

Do Passenger Trains Still Run Through Here?

It's a common question that visitors ask at Kelso Depot, today the Preserve's main visitor center and museum. And it's in one of the few national park units with a railroad running through it.

After all, what's a train station without trains coming by? Union Pacific *freight* trains do come by – about 15 or so a day, depending on how the economy is humming along, but passenger trains are no more. Only rarely is there a special-excursion, steam locomotive and tender touring through. That's happened thrice in the past decade, but the days of revenue-producing passenger rail service over Union Pacific tracks, and virtually all other rail lines in the United States, have long been a thing of the past.

Except for Amtrak, that is. Amtrak is the government subsidized National Rail Passenger Corporation (doing business as AMTRAK), and these trains don't operate on the U.P.'s tracks through the Preserve. Amtrak does run over Burlington Northern - Santa Fe's (BNSF) double-track route between Los Angeles, Needles, and Albuquerque, N.M., and points east, roughly paralleling Interstate 40, just south of the Preserve's southern boundary. Amtrak also operates passenger trains over U.P. lines on the old "Overland Route" that stretches between Sacramento, Calif., and Omaha, Neb.

On May 1, 1971, Amtrak took over all regular railroad passenger service in the United States.

Outside Kelso Depot on the building's façade wall, a window-sized Train Bulletin made of slate hangs alongside the colonnaded walkway, above a resting bench. The sign is a museum replica of the once-vital train bulletin that hung on a wall inside the Depot's ticket office.

"Is the *City of St. Louis* due in soon?" an outside visitor will sometimes crack the front door to ask. Then, when they see the blank look on the desk attendant's face, the truth dawns, and there's a sheepish follow-up: "Is that sign with the train schedule *real*?"

Today, the tracks outside the Depot are far removed from tourist nostalgia, but they're real enough. The U.P. Railroad, one of the top Fortune-500 companies of the nation, has run double-stack container trains between Ogden, Utah, and Los Angeles, for several decades now. It's a busy railway, with sea-tanker shipments from around the world transferring their multi-colored cargo containers at the wharfs of Long Beach and the Port of Los Angeles -- two of the busiest trans-shipment ports in the world and the most profitable on the West Coast.

That is, until recently with the viral pandemic.

Before most Americans had access to automobiles, beginning in the early 1920s, passenger train travel was a revenue producer for competing railroads catering to customers looking for luxury travel. The inaugural train on the Salt Lake Route through Kelso occurred on Dec. 20, 1905, when the *Los Angeles Limited*, the U.P.'s flagship train between Chicago and Los Angeles, passed through Kelso and the Mojave Desert. From the time of the Depot's opening in 1924 until 1936, the *Los Angeles Limited* was billed as the "most perfectly appointed train in America," an upstart rival to the Atchison, Topeka, & Santa Fe's much longer established *California Limited*. In the mid-1930s this heavyweight train became air-conditioned, one of the first trains to acquire the technology. In addition, the train sported observation cars, Pullman kitchen and dining car equipment, a library, buffet service, barber shop, bath and valet service, and a "commodious lounge smoking room for men."

It was the longest running passenger train in the U.P. stable, running the rails for more than half a century until 1954.

By then the trains were pulled by more cost-efficient electro-diesel engines. The last revenue run of a steam-driven locomotive and consist passing through Kelso was the *Utahn* in 1948. Where the older steam engines needed 45 hours to bring their consists from Chicago to Los Angeles, the diesel-driven *City of Los Angeles* could do it in 39 and a-half.

Ridership declined on railroads in the 1940s and '50s as automobiles made inroads. The U.P.'s electro-diesels -- lighter and faster trains -- had originally come online during the mid-1930s, and the *City of Los Angeles* began stealing passengers away from trains still using the old smoke-belching steam locomotives.

When congress passed the Highway Act of 1956, appropriating \$25 billion for the construction of the interstate highway system, it was the death knell for passenger travel. Railroads had long been losing money on passenger trains, and their economic demise was overdue. Yet the last regularly scheduled eastbound train to pass by Kelso, Amtrak's No. 36, the *Desert Wind*, pulled by a diesel engine, left Los Angeles on May 8, 1997 for Las Vegas, Nev. But this "party train" was the exception after 1971 and the coming of AMTRK.

Between 1905 and 1997, Kelso Depot felt the ground-shaking movement of thousands of trains, both eastbound and westbound. From the steam-driven locos of the early 1900s to the more economical, Depression-era *Challenger*, through the modernistic streamliner "name trains," like the long-running *City of Los Angeles* -- Kelso Depot has felt them all. The solidly built Depot today serves as an enchanting touchstone to a more elegant past age that most people alive today have never seen. It was a time when passengers dressed up to ride to their destination.

The trains may be long gone, but their spirit lingers in old places like the Depot, where its integrity of location evokes a feeling and historic association with the Golden Age of railroading,

and it provides a tangible link to the country's westward expansion by rail through the Mojave Desert to the Pacific Coast.