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Commuter king

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California's fascinating bottleneck

ALCO'S AUTOMOBILE

Amtrak after Gunn

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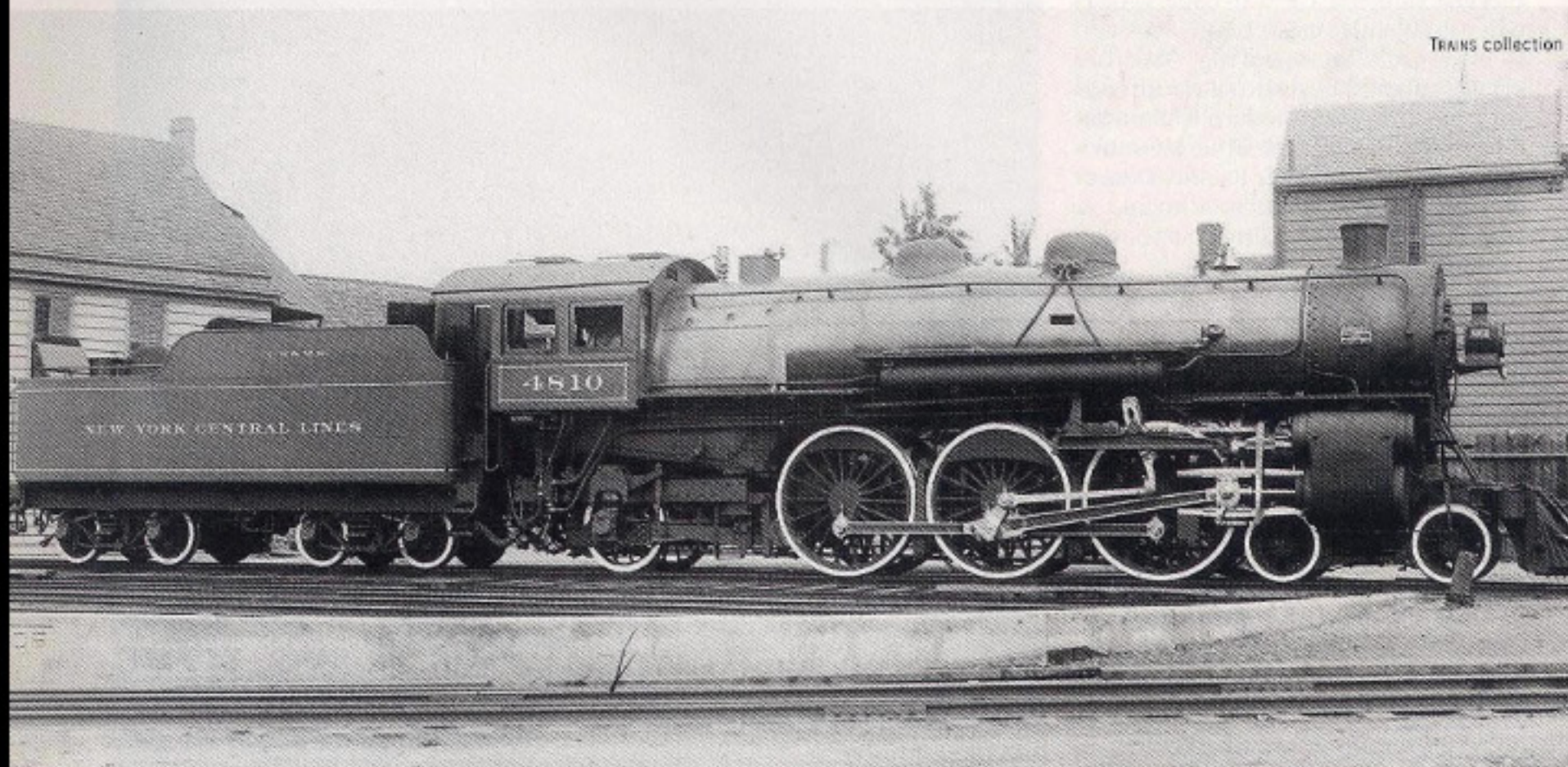


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The same PEOPLE

who brought you this ●●●



TRAINS collection

by Eric Powell

Just say the word "Alco," and grand images come to mind: New York Central 4-6-4 Hudsons and 4-6-2 Pacifics, and Union Pacific's mighty 4-8-8-4 "Big Boys." After all, the American Locomotive Co. set a high standard for steam locomotive excellence.

