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## **The Great 10-Hour, New York-to-Chicago Railroad That Never Was: Cameron on Transportation**

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What happens when a great transportation idea gets ahead of itself? Consider the story of the greatest American railroad that was never built.

Many people have heard of [The Twentieth Century Limited](#) and [The Broadway Limited](#), the trains of the [New York Central](#) and Pennsylvania Railroads that ran for decades between New York and Chicago.

Those daily trains defined deluxe, pampering passengers with plush Pullman cars, fine dining and even an on-train barber shop. But their circuitous routes made it a 16-hour trip.

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The New York Central followed the “water-level route” north to Albany, then across upstate New York and down the coast of Lake Erie. The Pennsylvania Railroad journeyed south to Philadelphia, then west to Pittsburgh and beyond.

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Today, Amtrak’s New York City-to-Chicago run takes 19 hours following the route of the Twentieth Century. Compare that to modern Chinese high-speed trains that run from Beijing to Shanghai — about the same distance as New York to Chicago — in just five hours.

But back in 1905, inventor Alexander Miller had a better idea: Build a new, flat and straight interurban railroad that would run directly between the two cities, [The Chicago-New York Electric Air Line Railroad](#).

The train would be “faster than the limited” and make the run in 10 hours for \$10 a ticket. Powered by the new marvel of electricity, the train could operate at a third of the cost of steam engines. By running in a straight line, the 743-mile route would be 168 to 237 miles shorter than its competitors. In principal, it was brilliant. And the timing was perfect.

However, its interurban cars (think trolley cars on steroids) might not be as plush, but they average 70-plus mph thanks to the nearly flat grade and no pesky grade crossings. There would also be few stops since the route would bypass all major cities. And this train would be fast — 100 mph on the straightaways.

Five million dollars worth of stock was issued with shareholders promised first priority for thousands of potential jobs. Railroads were the dot-coms of the era, and people rushed to invest.

With no bonded debt, the company’s prospectus promised stock dividends of 14 percent on top of the shares’ appreciation. You just couldn’t lose.

Construction began from west to east, as the railroad opened in stages to help pay for itself and construction toward New York. A mighty four-track railroad, akin to Metro-North, was envisioned to be completed in just 10 years. Spur lines were planned to serve the cities by-passed by the “air line.”

Then the depression hit in 1907 and 1908.

Construction got as far as Gary, Indiana, about 25 miles from Chicago, when the money started to run out. The engineering of the railroad was just too expensive.

Shareholders revolted when they heard the railroad's officers were getting fat paychecks as the coffers were drained. A bailout by British banks never happened.

Shareholders lost everything. The impending arrival of automobiles might have doomed the line anyway. Even The Twentieth Century and Broadway Limited eventually succumbed to the competition of true "airlines."

But for a brief moment, a century ago, a dream nearly became a reality for the greatest railroad that was left unfinished.

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