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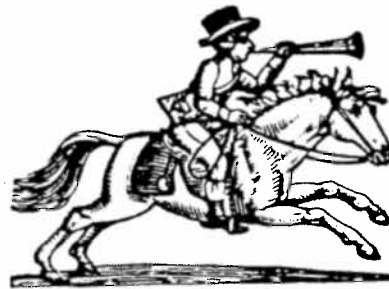
SUMMER 2003

## THE IC'S COMMUTER NEWSLETTER AND A DECADE OF TRANSITION

by John G. Allen

In October 1966 the Illinois Central Railroad inaugurated *Hello!*, a monthly newsletter for its Electric commuter rail customers on the South Side and in the south suburbs. Lasting through February 1975, *Hello!* was an easily forgotten and often overlooked publication of the railroad's public relations department to help convey the railroad's perspective at a time when fares were rising, ridership was declining, and the original electric fleet was approaching the end of its useful service life. Yet despite these limitations, *Hello!* has much redeeming value for today's historian. It brought together much information about IC Electric operations, it provided a comforting sense of community among riders, and its candid editorial style provides a welcome contrast to the sanitized euphemism of much of today's "corporate communications".

When the first issue of *Hello!* appeared in 1966, the original electric cars, built for the electrification of commuter service in 1926, had been in service for 40 years and provided service on all trains. Painted dark green, the cars had taken on a color more akin to brown after four decades amid smoke from the city's heavy industry and the coal which still heated many buildings. Inside, passengers sat on rattan-covered seats (once the finest in comfort) with reversible backs. Interiors were painted a pinkish tone, with maroon below the windows. Incandescent bulbs provided light, there were advertisements above the seats throughout the length of the cars, and the northernmost car of every train was designated as the smoking car. Underneath, the compressors which held air to release the brakes would recharge with a high-



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**HELLO!**

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Vol. 1. Issue No. 1.  
Published only for our  
Illinois Central commuters.

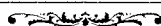
pitched "thunk-thunk-thunk". At each end of the cars were bench seats, above which stood grab handles for standing passengers. Twin sliding doors opened onto vestibules, painted the same dark green as the exteriors, where another set of doors opened onto high-level wooden platforms at almost every station. The only concession to modernity was a recently-installed Automatic Revenue Collection System, which had yet to shake off an unfortunate reputation for unreliability.

By the time *Hello!* ceased publication, the experience of riding the IC differed from today's Metra Electric largely in the still-prevailing use of wooden platforms, and the colors of the Highliners' exterior paint and seats – minor details compared to the change that swept the railroad during the past decade. At no point since electric service started in 1926 had the IC's "suburban service", as the railroad long called it, undergone more change than during the nine years that *Hello!* was published.

The newsletter was printed on letterhead or card stock, and was invariably 8½ inches high. Different issues appeared with one, two, or sometimes three folds (the latter being on 8½ by 14 inch paper). With the exception of a two-color issue commemorating the arrival of the Highliners, the newsletter was printed in one color—usually black, although brown, dark blue, and even dark green were also used.

The masthead was the same every month, with the volume and issue noted beside the *Hello!* name (which always carried the exclamation point), and immediately underneath appeared the words "Published for our Illinois Central commuters".

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◀❶ This changed to Illinois Central Gulf in 1972 when the railroad merged with the Gulf, Mobile & Ohio, and in 1973 the railroad adopted the formulation “Published for our Lakefront Electric Transit Commuters”.

With a few exceptions during the early part of 1973, *Hello!* appeared between the 18th and the 24th of each month to facilitate mailing to those riders who received their monthly tickets by mail. During the week of publication, gate attendants at the Randolph and Van Buren Street stations handed out single copies to passengers as they passed through the automatic fare collection gates.

The newsletter’s graphic format remained unchanged throughout its nine years. Material was printed in a conservative, easy-to-read serif type face. The articles were usually from one to three paragraphs in length, and a typical panel included three or four items. Adding to *Hello!*’s visual interest were a delightful assortment of small 19th century woodcuts.

