Train Talks

Informal discussions by the Pennsylvania Railroad with its patrons on matters of mutual interest and concern.

JANUARY, 1938

Mile-a-Minute Meals

Behind the Scenes in the Dining Car Service of a Great Railroad

ONE of the many things "taken for granted" on railroads is getting a first rate meal on a speeding train.

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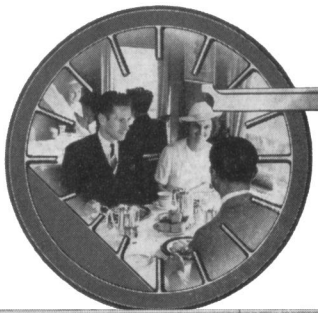
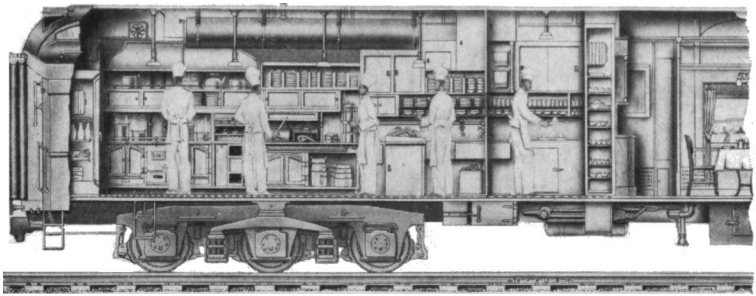
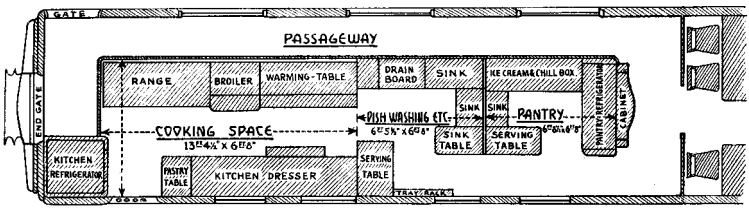
Your "Limited" has been clicking off a mile a minute or more, and the afternoon slips by. You step from coach or Pullman into a perfectly appointed, air-conditioned, travelling restaurant, and in an atmosphere of inviting leisure enjoy a dinner of your own choosing. It is as attractively prepared, as well cooked, and as deftly served as in an excellent hotel.



For you nothing could be simpler or more casual. Custom has made this service so matter of course that prob-





Dining car kitchen and pantry-a triumph in economy of space and effort.

ably few stop to think how it is possible. Yet back of it are some of the most intricate operations in the entire business of running a railroad, and in developing the service to its present standards almost numberless difficulties have had to be met and overcome.

Costly Cooking Space

The first model kitchen was not planned by an architect. It was conjured into existence by the ingenuity of railroad car-builders faced with a new problem in efficiency–that of using to best advantage the most expensive cooking space in the world. After years of improvement and refinement, the dining car kitchen of today stands as a veritable miracle of compact arrangement and economy in the utilization of space.

In a modern dining car, the kitchen and pantry together take up less room than the kitchen of an ordinary six-room house, but,

based on the cost of building the car, this space, with its special apparatus, represents an outlay of about $17,000, or enough to build two quite good six-room houses.

In the kitchen of such a house, on a fair average, perhaps ten meals a day are prepared. From the still smaller kitchen of the dining-car, on a popular train, it is not at all unusual to serve 300 meals or more in a day. What the possible limit would be has never been determined, but actual records show that on repeated occasions a single dining-car has served a considerably larger number of passengers at only two meal periods, luncheon and dinner–all from one apartment–sized kitchen with about 2½ x 14 feet of free floor space!

And–let women especially take note–it is just part of an ordinary day's routine to wash and dry a thousand pieces of china at one meal period. If travel is heavy and the passengers hungry, there will be more. And there are also glasses, knives, forks, spoons, pots and pans. The work is done in a few square feet of space in which everything is arranged to avoid lost motion.

Incidentally, the regular equipment of a dining car includes 1,945 articles of table and kitchen ware and 1,609 pieces of linen–

Tasteful and restful decorative schemes, complete air-conditioning, convenience of arrangement and deft service make meals on Pennsylvania Railroad trains both pleasurable and enjoyable.

a total of 3,554 items. Eight to ten million pieces of linen a year are laundered for the Pennsylvania's cars.

