ITC: Road of many manifestations

Interurbans, steam, big diesel freights — Illinois Terminal had 'em all • **By Mike Schafer**

As seen from St. Louis–Peoria train 92 on the main, Peoria–St. Louis 95 takes the siding at Chatham circa 1953. At right is the GM&O main line.
John Humiston, Richard Humiston collection

The Illinois Terminal Railroad might be one of the most misunderstood Class 1 railroads of the 20th century. If you think "the I.T.," as most called it, was just a creaky electric interurban that gave up on passengers and got some diesels to haul freight to a few customers, think again.

Illinois Terminal was an all-steam switching line established in 1895 at Federal, Ill., an industrial complex next to Alton, 25 miles north of St. Louis on the Illinois side of the Mississippi River. The electric IT began as an extended streetcar line 165 miles to the northeast, opening in 1901 between Danville and nearby Westville, Ill. While the original steam IT toiled in relative obscurity for the next quarter century, the little electric line was the genesis of what would — in terms of its 14-county reach from St. Louis to Peoria and almost Indiana — become the largest electric interurban operation in North America: the Illinois Traction System (ITS). Only the Los Angeles-based Pacific Electric was larger, in terms of route-miles, but its service area was more concentrated.

The ITS was the brainchild of William B. McKinley (not to be confused with

U.S. President William McKinley, who was assassinated in 1901), the Midwest's own empire builder and a member of the U.S. House of Representatives. McKinley entered what today is the University of Illinois in 1870 at age 14 and would become a brilliant businessman.

McKinley consolidated several electric railroads that he'd started individually with utility firms he had also been amassing, operating them under a holding company, Illinois Traction Co. Most of the interurban lines operated as the Illinois Traction System, often referred to as "the McKinley Lines." With McKinley as the interurban's president and right-hand man H. Eugene Chubbuck oversee-
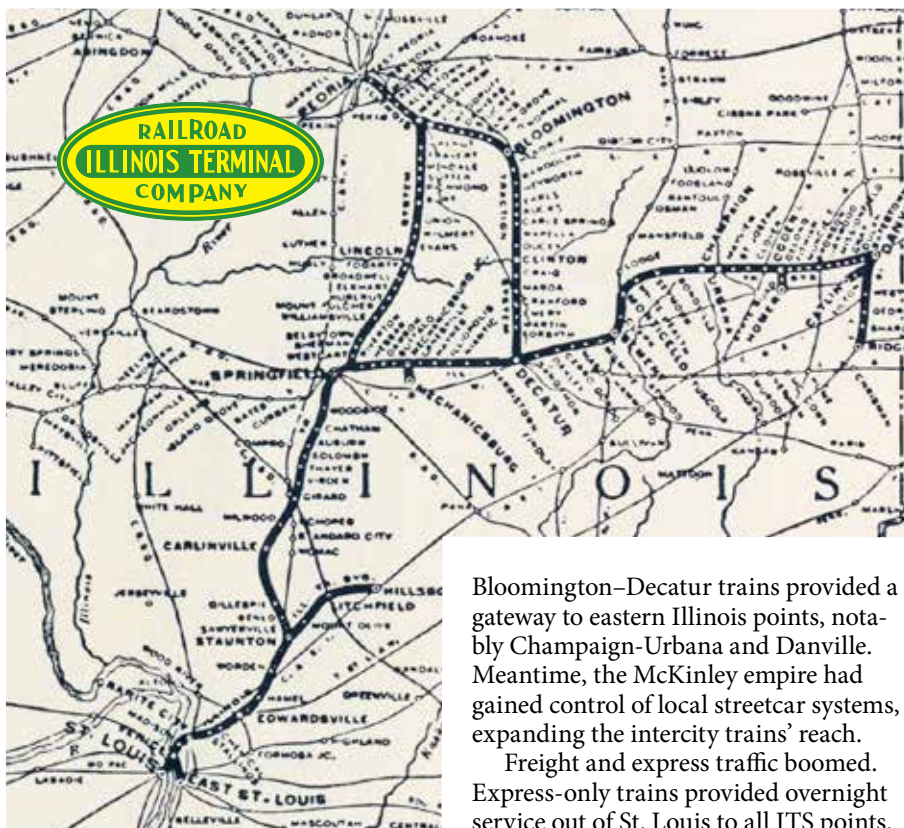
ing development, the ITS reached north from St. Louis into the heart of Illinois to link several urban areas, notably Edwardsville; the state capital of Springfield; Decatur; Champaign-Urbana, the twin hometowns of the big university; Danville; Bloomington; and Peoria, then the state's second-largest city. McKinley's lofty goals aimed beyond, to Indianapolis and Chicago, and ITS almost reached the latter though subsidiary Chicago, Ottawa & Peoria, but gaps between Peoria and the CO&P and between Joliet and Chicago were never filled.

Nonetheless, the ITS rose above its traction peers on many levels, not afraid to think both big and outside the box.

Having gone under the NYC, IT 30, one of three 1929 Baldwin 2-8-2s, is on the original (1895) Illinois Terminal linking Alton and Edwardsville with empties for Roxana refineries in the late '40s.
Illinois Terminal, Dale Jenkins collection

the belts let ITS move intercity trains off city streets, reducing running times.