The topics varied from issue to issue, but many of the items fell into one or another of the following categories:

#### Asking Riders’ Forbearance

A recurring theme in *Hello!* was the aging fleet of cars from the 1920s. One item (in the 7/26/67 issue) read:

*The Answer—Riders call to ask why, for heaven’s sake, doesn’t the railroad install air conditioning in the suburban cars. This has been considered many times. A recent cost estimate was \$6,720,000 for all the cars, a financial impossibility. Any new equipment that may be on the horizon would be air conditioned.*

*Hello!*’s editors had a disarmingly self-deprecating style that is sorely lacking in many of today’s “corporate communications”, as this item noted (10/24/68):

*Social Note—We understand that the Flossmoor Junior Chamber of Commerce has disbanded its “I Hate the IC” committee.*

#### Things are looking up.

Along similar lines, the 12/20/68 *Hello!* noted the disbanding of the I.C. Commuters Association, a group which had been actively pressuring the railroad to improve service in 1966.

The 10/24/68 issue noted that the railroad was modifying its gates so that both the first and second sets of doors opened simultaneously when a valid ticket was inserted. This, the railroad hoped, would reduce riders’ hesitation upon starting passage

through the two-part automatic gates. (In the early 1970s, the railroad would replace the awkward gates with the turnstiles still in use today.)

To help commuters understand the problems, the railroad’s public relations department invited comments from commuter Charles Schlewitt, Jr., one of many who had written the railroad complaining about conditions, and printed excerpts from their conversation in *Hello!* (2/19/70). The level of candor suggests a company actively seeking its customers’ patience and understanding.

Writing in the 11/20/72 issue in the wake of the October 30, 1972 collision at 27th St. between two commuter trains that claimed 44 lives and injured hundreds, *Hello!* acknowledged the difficulty of writing about the accident, but thanked all those who came to the aid of passengers. In conclusion, *Hello!* said:

*ICG can and will carry on. {T}he balance of the November Hello! will be devoted to its customary job of being an advocate for the commuter as well as a kind of unofficial conscience for the railroad.*

#### Progress on the New Cars

The IC had been seeking federal money to buy a new fleet of double-deck electric cars to replace the 1920s equipment since 1967, and the US Department of Transportation approved the funding in 1968. The 1/24/69 issue announced this welcome news and printed a small photograph of a model of a car recognizably similar to today’s Highliners. Subsequent issues of *Hello!* followed the progress of the grant money, the awarding of the contract to the St. Louis Car Company, and the status of construction. The 5/22/69 issue, instead of printing the regular news, was headlined “Special Issue: New Car Designs”, and contained photos of mockups of the new cars, inside and out. Similarly, the 8/21/70 issue discussed a variety of technical and operating features of the new cars.

#### Introducing the Highliners

In preparation for the arrival of the new double-deck cars, the IC announced a contest to name the fleet (2/18/71 issue). The 4/21/71 issue announced the winning entry, “Highliners”, submitted by 16-year-old railfan Arthur Peterson (now a respected Chicago area transportation professional). The same issue also published a photo of one of the steam locomotives replaced when electric service started in 1926.

A special issue, published between the regular June

and July 1971 issues and bearing only a 1971 date, featured photographs of the Highliners and discussed their interior and exterior appointments at some length. This was followed by the 3/21/72 issue, featuring more photographs, further discussion of the cars' features, and an interior layout diagram. (In the 7/19/71 issue, incidentally, *Hello!* offered to send a plan of the new cars, suitable for use in model railroad car-building, to anybody sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope.)

### Farewell to the Old Cars

Naturally, many commuters were happy to see the 1920s fleet go, but *Hello!* did tip its hat to the old cars in a couple of issues. The 4/19/72 issue showed a picture of several of the old cars awaiting scrapping, and the 10/20/71 issue announced that two of them had been sold to the Illinois Railway Museum in Union, Illinois.

