

STREAMLINERS



International

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Using beautiful period footage and photographs—some of which have been held in private collections and never viewed by the public—and interviews with the men and women who rode and worked on the rails, *Streamliners* uncovers the dramatic story of the rise and fall of an American passenger rail system that was the envy of the world. The film paints a vivid portrait of the men whose creativity and determination produced the streamliner, chronicles the tremendous impact the trains had on the U.S. during the '30s, and it explores the reasons why postwar America turned its back on the world's best passenger rail system.

When the story begins in the late '20s, railroads were in trouble. The Depression—coupled with the advent of the car—had driven the industry to the verge of collapse. No one knew how drastic the situation was better than Ralph Budd. The tall, lean railroad man was desperately looking for a way to turn around the fortunes of the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad. The solution came from a cash-strapped auto-body maker who believed that “a depression is a period in which you have time to think.” The result was a revolutionary diesel-powered rail car made of a new light steel alloy. The design caught Budd's attention. “Using a car that weighs less, but carries as much or more load,” he explained, “saves work just as surely and simply as does shortening the line.” He soon commissioned construction of the *Zephyr*.

But it wasn't just the train's lightweight construction that was revolutionary; it was also its speed. With a powerful diesel engine, the *Zephyr* could travel at 100 miles an hour. Before long, a wave of streamliners swept across America as railroad after railroad pressed its version into service. Their sleek, glamorous appearance made the public's heart race. By the late '30s, the train's design was a public obsession: its imprint could be found on everything from toasters to tractors and corsets to coffins.

The speed, economy and efficiency of the streamliners proved to be a tremendous asset to the United States during World War II. Trains carried 90% of defense freight and 97% of the troops. Given their wartime performance, railroad men were hopeful for the future.

But the optimism was short-lived. In the decade following the war, Washington launched massive road building projects, while hundreds of cities built new airports. Railroads were hit with higher property taxes and union problems. The impact was shattering. In 1954, 2,500 intercity passenger trains were in operation. By 1969 there were fewer than 500. Legendary trains of the streamliner era were taken out of service—some even sold to the Mexican National Railway. In the film's moving final sequence, railway workers and passengers describe their battle to save the streamliners, and explain how the trains' disappearance signaled the loss of a way of life.

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CREDITS

Executive Producer: Margaret Drain

Producers: Thomas Ott

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