

# THE NOON MILWAUKEE

TYPICAL OF TRAINS THAT SERVED  
ROUTES OF MODERATE LENGTH AND  
DECIDEDLY SECONDARY IMPORTANCE

By William D. Middleton    Photos by the Author



Didn't all of us who fancied riding on the cars have some one train that was a special favorite? I'm not thinking about the kind of reverence we bestowed on the *Century*, or the *Panama*, or the other great trains of that sort, which was based on strict standards of excellence, but rather I have in mind the kind of attachment that was based entirely on sentiment and long familiarity. For most of us our special train was one that played a central role in our lives.

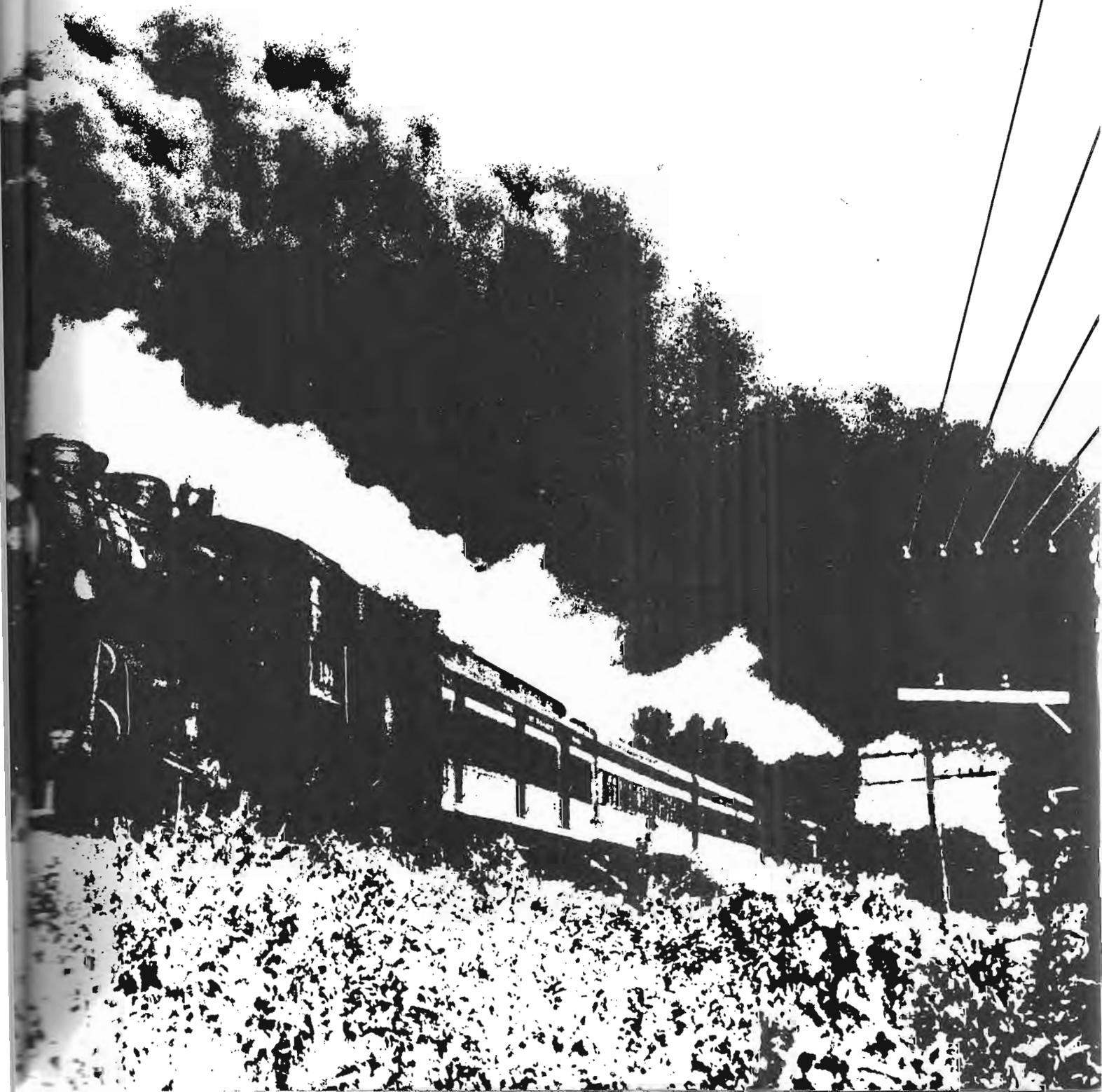
For me that train was the Milwaukee Road's *Varsity*.

