

# Empire of express

FROM BABY CHICKS TO  
REELS OF FILM, NEARLY  
EVERYTHING AMERICANS  
USED REACHED THEM BY  
RAILWAY EXPRESS

BY JEFF WILSON

**L**ong before the delivery trucks of UPS and FedEx dominated the parcel delivery business, it was the green trucks of Railway Express Agency that delivered packages, moved urgent shipments among businesses, and provided next-day deliveries. At its busiest from the 1930s through the 1950s, REA used both railroad cars and trucks — along with coordinated service among airlines — to deliver large and small shipments across the country.

Grandma in Oregon needs to send Christmas presents to grandkids in Texas, Florida, and Ohio? No need to go to the post office: Just call Railway Express and a truck will stop by the house and pick up the packages. Paramount Studios has 400 prints of new movies to send to theaters across the country? Call REA. A wholesaler in Chicago has 12 pairs of shoes to send to a store in a small town in Iowa? REA again.

Choosing an express shipment could shave several days off the delivery time compared to standard less-than-carload (LCL) freight. The difference was that REA shipments traveled in passenger trains (aboard baggage cars) instead of the freight trains used by railroads' LCL services. In the heyday of REA, the company guaranteed five-day service almost anywhere in the country, whereas a standard cross-country railroad LCL shipment could take seven to ten days (and the U.S. Post Office Department's Parcel Post service, the only other real option, might take a couple of weeks).

Railway Express Agency had a virtual monopoly on express traffic in the U.S., and its ubiquitous green trucks could be found seemingly everywhere: lined up at railroad depots in towns and cities of all sizes, and stopped along city streets making deliveries and pickups.

## WHAT WAS EXPRESS?

The variety of products and items shipped by express was staggering, as was the volume: 231 million shipments in 1946. Consumer goods, notably those ordered from big catalog distributors such as Sears and Montgomery Ward, which were extremely popular among those living in rural America, were often shipped by express.

Common parcels and personal packages were a staple of express traffic — think Christmas and birthday presents, or any other items that people could send to each other.

Important paperwork, including legal documents such as deeds, contracts, stocks, bonds, permits, and other busi-

ness forms, usually traveled by REA.

Valuables, such as cash, gold, silver, and jewelry, were often shipped by express. Offices and messenger cars (baggage cars with an REA employee riding in them) had safes to protect these items. Customers included Federal Reserve banks, which often shipped cash among branches, and military bases, which distributed payroll in cash. Through this era, many other companies also paid employees in cash, which was often carried by REA.

A major portion of REA traffic not seen by the public was its business-to-business deliveries. This could range from something as small as a single vacuum tube to an engine block for a tractor. If a machine in a factory broke down and needed a new part from a supplier hundreds of miles away, odds are that it would be shipped by express (and quite likely via REA's Air Express division).

Almost any other product produced at a factory could travel via express, especially fragile items, perishables, large items, or cases of any products that didn't warrant a full truckload.

Into the 1960s, retail stores — especially those in small towns away from large cities, and thus outside the range of company-owned delivery trucks — received a

**Some idea of the diversity of Railway Express shipments can be had in this view of an REA cart beside Katy train 6-26, the northbound *Katy Flyer*, at Muskogee, Okla., in about 1946.** Krambles-Peterson Archive



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lot of their merchandise by both REA and conventional railroad LCL.

A 1940s REA ad featuring a live moose [page 39] is cartoonish, but REA was well-known for shipping live animals. Common shipments included baby chicks, sent by the millions in cases from hatcheries to farms; zoo animals; and pets and other small animals. These were shipped in cages, and owners were required to include food and other necessary items, plus handling instructions for agents.

**Although Railway Express Agency didn't come into existence until 1929, most historians trace the express business to 1839.**

Racehorses were often shipped via REA in horse cars or converted baggage cars (both usually leased from railroads), and premium livestock (breeding animals or other valuable stock) often traveled by REA.

Other common express shipments in-

cluded medical supplies and equipment, human blood, movie films (which were both fragile and quite flammable) and scripts, radio recordings, and baggage — namely trunks and cases shipped by people moving, students heading to college, and military personnel being transferred.

