

Bill White's "luck"—and his legacy

William White had no patience with the "great man" theory of history. "Somebody quits, somebody dies, or you happen to be the right age; so much of it is luck"—that was how he reacted when the news reached him that he had been appointed (in 1952) president of the New York Central.

Twelve years earlier, when he became president of the Delaware, Lackawanna & Western, he similarly brushed aside the plaudits of his admirers. "I've managed to be at the right place at the right time," he said. "I learned as a boy that one has to press his luck."

Bill White's luck carried him from a \$20-a-month clerkship on the Erie at 16 to his first presidency at 43. It appeared to have run out when a proxy fight drove him off the New York Central in 1954. But Bill White was no quitter. He promptly accepted the presidency of the Delaware & Hudson; and nearly a decade later, one year past normal retirement age, he took on (as an extra burden) one of the least enviable jobs in the railroad industry—the chairmanship of the then faltering Erie Lackawanna. His last four years were crowned with spectacular achievement. He set a timetable for getting the Erie back into the black, and he met it, with months to spare.

Bill White died in Cleveland on April 6, still on the job—not long after Commissioner Charles Webb of the ICC had credited his "superb management" with having pulled the Erie from the brink of bankruptcy.

Bill White was a man who built not for the present alone—but for the future. In more than half a century of railroading, he also built for himself a singular place in the hearts and minds of his colleagues. One of them, Katy President John W. Barger, was moved to write the following tribute:

"The verse of scripture, '. . . Know ye not there is



WILLIAM WHITE
(1897-1967)

a Prince and a Great Man fallen this day in Israel' (2 Samuel, 3:38), flashed into mind upon receipt of the sad message reporting Bill White's death. Truly, he was both a Prince and a Great Man, in the best literal and figurative sense of both descriptive terms.

"He had been the chief executive of a railroad continuously since 1941, and 26 years of service in that senior capacity represented a noble achievement. Within the present century, only L. F. Loree, Daniel Willard and Ralph Budd occupied similar posts for equal or longer terms.

"It follows that Mr. White during the last decade was recognized as the dean of the present generation of railroad officers in addition to being an elder statesman of their industry. In each of the manifold responsibilities and disciplines in which a railroad president must manifest ability and capacity, he evidenced equal excellence and superior talent.

"His clarity of mind, facility of expression and impressive bearing made him one of its most effective spokesmen. The dynamic synergism of his many capabilities together with his exemplary character endowed him with a constructive influence not only within the councils of his industry but also externally within those of leaders of government, business, finance and labor. Through an unusual breadth of experience and range of interest, Bill White developed into the whole man—and the full circle, for no spoke of the wheel or part of the circumference was missing.

"Bill White will be remembered with esteem, admiration and affection by all who knew him for as long as they live. Beyond that time, were there a Railroad Hall of Fame where the memories of great railroaders who have passed on could be enshrined to inspire those who will follow, a prominent place would be assigned to its tribute to William White."