

Last days OF THE *Southern Belle*

KANSAS CITY SOUTHERN'S FLAGSHIP WAS "FIRST CLASS" RIGHT TO THE END

BY PHILIP L. MOSELEY

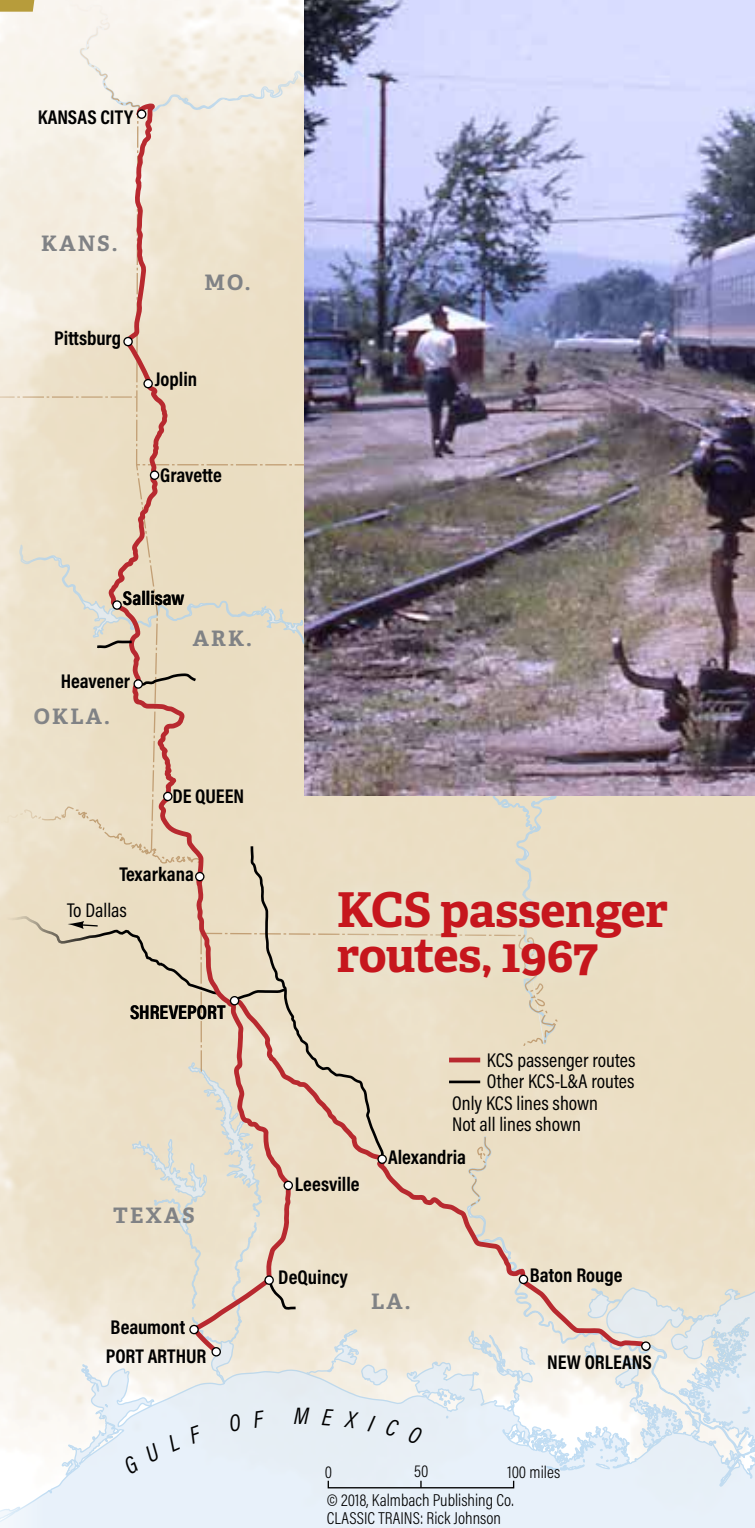
When I first started railroading in 1966, as an agent-telegrapher, the "golden age" of American railroading was nearly over. I consider myself lucky to have gotten in on the end of that era, with its passenger trains, small-town depots, express and mail traffic, and telegraph communication. The only thing I missed was steam. Many railroads were anxious to be rid of these symbols of the past, particularly passenger trains, many of which became increasingly shabby.