REA handled cans of milk and cream (en route from farmers to creameries) on routes not busy enough to support a dedicated milk car or train. In warm weather, messengers would have to keep ice atop

the cans to prevent the contents from spoiling. Fresh fish and seafood were often shipped, packed with ice (or dry ice) in insulated containers. REA also han-

dled large-scale refrigerated shipments, as we'll see in a bit.

#### **EXPRESS BEGINNINGS**

Although Railway Express Agency didn't come into existence until 1929,

most historians trace the express business to 1839. In that year William Hernden began a one-man operation by collecting small parcels from multiple senders and carrying them by hand in a bag between New York and Providence, R.I. His enterprise was successful and business grew rapidly, with multiple carriers soon serving clients in New York, Boston, and other cities.

By the late 1800s, dozens of express companies had sprung up across America. As the country expanded, the business evolved, with companies using a combination of railroads, steamship lines, and their own wagons (later trucks) to transport packages.

Express companies allied themselves with multiple railroads, signing contracts and building routes that allowed them to claim specific territories that they covered. In contrast to common-carrier railroad LCL business, express parcels were carried on passenger trains rather than freight trains, allowing faster delivery. For

**A Railway Express Agency truck is backed up to the messenger car of Grand Trunk Western train 54 at Pontiac, Mich., to transfer parcels in August 1956.** J. J. Buckley, Dan Pope collection



**During World War II REA hired women to cover many positions. In June 1943, Ida Hicks worked as an assistant at the agency in New Britain, Conn.** Gordon Parks, Library of Congress collection

this, express companies charged a premium rate — often double the standard charge for conventional LCL.

Into the 1900s, the U.S. Post Office didn't handle packages, leaving that to private express companies and railroad LCL services. In 1913, however, the Post Office introduced Parcel Post (fourth class) service, allowing packages up to 11 pounds and a combined length plus width plus height of 72 inches (weight limits would increase over the years).

Although Parcel Post was slower, it was much cheaper and took a big bite out of the express business — especially for personal packages. Express companies objected, claiming Parcel Post was unfair competition because it operated at a loss and was subsidized by the government. The protests were to no avail, and Parcel Post would remain a thorn for REA into the 1970s.

A loss of business to Parcel Post, together with increasing government regulations — namely the 1906 classification



**A vehicleman poses with his small Ford delivery truck in 1940. REA derived significant revenue from the sale of advertising space on the sides of its trucks.** Jeff Wilson collection

of express companies as common carriers (meaning they were subject to Interstate Commerce Commission approval for routes and rates) — led to several companies going out of business, with others merging.

By the eve of World War I, four major interstate express companies remained: Adams Express, American Express, Southern Express, and Wells Fargo, plus two railroad-owned companies: Great

Northern Express (owned by Great Northern Railway) and Northern Express (owned by Northern Pacific).

Increased wartime traffic caused serious congestion and delays on American railroads. Heavier traffic, aging equipment, and a lack of cooperation and coordination among railroads in interchanging cars were major problems.

Most know that in December 1917 President Wilson ordered the takeover of

Several of REA's iconic green delivery trucks are parked behind the New Haven's station at Canaan, Conn., in the early 1960s. REA's distinctive red diamond emblem was a common sight at large and small stations throughout the country. Paul Larson



American railroads by a government body, the United States Railroad Administration (USRA). The USRA streamlined operations, ordered new equipment, and coordinated operations among railroads, getting traffic flowing again.

What fewer know is that in 1918, the existing express companies were also consolidated. A newly formed company, American Railway Express (AREX), assumed all operations. To improve service and speed, AREX closed duplicate offices,

### **Railroads were responsible for providing space on trains, for moving the trains, and for providing space at terminals as needed.**

combined smaller agencies, consolidated and streamlined rail and truck routes and other operations, and adopted uniform nationwide billing.

In March 1920 USRA control of railroads ended, with individual railroads again assuming operations. However, it wasn't as simple for the express business. Railroads were the primary means of carrying express parcels. But, because the

express companies didn't "own" routes in the way railroads owned their tracks and rights of way, and because so many agencies had been combined and closed, it would have been impossible to divide American Railway Express back into the individual entities as they existed before the war.

