

Now & Then in Ripon ... Looking back with the Ripon Historical Society

Last passenger train departed Ripon 68 years ago

By Pat Grahn

More than 100 years of passenger train service through Ripon ended March 22, 1958.

The La Crosse and Milwaukee Railroad built a line from Chestnut Street in Milwaukee to Horicon, which ran from 1854 to 1856. The Milwaukee and Horicon Railroad extended this route and came to Ripon in 1856. Service was extended 10 miles to Berlin in 1857. The 97-mile route ended south of Berlin's main street, known as "Huron Street" and the rail never extended through Berlin.

Passenger and freight trains were operated daily on Route 30 (southbound) and 35 (northbound) from Milwaukee through to Berlin.

A 1958 Milwaukee Railroad newsletter article titled "The Bullet Is No More," by Train Clerk Don Dietrich, gives information about the passenger train through Ripon.

"Number 30 left Berlin at 6:30 each weekday morning and after stops in at the communities along the way, arrived in Milwaukee shortly after the opening of the downtown stores," the article stated. "The return schedule was equally convenient, with a 5:20 p.m. departure from Milwaukee. Connections were available to and from Chicago with trains 12 and 23."

In Ripon, the train left at 7 a.m. and returned to the city from Milwaukee at 8 p.m.

In the last decade of this route, the train — number 5900 — was referred to as the "Berlin Bullet" due to a bullet or bulldog-nose shaped engine.

It was constructed in Milwaukee in 1948 specifically for branch line service having

a unique combination of motor power and baggage room.

Before 1948, the train that ran on the route was called the "Berlin Express."

The railroad newsletter also noted that, "The crew will undoubtedly be remembered longer than the train, particularly Trainman Don J. Powell, who had been with the Road 44 years and on the Milwaukee-Berlin run for the last 15. He was a sincere backer of the trains he worked on and did much to publicize their service. In recognition of his efforts, the Ripon Chamber of Commerce presented him with a rod and reel on the last day."

The Ripon Chamber of Commerce tried to work with the railroad to save the passenger service. The Aug. 28, 1957 *Commonwealth* stated that the Ripon Chamber of Commerce "Contends that dropping of the passenger train service will be a definite hardship to the communities along the line from Milwaukee to Berlin. ... The substitution of buses is only a feeble attempt to appease the communities who are fighting the discontinuance."

For the last passenger trip, large crowds lined up at each of the 15 depots along the route from Berlin to Milwaukee. Some took one last ride to say goodbye to the train, crew and rail service. Two extra coaches were added to accommodate the crowd on the last return trip.

Many people, including Ripon Boy Scout Troop 29, took the last train from Ripon to Berlin with a wife, husband or friend driving behind to give them a ride back home.

Edith Bedell Halsey (1878-1974) lived in Brandon and utilized the train route first as



RIPON RAILROAD fans crowd coaches of last Milwaukee Road passenger train serving Ripon, March 22, 1958. Over 100 years of passenger train service ended with this run to Berlin.

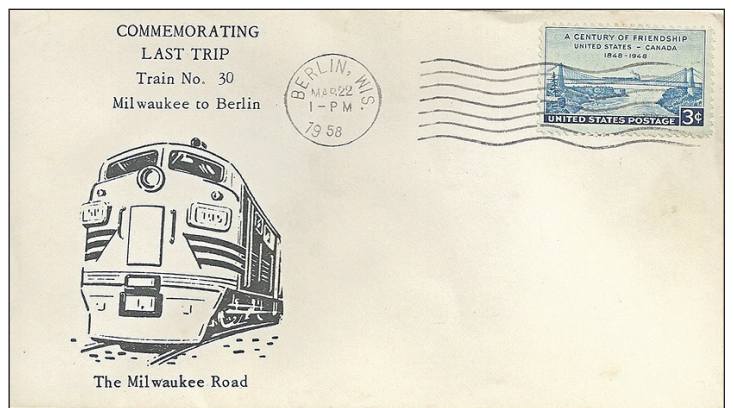
THIS PHOTO OF the last passenger train through Ripon was featured in the 1965 centennial edition of the *Ripon Commonwealth Press*. The Milwaukee Road passenger train started in Berlin and went south to Milwaukee. Many people boarded the train in Ripon for the last trip to Berlin on March 22, 1958. This train route is still used today for recreational purposes as the Mascoutin Valley State Recreation Trail West. *RCP file photo*

a young music student taking lessons in Milwaukee and later to travel and teach students in nearby communities.

The April 3, 1958 *Commonwealth* printed a poem that Halsey wrote about the passenger train.

This poem read in part: "We never thought in bygone days, that we would lose our train; We needed it, were proud of it, much comfort it contained. We never thought t'would share the fate of Dobbin and the mule; but cars and busses took their place and came to be the rule."

The 1998 book "Home Town Ties: Berlin, Wisconsin 1848-1998" explained that the passenger train service ended because "the railroads nationwide were in the midst of a major dismantling of passenger service. The dismantling was the result of higher costs and declining ridership caused in part by competition from

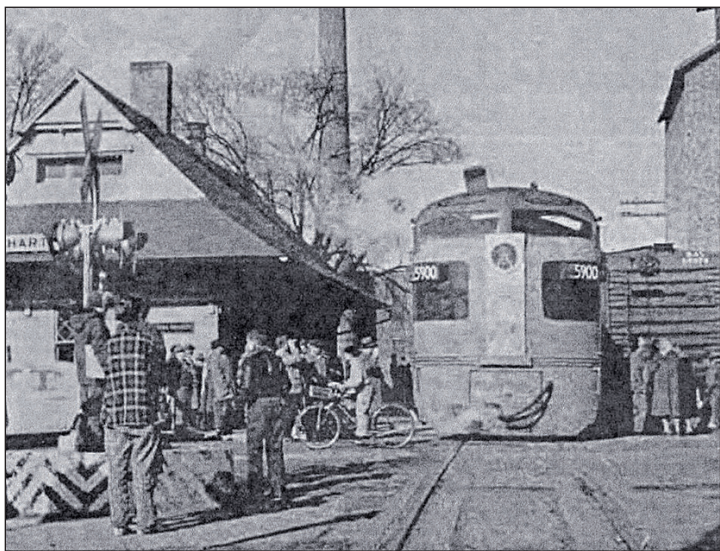


THIS POSTCARD COMMEMORATED the last train from Milwaukee to Berlin ending passenger service to Ripon. The train featured on the postcard was No. 5900, known as the "Berlin Bullet," which was built in Milwaukee in 1948. *RCP file photo*

airlines and the increased use of the automobile." *is the oldest continually operating historical society in Wisconsin. It is open Fridays and Saturdays 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.*

The 10.4 miles of train track between Ripon and Berlin was eventually removed and the route is now used for recreational purposes. It is known as the "Mascoutin Valley State Recreation Trail West."

The Ripon Historical Society



A MILWAUKEE ROAD newsletter featured this photograph of the "Berlin Bullet" at the Hartford Depot. This train left Berlin at 6:30 a.m., came through Ripon at 7 a.m. and then made several more stops before arriving in Milwaukee. The train left Milwaukee at 5:20 p.m. arriving in Ripon at 8 p.m. before ending its run in Berlin.

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