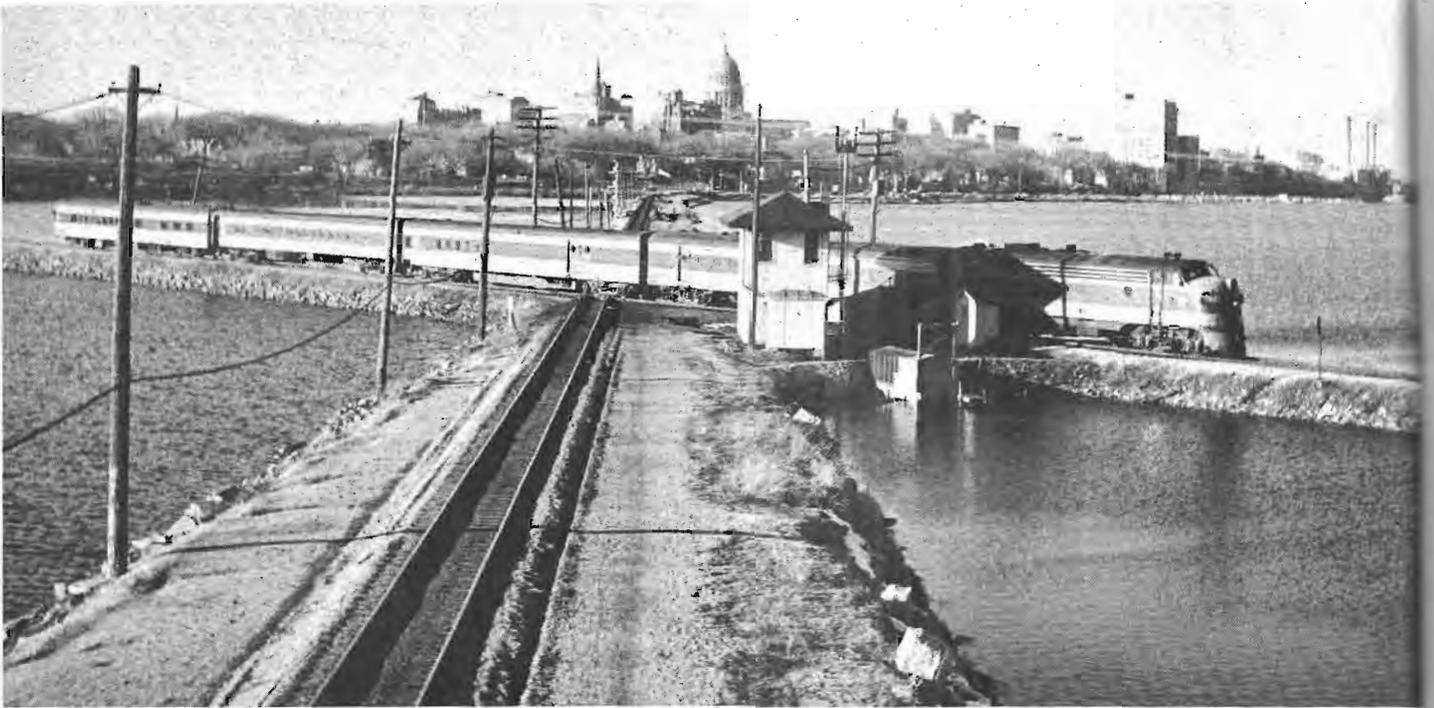
From April of 1927 until its demise in 1971 the *Varsity* operated over the Milwaukee's 140-mile route between Chicago and Madison, Wisconsin. It was perhaps typical of the better trains that served routes of moderate length and of decidedly secondary importance. Like such contemporaries as—for example—IC's *Delta Express*, SP's *Del Monte*, or GN's *Gopher* and *Badger*, the *Varsity's* reputation was, at best, regional.

