

My summer in Rocky's kitchen

For a high-schooler, employment on Great Northern dining cars was an adventure

By Byron G. Webster

BACK IN THE EARLY 1950's, the Great Northern Railway, headquartered in my hometown of St. Paul, Minn., hired high-school and college men for summer work as dining-car cooks. My dad helped me get such a job through John Budd, the GN president. In my case, as a high-schooler, it really was "hiring a boy."

Before I could start work, I had to go to the Lowry Medical Arts Building for a physical exam. The staff seemed to draw a lot of blood, and when I asked why, I was told most of it was for a Wasserman Test for syphilis. Now, I either could ask Mom what the test was about, or look it up in the dictionary. I chose the latter, and was pleased that I didn't have to ask and receive an embarrassing answer. I passed.

I got my first call to report to the commissary off Rice Street in St. Paul to provision a car prior to my first trip that would leave the next morning. Great Northern, famous for its "Rocky the mountain goat" emblem and for traversing some dramatic scenery, had two transcontinental trains, the premium *Empire Builder* and the economy *Western Star*. I was to work on the *Star*. The car to which I was first assigned had been in service for some years. The kitchen had coal-burning stoves to heat boiling water to keep food items hot. I was to keep the stoves stoked full of coal and haul out the cinders, which weren't wanted in the food.

The chef was nowhere to be seen. The first cook was my boss and the fellow who did most of the work. I was fourth cook, and he pointed to a large pile of plucked chickens in the sinks and told me, "Gut 'em." What to do? The second cook quickly showed me—

wash them under cold water, reach up the body to the heart, put my fingers around it, and pull everything out. I did! Hundreds of them. We put them in iceboxes and started to stow provisions for the five-day trip. At the end of the long day, I left that hot car for home. I was pleased to find we were not having chicken for dinner that night.

Next morning, very early, I rejoined the car and crew at St. Paul Union Depot, and we headed to Chicago. "Chicago?" I asked. I thought I knew my geography and that Seattle was west, not southeast. "Yes, we take an overnight in Chicago, head back through the Twin Cities, then off to Fargo and points west, all in five and a half days," I was told. We cooked breakfast and lunch on the Burlington Route, GN's eastern connection, arriving in Chicago in the late afternoon. We were put up in a flea-bag hotel in the "skid row" part of town. Our meal money barely covered dinner.

Early the next morning we were on board for the return trip through the Twin Cities. I soon found out that one benefit of working in the dining car was the food. The second and third cooks made sure we were the first to eat any meal, and it would be the best food served on the train that day. Besides taking care of the coal stoves, I was given many pots and pans to clean, and before I knew it we were halfway to St. Paul. We had a little time between breakfast and lunch, and the crew usually spent that interval sitting at the dining-car tables enjoying the view. Sitting was suddenly important, for I figured I'd been on my feet for six hours, and I

was told it would be close to 10:30 p.m. before we got to bed. The black waiters would polish the silver items and josh among themselves as we headed up the east bank of the Mississippi River.

It soon became time for lunch, and again our team was hustling to keep up with the orders, but I had yet to see or meet the chef. "Oh, he stays in his room. He has other things to do," I was told. I later found out the "other things" were in bottles; we could hear the empties rolling around the floor of the dormitory car where the crew slept.

At St. Paul Union Depot and the GN station in Minneapolis, we dropped off passengers and picked up others before heading for the great

American West. I was given another duty—peeling potatoes, tons of them. We needed them for all three meals, and I'd never seen so many in one place until the second cook pointed to a pile of them in a sink and said, "You do know how to peel a potato, don't you?" I did, but I still got a lot of practice that summer.

As the day progressed, it became warmer in the kitchen—there was no air-conditioning in there, just the smoke from the stoves, the heat and steam from the boilers, and the sweat from the four of us. As the car rocked and twisted, I learned how to balance on my feet and developed the necessary "sea legs." I could not get used to the noise and vibrations, though, and it was hard to communicate, so I had to learn the hand-signals of the kitchen, mostly to check the stoves and toss out garbage, or to peel more potatoes. The third cook had worked my job the summer



Sitting down between breakfast and lunch was important, for I figured I'd been on my feet for six hours.

