Decline of Railroad Passenger Services in Minnesota

Matti Kaups
Macalester College

Kalevi Rikkinen
University of Helsinki, Finland

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.morris.umn.edu/jmas

Part of the Geography Commons

Recommended Citation
Retrieved from https://digitalcommons.morris.umn.edu/jmas/vol35/iss1/12

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at University of Minnesota Morris Digital Well. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of the Minnesota Academy of Science by an authorized editor of University of Minnesota Morris Digital Well. For more information, please contact skulann@morris.umn.edu.
Decline of Railroad Passenger Services in Minnesota

MATTI KAUPS* and KALEVI RIKKINEN **

ABSTRACT — Since 1920 there has been an accelerating discontinuance of passenger train service in Minnesota. Railroads first tried to meet competition for passenger services from bus lines, streetcars, and private automobiles by reducing the frequency of schedules and by changing to mixed freight-passenger trains. These steps were followed by discontinuance of passenger services on branch lines or in marginal areas. The Transportation Act of 1958 created conditions favorable to continuation of unprofitable passenger schedules, but curtailment has continued.

This paper is concerned primarily with the declining role of Class I railroads as passenger carriers in the United States, with Minnesota as a particular case study. It illustrates dynamic spatial patterns of abandonment and curtailment of commercial railroad passenger services amidst economic growth and general affluence.

Historically, westward expansion shaped the transportation routes of America as avenues of settlement and as channels for moving the output of mines and agriculture. Railroad construction was intimately associated with the westward movement; indeed the nineteenth century witnessed the spread of “the civilizing rail” across the United States. From a mere 23 miles of rail operated in 1830, the nation’s railroad mileage had increased to 46,844 miles by 1869, when the first transcontinental rail route was completed (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1960). As the westward migration continued, railroads competed not only with steamboats, wagon freighting, and stagecoaches, but also with one another for trackage rights (Winther, 1964). By 1916, the railroad network in the United States had reached 254,037 miles, the all-time high for trackage in use (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1960). Also in that year, railroads handled 98 per cent of the intercity commercial passenger freight (Stover, 1961). In 1920, American railroads carried 1.2 billion passengers, a record which may never be attained again (Fig. 1) (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1960). By 1965, railroads reported trackage operated in passenger service in the United States had been reduced by 93,159 miles over a 25-year period. The drop was from 170,175 miles in 1940 to 77,016 miles (Association of American Railroads, 1966). The continuing decline has left large areas in the United States without railroad passenger service.

In the years from 1920 through 1965, the number of passengers on American railroads decreased by 76.5 per cent from the 1.2 billion record to 298 million. During the same period, railroad revenue passenger miles decreased from 47.3 billion to 17.3 billion (Association of American Railroads, 1966). These sharp decreases in railroad passenger volume have occurred while the population of the United States and spatial mobility of people were increasing. Intercity travel by private and public carriers in 1964 was 625 billion passenger-miles greater than in 1939. Private automobiles accounted for more than 90 per cent of the increase. During the same period, air lines have replaced railroads as major public passenger carriers (Association of American Railroads, 1966). Of the total 895 billion passenger-miles of intercity passenger traffic in 1964, private automobiles accounted for 89.6 per cent, air carriers 5.5 per cent, buses for 2.5 per cent, railroads 2 per cent, and inland waterways less than 1 per cent (U. S. Department of Commerce, 1966).

The Minnesota Situation

Railroad operations in Minnesota date from 1862, when ten miles of roadbed had been built between St. Paul and St. Anthony. The expansion and decline of railroad mileage in this state parallels the situation for the country as a whole. By 1916, there were 9,101 miles of line in operation in Minnesota, representing 3.6 per cent of the nation’s total railroad mileage (Minnesota Railroad and Warehouse Commission, 1917). Nearly an equivalent proportion to the national total was recorded in 1964, although operational trackage in Minnesota declined to 8,537 miles (Minnesota Railroad and Warehouse Commission, 1966 unpublished data). The all-time high passenger total in Minnesota was recorded in 1914, when railroads carried 19 million persons in this state. Between the years 1920 and 1965, Minnesota’s decrease of passenger traffic was at a greater rate than the national average, volume dropping by 90.2 per cent, from 18.3 million passengers in 1920 to 1.7 million in 1965 (Minnesota Railroad and Warehouse Commission, 1922; 1966: unpublished data). This exceptionally high rate of decline is attributed to lack of large metropolitan centers with railroad commuter services.