The *Varsity* was never a particularly prepossessing train. In steam days the train normally ran behind one of the

Milwaukee's venerable F-3 Pacifics. Although they were still spirited performers, the F-3s (Alco 1910) were hardly front rank power on a road that ran the likes of 120 mph Class A Atlantics and F-7 Hudsons.

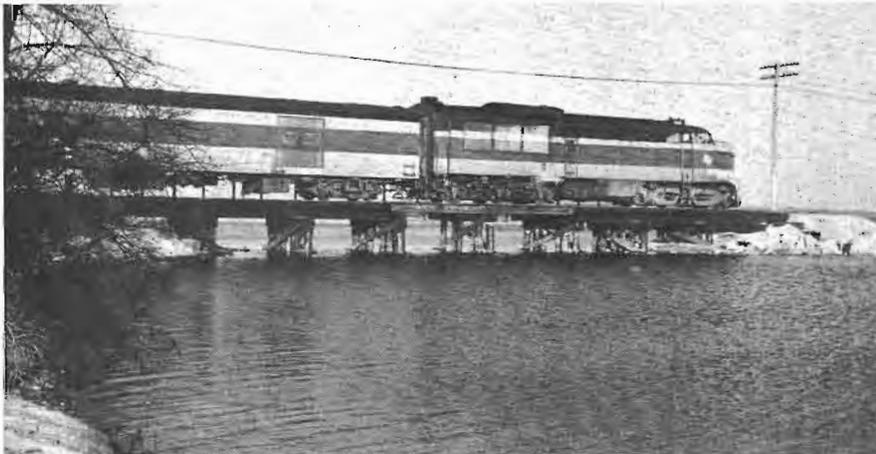
When diesels came to the *Varsity* in the late 1940s they were most often drawn from the ranks of the Milwaukee's earliest (1941) Alco DL-109 or EMD E-6 passenger units, themselves displaced from main line *Hiawatha's* by newer power. Later, during the 1950s and beyond, the Milwaukee's post-war Fairbanks-Morse OP's, or





Running behind an EMD F unit, the Varsity consist is typical of most of the 1950s. Seen at MX Tower in Lake Monona the consist is RPO/Rwy. Ex., combine, coach and cafe/parlor car.

1955 saw the "Varsity" running behind a Fairbanks-Morse Erie built A unit.



Author Middleton braved the cold Wisconsin winter to capture the "Varsity" being propelled by the rather rare, and now just a memory, Alco DL-109.

passenger-equipped EMD F units, often drew the Varsity assignment.

Like its motive power, the Varsity's rolling stock was usually handed down from the main line trains. From the 1940s on, the train's consist usually afforded a sampling of the Milwaukee's several earliest generations of Hiawatha equipment. Typically, there was a combination car up front to handle the RPO-express-baggage traffic, perhaps a car of storage mail, generally no more than two coaches, and the Varsity's own special cafe-parlor car bringing up the rear.

At holiday periods there were always extra cars, and on such occasions as a Wisconsin home game, particularly against Northwestern or Illinois, the morning Varsity from Chicago would carry as many as 18 or 20 extra cars of football fans that would be switched right out to Camp Randall Stadium, and then returned to Chicago on the southbound Varsity in the afternoon.

My long association with the Varsity began in 1947, when our family moved into a white frame house overlooking Lake Monona and the Milwaukee tracks at Madison. The northbound Varsity—train #117 in the timetable—arrived in Madison right around noon, and listening for the familiar whistle at the edge of town, and then watching for the string of red and orange (until they became UP yellow in the mid-1950s) cars to come gliding across Lake Monona toward the West Washington Avenue depot, was a lunchtime ritual. To us it was never "117" or the Varsity but simply the "Noon Milwau-

Train No. 20, the "Varsity" (then a morning schedule) crosses Lake Monona with a Pacific No. 171, an F-3, pulling the various coaches and a parlor car.





