



# A Primer on Headend Passenger Cars

April 17, 2025

# What is a Headend Car?

- Headend cars are so-called because they typically ran at the front end of the train behind the locomotive. Headend cars included the following:
  - Baggage cars (including messenger cars)
  - Express cars
    - Boxcars
    - Refrigerator cars
  - Postal storage cars
  - Railway post office cars (also known as mail cars)
  - Milk and creamery cars
  - Dormitory cars (also known as crew cars)
  - Combines
  - Container express and storage mail cars



# Baggage Cars

- Baggage cars hauled baggage and Railway Express Agency packages
- Classical definition of baggage is any checked travel bag with personal belongings
- Railway Express Agency (REA Express or REX) was the FedEx and UPS of its day
  - Cars hauling REA Express packages generally included the term “Railway Express Agency” on the side
  - Parcels, packages (could be very small to very large), money
- Messenger cars were baggage cars with facilities for a RR or REA agent on board
  - Messenger cars included a desk, desk light, stool, heating and a fan (exhaust and intake vents on roof), and a toilet
  - Messenger cars included a star or a star within a circle on the side of the car
  - Agents authorized to carry sidearms, if necessary

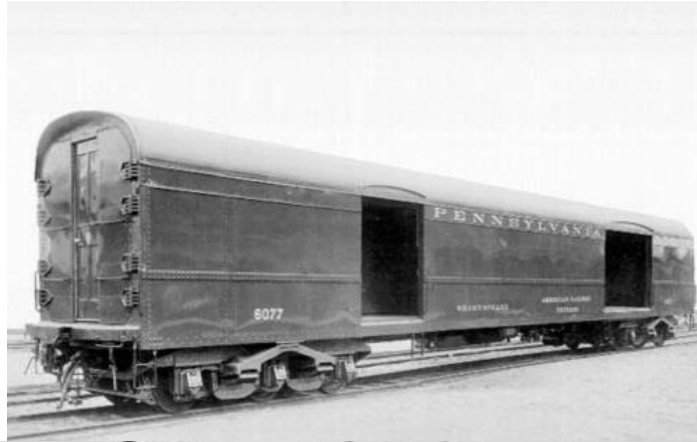
# Other Baggage Car Shipments

(Could be contracted through RR or REA)

- Magazines and newspapers (periodicals)
- Theater, musicals and stage show equipment
- Horses
- Bicycles
- Sports equipment
- Fish racks (wooden slat floors)
- Silk (SP and GN) – SP labeled their cars
- Vehicles, race cars, and harness racing carts
  - Full width end doors
- Nuclear material (L&N had dedicated combine labeled for Atomic Energy Commission)



# Baggage Cars



# Postal Storage Cars (Mail Storage Cars)

- Postal storage cars hauled presorted mail
- Primarily baggage design type cars, but could be box cars, retired RPO's and baggage RPO's (no mail hook)



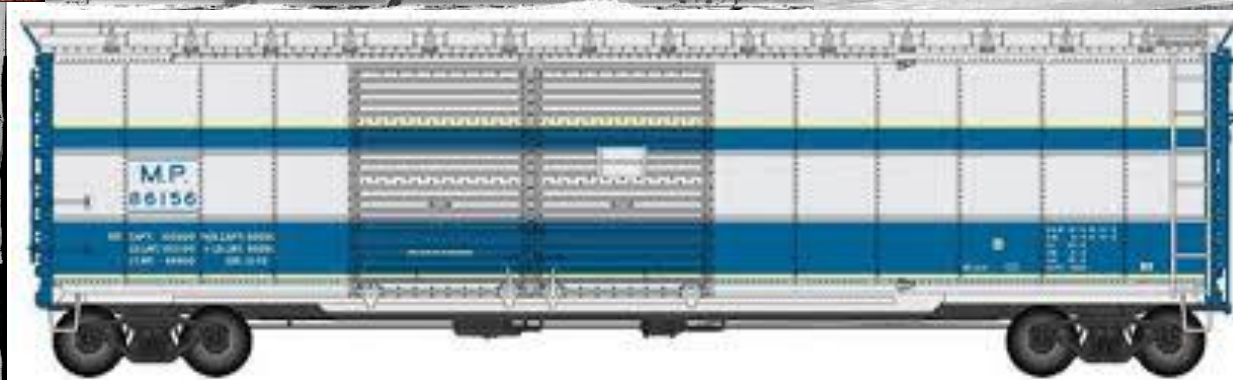


# Express Boxcars

- Boxcar – 40', 50', 60'
  - REA, postal storage, periodicals
  - High speed trucks (roller bearings)



