IC’s *City of New Orleans* slams the TP&W diamond at Gilman, Ill., in the mid-1950’s, en route to Champaign . . . and 100 mph.

**Notwithstanding the urgency** with which Illinois Central moved bananas northward, the railroad’s post-World War II reputation for speed was nowhere more evident than on the Champaign District, the 122.2-mile, double-track stretch of the Illinois Division between Champaign and Branch Junction. This latter obscure point, on the northern outskirts of Centralia (a town named for the railroad, as in “Central”) was where the “Chicago Branch” diverged from IC’s original “charter line” up through the center of the state.

This roadway through the Prairie State’s cornfields had a posted passenger-train speed limit of 100 mph for most of its length. IC was one of a select few U.S. railroads to permit train operation at the “century mark.” By the mid-1960’s, though, other roads such as Santa Fe and Atlantic Coast Line had quit the “century club,” leaving IC as the last operator of America’s fastest passenger trains in the pre-Metroliner era.

Where railroads chose to venture beyond 79 mph, train-control hardware was mandated by the Interstate Commerce Commission after 1947 (“Speed, Signals, and Safety,” pages 38-47). Illinois Central employed a “continuous” Automatic Train Stop (ATS) system, incorporating dual-aspect (clear or restricting) cab signals. Safe operation in this speed range on IC was made possible by an impeccably maintained main line with only one restricting curve (near Tuscola, 22 miles south of Champaign, where trains had to slow to 90 mph) and slower passages through two communities, Mattoon and Effingham.

In the mid-1960’s, five IC trains were authorized to run at 100 mph over the Champaign District—and did so for miles at a stretch, their brown-and-orange E units, which were geared for 116 mph, charging through the countryside with throttles wide open. (The best that IC’s coal-black passenger-service GP9’s could muster was a still-respectable 83 mph. They tended to be used on IC’s Iowa Division trains and secondary runs in the South.) IC still ran plenty of passenger specials through the 1960’s—catering to school, civic, and athletic events and whose consists boasted roller-bearing-equipped heavyweight cars—and these, too, brushed 100 mph across the Champaign District.

Leading the pack of Illinois Central speedsters was the *City of New Orleans*, inaugurated in 1947 as a 16-hour day train linking its namesake Crescent City with Chicago. Its modernized and streamlined heavyweight cars—rebuilt in the road’s Burnside Shops in Chicago—are remembered for their glass-smooth performances over the Champaign District, on a par with, or better than, the lightweight cars on the overnight, all-Pullman *Panama Limited*.

Even as Illinois Central condensed and recast its passenger services after 1967 under the guidance of Paul Reistrup, the railroad’s 100-mph operation on the Champaign District persisted. A post-Amtrak reduction to 90 mph—the previous maximum elsewhere on the IC—made track-maintenance costs more palatable. Operation above 79 mph came to an end when IC’s main line was single-tracked, and the ATS system removed, in the late 1980’s.

—Kevin J. Holland