The ensuing analysis of railroad passenger service curtailment and discontinuance in Minnesota is organized around three major periods:

1920-1934, decreasing passenger traffic and mixed trains;
1935-1956, after depression and World War II;

Decreasing Passenger Traffic and Mixed Trains: 1920-1934

The most startling change in Minnesota railroad transportation during this period was the decrease of pas-

* Matti Kaups is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Geography at Macalester College, St. Paul, Minnesota. He received the M.S. degree from the University of Wisconsin and the Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota.

** Kalevi Rikkinen is a Research Associate in the Department of Geography at the University of Helsinki, Finland, where he received his Ph.D. He was an American Learned Societies Visiting Scholar with the Department of Geography, University of Minnesota from 1966 to 1967.
sengers from 18.3 million in 1920 to 2.3 million in 1934, a decline of 87.8 per cent (Minnesota Railroad and Warehouse Commission, 1936). The extremes may be traced to the impact of military travel after World War I, which created the high volume in 1920, and economic depression at the low point in 1934. More basic, however, was the growing competition from busses and private automobiles. By 1927 bus lines transported 15 million passengers in Minnesota over a route network of 16,000 miles (Blegen, 1963). In one decade, the number of passenger automobiles in Minnesota more than doubled, from 303,730 in 1921 to 624,651 in 1930 (Minnesota Motor Vehicle Department, 1935). During the same period the ratio of population per passenger automobile in Minnesota changed from 8:1 to 4:1.

In the face of this competition railroads reduced the frequency and carrying capacity of passenger trains; changed many passenger trains to mixed passenger-freight trains, and established their own bus operations to carry lightweight freight to and from railroad stations. The impact of these innovations in public transportation was felt first in three geographic sections of Minnesota:

- Minneapolis-St. Paul.
- Duluth-Mesabi and Vermillion range.
- Southern parts of the state below the Minnesota River.

Major competition to railroad passenger service between urban centers (Minneapolis, St. Paul, Duluth) and their environs came from street railways as well as from automobiles. In 1917 a major railway company was permitted to retire eight daily passenger trans operating between Duluth and Fond du Lac after a street railway company that had commenced operations in 1916 to the industrial Morgan Park area captured three-quarters of the passenger volume over that route (Minnesota Railroad and Warehouse Commission, 1917).

The change in passenger service between St. Paul and St. Paul Park (Pullman Avenue) illustrates the impact of busses. A railroad company that provided suburban passenger train service between the two points carried 108,179 passengers during the first four months of 1921. By 1924, however, the four daily trains carried only 14,876 passengers in a similar four-month period, while a bus company operating 35 daily trips over the same route carried 72,773 passengers in the four months. The railroad company was permitted to discontinue these interurban passenger trains, and the state's railroad commission noted that:

... a continuation of the operation of this suburban service upon its present basis will entail a loss of at least $20,000 a year. The evidence in this case leads to the conclusion that it has been the patrons who have abandoned the service, and not the railroad. The president of the bus company testified that it would be able to handle the entire number of passengers carried by the railroad upon reasonable notice ... (Minnesota Railroad and Warehouse Commission, 1924).

Nor was expanding bus service a phenomenon only of the metropolitan areas. In northeastern Minnesota, expansion of bus services brought:

... hourly motor bus service between Virginia and Eveleth, nine daily trips between Virginia and Duluth, two daily trips between Duluth and Ely via Eveleth, Virginia and Tower, and ten daily trips between Virginia and Aurora on substantially two-hour service (Minnesota Railroad and Warehouse Commission, 1928).

Several passenger trains serving the mining towns were discontinued as a result.

Stop-pattern Not Significant

It is significant that by 1934 not a single railroad had discontinued entirely its passenger service in Minnesota. A traveler that year could duplicate his 1920 railroad journey, though with less choice of schedule time. By that depression year, however, 578 stations—or 54 per cent of the 1,067 passenger station facilities in Minnesota—had only one or two daily train stops. Except for Duluth, stations with moderate numbers of stops were located on the main southeast-northwest transcontinental axis or on the south-southwestward rail thoroughfares. This emphasizes that the number of daily train stops at a station is not an index to mobility in a local or state population. A daily stop of a mixed freight-passenger train on a branch line can not be equated with a stop of a Chicago-Seattle passenger train at St. Paul or Minneapolis. The map of railroad passenger stations (Fig. 2) depicts points at which potential passenger service was available as well as the frequency with which these points were served in 1934.

After the Depression and World War II: 1935-1956

Except for a large increase of passenger traffic during World War II, (in 1944, 7.4 million were transported in Minnesota) — attributable to military troop movements and restrictions on fuel for private automobiles — followed by a more modest increase during the Korean War, there was little change in numbers of railroad passengers carried in Minnesota during the 1935-1956 period. The 2.6 million passengers carried in the state during 1956 was at best reminiscent of passenger volume in the depression year 1935 when 2.4 million were transported by rail in Minnesota. Because of longer average trips, however, revenue passenger miles had increased from 240 million in 1935 to 342 million in 1956 (Minnesota Railroad and Warehouse Commission, 1956).