The result was that AREX continued operations. The lone exception was Southeastern Railway Express, which covered routes of the Southern Railway and subsidiaries and parts of the Mobile & Ohio Railroad (and which would be acquired by REA in 1938).

The 1920 contract between AREX and the railroads gave the railroads the option to purchase AREX, which they did in 1929. A group of 89 Class I railroads bought the company, dividing 1,000 shares of stock based on the amount of express carried by each railroad. The new company was named Railway Express Agency. The agreement granted REA the exclusive right to carry express shipments on U.S. railroads.

### **RAILWAY EXPRESS OPERATIONS**

Duties and responsibilities were divided among REA itself and the carrier railroads. REA was responsible for handling all package pickup and delivery to and from customers, all billing, and all transfer of parcels at terminals and among various types of transport (trucks, trains, and planes).

Railroads were responsible for providing space on trains, for moving the trains, and for providing space at terminals as needed (usually in freight rooms of depots). REA parcels were carried in baggage cars — more accurately, "baggage-express" cars. These were owned by the various railroads, but carried RAILWAY EXPRESS AGENCY sublettering.

Rates were strictly regulated by the Interstate Commerce Commission, and were generally about double what it cost to ship via standard LCL. REA's profits were divided among owning railroads proportionately by shipments hauled by each. Non-owning railroads still participated in REA operations and were paid for services, but did not share in REA profits. For example, by 1962 REA was

co-owned by 61 railroads but operated over 104.

At its peak, REA operated 22,000 agencies across the country. Most were located in railroad stations, although some were in storefronts or in other structures away from the tracks. The familiar red diamond emblem hung at agency depots. Each agency was assigned a specific area for which it was responsible for pickup and delivery. Large transfer terminals were located adjacent to yards in major cities. These received and dispatched cars of express shipments to other terminals.

Duties were divided among employees, and this varied by the size of the office. An agency in a city of 15,000 might have an agent, a cashier, several vehicle-men (what REA called drivers) and trucks, and an assistant or two. Many small-town agencies had a single employee performing all tasks. REA also contracted with railroad employees at many locations to perform part-time duties.

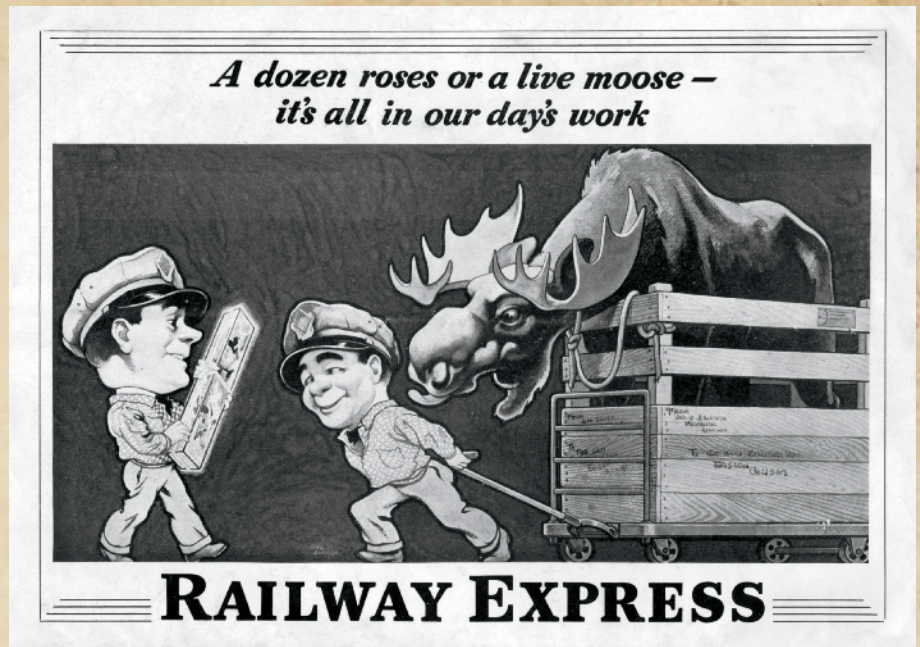
REA's basic operations are easy to follow. A customer could either drop off a parcel at an agency office or call for a pickup, and soon a familiar green truck would stop by. An invoice, waybill, and label would be completed for each parcel, and payment made (collect-on-delivery was also an option).