$12,000,000 in Dining Cars

The Pennsylvania Railroad owns and operates 194 dining cars, of which about 150 are in regular daily use. The others form a necessary reserve to meet peak demands and to permit repairs and reconditioning.

The total investment in these 194 cars is about $12,000,000, a sum which would build and equip a great metropolitan hotel. In these cars the railroad serves meals to about 3,000,000 people a year, a number equaled by only three or four of the country's largest caravansaries. In a twelve million dollar hotel, meal service is only part of the business, and not in point of revenue the most important part. In the twelve million dollar fleet of dining cars it is the only use to which the investment may be put.

A great hotel conducts its cafe and restaurant trade in a single compact building, anchored to terra firma and close to depots of supply. The railroad's dining cars do about the same amount of business but split up into 150 separate operating units, scattered over thousands of miles of track, in constant motion during their hours of service, traveling twenty million miles a year, and dependent for their supplies upon far distant points.

In this limited space over 1,000 dishes are washed and dried during an ordinary meal period - - beside glass, silverware and kitchen utensils.

These and many other factors create problems in dining car operation which have no parallel, even remote, in the regular restaurant business, highly specialized and complex as that is recognized to be.

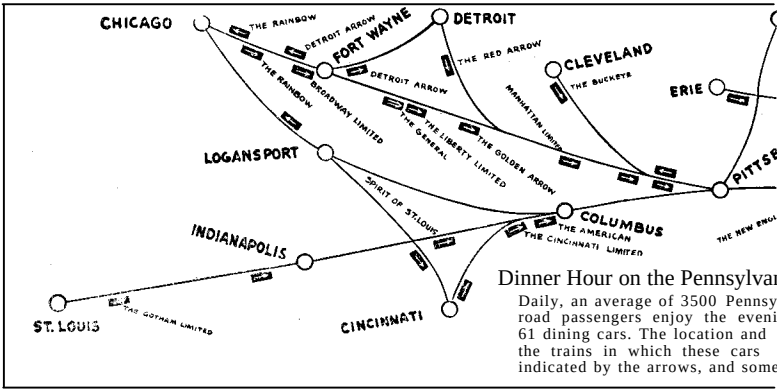
One of these problems is that of arranging dining car runs to meet the needs of the traveling public, while at the same time assigning

The standard equipment of a Pennsylvania dining car consists of the 1945 pieces of china, glassware, silverware and cooking utensils shown above. In addition, 1609 pieces of linen are carried.

crews to these runs in such manner that the time of the employes shall be productively used.

Wide Range of Requirements

On the Pennsylvania Railroad, dining car service is furnished on trains whose runs range from the 91 miles between New York and Philadelphia to the 1,051 miles between New York and St. Louis, and time on the road from a little over an hour and a half to more than twenty-four hours. By no means all of these trains require dining car service for all three meals of the day. On many—such as overnight runs of ten or twelve hours—the need is for breakfast only; on somewhat longer overnight runs, for dinner, with breakfast the following morning; on some daylight trains, for dinner alone, or luncheon alone; on still others, for breakfast and luncheon, or luncheon and dinner. All-day journeys, of course, call for all three meals.



Dinner Hour on the Pennsylvan

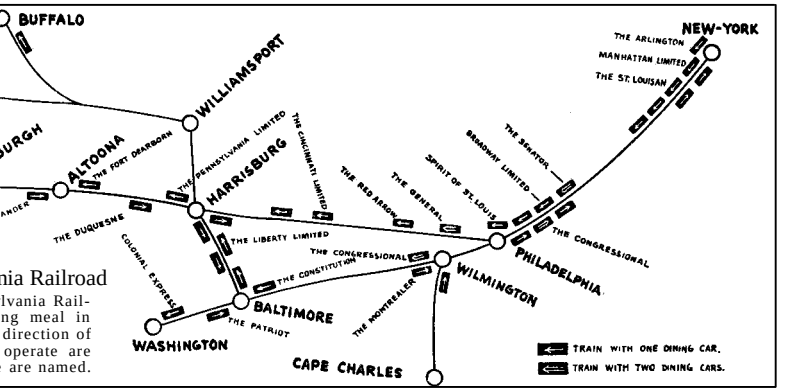
Daily, an average of 3500 Pennsy road passengers enjoy the eveni 61 dining cars. The location and the trains in which these cars indicated by the arrows, and some

Breakfast may begin before 7:00 A. M. and dinner may be prolonged after 10:00 P. M., and many trains carrying dining cars operate in two time zones, spreading the meal periods still further. Differences as to the observance of daylight saving in summer add further complications to the hours at which patrons may desire meals.