*Christmas Day, 1948, and the "Varsity" is powered by an E7A, No. 17B as train 117 arrives from Chicago. The train is passing MX Tower at the mid-Lake Monona crossing of the Milwaukee and the C&NW.*

*Alco DL-109 diesel No. 14B, one of two units purchased in 1941 for Milwaukee Road's "Hiawatha," arrives at Madison in 1948.*

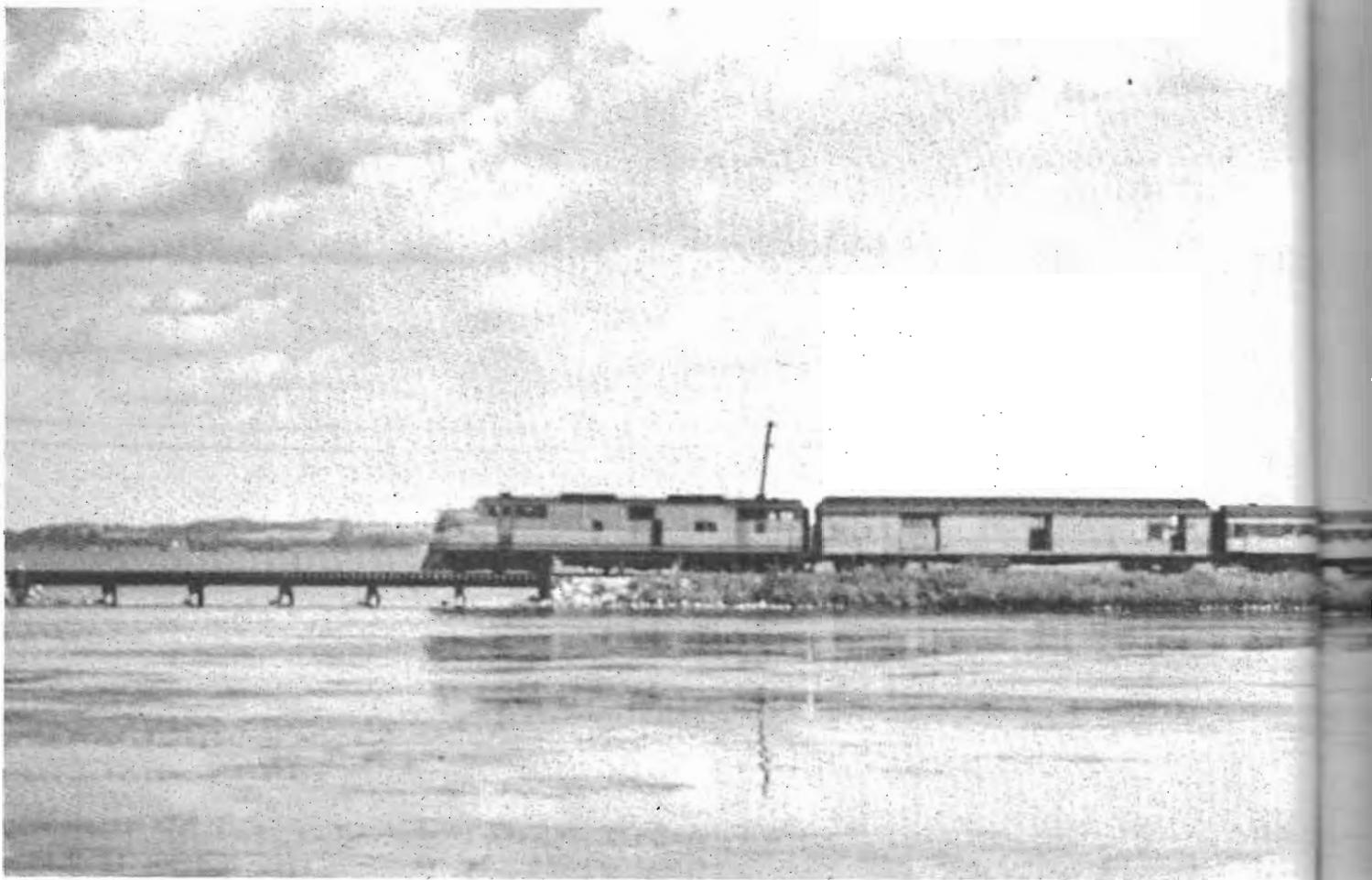
kee," and all you ever had to do was write, "I'll be in on the Noon Milwaukee," and the family knew just what you meant.

