Grand Trunk Western, the Canadian National subsidiary operating in Michigan, Indiana, and Illinois, plus Lake Michigan carferry service to Milwaukee, Wis., is well known for having operated the last daily Class 1 mainline steam-powered passenger trains in the U.S., on its Detroit Division. GTW celebrated the "last run" in grand style, on March 27, 1960, with two sections of Detroit–Durand (Mich.) trains 21 and 56 as a well-publicized "Farewell to Steam" that drew 3,600 passengers and required 37 passenger cars! Workaday GTW steam in freight service lasted two more days, and GTW ran occasional steam excursions into fall 1961, but only a handful of other Class 1 U.S. roads ran regular everyday steam after March ’60.

Steam had been dwindling on Grand Trunk Western for several years, with a sea change occurring in February 1957 when the Chicago Division became fully dieselized west of Battle Creek, Mich., except for the occasional passenger excursion. GTW’s mainline passenger trains, through Toronto–Chicago runs...
that “the Trunk,” as many called it, accepted from CN at Port Huron, Mich., got their first diesels in 1954. They were not “covered wagons” as on most other railroads but two EMD GP9’s. There were three pairs of trains: the crack International Limited, Nos. 14 and 15, overnight on GTW; Nos. 5 and 6, the La Salle westbound and Inter-City Limited eastbound, also overnight; and in the daytime, Nos. 17 and 20, the Inter-City Limited westbound and Maple Leaf eastbound. No. 17 crossed Michigan in the afternoon, while No. 20 left Chicago’s Dearborn Station in mid-morning and gained Canadian National rails at suppertime.

Dieselization of all Chicago Division trains was accomplished after the delivery of 24 more GP9’s, 16 for passenger work (Nos. 4907–4922) and 8 for freight (4539–4546). Until then, Grand Trunk Western’s Chicago passenger trains were in the charge of 4-8-4’s, either its six streamlined class U-4-b, 4-8-4’s 6405–6410 (Lima, 1938) or the surviving locomotives among its 25 ubiquitous class U-3-b dual-service Northerns, 6312–6336 (Alco, 1942). (The Trunk also had five dual-service, class U-1-c 1925 Baldwin 4-8-2’s, 6037–6041.)

NEW HOME, NEW ALLEGIANCE

As a kid, my favorite railroad was not the GTW but the Chesapeake & Ohio, whose former Pere Marquette Railway’s Grand Rapids–Chicago line ran through my hometown of Coloma, Mich., near the twin towns of Benton Harbor and St. Joseph. My earliest recollection of steam was when I was 5, when a fast freight powered by a PM 1200-series Berkshire stopped to set out a car with a hot box at Coloma. Another time at about that age, I saw New York Central steam up close on a visit to the roundhouse at Niles, Mich., a large terminal not far from home. Otherwise, as a kid I remember seeing only diesels.

That changed, if only for a brief time, when my family moved to Lansing, Mich., in 1956, when I was 11. There I was thrilled to hear distant whistles and see steam locomotives in regular service on the GTW. It became my favorite railroad, and I saw its steam engines all the time—the huge, shiny black Northerns on freights and, best of all, the streamlined U-4-b beauties on passenger trains, glistening in olive and black with a red number plate on the front and red-and-gold emblem on the tender. To me, that was steam in all its glory.

It was not to last, however. My father, Joe E. Wells, worked for the state in Lansing, the capital, and...
had coffee every morning with Donald Hughes, a safety inspector for the Michigan Public Service Commission, who kept us posted on all things railroad going on in the state. In January 1957, he said that steam on the Trunk’s Chicago Division would be ending soon... and indeed it would, on April 6 on train 17 to Chicago.

Before that, though, I wrote an impassioned letter to A. G. Thernstrom, GTW Chicago Division superintendent in Battle Creek, stating my sadness about the passing of steam power and requesting a cab ride on one of those steamers. It did not fall on deaf ears.

