

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, September 14, 2015

Railroads & Restaurants: A hundred years ago, some of the best restaurants in the country were in railroad stations. The Pennsylvania Railroad's restaurant in Philadelphia's Broad Street Station was considered by many to be the best one in town. My father would occasionally drive one of his Stanleys there to enjoy Sunday dinner. The Fred Harvey Restaurant in Kansas City's Union Station was the flagship of his restaurant chain and also the best place to eat in the city. Many of their patrons were not on a journey by train.

Some businessmen thought dining cars on crack long-distance trains offered excellent food. While the Pennsylvania Railroad offered the fastest and most direct service from the Wilmington-Philadelphia area to the Midwest on trains such as the Broadway Limited and the Spirit of St. Louis, diner service on the B & O, the C & O, and the New York Central was often superior. Some thought the few extra hours en route was offset by the improved food and service.

Fred Harvey was a Scotsman who made his way to the Chicago area and had some success in the restaurant business. He convinced some western railroads that it would be much more efficient to have good trackside restaurants along their distant right-of-ways than having the expense of dining cars on most of their trains. After working with several railroads around Chicago with this idea, Harvey centered on the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe, the only railroad with tracks running the 2,200 miles between Chicago and the West Coast. In large cities, of which there were few, and small railroad towns where steam locomotives would be serviced, Fred Harvey restaurants were built at trackside. In a period of one-half hour, passengers would disembark and be fed a full-course meal at long tables with linen napkins and tablecloths, served by neatly groomed young women. With a fresh locomotive and crew on the front end, the train would pull out with a load of happy passengers. I witnessed such a Fred Harvey restaurant in operation at Clovis, New Mexico, in 1944, when the wartime westbound California Limited made its daily stop. Of course I talked with the engine crew, not the waitresses. A Hollywood musical starring Judy Garland in the late 1940s glorified the Harvey girls.

In more modern times, restaurants with a railroad theme became popular. A small chain called Victoria Station had a popular eating spot near Boston's South Station in an area that was being redeveloped as a tourist attraction. There was a Victoria Station at King of Prussia (Pennsylvania) as well, located toward Norristown from the big mall. Soon after the Wilmington & Western was revived as a tourist railroad in the late 1960s, I solicited Victoria Station to open a restaurant next to Greenbank Station, and we had the blessing of New Castle County to build one on their land. Obviously, this never worked out.

The word restaurant comes up frequently in connection with the redevelopment of the former NVF site in Yorklyn, with the reasoning that it would be a great tie-in with the Wilmington & Western Railroad that also passes through the site. Although having a theme helps to get started, the success of such a venture would be determined by the quality of its food and how well the restaurant was managed.