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Here Come the Streamliners: In the early 1930s, everything “streamlined” had great appeal to youngsters my age. This applied to cars, speedboats, and trains. In the decade of the ‘30s, styles changed completely from utilitarian “boxey” to streamlined, with rounded corners and gentle curves, and a “tear-drop” effect. Older people rejected these changes; young people delighted in them.

Except for commuter electric service, the railroads of this country were almost 100% steam-powered in 1930. About that time, the Northern Pacific Railroad ordered a Timken-bearing 4-8-4 passenger locomotive, with all bearings being either ball or roller, doing away completely with the former bronze-to-steel journal boxes on the main bearings, and high-friction bushings on main and side rods. This locomotive was highly successful, and within a very few years, most important U.S. railroads had on order or in service several of these improved locomotives. In the early 1930s, however, streamlined shrouds covering these engines had not been thought of.

Starting in 1934 with the advent of the first long-distance Diesel-powered passenger locomotives, the outward appearance of passenger railroading began changing rapidly. In the west, the Burlington Route (Chicago, Burlington & Quincy) introduced its Pioneer Zephyr, a 4-car unit passenger train pulled by a 1500-horsepower Diesel, which probably ran between Chicago and Galesburg, Illinois. Soon a similar train called the Denver Zephyr made its 1,000-plus mile run from Chicago to Denver in 16 hours. To match the Burlington, Union Pacific introduced its similar streamliners, the first of its “City” trains. The City of Denver, running over the Chicago and Northwestern from Chicago to Council Bluffs (across the Missouri River from Omaha), and then the UP to Denver, equaled the Burlington schedule. Eventually, the Rock Island joined this competition with its Rocky Mountain Rocket. (My parents rode a 4-car Rocket from Kansas City to Oklahoma City in May 1945.) By 1937 or so, UP had added similar but longer trains with the same streamlining running from Chicago to the West Coast, with its City of Los Angeles, City of San Francisco, and City of Portland. (The most expensive electric trains in the Lionel line in the late 1930s were models of these City trains, and replicas of New York Central Type J Hudson steam locomotives, both “O” gauge requiring special 72”-diameter curved track, which came with the set.) Burlington Zephyrs served Lincoln, Nebraska. Westbound from Chicago this train was called the Nebraska Zephyr, eastbound it was the Aksarben Zephyr. In the east, the Boston & Maine put the Flying Yankee in service, a 4-car Diesel train between Boston’s North Station and Portland, Maine.

Actually, there were only two railroads that owned their own track from Chicago to the Pacific, the Santa Fe (Achison, Topeka & Santa Fe), and the Milwaukee Road (Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul & Pacific), and I really thought the Milwaukee terminated in Spokane (WA). In any event, this latter line, opened about 1915, was built too late to successfully compete with Northern Pacific and Great Northern for the Portland-Seattle trade, both dating from the 1880s. Operating for many years at a loss, the Olympian Hiawatha of the Milwaukee continued operation into the 1960s, and in the post-war years it was Diesel-powered.

The Santa Fe was highly successful with its long-distance passenger service. During World War II, it operated at least six trains daily between Chicago and Los Angeles, and one or two between Chicago and San Francisco, all but two of them steam powered with the railroad’s large fleet of 4-8-4 oil-burning locomotives. The railroad prided itself in that one locomotive could run through from Chicago to L.A., almost 2,200 miles, without change! Only the Super Chief and El Capitan (an all coach reserved-seat train) were streamlined and Diesel-powered during World War II, and operated on a 40-hour schedule for the run, equaling the schedule of the “City” trains of the UP.

The epitome of the western streamliners was the California Zephyr that succeeded the Exposition Flyer about 1950. It was a long train with 5 or 6 dome cars that traveled over the Burlington, the Rio Grande (Denver & Rio Grande Western), and the Western Pacific. It went through the Moffat Tunnel in the Rockies just west of Denver and the Feather River Canyon through the Sierras en-route from Chicago to Oakland Pier on San

Francisco Bay. Amtrak still runs a train by that name with a slightly altered route, but, like other long-distance Amtrak trains, it runs at a loss.

For the most part, most other railroads stuck with steam hauling their passenger trains until after World War II. Some of the shrouds that covered steam locomotives and matched the passenger cars in the train behind were spectacular. Dozens of railroads followed this practice. My favorites were the 20th-Century Limited and the Empire State Express of the New York Central, eastern rains between Chicago and New York. I often rode behind one of the ten streamlined 4-6-4 Hudsons on the New Haven (New York, New Haven & Hartford) during World War II, but their trains never matched the locomotives.

The Milwaukee Road (mentioned above) had many streamlined matched trains, which were steam-powered and fast, and were very successful between Chicago and the Twin Cities and many points in Wisconsin. Personally, I didn't like the streamlining or the color of Milwaukee Road trains. I think they had six steam trains each day that raced between Chicago and Milwaukee, 85 miles in 75 minutes. On the West Coast, Southern Pacific operated many passenger trains between the Bay area and Los Angeles, and some north to Portland. Both the San Joaquin Valley Route and the Coast Route were used for the 450-mile run. The Coast Daylight was especially popular with tour groups. Often it had up to 20 passenger cars, pulled by a streamlined 4-8-4 with two headlights.

By the early 1950s, most steam was gone from American railroads, although the Norfolk & Western, a coal-carrying carrier, was almost 100% steam until about 1958, when it changed overnight. It operated two coal-fired steam-powered passenger trains daily between Norfolk, Virginia and Cincinnati, 715 miles, without change of locomotives. I rode the cab of a streamlined 4-8-2 pulling the Powhatan Arrow from Roanoke to Bluefield (WV) and return in 1956.

Many things were streamlined in addition to trains. By 1935, the rounded, streamlined effect was evident on all American automobiles. Even things like office staplers, electric toasters, alarm clocks, and many kitchen appliances became streamlined, and several took on the "tear-drop" appearance.