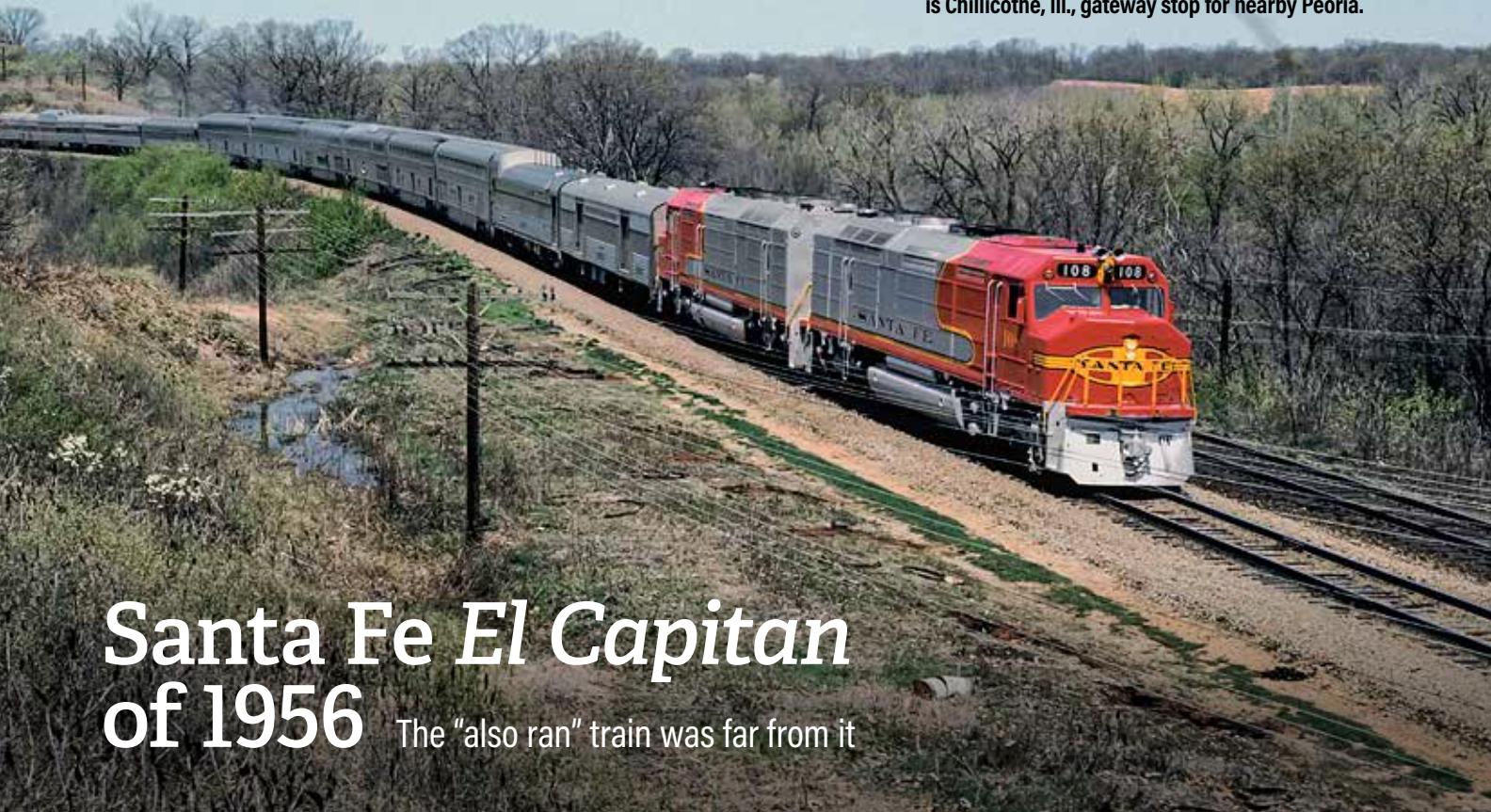


The eastbound combined *El Capitan/Super Chief* — note the equipment variety — descends Edelstein Hill in April 1968. Next stop, at the bottom of the hill, is Chillicothe, Ill., gateway stop for nearby Peoria.