For most of one summer during his high-school years, author Webster was employed in this hot and busy environment—the galley of a Great Northern dining car. Philip R. Hastings photo.





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The Montana Rockies was just one of several scenic Western areas to open the eyes of our young GN summer dining-car cook . . . but stay inside during the Glacier Park station stop!

before, and he was a great help to me. It was later in the summer before I realized that if the train had been in an accident, we would have been goners, for all that boiling water and hot coals would have spilled out onto us.

It seemed like a short time later, not days, when we pulled into Seattle and had some time off. When I stepped down off the car, I was dizzy—my legs couldn't understand the lack of motion. We hiked around for a few hours and then headed back to the train to prepare the evening meal. It was then that the chef actually showed up—he had to make up menus for the return trip. He strutted about for a time, gave some orders that had already been accomplished, and left to buy some “supplies” for his return. We never saw him again, until they “poured him off” in St. Paul.

The few times I was able, I would stick my head out of a Dutch door and take in the magnificent scenery. These were sights this teenage “flatlander” had

never seen. My eyes were really opened on that first trip, and I enjoyed these interludes on subsequent runs.

We arrived back in St. Paul late on our fifth day on the road. I lugged my little suitcase up the steps into the depot and over to the streetcar stop on Fourth Street to grab a car that would take me home. Mom would be at “the Frontenac,” our lake cabin, for the summer, but Dad was up late reading in our hot apartment living room, as I expected.

Greeting me, he said, “Pull up your pants.” I did so, and looked down to see that both of my ankles were larger than a softball. That's what wearing low-cut tennis shoes for 16-hour days on a rocking train will do. “We'll go down to Seventh Street and get you some work boots tomorrow,” he said.

Promoted to the *Empire Builder*

The job was five days on and five days off, and well-paid, too. What a life! A few times that summer during my time off, I was called in to work on special trains. The best was a trainload of Kappa Kappa Gamma sorority girls going to a convention in Winnipeg, Manitoba. We served dinner, and of

course the younger members of the crew sat up all night talking with the college girls. This was “big-time” for a high-school kid like me! We stopped for Customs at the border, and officials tossed out all our bacon, sausage, and pork. We figured that all the Canadian Customs men had good meals that night.

In mid-summer I was promoted to third cook and up to the *Empire Builder*, one of North America's great trains. What a change! No more coal; we had electric stoves and refrigerators, so no more iceboxes, either. My new duties still included those potatoes, but cooking them, not peeling them. I also cooked vegetables, but my favorite duty was baking. My sisters-in-law, Barbara and Betty, got a kick out of my baking. When they asked what I made, I explained that about 5 a.m., I mixed up a large batch of dough and used it all day. I put in some blueberries for pancakes in the morning, made plain muffins for lunch, and added walnuts for dinner rolls. Some days, I would put dough in bread pans and make loaves of bread for the crew. When I told Barbara and Betty I started with 75 pounds of flour

and three dozen eggs for the dough, they were lost on the recipe and told me to stop explaining it to them.

Our days started before 5 a.m. and ended with me locking the car up after 11 at night. We had an hour off between breakfast and lunch and a few more hours between lunch and dinner, again usually just sitting in the dining room. The waiters would play cards and polish silver. Their off-duty costume consisted of an undershirt, dress pants, slippers, a small leather bag hung about their necks in which they kept their tips, and a woman's nylon stocking cut off and knotted, worn on their heads. When I asked about this, they said that it kept their hair in order.

