or Huntington. In fact, it spent most of its time shuttling between Baltimore and the Virginia Peninsula, where the officer had a home, or to the Greenbrier Hotel.

Then there was the question of just who was riding the cars. On one occasion, staff inspected an office car scheduled to depart Charlottesville, Va., "officially occupied" by a high-ranking officer. As the story goes, the inspector encountered the car's attendant walking a dog near the car. The inspector inquired as to who was aboard that night. After an embarrassing moment of silence, the attendant spilled the beans. Making the trip alone that evening in the splendor of a wood-paneled private car with a personal staff was the officer's dog!

Finally, there was the almost comical issue of "protocol." Simplified, when more than one business car was on a train, the car assigned to the highest-ranking officer would be on the rear. When speaking of a pending office-car trip, a B&O general manager once exclaimed, "If I can't ride on the rear I won't go [by rail]. I'll fly." In most cases it was possible to deal with the issue easily. But on movements where a number of office cars were on the same train it became a nightmare — for



Hays Watkins

COMBINED 1966 OFFICE-CAR ROSTER

Chesapeake & Ohio:		
2	Pullman Car & Manufacturing	1925
3	American Car & Foundry	1922
7	Pullman Car & Manufacturing	1926 ¹
15	Pullman Car & Manufacturing	1927
21	Pullman Car & Manufacturing	1925
23	Pullman Car & Manufacturing	1927
25	American Car & Foundry	1931
Chessie 29	Pullman-Standard	1950 ²
Baltimore & Ohio:		
97	Pullman	1923
100	Pullman Car & Manufacturing	1929
900	Pullman Car & Manufacturing	1930 ³
901	Pullman	1913
902	Pullman Car & Manufacturing	1929
905	Pullman Car & Manufacturing	1925 ⁴
908	builder unknown	unknown ⁵

1 Later renumbered RI-3
 2 Built as a 5 double bedroom observation lounge; converted to office car in 1951
 3 Built as sleeper *Palm Key* in 1930; converted to office car in 1953
 4 Built as sleeper *East Newark* in 1925; converted to office car in 1945
 5 Acquired from Alton Railroad in 1945
 Source: Bill Howes

as a train moved from region to region, the rank of the officers on board might change en route. This overriding concern about who rode on the rear and in what order cars were arranged sometimes sparked multiple, and expensive switching moves on a single trip — simply to serve the delicate egos of management.

All this waste stood out in a business where the bottom line was getting tougher to meet every day. Despite the railroad's old-line traditions and classic fleet, it was obvious that the party was over. By the beginning of 1967, three of the remaining B&O cars were sold. In 1971 the arrival of Amtrak meant that the C&O/B&O lost most of the trains to which it could attach its office cars. Now moving a car often meant handling it in a freight train or as a special move — a much more expensive proposition. With this change and the ascension of Hays Watkins to CEO in 1971, the use of the traditional office car as an everyday tool of the railroad, soon rebranded as the Chessie System, was drastically reduced. ■

JOE WELSH is the author of 14 books, including *Baltimore and Ohio's Capitol Limited* and *National Limited (Voyageur Press, 2007)*. This is his 13th byline in a CLASSIC TRAINS publication.