BY WILLIAM BENNING STEWART

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Monon passenger trains were painted I.U. red and white. Freight trains were Purdue black and gold.

All Aboard

Last call for the Monon line.

Folklorists lionized it. Historians studied its contributions to Indiana's development. And for more than a century, multitudes of Indiana residents happily acknowledged their affection for that most Hoosier of enterprises, the defunct Monon Railroad.

The line, which was decommissioned this year, traced its roots to an error in judgment made by its parent company in 1847. Armed with a charter permitting it to lay track anywhere in the state, the New Albany and Salem Rail Road initiated a rail line which in 1854 linked the Ohio River with Lake Michigan. The company rashly chose Michigan City over Chicago for its Northern terminus and spent the next 25 years trying to correct its error by buying another route into Chicago. Eventually, the company purchased another rail line that intersected their old route at the White County town of Bradford. In 1879 the village adopted the name of neighboring Monon Creek, and the rest, as they say, is history.

The train's original route knifed through Monticello, Delphi, Frankfort, Sheridan, Westfield, Carmel, Nora and Broad Ripple before stopping at Union Station in downtown Indianapolis. In 1911, the Monon introduced the *Hoosier,* a special passenger train for the Indianapolis-Chicago evening run. Also known as "the 5 o'clock Monon," this train became a fixture in Indiana life for more than five decades. A brass observation deck on its rear platform invited passengers to take the air and gaze at the passing tapestry of small towns and countryside.

One of the Monon's better ideas came to fruition in 1922 with the completion of Boulevard Station, a stylish depot located across the tracks from the Fairgrounds at Maple Road (now 38th Street). All trains stopped at the new station, obviating the need for Northside residents to board at Union Station. For many years the railroad placed a Pullman car on the Boulevard Station's siding each evening. It welcomed passengers after 9 p.m., most of whom were asleep in their berths when the *Mid-Night Special* picked up the car in the darkness and whisked it off to Chicago's Dearborn Station.

Another fixture at Boulevard Station was the Monon's venerated agent and goodwill ambassador of three decades, M.O. "Benny" Benefiel. "When mothers start checking up on the whereabouts of their children on a summer evening," he once told a reporter, "they phone here and often the youngsters are on hand, waiting for the *Hoosier* to roll in."

That sparkle of lighthearted rapport and goodwill helped carry the Monon through several bouts with insolvency. Its business ravaged by the Great Depression, the carrier sank into bankruptcy during the 1930s and faced the loss of the majority of its passenger trains at the hands of dispassionate directors in Chicago.

But remarkably, the railroad's fortunes reversed following World War II, when the Monon eagerly departed the restraints of receivership and entered its

golden age.

In assuming command of the Monon at age 46, John Walker Barriger became the youngest president of a major American railroad. Resolving to make the Monon a model of efficiency, he quickly shook the carrier's Depression-era dowdiness. New York industrial designer Raymond Loewy (later to gain fame for styling Studebakers, including the *Avanti)* set the stage. His new logo, embracing a stylized "M" made of tepees, graphically joined the Monon's contemporary technology with its Indiana heritage. Barriger's $12 million modernization program vanquished the steam locomotive in favor of new diesels styled in Indiana University colors and freight haulers in Purdue's black and gold. Tracks were rebuilt, and travel time from Indianapolis to Chicago was reduced by 40 minutes. To the delight of John Hillman and many others, the *Hoosier* was restored and joined by a morning counterpart named the *Tippecanoe.*

Easily the most conspicuous of Barriger's improvements to the postwar Monon, the sleek new trains (ingeniously designed by Loewy from surplus Army hospital cars) were resplendent in Monon Royal Red, gray and white. Passengers enjoyed a panoramic view of Indiana through windows five feet wide, and could visit new dining, lounge and parlor cars. The Monon Company even wrote songs for the occasion, produced records, published sheet music and distributed color postcards depicting the railroad in its Indiana context. Hoosiers demonstrated their rekindled devotion to the carrier by purchasing 84,000 tickets on the new Indianapolis-Chicago trains during their first year of operation.

In this renaissance era the Monon's company magazine faithfully printed hundreds of complimentary letters from patrons, including one offering grim insight. "If I am in a hurry it will have to be a plane, but if I have the time I'll make it the Monon," wrote a passenger. Despite the warm ambience of the *Tippecanoe* and the *Hoosier,* customers were lured away by the speed of the airliner and the convenience of the automobile. After Barriger's departure in 1952 a new Monon management found the operating costs of his passenger trains increasingly intolerable. Protests by on-line communities and generations of loyal riders to the contrary, the last Monon passenger trains to Indianapolis departed on April 9, 1959.

Through the '60s the black and gold engines still roared forth with a freight train each evening, inspiring motorists to give chase where Westfield Boulevard briefly paralleled the Monon north of Broad Ripple. Others, given to wan-

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Monon passengers took their ease in refurbished Army hospital cars.

derlust on warm summer nights, contemplated empty boxcars as the train switched at Carmel and dreamed of being carried away on a midnight adventure to Chicago in the best tradition of The Frisco Kid and other legendary railroad hoboes.