Neg# SFR-53



# Express Refrigerator Cars

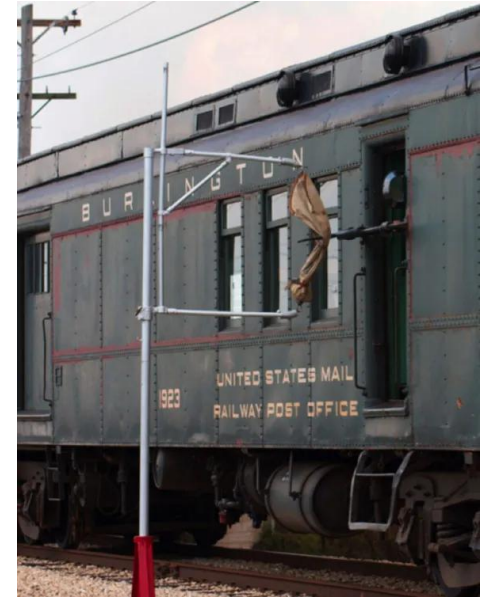
- Insulated refrigerator cars with ice hatches
  - REA and RR owned
- Predominately 50', some 40', could be various sizes
- Sometimes used as backup express boxcars
- Steel and wood (wood discontinued 1965)





# Railway Post Office Cars (Mail Cars)

- RPO's picked up, dropped off, and sorted mail enroute
  - Mail hook, catcher pouch, railway mail crane
- By regulation, spaces were 60', 30', or 15'
  - Size depended upon amount of mail carried – contract by USPO dictated size
  - Spaces were heated and ventilated
  - Included a toilet
- Besides mail, small parcels and packages, jewelry, and monetary items (money, bonds, stocks, etc.) were carried
  - At least one clerk authorized to carry sidearm, if necessary
  - All entrances were restricted or could be locked
- 60' spaces could be in RPO only cars, or 70', 72' or 85' cars with baggage section
- 30' or 15' spaces combined with baggage, REA, or postal storage
- Usually only one RPO operated on a passenger train



# RPO cars



# Milk and Creamery Cars

- Milk cars hauled raw milk, in milk cans or tanks, from rural farm areas to urban dairies
  - Most milk cars looked like express refrigerator cars, but did not have ice hatches
  - Milk cars operated over short distances between the farms and the dairies
  - Milk cars owned by railroads, dairies or farmer cooperatives
  - Milk car operation normally only around large cities
  - Milk cars operated in passenger trains or as stand alone express service
  - Most famous carrier was the Borden Dairy Company, still in operation today
  - Many milk cars were built and operated by the Pfaulder Co., but leased out
- Creamery cars hauled processed dairy products from dairies or processing facilities to distribution centers or large customers
  - Pasteurized milk, cream, butter, cottage cheese, buttermilk, and custard
  - Looked like express refrigerator cars, and may or may not have ice hatches
  - Creamery cars may be operated in either passenger trains or freight trains, usually as one or two car operation



# Milk Cars





# Milk and Creamery Cars



# Dormitory Cars (Crew Cars)

- Dormitory cars provided sleeping quarters, restrooms and washrooms for the train crew, dining car staff, lounge car staff, conductors and brakeman
  - Sometimes the dining car maître D and the head chef would be provided a section in a pullman
  - Pullman conductor and stewards are provided a section or roomette in a Pullman
  - Most dormitories had two or three tier bunk arrangements
- Most dormitories would be part of a baggage combine
- Occasionally, a heavyweight sleeper with or 6-6-4 lightweight sleeper would be used