We made stops at Glacier National Park in Montana on each trip, but we were asked not to hang out the galley door while in our dirty uniforms, as "the passengers might not approve." The park was spectacular. A "picture-postcard hotel" sat up on a hill some distance away with the magnificent mountains framed behind it. There were large, ancient touring cars for the guests. Welcoming the visitors were Indians, all in ceremonial dress. Male hotel guests received a big cigar, while the children were given a cheap little bow and some arrows. I don't remember what the women received—perhaps a box of playing cards with pictures of famous Indian leaders on it, which was a standard GN item.

I made friends with the cook and the bartender in the lounge car. We would trade beef filets for chocolate malted milks, then together we would grind up the steaks to make hamburgers late at night. When I told Dad about our midnight snacks, he thought it was a sin—"You ground up a great filet mignon to make a hamburger?"

On the *Empire Builder* the dining-car crew consisted of five cooks and the chef, whom we would rarely see. The first and second cooks were the real workers and professionals; the third cook (me) and the fourth cook were better known as "pots and pans." Our crew became regular by mid-summer, and we worked well together. The fourth cook went to Harvard and was miffed that he was under a high-school boy.

The first and second cooks were potato farmers from Mora, Minn., Swedish, and talked like they just got off the boat. They were jovial fellows who loved to tell jokes and laughed at most



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anything. Once, as we got back into St. Paul, it was raining heavily and they asked if I wanted a ride up to the street-car line. I did, and all I had to do was assist them with their luggage to their car, a big Chrysler. When I pulled a suitcase off the car, it almost fell to the ground, it was so heavy. Later I learned it was full of salmon, lobster, steaks, and roasts—"no sense in it going to waste," I was laughingly told. I believe their families ate well, too.

On one run, the waiters were giving me a hard time, and my second cook told me he would take care of it if they didn't stop. They didn't, so he took out of his wallet a newspaper clipping of a recent incident on the Milwaukee Road in which a cook had stabbed a waiter. My cook took a big knife with the newspaper clipping, walked around to the pantry, and stuck the knife with the article on the waiters' bulletin board. I had no more trouble with them after that.

Sightseeing, and the end of the ride

By the end of the summer, I had figured out a good routine and had somewhat mastered the work. Our time off in Chicago allowed me to visit Uncle Byron and Aunt Flora, he in his large Merrill Lynch office in the Loop and both of them in their beautiful high-rise home with a view of Lake Michigan. The GN turnarounds in Seattle allowed me to see much of that city, which had experienced an earthquake earlier that year. The railroad's pay was great, and in between trips I could head for the Frontenac to visit my family or hang around with my friends in the Twin

No stilted publicity shot, this! The steward is at attention, a waiter serves a table, and several passengers eye the photographer in the *Empire Builder* dining car as the 1947 version of GN's top train makes its first Seattle-Chicago run.

Cities. We'd go to the beaches in Minneapolis, cruise the drive-ins, or visit girls whom I'd tell of my visits to Winnipeg, Chicago, Glacier Park, and Seattle.

Toward the end of the summer I was summoned to an office on Rondo Street, in the black area of the city, to meet with the local steward about my joining the dining-car workers union. I begged off, saying I had to return to Central High School. The steward mentioned various sons and daughters of members with whom I went to school, and then dismissed me. A few days later I received a letter from the Great Northern saying that my services were no longer needed after my next trip. The reason was "failure to join the union."

On my final run before returning to school, the black waiters were excited. It seems that the great former boxer, Joe Lewis, had boarded the train at Fargo, traveling to Minneapolis. I caught a glimpse of him. It was late in his life, when he was refereeing wrestling matches. Most of his money had been stolen, or had gone to pay large tax bills or alimony. He was far removed from his championship boxing days. He was a big man, with large bags under his eyes, but he had the largest, fanciest golf bag I'd ever seen. Lewis was still very much a gentleman, though, signing autographs for his fellow passengers and the crew. He left a \$20 tip to be split among the waiters and cooks. I never saw my share, but I could say that Joe Lewis, the "Brown Bomber," ate my muffins. *April 1968*

I baked blueberry pancakes in the morning, made plain muffins for lunch, and added walnuts for dinner.