

# Dining on TM Rails

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Photos by the Author



The traditional railroad dining car experience in North America is being replaced by mundane forms of sustenance for long-distance travelers. Apart from the uncertain future of full-service dining on Amtrak long-distance trains, only a few tourist railroads and privately-owned carriers offer this experience. East Troy Electric Railroad's dinner train is unique, being the only such service in North America that uses vintage electric interurban cars (dining cars elsewhere are hauled behind diesel or steam locomotives). These operate under wire on a former interurban line, a seven-mile remnant of The Milwaukee Electric Railway & Light Co. (TM), between East Troy and Mukwonago, Wisconsin.

The two cars used for this service, numbers 24 and 25, were originally built as passenger coaches for the Chicago South Shore & South Bend by Pullman in 1927. Originally 61 feet long, these and several of their fleet mates were lengthened by 17 feet to accommodate increased ridership demand during WWII. In 1947, these same cars were modernized with updated interiors, sealed picture windows and air conditioning. Although maintenance was neglected in their final years, the cars soldiered on in daily service until 1983.

From 1927 until 1932, the South Shore Line operated a pair of elegant dining cars

▲ ▼ The South Shore Line heritage of ETER's dinner train is unmistakable beneath the museum-branded livery. Cars 25 and 24 have just been stocked with provisions and are preparing to board passengers for a lunchtime charter at the historic TM substation building in East Troy.



and also served light meals in parlor cars operating between Chicago and South Bend. Both diners were scrapped in 1941 and some of the steel from those cars might have been utilized towards the car lengthening program. Parlor car 351 survives and is privately owned.

With the rail preservation movement in full swing, many of the newly-retired Insull-era cars survived the scrapper's

torch. Among a large group of cars selected for preservation, car 25 was conveyed to East Troy in 1983 and 24 followed in 1992. Seeking to generate more passenger traffic on the former TM line which served resort and recreational areas until 1939, ETER initially decided to refurbish and equip car 25 for dinner train service. They wisely took the opportunity to acquire car 24 to increase dinner train capacity.





The cars' aging 1,500 VDC electrical systems had to be refurbished and modified for compatibility with ETER's 600 VDC current distribution system. New MG sets were installed and trolley poles replaced the pantographs (the motors work fine on the lower voltage although slower). Both cars emerged from the shops in a bold new livery distinctively different from South Shore's orange & maroon. Conversion of 25, dubbed the "Ravenswood," was completed in 1992; and 24, the "Beverly Shores," was completed the following year. Both cars have been operating in regular seasonal dinner train service since then.

The first time I experienced East Troy's dinner train was in 2003. Back then, I thought the food and service were lackluster. Fast-forward to June of 2019: As a passenger on a weekday lunchtime charter, I found the food and service to be much improved!

The dinner trains operate a leisurely 14-mile round trip approximately two hours long. The ride through the gently rolling farmland and wooded areas is scenic and pleasant. The dining cars are outfitted with improved air conditioning and updated rest rooms (holding tanks have replaced the infamous view of the ballast). Movable

▲ CSS&SB cars are best remembered in the classic orange & maroon which they flaunted for over half a century. Here, 25 led a morning departure from Randolph Street Terminal on November 6, 1977. Lengthened in 1942 and modernized in 1947, it had coach seating. A partition divided the car's interior into smoking and non-smoking compartments. The "temporary" station platforms, installed in 1926, were later replaced by today's Millennium Park Station.

tables and chairs replaced the fixed coach seating, and the car interiors have been refurbished with mahogany paneling and art deco light sconces. Elegant table settings replete with silverware and china are the same as in a fine white-tablecloth restaurant.

ETER does not have kitchen facilities or a commissary. The food is prepared and plated off-site by a local caterer, and everything is transported to East Troy and placed on the train prior to departure. Provisions for maintaining food temperature on board include ice chests, thermos jugs for coffee, and covers for the hot food. Catering staff and experienced museum volunteers provide attentive and polished service.

◀ A closer look at the lettering 25 has worn since its 1992 conversion to a dining car.



Each dinner train trip features a different theme and menu. Trips scheduled during 2019 included a burger train, beer tasting train, family picnic train (hot dogs), family pasta night, and an Oktoberfest train. Special diet requests made in advance of the trip date are honored. Soda, beer and wine are available for purchase at a small onboard bar.

The menu for our lunch charter included a tossed salad and chicken parmigiana. Both courses were served during the eastbound leg of the trip. Our train paused alongside Phantom Lake so passengers could relish the view, which is especially glorious at sunset. Then there was a brief stopover at Mukwonago's Indianhead Park, the east end of the line (from Mukwonago, the interurban line once continued northeastward to downtown Milwaukee). Here, we were able to alight briefly while the crew changed ends. During the return trip to East Troy, dessert and coffee were served.

Friendly crew members, all ETER volunteers, pitch in as bartenders, servers and museum docents. Their presence helps to make the trips even more enjoyable.

For more information about the East Troy dinner train and to make reservations for the upcoming 2020 season, visit [east-troyrr.org](http://east-troyrr.org) or call (262) 642-3263.

- ▶ On May 22, 1976, our camera captured car 24 in its natural habitat – the middle of 11th Street in front of the Michigan City, IN. station. Car 3 was in tow on this PM westbound run.
- ▼ 24 was seen at Randolph Street on April 13, 1975. By this time, all seats had been fixed to face forwards or backwards.



▲ Car 24, dubbed the “Beverly Shores,” is preparing to board a group of hungry travelers at the East Troy depot. The car ends look very different without the diaphragms, horn enclosures, and roof “humps.”





▲ Salads and baskets of rolls greeted the passengers as they boarded. Mahogany paneling and soft lighting make the interior of the “Beverly Shores” inviting and elegant. Each dining car has a seating capacity of 50 guests. Prepared meals are stowed in a “pantry” visible in the background.

► Dinner is served! The entrée for the charter trip was chicken parmigiana with sides of pasta and green beans.

▼ The dinner train has just arrived at Indianhead Park in Mukwonago, near the ex-Soo Line interchange, and is about to change ends for the return trip to East Troy and the dessert course.



▲ Museum volunteer Pat Barney tended the bar on this trip.

