

Before There Were Bar Cars

“There is more poetry in the rush of a single railroad train across the continent than in all the gory story of burning Troy.”

— Joaquin Miller,

pen name of American poet Cincinnatus Heine Miller, “Poet of the Sierras”

The history of railroading—here in the U.S. and around the world—is a saga of epic proportions: North meets South; Ocean meets Ocean. Track and trains and the locomotives that power them have long held Americans’ fascination and fancy.

Here is a brief take on some of the earliest locomotive “prototypes.” Most of these early “Iron Horses”—and the engineers who designed them—were derided in their day. But as the old saying goes—It’s not where you start; it’s where you finish that counts.

The information here is provided by Angus Sinclair (1841—1919), Scotsman émigré, writer, engineer and life-long railroader who attained greatest prominence as publisher, editor and scribe of the Bible-as-journal *Railway and Locomotive Engineering—A Practical Journal of Railway Motive Power and Rolling Stock* (find it on Amazon starting at \$19), who states it much more eloquently.

“The man who ventures to stray from the familiar beaten path may stumble into a quagmire, but he may have the good fortune to discover a vein of rich ore which the beaten path would never reveal. When an inventor scorning the common forms proceeds to work out new and original shapes for himself, he may produce something which is ridiculous and impracticable. But even when he does that, the enterprising person deserves praise, for it has been by departing from other people’s lead that new and original inventions have been given to the world.”

Sinclair sailed to America in 1883 to accept a writing position offered him by the prestigious *American Machinist*, then the engineering tome of record. In 1887, *American Machinist* began publishing *Locomotive Engineering* under Sinclair’s stewardship as its assistant editor. Just a year later, Sinclair was appointed secretary of the American Railway Master Mechanics

Association, a position he held until 1896. In 1892 Sinclair partnered with his boss (managing editor) at *Locomotive Engineering* to buy the journal from *American Machinist*, Sinclair eventually assuming sole proprietorship five years later.

Our space is limited, so let’s cannonball ahead to brief summaries of a number of Sinclair’s published comments on the various locomotive “designs” of railroading’s “getting the bugs out” days, and their manufacture—most of which were abject failures on any number of levels.

Angus Sinclair writes:

“**William Brunton’s Mechanical Traveller** locomotive attempted to emulate mechanically the action of the horse, and was duly built to put that idea in practice. One day that it was on trial, rushing along at a speed of three miles an hour, accompanied by a host of admirers, the boiler exploded, throwing hot water, pieces of iron and disaster among the crowd, ending the career of the *Mechanical Traveller*.”

“The (**Liverpool and Manchester Caledonian**) displayed a weakness for jumping the track; serving railway development only in emphasizing the mistake of using vertical cylinders.

“The **Great Western Railway (England)** received an engine manufactured according to a patented design which called for driving wheels being secured on one set of frames, the boiler being carried on another set. The science of mechanical engineering was in its infancy in those days, yet one marvels how the designer of such a locomotive expected to obtain the necessary adhesion.”

“At various times amateur locomotive designers, saturated with egotism and personal conceit, have produced ridiculous engines. The **Raub Central Power** locomotive (Paterson, N. J., 1892) was (supported) by the influence

of sensational articles in the daily newspapers, their claims for speed and efficiency being senseless exaggerations. This engine was not only an oddity—it was a fake of the worst kind, a product of combined ignorance, egotism and perversity.”

“The **Holman Locomotive Company** had a locomotive built that was immediately assailed by practical railroad men and others. My opinion: It is a humbug. It is sound engineering to hold that every piece added to a machine—after it has reached the practical stage—is a source of weakness. (The specified) locomotive design would be proposed only by one who is densely ignorant of mechanics.”

“Some of the locomotives designed with a special view to securing low center of gravity are curious. **Zerah Colburn** was a sensible railway man with a good practical training as a mechanical engineer. Yet in 1854 he fell into the blunder of designing an absurdity in which the best that can be said about it is that it was a very courageous design, but it came to nothing.” **PTE**

(Ed.’s Note: If you are an engineer—or just love railroading—and want to learn more about Mr. Sinclair—<http://www.catskillarchive.com/rrextra/odcuri.html> is a good place to start.)