### Etiquette of Commuting and Other Problems

The IC used the pages of *Hello!* to commend and correct its riders. The 3/25/68 issue thanked one gentleman who sent nine 6-cent stamps for a ride he had taken without paying. On the other side of the ledger, the 4/20/70 issue was mildly scolding:

*Request—A gentle note to ticket-by-mail customers: Part of the deal on IC's monthly mail plan is that you send us a check promptly each month upon receipt of your ticket. The agreement says nothing about long-term credit.*

In several issues, the railroad tried to cure its riders of the habit of "train marching", or walking through the train in order to be closer to that end of the platform where commuters wanted to exit. Shortly after the Highliners had arrived, the 9/20/71 issue warned:

*Frankly, the present herd instinct is a habit from long*

*years of riding the old cars. It is a habit passengers will have to break on the new cars or else the railroad will have to lengthen schedules. No one wants that.*

One of the unfortunate aspects of the years when *Hello!* was in publication was the prominence of crime and violence. The 6/20/69 issue told of the presentation of the Illinois Central Medal of Honor to engineer George McKinley "for his part in the capture of a burglar attempting a break-in at the Harvey ticket office." And the 7/22/70 issue reprinted the text of the bright orange "Broken Window" stickers the railroad pasted on windows broken by vandals, which read, in part,

*Delay in the replacement of this \$15 window is temporary, due either to a delivery delay of the special glass or to the difficulty our people sometimes have in keeping up with the number of windows being broken.*

Not all of the news was bad, though. The same *Hello!* noted that

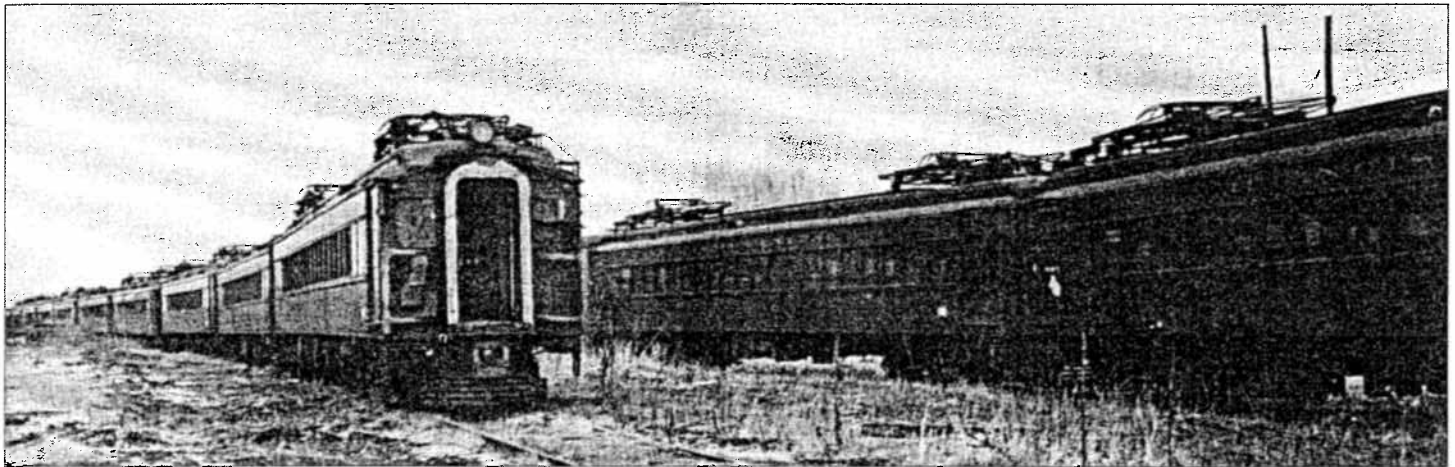
*A feature story by Ralph Stow of Chicago Today ribbed the railroad about the ... Randolph Street station clocks running from 35 to 40 seconds fast. Maybe they're that way because some commuters habitually run slow.*

### Human Interest and a Sense of Community

*Hello!* editors looked for the interesting among the IC's passengers and employees. The 10/24/67 issue identified the railroad's oldest daily commuter as Lewis DeCosta of South Shore, and wished him a happy birthday (he turned 90 that month). And the 2/19/70 issue asked:

*Old Timers—Is it possible anyone from the "Association of '93ers still is riding with us? Please drop Hello! a note.*

Mr. DeCosta had presumably retired by the time the 4/20/70 issue identified Dr. Howard Wakefield as the IC's longest-riding commuter. Dr. Wakefield, 77, of Prairie Shores, took his first IC ride in 1906. ▶ 4



Some of the 56 old cars now out of service. Next stop for these weary MU's will be the scrap heap.