Pickups were consolidated at the agency for loading into baggage cars; likewise, inbound shipments were unloaded from baggage cars at depots and sorted for delivery. Not every passenger train carried express. Certain trains were assigned the task, and each town with an agency was served by one or more trains.

Baggage cars carried REA shipments. Larger stations might receive full sealed cars that were set out for unloading, while smaller agencies were served by "messenger cars" that dropped off and picked up parcels as the train paused at each town. As the name implies, these cars had a messenger — an REA employee or contracted railroad employee — riding the car who was responsible for tracking all waybills and parcels as they were transferred at agencies. Messenger cars were indicated by having a star stenciled with the car lettering. These cars were equipped with a desk, lavatory, and a safe for valuables.

Sealed cars were used to carry parcels between major terminals. These operated on regular schedules, just like passenger cars. They would be carried in passenger or dedicated mail-and-express trains and be handed off among railroads.

For example, parcels gathered at the



REA worked hard to maintain the image that it would ship virtually anything. This ad appeared in a 1940 issue of the company's employee magazine, *Express Messenger*. REA



In the mid-1940s, Pennsy GG1 4867 stands at Harrisburg, Pa., amid carts laden with mail and Railway Express shipments including, at left, boxes of baby chicks. Bob's Photo

New York City terminal that were destined for locations in central and northern California would be placed in a sealed car. This car might travel to Chicago on the New York Central, then ride the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy to Council Bluffs, Iowa, the Union Pacific to Ogden, Utah, and the Southern Pacific to San Francisco. The car would then be opened and parcels sorted and reloaded aboard railcars or trucks to individual agencies in the region.

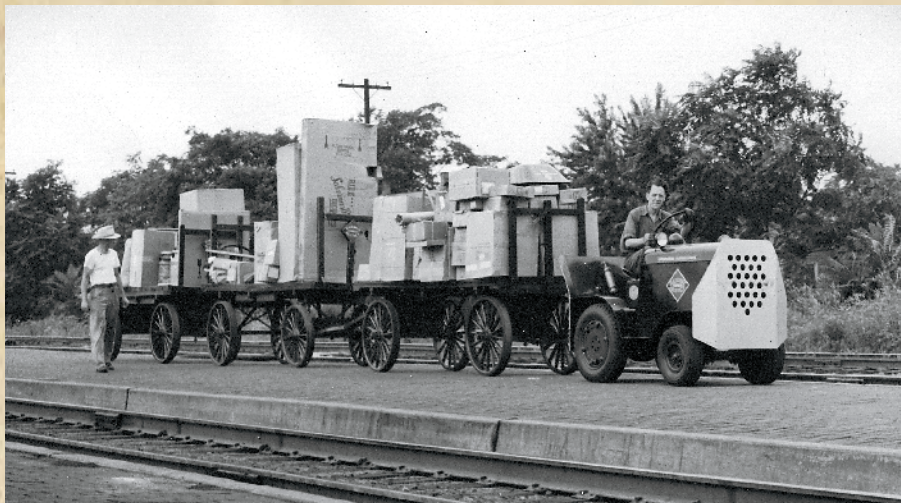
These cars — along with baggage cars of mail — were handled by regular pas-

senger trains, often railroads' secondary trains for a given route. For example, on the Northern Pacific, the *North Coast Limited* didn't carry express, but the *Mainstreeter* usually had several express cars at the head end. On high-volume routes, railroads also ran dedicated mail-and-express trains that either carried no passengers or might have a single rider coach at the rear.

Many cities were joined by two or more railroads in the REA ownership group, and part of REA's operating contract specified that traffic was to be divided



**American Car & Foundry built 500 new 55-foot express refrigerator cars for REA in 1947-48. The ice-bunker cars were initially painted aluminum and green as shown here. ACF**



**A sure sign that a train was about to arrive was the station's expressman driving a "mule" pulling carts of outbound express into position. This is Centralia, Ill., in 1946. Henry McCord**

equitably among owning railroads. This was important, since profits were distributed to owning railroads based on the proportion of shipments carried — not per parcel, by weight, or by space occupied by car carried.