After World War II, railroads generally introduced faster passenger trains and lower fares, but also discontinued passenger service entirely on many local lines, mostly in southern Minnesota.

The number of railroad stations in Minnesota at which
passenger service was still available had dwindled by 1956 to 681, or 64 per cent of the 1,067 stations which were operating in 1934 (Fig. 4). Frequency of trains stopping at these stations was reduced also, with the total number of daily stops down nearly a half from 3,859 in 1934 to 2,035 in 1956. While the total number of stops decreased by 47 per cent, stations at which just one or two trains stopped had decreased by only 11 per cent. In 1934, 29 per cent of the stations had one or two stops per day, and by 1956 76 per cent of stations were in this category.

Through this period, railroads reported mounting financial deficits in whatever passenger services they still operated. In 1956, the total railway operating revenue of the 13 Class I railroads in Minnesota was $273.1 million, out of which $19.2 million were derived from passenger and allied services ($7.9 million from passenger revenues, $6.8 million from mail, $2.4 million from express, etc.) and $253.9 million from freight and allied services (including $3,645 from passenger revenues on freight trains) (Minnesota Railroad and Warehouse Commission, 1956).

While the railroads in the state earned a net profit of $37.4 million from freight and allied services in 1956, passenger and allied services operated with a $22.5 million deficit that year.


By 1965, the number of passengers carried in Minnesota had declined to 1.8 million, a volume equal to the year 1879, when the total population was much smaller (Minnesota Railroad and Warehouse Commission, unpublished data). The federal census of 1870 listed Minnesota's population as 439,706, and the 1880 figure was 780,773. For comparison, the 1960 census gave Minnesota population of 3,413,864.

For the 1957-1966 decade, the number of passengers carried in Minnesota declined by nearly one million, from 2.6 million to 1.7 million. This was accompanied by discontinuance of 102 passenger trains, including mixed freight and passenger trains (Minnesota Railroad and Warehouse Commission, unpublished data).

During the preceding decade (1947-1956), passenger traffic had decreased by 1.4 million, but only 32 passenger trains, were discontinued in that period (Minnesota Railroad and Warehouse Commission, unpublished data).

The stepped-up rate of passenger train discontinuances during the more recent decade may be related directly to the Transportation Act of 1958. This granted the Interstate Commerce Commission jurisdiction over passenger service abandonments. In Minnesota seventy-two of the 102 passenger train discontinuances in the 1957-1966 decade involved interstate trains (Minnesota Railroad and Warehouse Commission, unpublished data).

By 1966, the available passenger train services in Minnesota were concentrated along the northwest-southeast transcontinental transportation axis extending through central Minnesota; southward between Minneapolis-St. Paul and St. Louis and Kansas City; and to-
The 169 stations at which passenger services were still available in 1966 represented only 15.8 per cent of the 1,067 stations that had been operating in 1934 (Table 1). The linear distances between stations at which passenger services were available increased proportionally to the declining number of stations.

Table 1. Daily Stops Made By Trains in Minnesota With Passenger Accommodations, 1934–1966

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Stops</th>
<th>1934 Stations</th>
<th>1956 Stations</th>
<th>1966 Stations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-2</td>
<td>578</td>
<td>518</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-4</td>
<td>334</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-6</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-8</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-10</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-12</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13-14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-16</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17-18</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19-20</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>38</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>92</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>92</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>94</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>94</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>112</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>112</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>116</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>116</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1067</td>
<td>681</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per cent of 1934</td>
<td></td>
<td>63.8</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per cent of 1956</td>
<td></td>
<td>52.7</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Stations and Population

Not only have railroad passenger services declined in terms of the number of places served, but also in terms of scheduled frequency. In 1956 there were 547 stops per day compared with 3,859 per day in 1934. Small wonder then that only six railroad companies in 1966 against thirteen companies in 1920 provided passenger services in Minnesota.

While the 1934 railroad passenger station map closely resembles the distribution of hamlets, towns, cities, and therefore also the distribution of population in Minnesota, the 1966 map bears little resemblance to those former relationships. Rural depopulation, widespread use of the private automobile, and development of passenger air routes have been important factors leading to discontinuity of passenger trains.

However, the geographical position of Minnesota astride northern transcontinental railroad lines has so far assured continued passenger services for the central part of the state.

References