One railroad that kept running a high-quality passenger service, though, was Kansas City Southern. Its *Southern Belle*, the "Sweetheart of American Trains," cruised 870 miles daily between Kansas City and New Orleans, in daylight between K.C. and Shreveport, La., KCS's operating hub 561 miles south of K.C., and during the night between Shreveport and the Crescent City. North of Shreveport, the *Belle* passed through some of the most scenic country east of the Rockies, the mountains of eastern Oklahoma and western Arkansas, an area not well-known in other parts of the country.

When I went to KCS in 1968 from the Santa Fe Railway, the *Belle* was still one of the nicest and cleanest trains in the country, despite the fact that KCS, like virtually all other roads, had lost its mail contracts in 1967 because the Post Office Department deemed it too expensive and inefficient to move First Class Mail by rail. (You could mail a letter for 6 cents at the time, incidentally.) KCS was the last railroad with an operating Railway Post Office out of Kansas City Union Station.

Passenger traffic in general had been declining, but after the mail contract cancellations and discontinuances of RPOs in fall 1967, the Interstate Commerce Commission received a flood of train-off applications. Passenger trains began dropping like flies all over the country.

KCS did not take that path, instead keeping in top shape its few trains that served a remote region. In a late burst of optimism, the road bought new passenger cars in the mid-1960s





The *Southern Belle* has five months to live on this Saturday, May 31, 1969 (above), as northbound No. 2, led by scruffy E9AM 25, pauses at Heavener, Okla., for a crew change. Already the normal consist is just four cars: a baggage/storage mail car, two 1965-built chair cars, and an ex-NYC tavern lounge observation.



KCS converted the round-end cars, as seen earlier the same day at Texarkana Union Station (left) during the photographer's ride, to "café-observation" cars.

Two photos, Tom Hoffmann

KCS's main line traverses some unremarked scenery, the Ouachita Mountains of eastern Oklahoma and western Arkansas. A third coach is in the consist of No. 2 on July 5, 1969.

David W. Salter



The final southbound *Belle* enters Joplin, Mo., November 2, 1969, with business car *Tolmak* on the rear behind the cafe-observation car. Only two KCS Es were repainted white: 23 and 27.

J. David Ingles collection

from Pullman-Standard: 6 baggage cars in '64 and 10 coaches in '65, the last intercity railroad to do so. The new coaches were spartan, with fixed vestibule steps, interiors lacking shades on tinted windows, and tile floors. Their vinyl seats were comfortable, though, and the cars were easy to clean. KCS had bought tavern-lounge observation cars from New York Central, and by converting them to "café-observations," also with spare interiors and serving a limited food menu at a lunch counter, KCS was able to retire its full-service dining cars. In this way, KCS kept costs minimized while still providing a decent level of service. A sleeping car stayed on the *Belle* until Pullman exited the business at the end of 1968. KCS's stance was summed up in Louis Marre's story in November 1967 *TRAINS*, entitled "About the Railroad Whose President Says, 'We Have No Intention of Going Out of the Passenger Business.'"

Some might cite the so-called "TRAINS jinx," but the reality of declining patronage soon contributed to the dimming of KCS's optimism. At least equally respon-

sible was the loss of mail contracts. As a result, in March 1968 KCS discontinued trains 15/16, formerly the *Flying Crow*, between Kansas City, Shreveport, and Beaumont/Port Arthur, Texas. These trains, which connected with New Orleans–Shreveport trains 9/10, ran through the Ouachita Mountains at night. But the *Belle* had a year's stay of execution.

Another contributing factor was the reduction of good connections at Kansas City. KCS was dependent on several of them, the most important being Union Pacific's *City of St. Louis* from Pacific Coast points and Denver. KCS 2, the northbound *Belle*, arrived at K.C. Union Station to connect with UP 9 westbound, and in the morning UP 10 was a reliable connection to KCS 1. Other important connections were with Santa Fe for Chicago and Missouri Pacific for St. Louis. But in 1967, UP cut the *City* back from a discrete St. Louis–Ogden train, which it had been since 1964, to a St. Louis–Cheyenne service, and in April '68, ended the St. Louis–Los Angeles sleeping car.

Norfolk & Western, 1964 successor to

Wabash as the *City*'s carrier across Missouri, ceased all through service with UP at Kansas City in 1968. The expected result was that in April '69, N&W went freight-only west of St. Louis; UP then re-named its train *City of Kansas City* (N&W's train of that name had been gone for a year). The capper occurred in April '70 when UP cut back from daily service to triweekly west of K.C. By this time KCS was freight-only, and Amtrak was on the horizon.