Another key part of the contract stipulated that railroads must be used for intercity shipments whenever routes were available (*i.e.*, those on which passenger trains were operating). On these routes, REA could only use trucks (or planes) with the permission of the railroads that would have participated in the shipment. In 1929 this wasn't a negative for REA, since rail routes were usually the best option. Most highways were generally poor quality, and trucks were small and inefficient for long hauls. Within the next 20 years, however, this clause would greatly hinder the company's flexibility,

leading to express traffic departing for trucking companies.

### **EXPRESS REEFERS**

Railway Express Agency was also responsible for express shipments of perishables. It maintained a fleet of refrigerator cars and also managed operations of railroad-owned express reefers to handle these shipments. Express reefer operations were faster than conventional freight reefers by two to four days for cross-country trips — and as with conventional express, the rates were also higher (typically 1.5 to 2 times the regular refrigerator-car rate).

Refrigerated express comprised a wide variety of products. Berries (namely strawberries) were almost always shipped via express because of their short shelf lives. Citrus fruits were frequently carried



by REA, especially for the first harvests of a season when they could command premium prices. Other fruits often carried were apricots, plums, peaches, and cherries. Flowers and live plants were often shipped via refrigerated express (especially before Easter and Christmas), as were prepackaged baskets of fruit, meat, and cheese.

Cars could be loaded at the site of harvest, having been precooled at a nearby icing station, or at a central terminal. An example was REA's Jacksonville, Fla., terminal, which loaded a great deal of refrigerated express goods bound for markets in the Northeast and Midwest.

Express refrigerator shipments could be handled at the front of standard passenger or express trains with other head-end traffic (including sealed cars of mail and standard express). For large, multi-car shipments, express reefers were sometimes handled as a dedicated train, usual-

**The North Coast Limited was Northern Pacific's glamour train to the West Coast, but the Mainstreeter was the workhorse that handled express. At least nine head-end cars, many carrying REA shipments, trail train 1's F units at St. Paul in 1967.** J. David Ingles



ly as an extra section of an existing passenger or express train. This made re-icing of cars a bit easier.

Express refrigerator cars differed from standard reefers by having high-speed trucks and steam and signal lines, which enabled them to be carried at the front of passenger trains. Express reefers were typically longer than conventional reefers, with most wood and early steel cars measuring 50 feet long instead of 40.

In 1947-48 REA bought 500 new steel 55-foot cars built by American Car & Foundry. Cooled by ice, these cars initially wore a catchy silver (aluminum) and green scheme, but were repainted solid green by the early 1950s. REA bought another 1,000 similar cars from General American in 1955 and '57, as well as 275 reefers converted from former World War II troop sleepers. By the early 1960s, REA had also acquired many express reefers formerly owned by railroads.

These refrigerator cars were often used for non-refrigerated shipments. In fact, by the late 1950s and early '60s, they were rarely used as originally intended. The decision to purchase reefers in the late 1950s had been controversial, as refrigerated express shipments were already in a steep decline. Most traffic that was once a staple for rail shipment — notably berries — was now carried almost exclusively by truck.

#### **AIR EXPRESS**

Air express had begun in 1927 by REA predecessor American Railway Express. A uniform contract with multiple airlines (approved by the Civil Aeronautics Board) covered rates and duties. REA provided full door-to-door delivery of air parcels, unlike airlines' own freight busi-

ness, which provided airport-to-airport service. By 1940, REA had contracts with 17 airlines at 216 airports.

This allowed same-day and next-day delivery, an exciting innovation for the 1930s — albeit a costly one, as air rates

**REA maintained a fleet of refrigerator cars and managed operations of railroad-owned express reefers for perishable shipments.**

were often 10 times those of standard express. Air shipments topped 1 million in 1940 and rose to more than 7 million per year by the 1960s, with rates dropping as equipment (and speed) improved.

#### **DECLINE AND DEMISE**

Improving roads, the introduction of the Interstate highway system, and larger, more-efficient trucks meant more and





more express business moved from REA to trucking companies during the 1950s and '60s. Railroads were eliminating and cutting schedules of passenger trains, giving REA fewer (and often slower) options for shipping parcels long distances.