The southbound *Varsity*—No. 118—was no less a fixture. It was always scheduled out of Madison around 5.30 or 6 p.m., and the spirited way the train came booming out across the

lake, honking impatiently at the fishermen roosting on the trestle, always helped to enliven the highball hour as the family relaxed on the front porch before dinner on summer afternoons.

During nearly a quarter century the paths of my life and that of the *Varsity* were interwoven. During those years I came and went from Madison many

times and in many ways, but as often as any other my journey began or ended on the *Varsity*. Scheduled out of Chicago's Union Station around nine or nine-thirty in the morning, it was almost always the best connection you could make from anything arriving in the morning from the east, south, or west, and I rode it on the last leg of





countless journeys home.

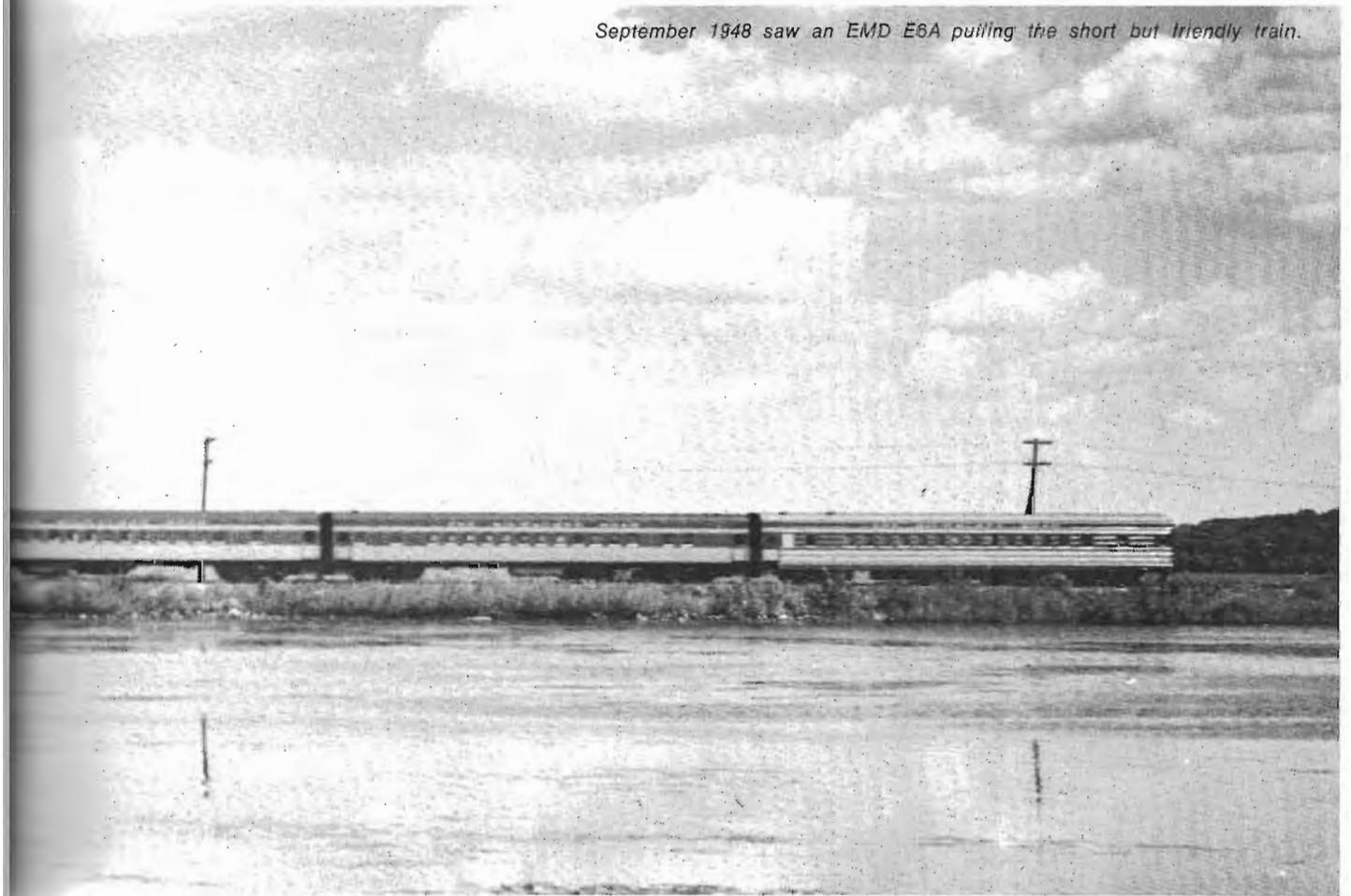
Boarding was never the rush that characterized the big main line trains; you always knew there'd be plenty of seats ("Madison?—to your left. Local passengers to the right."). If you'd slept late on the *Capitol* or the *Pace-maker*, and hadn't had time to breakfast at Fred Harvey's in Union Station,