Enter "Illinois Terminal"

With the Roarin' Twenties came roarin' changes for the ITS, and by the end of the decade, a new railroad emerged. A series of purchases of smaller carriers and consolidations that began in 1925 saw ITS merged with the original Illinois Terminal and several other East St. Louis/Alton-area roads, steam as well as electric, including Alton & Eastern; St. Louis, Troy & Eastern; St. Louis & Illinois Belt; East St. Louis & Suburban; and St. Louis & Alton. The new system became known as Illinois Terminal.

"Terminal" now was the key word. The acquisition of these smaller roads, mostly terminal and switching carriers but also including suburban rail and bus operations, provided the former ITS with a solid anchor at its south end, with many large, captive freight customers and a network of tracks that seemed to poke into every nook and cranny of the industry-heavy "Tri-Cities" north of East St. Louis: Venice, Madison, and Granite City. The new Illinois Terminal Railway System, its formal name, had a strong presence in the area east of St. Louis, where many eastern steam trunk lines' freights terminated.

With this change also came a new IT terminal and headquarters building in downtown St. Louis, at Delmar and 12th streets (today Tucker Boulevard). Seven stories high and occupying an entire city block, the Midwest (later, Central) Terminal Building opened in 1932, serving

Steam roads were adamant about not allowing ITS to enter St. Louis proper over their Mississippi River bridges, so ITS built its own. Opened in 1910, McKinley Bridge remains today as a vehicular and pedestrian gateway to St. Louis. ITS also was aggressive in soliciting freight interchange, its ability to do so enhanced by new belt lines around city centers.

ITS passenger service was second to none among U.S. interurbans, and even some steam roads. ITS had a practical monopoly on St. Louis–Peoria service, in later years offering the only direct trains linking those two markets. The flagship was the *Illmo Limited*, complete with buffet-lounge and parlor observation cars. The overnight St. Louis–Peoria *Owl* carried all-room sleeping cars, including an observation car with drumhead. The companion sleeper train *Illini* linked Champaign and St. Louis, combined with the *Owl* south of Springfield. ITS was one of only three interurbans to feature sleeping-car service [Summer 2008 CLASSIC TRAINS], which lasted until 1940. ITS sleepers boasted upper-berth windows, a precursor to those on Amtrak Viewliner sleepers of today.

Trains off the Danville–Champaign–Decatur line connected with Peoria–St. Louis trains at Springfield. Peoria–

Bloomington–Decatur trains provided a gateway to eastern Illinois points, notably Champaign-Urbana and Danville. Meantime, the McKinley empire had gained control of local streetcar systems, expanding the intercity trains' reach.

Freight and express traffic boomed. Express-only trains provided overnight service out of St. Louis to all ITS points. Freight trains, hauled by nimble electric locomotives, grew enough to make ITS a rival to steam roads, though in some cases it served as a handy extension. In 1909, for example, ITS established joint rates with Frisco and Chicago & Eastern Illinois. This paved the way to make ITS more like a steam road than a typical interurban, which required a transfer of goods between cars at interchange points. Industry-standard freight cars could flow freely onto and off ITS, and soon interchange with steam roads grew.

Enhancing this increase in interchange was ITS's quest to build belt lines, for some ordinances kept freight cars off city streets. At Springfield and Decatur,

Two streamliner cars making up St. Louis–Peoria train 90 on September 18, 1954, stop in Lincoln, Ill., at the GM&O depot, where IT was a tenant. IT quit this track for rights on IC in 1962.
Bernard Rossbach

In an early '50s scene looking west, Granite City-bound PCC 457, one of eight, holds for an interurban from Peoria to enter McKinley Bridge.
John Humiston, Richard Humiston collection

Half of IT's GP7s show three liveries at East Peoria in 1966. The 1602 wears EMD factory paint, while preserved 1605 looks like this today.
Mike Schafer

freight and, beginning in 1933, passengers. Trains entered St. Louis off the McKinley Bridge onto a new combination elevated and ground-level line, which dived below street level just before entering the headquarters/depot. Both the Central Terminal Building and the elevated track structure are intact today.

The consolidation also resulted in major changes of St. Louis-area freight and passenger traffic patterns. Intercity passenger trains bypassed street-running congestion on the Illinois side of McKinley Bridge by using electrified parts of steam lines plus new elevated trackage, while freight operations were hubbed at Le Claire, Ill., adjacent to Edwardsville. Electric freights from the north terminated at Le Claire, with many of their cars being distributed from there on IT's newly acquired steam lines.

IT began dabbling with diesels after World War II, in 1947 ordering from Alco the system's first ones: 12 S2s and 7 RS1s. In 1950 IT picked up its lone SW8, a former EMD demonstrator. With IT's Steam Division now fully dieselized, it was renamed the Diesel Division. As a portent of the future, two of the RS1s tested in road service on the electric main line to Peoria.