Santa Fe *El Capitan* of 1956

The “also ran” train was far from it

Just say “Santa Fe” to anyone in the realm of railroading and they’ll likely think “*Super Chief*.” Truly, that first-class-only Chicago-Los Angeles streamliner was about as top-notch as they got here in North America. But here I’m focusing on the *Super*’s companion train, the all-coach *El Capitan* — specifically, the 1956 version.

First, a bit of history, zeroing in on top-of-line Chicago-California passenger trains. Ultimately, afternoon or early evening departure times from the end-point cities — Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco — became quite popular, and therefore, those trains got the best equipment. Think *City of Los Angeles*, *California Zephyr*, *Golden State*, and of course the *Super Chief*.

Ridership on Santa Fe trains remained super strong into the early 1950s, and by this time, the railroad had learned not to ignore the coach-travel market. Even in the 1930s Santa Fe believed there was a market for a fast, deluxe, all-coach train with high-end appointments (e.g., lounge-observation cars and full-service

diners) with a schedule mirrored that of the *Super Chief*.

Thus was born, in 1938, *El Capitan*. As with the *Super Chief*, the *El Cap* operated on a 39¾-hour schedule between Chicago and L.A., though initially just twice weekly. Nonetheless, it was a hit.

Like so many U.S. railroads, Santa Fe got caught in the post-World War II euphoria that prompted new, streamlined trains or the re-equipping of earlier trains with modern, lightweight equipment. In 1947, both the *Super Chief* and *El Capitan* were re-equipped, and both put in daily service.

By the end of 1951, both had received still more new equipment, including the *Super Chief*’s *Pleasure Dome* lounge cars, complete with a private dining room,

no less — but that’s another story.

In 1954, attention turned to the *El Capitan* when two new experimental, “Hi-Level” coaches built by the Budd Co. showed up on the train, both with a “step-down” section at one end, enabling them to be mixed with conventional rolling stock.

According to Santa Fe historian and author Michael W. Flick, the two prototype cars were ordered by Santa Fe in

1952. Their production was the answer to the question of whether a long-distance chair car could be built that would combine the capacity and economy of a double-deck commuter coach with the luxury and public appeal of a dome car.

Whoa, some of you might say! Burlington Route and Chicago & North Western were

1956 EL CAPITAN FACT FILE

- Nos. 21-22
- Chicago to Los Angeles via Kansas City and Albuquerque
- All-coach service
- Features “Hi-Level” equipment as of June 15, 1956
- Significant competitors: Union Pacific-Milwaukee Road *Challenger*, Rock Island-Southern Pacific *Imperial*

EL CAPITAN TIMELINE

- Inaugurated Jan. 22, 1938, as Nos. 21-22 on a twice-weekly schedule
- Operated with two consists powered by new EMC E1 diesels
- Featured exclusive "Adobe" dining car china from 1941 to 1969
- September 1946 operates same schedule, alternating departure days with *Super Chief*; employee timetables show as Nos. 17-18
- Daily operation commenced Feb. 29, 1948, again with Nos. 21-22
- Extra fare eliminated Jan. 10, 1954
- Assigned full-length domes March 1, 1954
- Converted to Hi-Level cars on July 8, 1956
- Combined with the *Super Chief* on Jan. 12, 1958, as Nos. 17-18
- Additional Hi-Level cars delivered in 1964 for regular use on the *San Francisco Chief* and the *Texas Chief*

already operating bi-level commuter trains in Chicago early in the 1950s. True, but those were gallery-type trains.

Santa Fe declared that the Hi-Level concept was a winner. In 1956, *El Capitan* became a true double-deck train, though with emphasis on the upper level. Hence Santa Fe's "Hi-Level" marketing strategy for the new train.

Most, if not all, coach seating was in the upper level, with restrooms and baggage on the lower along with air-conditioning and related equipment in compartments rather than hung under the car, exposed to weather conditions — a long-time problem with traditional single-level cars. In the Hi-Level diner, seat-



Winding through the throat tracks of Chicago's Dearborn Station (note the clock tower), the eastbound Santa Fe *El Capitan* is at the end of its run in April 1971. Two photos, Mike Schafer

ing was upstairs and the kitchen below. *El Capitan's* Hi-Level lounge included a compact magazine stand while downstairs seating catered to travelers in need of snacks and other refreshments.