a late breakfast in the cafe-parlor, with the inevitable Milwaukee Road rose on each table, was one of the journey's special pleasures. The cook and waiter that ran the little dining section served up as good an order of hot cakes and sausage as I can remember having, the coffee was hot and plentiful, and business was never so heavy that

you couldn't linger long over your breakfast.

The run up the main line to Rondout was always made at a good clip, but the further you got from Chicago the slower *Varsity* ran. There was always a stop at Fox Lake—the end of suburban territory—and then the train went rolling across the gentle, rich hills of

*September 1948 saw an EMD E6A pulling the short but friendly train.*



the southern Wisconsin countryside, pausing at places like Walworth and Avalon, where perhaps a post office truck and a relative or two waited expectantly beside the track.

Janesville was the biggest place along the *Varsity's* route, and the train always seemed to spend a little more time there while the crew handled the head end business. Beyond



*For about a year, until they were sold to the Canadian National in 1964, a super dome car operated on the Varsity, in place of the cafe/parlor equipment.*

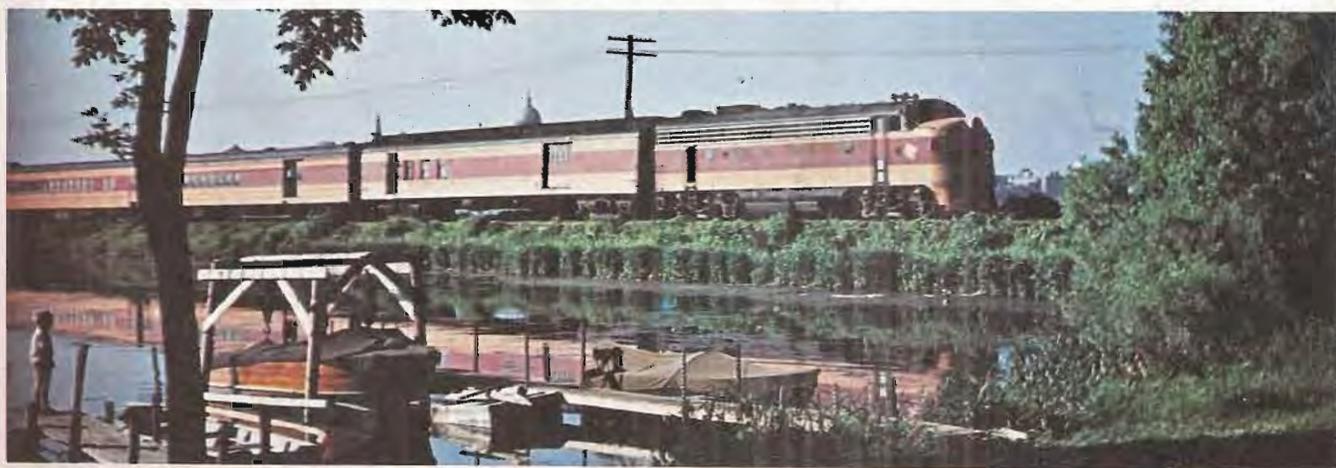


Janesville my impatience always seemed to grow as the stops became more frequent—Edgerton, Stoughton, and then McFarland—and finally we were almost in Madison.

There was a quickening sense of anticipation as I watched for Lake Waubesa and the County Fairgrounds on the left. Then the diesel honked for the Lakeside crossing and moments later the train was out on the long Lake Monona fill. To the right the state capitol dome loomed above the lake as the wheels pounded rhythmically across the diamond at the mid-lake crossing with the