A SHORT ACQUAINTANCE

For the short time I knew her, the *Southern Belle* almost always ran on-time. I joined KCS in September 1968 at DeQueen, Ark., and if she was tardy there it was usually only 30 minutes or less in either direction. Southbound, her consist was usually one E unit, a baggage car of storage mail for Texarkana, a baggage car of storage mail for New Orleans, a 14-roomette/4-double-bedroom Pullman sleeper, two chair cars, and a café-observation, all K.C.–New Orleans except the Texarkana mail set-out. The sleeper came off in January 1969, although it made a short cameo return in spring. Sometimes in the off-season, patronage would require only one chair car. The crew of the café-observation was always courteous, and the cars' interiors were kept clean. The meals were reasonably priced and tasty; the hamburger steak was my favorite. Unlike some of its neighbors — Mo-Pac, Katy, and Rock Island — KCS kept its equipment clean until the end.

This occurred on Monday, November 3, 1969, when the last southbound *Belle*, train No. 1, arrived at New Orleans Union Passenger Terminal in the morning, and when the last northbound *Belle*, No. 2, tied up at K.C. in the evening. I



The café-observations, like the 1965-built chair cars, had tile floors, vinyl seat coverings, and tinted, shadeless windows, making for easy and economical cleaning. As the menu at left reveals, the counter at the forward end offered a selection of tasty, reasonably priced items.

Menu, author's collection; photo, Larry Thomas

was working "second trick" at DeQueen on Sunday when she made her last south-bound trip. She left Heavener, Okla., the division point across Rich Mountain to the north, 30 minutes off the advertised and could not make up any time. The dispatcher put out the call to me, "No. 1, 30 minutes late." I relayed this information to the engine crew who would take over at DeQueen: engineer Jake Thomas and fireman Jimmy Henry. The regular crew of Earl Seagraves and L. E. Dennis had laid off, perhaps because they didn't want to take the *Belle* to her funeral.

I sold more tickets that night than I'd sold in all the 15 months I'd worked there on second trick. Typical of last runs, people came from all around to ride one last time. Behind one of the two E units KCS had painted in its new scheme of solid white, the consist included two chair cars, and for the occasion, KCS business car *Tolmak* was behind the café-obs for Vice President and General Manager R. J. Blair. The car's name comes from the first letter of the six states KCS served: Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Missouri, Arkansas, and Kansas.

The *Belle* eased to a stop, and carman Bill Whitley iced the engine. The new engine crew tossed their bags up in the cab and mounted the side ladder. Railfans, townspeople, and others shared my somber mood as we watched conductor T. O. Young throw the stepbox up into the vestibule and holler "All Aboard!" He gave the highball wave to Jake Thomas, who



Business car *Tolmak* (above), which was on the rear of the last No. 1, was built new for KCS President W. N. Deramus by Darby Corp. in 1966 using the frame of heavyweight business car 100 of another Deramus road, Chicago Great Western. The car now is KCS 99. Business car *Kaysee*, on the last northbound *Belle*, dated from 1928 and survives as a KCS display item.

Louis A. Marre collection

whistled off as Young boarded, closed the Dutch door, and waved good-bye.

We all stood and watched as the red light on the *Tolmak* disappeared around the curve and across Bear Creek south of town. Somewhere in the Louisiana darkness down around Alexandria, the last No. 1 would meet the last No. 2.

I went back into the depot and "OS'ed" her to the dispatcher. I made an extra copy of the train orders and clearance card that night for myself, and before I closed the books, I sold myself a round-trip coach ticket from DeQueen to Neal Springs, Ark., for 35 cents. I still have the train orders and the ticket. ■

PHILIP L. MOSELEY's one earlier byline with us, "Racing South on the Southern Belle," led off "The Way It Was" in Winter 2008 CLASSIC TRAINS. A retired KCS dispatcher, he resides in Guthrie, Okla.



The last northbound No. 2, with an E8 and F7B up front and business car *Kaysee* on the rear, has halted at DeQueen for the crew change. From left are coach porter Lucien Stewart, DeQueen carman Peck Brooks, conductor R. P. "Poco" Meredith, and brakeman Jim Bailes. The porter, conductor, and brakeman, plus engineer I. B. Price and fireman Carl Dixon, will take No. 2 to Heavener.

John Craig, author's collection