As with many roads, IT was swept up in the post-World War II euphoria that seemed to herald an era of growth in freight as well as passenger traffic. The road ordered three new electric streamliners from St. Louis Car Co. to serve the St. Louis–Springfield–Peoria and St. Louis–Springfield–Decatur routes, supplementing the existing frequent standard interurban service.

Alas, the IT, like the entire over-regulated American rail industry, was about to be blindsided in the 1950s by growth in government-subsidized highway and air transport. The streamliners were an early failure, doomed in part by IT's own design errors. The intercity passenger service, still using ancient cars, was gradually cut back and ended in 1956, followed by IT's St. Louis–Granite City suburban service, with PCCs, ending in 1958. With that, IT's electric operations ended. Its road freights were in the charge of EMDs: 6 GP7s delivered in 1953 and then 12 SW1200s, with Flexicoil trucks for road service, in 1955.

Freight operations also were being hammered, by growth in trucking, especially on what was still known as the Electric Division. Line rationalization began in the early 1950s with abandonments, the two largest being a gradual

IT Springfield–East Peoria train 200, with two SD39s, waits on ICG rails at Mount Pulaski in June 1977 to follow the track owner's train north.
Mike Schafer

retrenchment from Danville west beginning in 1952 and the Mackinaw Junction–Bloomington–Decatur line in 1953.

Where IT's electric main lines paralleled steam roads (themselves being dieselized, of course), IT in 1959 began acquiring trackage rights so it could abandon the old interurban lines.

Survival by transformation

In the midst of what had become IT's desperate attempt to save itself, 9 connecting Class 1 railroads (in the end, 11) in 1954 formed a coalition — the Illinois-Missouri Terminal Corp. — to buy the IT to serve as an ersatz terminal road for them to access IT's customers, notably in the Tri-Cities area but also in Decatur and the Peoria Gateway. The purchase took place June 15, 1956. The Interstate Commerce Commission mandated that owner roads keep open all traffic routes in which IT participated, with "neutrality of handling traffic." The downside was that the owner roads were liable for IT's losses.

Regardless, this new Illinois Terminal Railroad Co. was able to survive as an independent carrier for 26 more years, though they weren't always easy years. The push to rationalize, by abandoning former interurban segments in favor of trackage rights on owners' lines, continued. As a result, IT from 1950 to 1972 was transformed from a largely interurban passenger and freight railroad on 462 route-miles (378 of which were electrified) into an all-diesel, freight-only carrier running on 280 miles of its own track but also on 264 miles of trackage rights. Most of IT's own lines that remained consisted of terminal trackage in the Tri-Cities area.

Nonetheless, by the end of 1967, IT had a record deficit of $1.1 million. The owner roads panicked, and reacted by eliminating IT's Traffic Department. The next step would be to dismantle IT, splitting the assets (such as they were) among the owners. Instead, along came IT's messiah, E. B. Wilson, then assistant manager of Chicago & North Western and a member of IT's board of directors.

Beginning in 1968, the visionary Wilson injected new life into Illinois Terminal with further trackage rationalizations, new motive power (6 SD39s in 1969, 7 SW1500s in 1970, and 4 GP38-2s in 1977), streamlined operations, and a revived traffic department. One example: IT quit its cramped interurban-era East Peoria yard, first to temporarily use nearby Toledo, Peoria & Western and Peoria & Pekin Union facilities before building its own new Wilson Yard out at Allentown, Ill. A surprising move came on April 1, 1976, when IT purchased 55.6 miles of the former Pennsylvania Railroad's Peoria line as a means of restructuring traffic patterns while avoiding some trackage-rights fees.

Illinois Terminal remained a more or less viable operation until the landmark Staggers Railroad Act of 1980, which radically changed the face of U.S. railroading. With so many mergers having been effected since 1960, there was less need for a terminal road in the industrial area north of East St. Louis. By 1980, only one IT owner could really benefit from IT's assets, and that was the Norfolk & Western, formerly the Wabash in this area and soon to become Norfolk Southern.

The assets were mainly the agriculture-based traffic between the St. Louis area and the huge A. E. Staley and Archer-Daniels-Midland complexes in Decatur. IT's other owning railroads agreed to sell their IT shares to N&W, and at 12:01 a.m. on May 8, 1982, Illinois Terminal ceased to exist, nearly a century after its DNA was "planted" in a little switching operation along the banks of the Mississippi River near Alton, Ill. ■

IT fact file

(comparative figures are for 1929, 1950, and 1980)

Route-miles: 561; 462; 413

Locomotives: 23 steam, 48 electric; 14 steam, 9 diesel, 45 electric; 46 diesel

Freight cars: 884; 2,004; 2,624

Passenger cars: (includes powered and trailers): 113; 67; 0

Headquarters city: St. Louis, Mo.

Special interest group: Illinois Traction Society, 264 Victoria Ave., Decatur, IL 62522; www.illinoistractionsociety.org

Recommended reading: *The Illinois Terminal Railroad: The Road of Personalized Services*, by Dale Jenkins (White River Productions, 2005); "The Interurban That Survived," by Mike Schafer (May and June 1981 TRAINS)

Sources: *Historical Guide to North American Railroads* (Kalmbach, 2014), plus the book and magazine articles noted above.