**WHAT DO I RECALL? ALL OF IT**

Lo and behold, my father got a call, and permission was granted if he would accompany me on the trip. No problem there—he was as crazy about trains as I was, having worked for both the Pere Marquette and the Michigan Central as a switchman before being laid off in the Depression. We were to ride the cab on train No. 17 from Lansing to Cassopolis, about a two-hour ride, on Thursday, January 24.

What do I remember more than 50 years later? Nearly everything.

The train roared into Lansing at 4:21 p.m., right on time, behind colorful, streamlined U-4-b 6407. Engineer Potter climbed down with his alemite grease gun and started pumping grease into those huge drive-rod bearings. He greeted us cheerily.

The fireman had taken on coal and water at Trowbridge a ways up the track (the huge concrete coaling tower spanning the main line there still stands!), but was having problems with clinkers.
and had a long-handled rake in the firebox breaking them up. He showed us how the automatic stoker fed coal up to the firebox and compressed air distributed it onto the huge, roaring fire. He used a shovel only to fill in the bare spots. Compressed air also opened the butterfly doors, and when you walked across the cab floor, the uninitiated often mistakenly stepped on the pedal and were scared out of their wits when the doors flew open, revealing the fires from hell.

Keeping watch over the water gauge and injecting water into the boiler was the most important part of the job, he said. Because of the fear of boiler explosions, no locomotive fireman was indifferent when it came to watching the water gauge or missing a chance to take on water.

Quickly, it was 4:28, time to go. I took my place on the seatbox behind the engineer, and my father did the same on the fireman’s side. Within a mile or two, we were doing 80. Engine 6407 was late its service life and had worn tires (the steel rims on the driving wheels), and the engineer said the ride was harder than when the engine had been better maintained. But 6407 still had lots of life and power to move the 10 cars at 90 or better, if need be, on the Trunk’s perfectly maintained double track. Safety came first, but keeping the schedule was as important, and exceeding the speed limit of 79 mph, within reason, happened often in those days.

The towns shot by, with me blowing the whistle—Millett, Potterville, a quick stop at Charlotte (Shar-LOT), then Olivet, Bellevue, and suddenly we were going by Nichols Yard at the east end of Battle Creek, also the site of GTW’s backshops and the adjacent Kellogg’s cereal factory. Bam-baty-bam-bam we went over the New York Central’s former Michigan Central mainline diamond and into GTW’s Battle Creek station. We changed crews, and operation switched to Central Time. Only 7 minutes were allowed for the crew change and to load baggage, mail, and passengers, and then we were off again.

West of Battle Creek, there is a long straight stretch near Fort Custer. The engineer got out of his seat and said to me, “Here, you take it for a while.” I slid in and held the throttle, still hitting the whistle—the cord for country whistles and a whistle valve near the brake lever in the city. Soon the town of Climax was coming up, so he needed to take over again.

We slammed through Scotts and Pavilion, where the Kalamazoo line branches off, and then Vicksburg, where we crossed the Pennsylvania’s line from Fort Wayne to Grand Rapids and made a quick station stop, during which we caught the smells from the Lee Paper factory. We pounded through Schoolcraft, made a short stop at the farming community of Marcellus, and finally rolled the last 13 miles on to Cassopolis. There the fireman swung up onto the tender to take water, and my dad and I prepared to get off, to be met by relatives coming down from Coloma to drive us back to Lansing.

**ALL TOO QUICKLY, IT’S OVER**

It had been a fast two hours. I was on cloud nine as I climbed down the cab ladder. The fireman pushed the water spout back into position and returned to the cab. The engineer gave us a farewell wave and the train moved out. The Cassopolis depot area seemed eerily quiet as we watched the train disappear into the winter night toward Edwardsburg, South Bend, Valparaiso, and Chicago.

A lot of railroading has happened in my life since then, including a cab ride on the Santa Fe’s *Super Chief* over Glorieta Pass, N.Mex., a private-car excursion trip through Mexico, and many memorable fan trips. But nothing will ever equal those two hours I spent riding in the cab of Grand Trunk Western streamlined 4-8-4 6407.