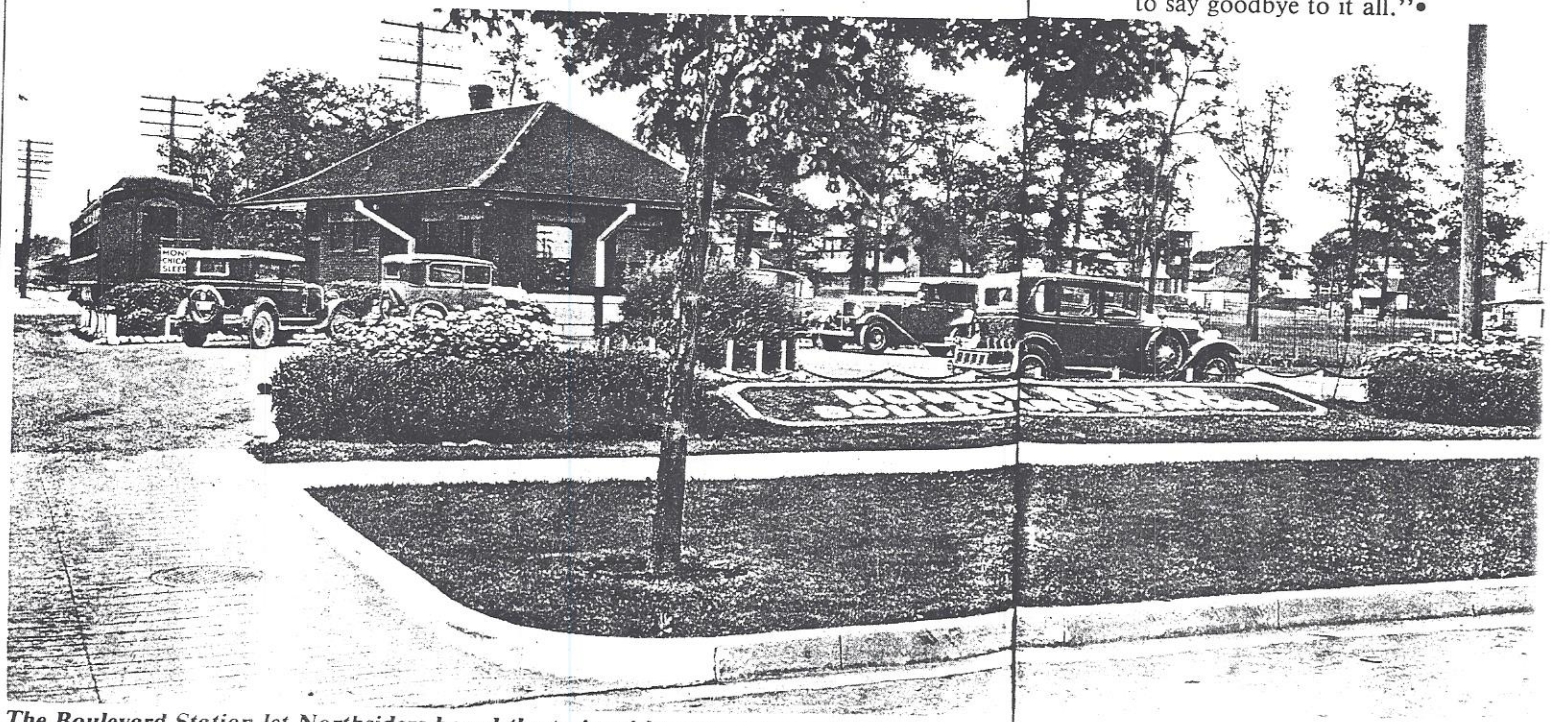
Such traditional images quickly faded with the nationalization of the railroad industry in the '70s. In 1971 the Monon was absorbed by the Louisville & Nashville, which in turn became part of a massive rail system ranging from Ontario to Florida. Whereas the Indianapolis line had been a primary component of the pre-merger Monon, it was now but a redundant branch line, unnecessary to the 25,000-mile-long megarailroad that announced plans to abandon it south of Frankfort.

For a few flickering moments in 1983, 1984 and 1985 the Indiana Transportation Museum's *Fairtrain* brought back vignettes of the Monon's past. Not as fast (25 minutes from Carmel to the Fairgrounds versus 13 for the *Hoosier)* or as stylish as its Monon predecessors, the *Fairtrain* nevertheless brought welcomed opportunities for many t ride a train for the first time.

To properly operate eight daily roun trips to the State Fair and back require the services of professional railroaders Consequently, several tenured Mono trainmen got one last passenger servic assignment. One steamy afternoon, vet eran conductor George Moorhouse wa accosted by an irate ticketholder wh had missed the previous train because i had departed *on time.* It was, sh charged, totally contrary to her trave experience with Amtrak and certainl inconvenient. The conductor shook hi head with a blend of disbelief an amusement. "Lady," he replied, "thi ain't Amtrak; this is the *Monon."*

In 1985 the Transportation Museun honored the Monon men who ran th trains by repainting the *Fairtrain* loco motives in Loewy's celebrated Mono Royal Red color scheme. It proved t be the final year for the *Fairtrain.*

For those who knew the railroad an its people, Joe Adams' 1959 tribute t the passing of the Monon passenge trains held renewed meaning as th melancholy task of removing the rail began in 1987. "You know why it flour ished up to the current automotive ag when you recall the sincere solicitude o the train crew for their passengers an the friendly way the passengers got to gether on any trip," Adams wrote i *The Indianapolis Star.* "And you ca spot the true Hoosier color in the las timetables — Cyclone, Kankakee, Littl Iroquois, Monon Creek. Tippecano River, Wildcat Creek, Fall Creek an the rest. Small wonder Hoosiers are sa to say goodbye to it all."•



The Boulevard Station let Northsiders board the train without traveling to Union Station.