◀ Commuters of interest for other reasons sometimes were the subject of features.

The back panel of the 8/22/68 issue introduced Mrs. Bertha Gibbs, the Field Museum's reference librarian, whose desk was a short, if windswept walk from the Roosevelt Road station—which at that time the IC's



conductors announced as Central Station.

Naturally, *Hello!* acknowledged the contributions of IC employees. The 1/24/68 issue noted the retirement, after 41 years, of Harold Preston, the IC's supervisor of electric power. (Yes, Mr. Preston was working for the IC when electric service started in 1926.) The 11/20/72 issue discussed the job that General Yardmaster James Bennett did behind the scenes, directing the movement of trains into and out of Randolph St. Station during the morning rush hour.

The 10/18/71 issue commended 53rd St. ticket agent Helen Karambis, "known for the good-natured way she helps passengers and gets along with everybody". And the 3/19/71 issue noted the return of conductor Ed Neal, well-liked by riders on his regular train, following a heart attack:

*When Ed returned to work commuters put up a big sign saying "Welcome Back Ed... Ed is especially proud that several commuters visited him during his stay at Ingalls Memorial Hospital."*

The central figure in one human interest story wasn't even a person. The front story of the 7/24/72 issue was about Hemingway, a golden retriever who boarded a rush-hour train from Homewood and was returned to his owners by helpful commuters and conductors.

### Local History

From time to time, *Hello!* carried brief items about the history of communities en route. Blue Island and Markham were among the suburbs so honored, the latter named for an IC president in the 1920s. The newsletter told a story of Markham helping a lady at Central Station with her heavy suitcase. Upon learning that the gentleman who helped her worked for the railroad, she offered to write a letter to the president of the railroad telling how helpful he had been. Markham tipped his hat to her and told her she didn't need to do that. "Any Illinois Central man would have

been glad to help you" (1/26/67).

Gone but not entirely forgotten was the IC's station at 43rd Street. The 7/22/70 issue published a picture of the now-demolished building, asking readers if they could identify the location. Likewise, the 9/23/69 issue published a photo of the Riverdale station

at the beginning of the 20th century—a wooden depot at grade level, with no resemblance to the high-level wooden platform on a raised embankment that would replace it when the line was electrified in the 1920s.

### Hyde Park and Hyde Parkers

Occasionally, Hyde Park and its people figured in *Hello!*. The 10/18/71 issue asked this about the 51st St. station location:

*Commuter Quiz—As late as 1914 a station named "Madison Park" was listed in the timetable. Who knows where?*

The station rebuilding at 53rd-Hyde Park and 55th-56th-57th was almost three decades in the future when Hyde Parker Howard Rosenbaum wrote to suggest replacing the "old, dilapidated platforms in the Hyde Park area with modern platforms" (his words, in the 10/20/72 issue). The railroad replied that

*The CTA's modern stations were built with public money. Such funds are not available to ICG. The railroad has had to put station replacement at the end of a long list of commuter service priorities...*

The back panel of the 8/18/72 issue, under the heading "Rays of Sunshine", discussed the various murals (now, alas, some of them sorely neglected) that local artists had painted on the walls of street underpasses over which the IC traveled, and concluded:

*IC Riders: We recommend a visit to Hyde Park and a stroll through the viaducts to see what beauty has been created in them. The 55th Street murals will be dedicated Sunday afternoon, August 27.*

The 3/25/68 issue told about the statue on the Midway just west of the IC tracks honoring Czechoslovakia's founding statesman Thomas Masaryk—and noted that Masaryk was a visiting professor at the University of Chicago from 1902 through 1907.