Early in the 20th century, it seemed as though every horse-and-buggy maker was caught up in the craze of producing a new invention: the automobile. Just slap an engine on a modified buggy frame and you have a car, right?

As early as 1906 — just five years

after the company was created by a merger of eight locomotive builders — Alco entered the automobile-building business by producing the American version of the French Berliet car under license. Three years later, Alco officials figured they could build a better car under their own brand. They were right.

The company's reputation for well-engineered and fast cars gained momentum quickly with consecutive victories at the prestigious Vanderbilt Cup race on Long Island in 1909-10. Alco's chief test driver, Harry Grant, drove to victory in a modified model

New York Central 4-6-2 No. 4810, built and photographed in 1907, typifies Alco's usual transportation offerings.

9-60, similar to the 1909 9-60 Touring motor car in the Indianapolis Motor Speedway Hall of Fame Museum's collection.

The 1909 Alco features incredible style and engineering for autos of the era: a green steel carbody with black fenders, tan leather interior, brass headlamps and grill, and beige canvas convertible top. The car boasts a 4-speed transmission and the massive 4-cylinder, 487 cubic-inch engine, which produced 42 hp. Mileage was 14 miles per gallon, at best.

Clearly, Alco's commitment to excellence extended to its automotive di-

vision, but the exquisite attention to detail and the elegance of the cars ultimately did it in. As classic-auto enthusiast and author Beverly Rae Kimes wrote in *Standard Catalog of American Cars: 1805-1942*, Alco's cars were too well built. Alco gave scrupulous — or arguably, absurd — attention to detail in engineering and building the cars, as it took more than 18 months to assemble each one.

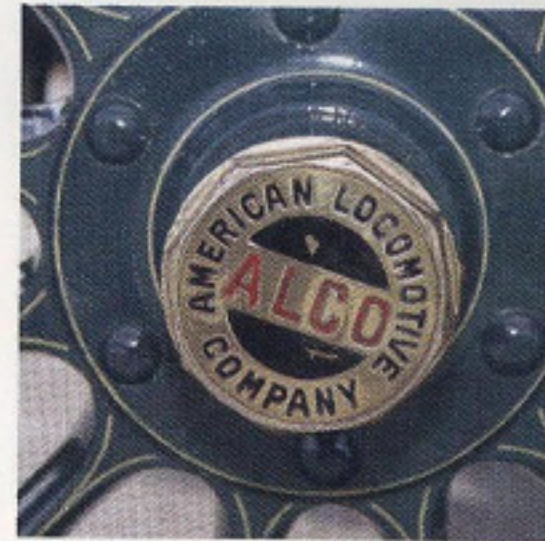
And as Kimes put it, "The Alco people apparently had been unaware that while locomotives were bought, automobiles have to be sold."

An audit conducted in 1913 revealed that in four years' time, the company had built about 5,000 cars in 54 models, and lost more than \$450 on aver-

age per car even though they retailed at \$6,000 - \$7,500 and higher. The losses weren't a result of poor workmanship, though: The company gave many cars away as incentives to buy locomotives. By the end of 1913, Alco closed its automobile-building division.

Indianapolis Motor Speedway's Alco car occasionally appears at special events around the country, so before venturing to the Hall of Fame Museum, call the museum office at (317) 492-6747 to verify whether the car is on display. **I**

ERIC POWELL lives in Indianapolis, and is media coordinator for the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. This is his first TRAINS byline.



Two photos: Indianapolis Motor Speedway

Even on the auto's wheels, Alco proclaimed that it was the American Locomotive Co.

●●● built this

Alco's 1909 9-60 Touring motor car was built too well for its own good and resides now at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