# Dormitory Cars



# Combines

- Are they headend equipment, or are they passenger cars?
- Nearly all combines have baggage compartments, but a few have a 15' RPO
- Types of combines
  - Baggage dormitory
    - UP had variant that included a diesel engine for train power
  - Baggage club lounge
  - Baggage chair or coach
  - Baggage diner

# Combines

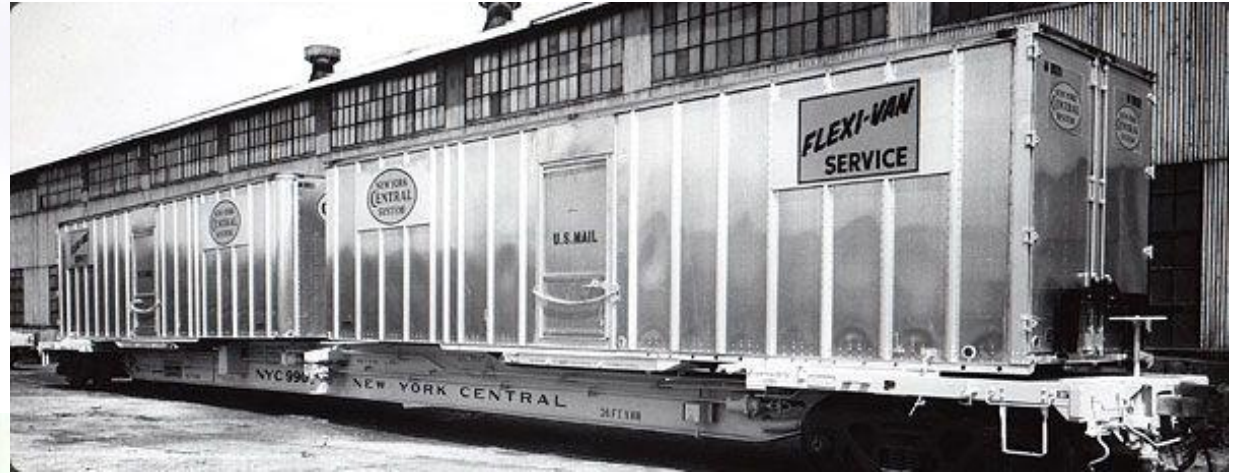




# Container Express and Storage Mail Cars

- Beginning in the 1960's, some railroads began experimenting and operating containers in express and storage mail service
  - Most cars included steam lines passing through the car
- Erie and B&O experimented with TOFC for storage mail service using 40' trailers
- REA experimented with 85' modified TTX flat cars hauling 20' containers for express service
- NYC pioneered the use of Flexi-Vans for storage mail and express service
  - Flexi-Van service eventually included the PRR, Seaboard, IC, CB&Q, MILW, and ATSF
- SP used standard TTX flat cars (modified with steam lines) and standard 20' containers for storage mail over the Overland and Sunset Routes

# Express and Mail Container Cars



# Mail and Express Trains

- Nearly every passenger train (and mixed trains) carried at least one baggage car that also carried REA shipments
- Many passenger trains, but all, carried a RPO
- Select railroads had an exclusive contract to haul bulk mail and REA shipments
  - This made for some strange bedfellows – GN/MILW, CB&Q/UP/SP, MP/GM&O
  - Mail and express train could range from 5 to 30 cars



# Mail and Express Trains



# Final Comments and Epilogue

- Many headend cars were painted Pullman Green or Coach Green until after WW2
  - After WW2, mail and express trains were a rainbow of colors
- Sometimes headend cars were carried on the back of the train to facilitate easy switching at brief station stops
- Many of the heavyweight cars had their doors replaced after WW2 because of wood construction that rotted
- Nearly all of the eastern roads did not purchase lightweight, streamlined headend cars
  - NYC was an exception with sizeable purchase of lightweight baggage cars and Erie with purchase of baggage and baggage RPO lightweight cars
- Western roads made sizeable purchases of streamlined cars (ATSF, CRIP, MP, SP, and UP)
- Mail and express business was an important revenue source for the railroads, and when it went away in the late 1960's, it caused the end of passenger service and the ultimate formation of Amtrak
- Nearly all of the headend cars, both heavyweight and lightweight cars are now gone forever, with only a few left at tourist railroads and in MOW service