"Super Chess" on the Rails

These and other varying and over-lapping needs must be met each day on 132 regularly scheduled trains, requiring 150 dining cars and crews, and rushing at express speeds across thirteen states. In addition, the Dining Car Department must be ready almost at a moment's notice to answer unforeseen calls, such as providing cars for extra sections of regular trains or for unexpected travel too great to be served by one car, and requiring a second.

With all these complications and contingencies to meet, the problem of arranging and assigning dining car crews and shifting the crews from one train to another, together with the necessity of returning all crews frequently to "home port," becomes like a gigantic game of chess. It is a game, however, in which the moves must be made with 150 groups of flesh and blood individuals



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—the crews, comprising 1500 men-and on a map stretching a third of the way across the continent, instead of with the 32 inanimate pieces of the two-foot square chess-board.

Another problem is the stocking of dining cars, success in which lies somewhere between the mastery of an art and the possession of exceptional gifts in the wooing of Lady Luck. A main objective is to satisfy as nearly as possible two requirements which are not easy to reconcile—that all reasonable demands of patrons shall be met, and that waste shall be avoided.

Heavily Fluctuating Demands

In this branch of dining-car management, the law of averages helps, but falls far short of complete solution. Experience shows that if 100 persons can be counted upon for dinner on a certain run, about so many will want roast beef, so many chops, so many chicken or turkey, etc. If the number for breakfast is known closely in advance, the quantities of fruit, eggs, coffee, ham and bacon required can be predicted within small margins.

Dining car runs are of course carefully studied and continuous records kept. The average number of patrons for each meal on each run is known, as well as any tendency of these averages to

Only the best in market is purchased for service to patrons of Pennsylvania Railroad dining cars. In addition, meats are examined and stamped by a United States government inspector in the refrigerator rooms at the commissaries, officially certifying to quality.

change. Were the averages closely paralleled in day to day experience, the problem of stocking dining cars would be greatly simplified, but actually the patronage varies from one day to the next far more than most persons would expect. A car averaging 85 luncheons may suddenly be confronted with a call for nearly twice that number, and a day or so later the demand may be for less than 50. Sometimes there is a basis for fair guessing ahead; at other times, little or none.

Forecasting the Public's Appetite

The understandable reasons for great fluctuations are many. Demand on any given run may vary with the day of the week, the season of the year, the state of the weather, the condition of business, the question whether or not Congress is in session, and with other governmental activities at Washington or the state capitals or elsewhere. It is of course powerfully stimulated by popular holidays, football games, inaugurations, races, conventions

and all mass movements such as those of boy scouts, military units and fraternal and other organizations.

In the case of extremely heavy mass movements as many as 1,800 box lunches, assembled in dining cars from materials partly prepared in advance, have been served to patrons in the coaches within a period of 20 minutes. The preparation of box lunches in such numbers is true mass production and some idea of its scale may be gained from the fact that 100 turkeys may be reduced to sandwich meat as a preliminary.

Aside from the operation of such well-recognized causes, other wide fluctuations in the demand for dining car meals occur without visible cause at all, and apparently nothing short of a sixth sense would be capable of divining them in advance.

Best the Market Affords

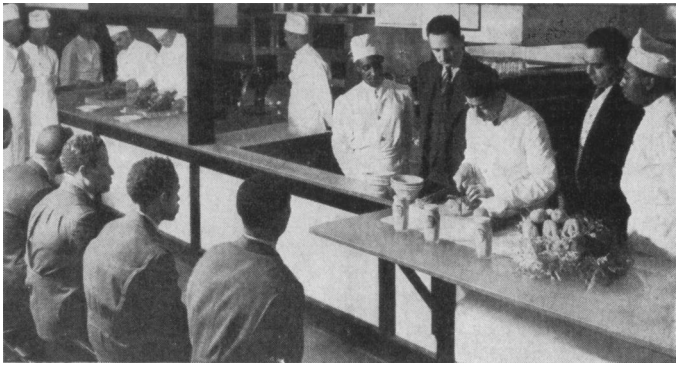
One cardinal and fundamental rule, from which no deviation is ever permitted, governs the stocking of all Pennsylvania Railroad dining cars at all times and all seasons. It is that the best, and only the best, that the market affords shall be provided.

