

RIDING THE CINCINNATI DINNER TRAIN

by
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It is hard to believe that Mary Ann and I have been married 45 years. In order to celebrate our 45th wedding anniversary Mary Ann surprised me by producing tickets to ride the Cincinnati Dinner Train. On the night she chose the train was hosting a murder mystery. The crowd as a result was young, boisterous and loud. Our train consisted of locomotive Great Miami #30, a GP30, ex Nickel Plate with seven cars in tow.

Located behind the locomotive was Northern Pacific dome sleeper car, Observatory. She was not in service and one could not visit her. Observatory was built in 1954 by Budd Car Company as dome coach car as NP #558 for use on NP's Chicago-Seattle "North Coast Limited". In 1971, she became Amtrak #9485; then in 1983 it was renumbered by Amtrak #9406. Rail Adventures, Inc. acquired the car in 1995 and made mechanical upgrades in 1996 and adding in 1998 a galley, lounge, and a master bedroom. In 2000, two deluxe bedrooms and a porter's room were added. She runs in private car charter excursions

Next in the consists was Southern Pacific's Birch Grove. She was built in 1950 by the Budd Car Company as one of twenty-five 10 & 6 sleepers ordered by the Southern Pacific for use on the Sunset Limited. The cars were at this time not named, but were numbered from SP #9001 to SP #9025. The Birch Grove was SP #9020. She was sold in 1971 by Southern Pacific to Amtrak in 1971 and renumbered #2696. Amtrak continued to use her in Sunset Limited service. In 1980, Amtrak sent her to their car repair shop at Beech Grove, Indiana for a major shop rebuild. Here she was converted to a handicap accessible sleeper by eliminating the porter's quarters and public restroom, enlarging roomette #10, and widening the B end door and entryway.

Circa 1980, Amtrak gave "Grove" names to their sixteen Southern Pacific sleepers, thus Amtrak car #2696 became "Birch Grove" and was renumber #2451. In 1988 the Birch Grove received yet another major shopping and was reassigned to the various routes between New York and Florida. In 1995, Amtrak sold the car to a private individual. The car was rebuilt between 2001 and 2005 the car was totally rebuilt into a 22-passenger excursion car.

The third car back was Chicago Burlington & Quincy "Silver Sword" which had been built as a 50-seat coach 1952 by the Budd Car Company. She ran from 1952 to 1971 as CB&Q #4734 in pool service. In 1971, after her sale Amtrak her number was changed to #5013. Circa 1980, she was rebuilt into a Heritage Cafeteria car for service on Amtrak's Auto Train as Amtrak #8714. The Silver Sword was purchased by the Cincinnati Dinner Train in 2010, and refurbished into a dining and bar car. She runs in a Northern Pacific paint scheme

Fourth car back from the locomotive was New York Central Dining Car #447. This was the car we ate in. She was built by Budd Car Company in 1947. She ran in mainline service until 1967 when she was retired to work train service. In 1968, when New York Central merged with The Pennsylvania Railroad she became Penn-Central #447 and later Conrail #447. Conrail converted her into a police training car. When Conrail was purchased in 1999 by CSX and

Norfolk Southern she was transferred to CSX. In 2000, she sold to the Illinois Transit Assembly Corporation (ITAC) in Madison, Illinois.

In November 2002, #447 was purchased by her current owner, Bill Thomas who brought her to Cincinnati. She was parked BBQ Revue's parking lot and used as an ice cream parlor from 2003 to 2006. In October 2007 she was sent to Gateway Rail Services for restoration to rail service. She was then part of the original consists of the Cincinnati Dinner Train when operations commenced in the spring of 2009.

Fifth car back was car #201. She had built in 1946, by ACF (American Car Foundry) for the Louisville & Nashville Railroad as a long distance coach. As L&N wound down passenger train service in the 1960s she was sold to the Pittsburgh & Lake Erie Railroad, where it operated in commuter service out of downtown Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Then circa 1980 she was sold to the Fort Wayne Railroad Historical Society for operations behind steam locomotive #765.

In 1994, #201 was then sold to North Star Rail in Minneapolis, Minnesota and ran behind restored steam locomotive #261. In 2005, the car was sold to Railroad Associates, where it operated in excursion service across the state of Michigan. In 2008, it was purchased by its current owners, Brian Collins and Bill Thomas for the Cincinnati Dinner Train. The car is painted in Milwaukee Road colors.