Northwestern. Then the coaches slid in between the A. J. Sweet produce house and the Findorff lumber yard on the far side of the lake, past the coal yard and the creamery, and at last into the yellow brick depot on West Washington. I'd look down from the vestibule and see the folks waiting on the platform and I knew I was home once again.

The *Varsity* expired from much the same causes as did its contemporaries elsewhere in North America. After the Illinois Turnpike and I-90 went all the way you could drive to Chicago in less time than it took the train. And even if you didn't drive there were express Greyhounds almost every hour, and two airlines could get you from Madison to O'Hare in less than an hour.

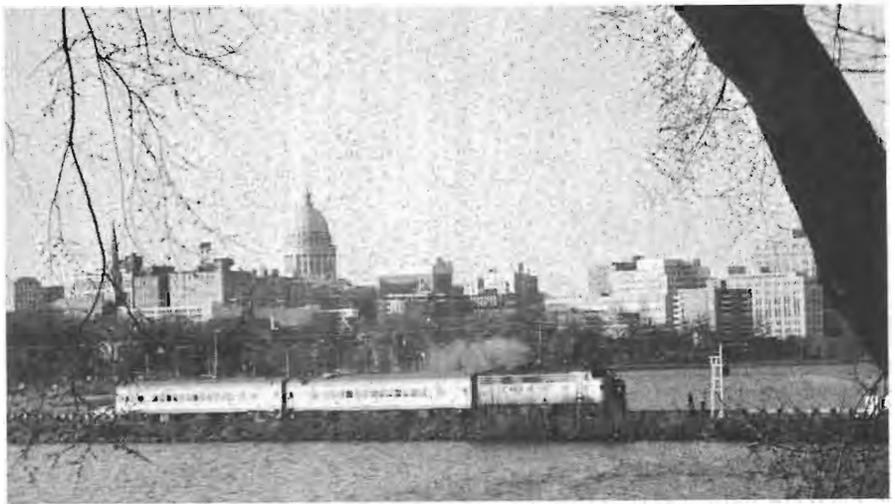
By the end of the 1950s Nos. 117-



118 had begun their inevitable decline. Parlor car service ended in 1963. For a season cafe-lounge service was continued with one of the Milwaukee's Super Dome cars—displaced from the abandoned *Olympian Hiawatha*—and then for a few months more with a regular cafe-lounge, but after April 1965 the train carried only coaches.

In 1967 the Post Office Department withdrew the *Varsity's* RPO contract, and the Milwaukee promptly filed for abandonment. There were hearings and then the ICC finally said the train must continue to run on weekends and holidays, and thus the *Varsity* lingered on for a few more years. But finally, with the arrival of the Amtrak era on May 1, 1971, the *Varsity* was allowed to end its now empty journeys.

My train—the Noon Milwaukee—is gone now, and going home will never be quite the same again.



*Near the end of its days, the "Varsity" in the early '70s operated Fri-Sat-Sun and Holidays only, and carried only coaches. Operation ended when Amtrak took over passenger service in May of 1971.*