Does this all sound somewhat familiar? Yup, I've just described the format of most Amtrak long-distance trains that would follow. Thus, the importance of the 1956 edition of the Santa Fe *El Capitan*.

The Hi-Level *El Cap* was a stunning success for Santa Fe, prompting the carrier to explore bi-level sleepers for re-equipping the *Super Chief*. Years ago, a friend who worked for the railroad showed me its car plans for bi-level sleepers. That was as far as Santa Fe got — designs.

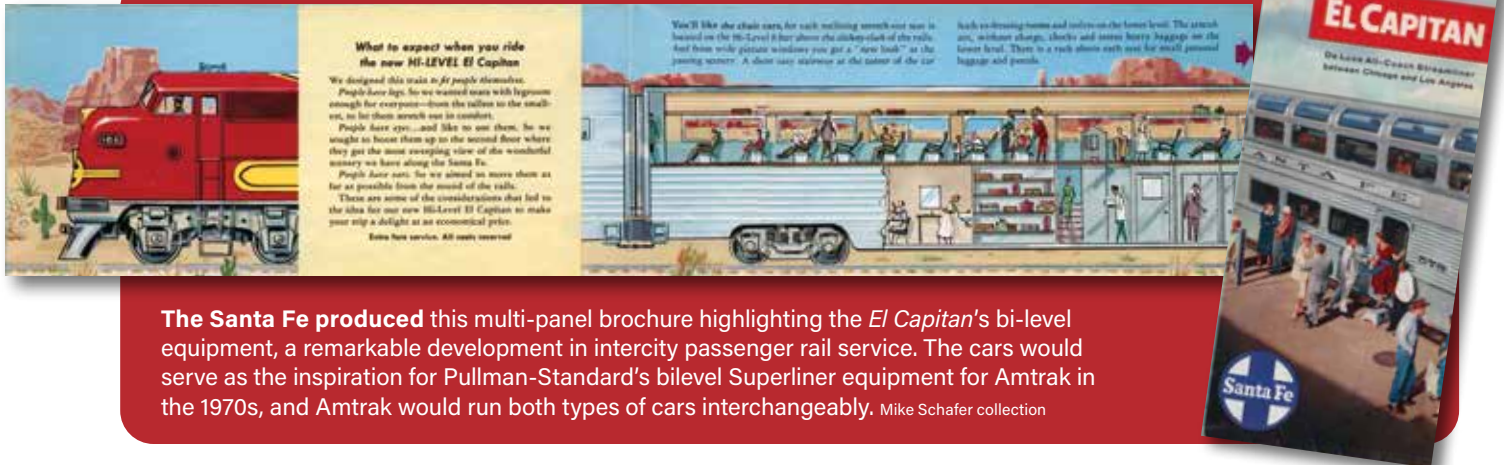
No doubt even the Santa Fe knew that intercity passenger trains were facing a bleak future, what with the coming of the jet airliner and interstate highway system.

In 1958, *El Capitan* and the *Super Chief* were combined except during the summer or other heavy travel seasons — a sign of things to come, and an arrangement that lasted into the Amtrak era.

From the get-go, Amtrak knew it had to address the fact that a wholesale

re-equipping of its entire fleet was imperative. The young carrier recognized the huge cost and operational advantages of Hi-Level design for trains running where there were no serious height restrictions.

Further, the bi-level *El Cap* equipment would serve as inspiration for the next generation of long-distance bi-level rolling stock — the Pullman-Standard-built Amtrak Superliners of the late 1970s. ■



The Santa Fe produced this multi-panel brochure highlighting the *El Capitan's* bi-level equipment, a remarkable development in intercity passenger rail service. The cars would serve as the inspiration for Pullman-Standard's bilevel Superliner equipment for Amtrak in the 1970s, and Amtrak would run both types of cars interchangeably. Mike Schafer collection