The sixth car back was The Queen City Tavern car, RPCX #1379. She was built in 1953, by the St. Louis Car Company as a coal-fired kitchen car the United States Army, DOD #89687. She was in troop train service until circa 1960, when she was stored. In U S Army service she was painted standard olive drab. She and 49 sister cars were acquired by Amtrak circa 1962. In Amtrak service #89687 was numbered #1379 and rebuilt into 50 foot baggage-mail cars for service on long distance trains. She was in Amtrak service until circa 1990 when the arrival of newer, higher speed equipment began to displace them. In 2008, #1379 was purchased by the Cincinnati Dinner Train and rebuilt for use as an entertainment car. She is painted as a U S Army hospital car.

The trailing car was boxcar CNRY #1376, ex Amtrak #1376, ex U S Army kitchen car, built by St. Louis Car Company 1953. She is used for generating head end power.

The dinner train runs over former Pennsylvania Railroad (PRR) track. Upon leaving Oakley the train runs nine miles west to Montgomery Inn parking lot, on Cincinnati's waterfront. Boarding of the train is from the parking lot of BBQ Revue parking lot on Madison Avenue in Oakley. Ticket sales/pickup is out of a small recreational trailer located by the track. Boarding started at 5:00 PM and the train pulled at 6:00 PM. We boarded at 5:30 PM and were assigned to a table in NYC #441. Seated with us was a young couple who were contemplating marriage.

Our train ran with the locomotive pushing to the riverfront and pulling back to the boarding area. On pulling from the boarding platform the train at first header west, then it stopped and began the backup move. Only NYC #441 and L&N #201 were carrying guest. Both cars were 90 percent full. For the murder mystery each car had a moderate who led the action.

Each table had one of its members designated as a participant in the play. I declined and our table partner Chris was so honored.

Upon taking our seat an appetizer was found at each place ready to eat. Upon sitting down a waiter took our order for a drink. They have a nice selection of beer and wines. The complete meal was served during the 90 minute run to Montgomery Inn parking lot. Upon the train pulling the appetizer plates were picked up and a very nice salad served. For our main course I had chosen hickory smoked prime rib and Mary Ann had salmon with a spicy hoisin glaze. Desert was pecan pie. The meal was excellent.

The murder mystery play ran as follows. Each table had a designated player. They were given a folder with information on who they were. The moderator had each of these individuals stand up and state who they were as laid out in the binder. The victim then arrived on the scene smoked a cigar and fell dead from poison contained in it. Each of the participants then had to re-stand and make further comments about themselves from the binder. A third section in the binder contained more information about yourself that you were only to provide if asked. This was to encourage mixing of those riding the train. The noise level now began to go upward as the people got into solving the mystery. Mary Ann and I ignored the noise around us and looked out the window at the passing scenery. The scenery was not much to write home about, basically an urban landscape, but it was a slice of Cincinnati.

Upon reaching the riverfront and our meal finished Mary Ann and I moved to the Queen City Tavern. This car has a bar at one end and tables at the other end but its main attraction was that the boxcar doors were open. A waist high barrier kept you from falling out. I ordered another beer and with Mary Ann took up a position in the doorway. Mary Ann says the only way to ride a train is in a doorway. Joining us at the doorway was Bill Thomas, was of the owners of the dinner train. We had met him a number of years ago while serving as car host for a CRRC outing from Cincinnati to Batesville, Indiana.

From Bill I learned that the track we were riding on was owned by Southern Ohio Regional Transportation Authority (SORTA) and that Genesee & Wyoming was the current operator. I had forgotten that RailAmerica had assumed operating rights over the line from Indiana & Ohio and last year RailAmerica had been purchased by Genesee & Wyoming. The ride back was sort of sad for I remember the area from the 1950s when PRR was a major presence in Cincinnati, Oasis Yard and Undercliff Yard were full of cars, Rendcomb Junction Tower was still in operation, and Norfolk & Western trains came into Cincinnati over the Peavine Line. Yet it was interesting to see an area I was familiar from the road from the railroad track.

Highlight of the trip was passing the former PRR Torrance Road Depot. This depot opened in 1907 and closed in 1933 served the fluent walnut Hills area of Cincinnati. President Taff often used this depot. Set into the hillside to the north of the track is a sculptured panel showing a representation of Cincinnati. This was one of eight panels created by Carl Bitter to honor western cities served by PRR. The eight panels graced Philadelphia's Broad street station. After that station burnt the panels were disbursed to their namesake cities. Amazingly the panel still stands, vandalized it is true but still welcoming those passing her by.

I need to mention that a lot of housing pushes up against the railroad track along River Road and a number of people were on their porches or in their yards to wave at us. Bill told us that there were still two on line customers. Pig iron is transshipped from barges to railcar just upstream from Montgomery Inn and at Luken Airport sand is off loaded from railcars for transportation by truck to work sites. We were back to the boarding area at 9:10 PM. Upon returning to our table we learned from our table mates that the murder had been identified and that we missed a great time. We will humbly disagree to that, standing in an open doorway is much more fund then riding in an air condition car.