The major stocking of the Pennsylvania's cars is done at three principal commissaries located, respectively, at New York, Columbus, 0., and Chicago, though supplementary supplies are available at several other points. The New York commissary, the most extensive on any railroad, is located in the center of Sunnyside Yard on the western tip of Long Island. This is the world's largest passenger yard, occupying 173 acres of metropolitan land within the city limits of Greater New York.

To serve 3,000,000 dining-car meals a year means of course that food supplies of many kinds are bought in large volumes. Eggs, for example, are required to the extent

P.R.R. Dining Car Patrons In a Year Consume:

2,500,000 eggs
1,300,000 oranges
550,000 lbs. fowl
390,000 lbs. beef
490,000 lbs. pork prod.
1,000,000 lbs. potatoes
300,000 lbs. fish
350,000 heads lettuce
2,000,000 cups coffee



A class of dining car cooks, under supervision of departmental officials, is here being initiated into the art of preparing "P.R.R. Salad Bowl" –the most popular dining car dish in America. To the left, supervising cooks are instructing another group in the most approved methods of preparing cuts of meat attractively.

of more than four thousand dozen a week. To insure a strictly fresh supply, the railroad regularly takes the entire output of a large egg farm but, as this provides only part of the needed quantity, many thousands of dozens are bought, elsewhere from sources equally dependable as to freshness.

"School Days" for Cooks and Waiters

Dining-car crews—stewards, waiters and cooks—are all picked men. All new waiters and cooks attend schools, conducted in exact replicas of dining cars, at the New York, Columbus and Chicago commissaries, before going on the road, while the experienced men are brought in from time to time to keep them up to the minute and abreast of new ideas. Every member of the crew is required to master in full the principles governing his duties, deportment and responsibilities. Unfailing courtesy and consideration for the patron are fundamental requirements.

Including the forces at the commissaries and the administrative staff, the Pennsylvania Railroad's Dining Car Department has

1,650 persons on its payroll. All are highly trained in their respective branches of the work.

Keyed to Expert Supervision

Two members of the staff, both experts in their callings, are assigned to direct personal charge over all details of service on the road. One is a master chef with many years experience in the capitals of Europe, and the other, a woman, is one of the best qualified dieticians in the country. They are assisted in their duties by a competent corps of supervisors of service, instructing chefs and instructing waiters.

This organization, constantly covering the road operation of dining cars, is responsible for the quality of all supplies; for the introduction of variety, pleasing arrangement and healthful balance in the menus; for the development of new recipes and the improvement of those already accepted by the public; and for all details of cocking, seasoning, blending of flavors and the preparation of dressings, sauces, etc. Their mission, in short, is to keep every feature of the service constantly at the very apex of the cooks' and waiters' art.

For coach passengers who so prefer, appetizing foods prepared in the dining car are served by waiters who go through the coaches. This service is becoming increasingly popular.

Trains—by Don Herold

From the November, 1937, issue of Scribner's Magazine

I have just been on a train trip out to Indianapolis to see a man about a dog.

Gosh, I like trains.

The human race has been going to pieces on me pretty fast, lately. On the whole, I think we are a sad and sorry sight. But trains are a human institution, and they are pretty nearly perfect, and they restore, to some extent, my esteem for the mankind who made them.

Our nations muss each other up, our government acts at times like a big moronic oaf, our businesses go bankrupt, our laziness and our carelessness and shiftlessness triumph over us in almost everything we undertake—even our merry-go-rounds break down—but a train* leaves New York at 6:10 P.M., gets to Indianapolis at exactly 10:40 A.M., and does it day after day, year after year, in all kinds of weather, with practically never any variation. I feel good to see some human institution thus working as it should work, and making no excuses and telling no lies. Maybe the human race will come out all right, after all.

I like the kind of people who, run trains. There always seems to be something trustworthy and fatherly in a railroad engineer or in the conductor who punches your ticket. Railroads, being regular, seem to attract regular people . . . not crackpots.

I like to snuggle into a train seat or a Pullman berth and listen to the regularity and dependability of the train . . . wheels clicking beneath me . . . and the mellow, melodious whistle on the engine.

Places to go are not much, but going there on trains is . . . marvelous.

*The Pennsylvania's "St. Louisan" from New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington to Cincinnati, Indianapolis, St. Louis and other central western cities.