Although Masaryk may not have had much

occasion to ride the IC during his years at Chicago, other distinguished residents have been loyal IC riders. One item about famous IC commuters mentioned Clarence Darrow – who was mentioned along with John “Bet a Million” Gates, perhaps to convey the spectrum of people who have ridden the IC (1/13/67).

### Regional Transit

The Illinois Central and other Chicago commuter railroads promoted the idea of an agency that would relieve them of the financial burden of their money-losing commuter trains. As early as 1967, *Hello!* noted the state of New Jersey’s agreement to subsidize the Erie Lackawanna’s commuter trains in the New York metropolitan area (5/23/67).

In the 7/24/72 and 4/19/73 issues, *Hello!* talked up the idea of what was eventually to become the Regional Transportation Authority. The newsletter urged voter passage of the March 1973 RTA referendum in its 12/28/73 issue, shortly after the Illinois General Assembly had created the RTA, subject to its passage in a regionwide referendum.

The next issue (1/25/74) included supportive comments (published earlier in Chicago Today) by Illinois Representative Robert E. Mann, whose district included Hyde Park. The 2/14/74 issue included similar arguments from Homewood State Representative William Mahar. Finally, the 3/14/74 issue, shortly before the referendum, contained an editorial urging voter approval of the RTA (which, in recognition of the changing demographics of the IC’s customer base, was also published in Spanish—the only occasion when *Hello!* published an item bilingually). Following the narrow passage of the RTA referendum question, *Hello!* admitted that

*ICG’s preoccupation with RTA led Hello! to get a bit long-winded in recent issues. We’ll return to normal format this month.*

### Other Commuter Newsletters

Among Chicago’s other commuter railroads, the South Shore Line and the Rock Island apparently issued newsletters on a sporadic basis in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but they were more limited in their scope. Both Shore Lines and the Rock Island Lines Commuter Bulletins were limited to communicating information about such matters as proposed service changes and the financial distress of the railroads themselves.

The author’s research suggests that two other large commuter railroads, the Chicago Burlington &

Quincy (which became the Burlington Northern in 1970) and the Chicago & North Western did not publish newsletters for their riders.

The only other commuter railroad newsletter approaching *Hello!* in its long life and regular schedule was the Milwaukee Road’s newsletter *On the (Bi) Level*, its name referring to the bilevel double deck configuration which by the early 1960s had become the norm for railroad commuting in Chicago. Yet even the Milwaukee Road’s newsletter failed to convey a sense of community among its riders. Although few IC riders were probably aware of it at the time, their railroad’s newsletter was the leader within the genre.

Some of *Hello!*’s outspoken style lives on in Metra’s newsletter, *On the Bi-Level* (the name being borrowed from the Milwaukee Road’s newsletter with slight modification), though the feel is somewhat different. Metra’s newsletter serves all the commuter lines in northeastern Illinois and of necessity lacks the local focus of *Hello!* and its counterparts.

### End of an Era

Alas, *Hello!*, like many good things, eventually came to an end. With the 1972 merger of the IC and the Gulf, Mobile & Ohio, the railroad changed its name to Illinois Central Gulf (not reverting to the IC name again until 1987, by which time it had sold off most of the former GM&O). As changes in the economics of railroading forced ICG and its competitors to trim costs, the railroad’s public relations department could no longer justify *Hello!* in the mid-1970s.

But at least the newsletter left the scene with dignity. The front page story of the February 1975 issue announced management’s decision to cease publishing *Hello!*. At the end of the story was a farewell message.

In retrospect, it was clear that *Hello!* had served its purpose. The passage of the 1973 law and the 1974 referendum creating the Regional Transportation Authority guaranteed a future for northeastern Illinois’ commuter railroads, including the Illinois Central, which sold its commuter operation to Metra in 1987. (The sale did not include the right to use the IC’s name, which is why Metra renamed the line Metra Electric.)

Today, *Hello!* has been gone for a quarter of a century, and has largely been forgotten. But through its pages, we may relive some of the history of a railroad that many people across the South Side and the south suburbs still think of as “The IC”. **HPH**