Less-than-truckload (LTL) truckers were not hindered by rail-only rules, and could schedule trucks on their ICC-ap-

### Improved roads and larger, more-efficient trucks meant more and more business moved from REA to trucking companies.

proved routes as needed, whereas REA was hamstrung by its requirement to ship on many routes by rail.

United Parcel Service, which would ultimately get ICC approval to provide package service in all 48 contiguous states after REA's demise, was growing rapidly.

The difference was that UPS, for interstate transport, was a contract carrier, not a common carrier (even though in some areas UPS had common-carrier status for intrastate hauls).

This meant that, unlike common-carrier REA, UPS could pick and choose the traffic it hauled, and it specialized in fairly lucrative high-volume retail and store traffic. REA, meanwhile, as a common carrier was obliged to accept all business, including to and from expensive-to-serve low-traffic and low-population areas.

A new contract with railroads in 1961, together with a new management team, briefly improved REA's profitability. Thousands of small agencies were closed, replaced by "Key-Point terminals," which were basically larger regional distribution centers that could serve wider areas.

The new contract removed the rail-only stipulation from most routes and also changed the way railroads were compensated. Under the new system, REA began leasing baggage-car space from railroads, dividing revenue with the carrying railroad. REA also experimented with containers of various types as well as piggyback service.

Ultimately the changes were too little, too late. After a brief increase in shipments in 1963, REA's business again declined and the company began operating at a loss. By the mid-1960s multiple railroads had pulled out of the REA contract, including major carriers such as New York Central and Southern. The owning railroads began looking to divest themselves of REA.

The railroads' own LCL services were suffering the same fate, with carloadings plummeting from 1.1 million in 1962 to just 96,000 by 1969. By 1970 most rail-

Southern Railway 28, the Cincinnati-Columbia, S.C., *Carolina Special*, curves along the French Broad River west of Marshall, N.C., in fall 1964. The REA reefer between the diesels and baggage-RPO will come off at Asheville, N.C. Other cars, carrying mail and express, are bound for Greensboro, N.C. (in train 22), and Columbia. A coach, dinette-coach, and sleeper round out the train. Jim McClellan



The Nashville Key-Point Terminal was one of about 50 regional centers opened by REA in the early 1960s to replace less-efficient agencies based in small-town depots. REA



Ford delivery trucks await disposition in New York City following REA's bankruptcy and cessation of operations in 1975. They wear REA's final upward-arrow scheme. Jeff Wilson collection

roads were exiting the LCL business, unable to compete with truckers. Package service of any kind needs a high volume to justify the equipment, routes, and personnel required. Below a certain traffic level, the service becomes untenable; both LCL and express had fallen below sustainable amounts by that time.

Through the 1960s, railroad LCL and REA were both still hampered by ICC restrictions on trucking routes, and trucking companies were quick to file protests anytime REA petitioned for new routes if they thought their territory was being encroached upon.

In 1969, REA was bought out by an investor group led by REA officers, which acquired almost all stock from the owning railroads. By this time the move from trains to trucks and air was almost complete (less than 10 percent of REA revenue at the time came from rail operations), and by the coming of Amtrak in May

1971, rail operations had virtually ceased.

An unofficial name change to "REA Express" had taken place in 1960, eliminating what was considered to be the undesirable and dated "railway" from the company name. This name change became official in 1970, with a paint-scheme change to light gray and the dropping of the familiar diamond logo, which was replaced by an upward-pointing arrow.

By 1972, REA carried just half as many shipments as it had in 1965. The company was trying to recover by pushing its Air Express service, but yet another blow came in 1974 when the Civil Aeronautics Board ordered airlines to drop their REA-exclusive express contracts. Although this was appealed and officially pushed back to 1978, the ruling would shortly become moot.

REA's end came slowly and painfully, amid protests of ICC regulations, litigation with UPS, a futile lawsuit against the

previous-owner railroads, a legal battle with the railway clerks' union, and finally with embezzlement charges against several REA officers. The company declared bankruptcy in early 1975 and operations ceased. Any hope of reorganization died in November of that year when courts ordered all REA assets to be liquidated.

The days of familiar green delivery trucks were gone, replaced with the brown of UPS and white of FedEx, but the legacy of Railway Express remains a fascinating part of railroad history from the 1930s through the 1970s. ■

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