

The Story of Northern Pacific's Great Big Baked Potato - Part I

Hazen Titus Makes a Silk Purse from a Sow's Feed

By David Hamilton

"The Water Level Route," "Mainline through the Rockies," "Sleep Like a Kitten" – the most memorable railroad advertising slogans over the years have extolled the comfort and reliability of passenger trains, along with the scenic beauty of the routes over which they ran. Some trains were so well-known that the railroads adopted them as the focus of their advertising, such as the "Route of the 400's" or "The Way of the Zephyrs." And while the subject of slogans that proclaimed "The Royal Gorge Route" or "The Yellowstone Park Line" are fairly obvious, modern historians might be puzzled by the meaning of "The Route of the Great Big Baked Potato."



Although most companies had signature items on their dining car menus, the Northern Pacific Railway was unique among railroads in that it created an entire advertising campaign around a rather basic dish. From postcards and souvenirs to 20-foot long billboards, the familiar image of a baked potato adorned Northern Pacific promotional materials for over five decades. And unlike the carefully organized publicity stunts of such railroad men as George Daniels and William Crush, the famous "Great Big Baked Potato" was simply the result of a chance encounter on a train.

It was in late 1908 that Hazen J. Titus, the recently appointed superintendent of the Northern Pacific's Dining Car Department, was riding on the line's flagship North Coast Limited when he happened to overhear a conversation between two passengers. The men were involved in the farming business, and were discussing the recent potato crop in Washington. The



What started as an effort by Northern Pacific Dining Car Superintendent Hazen J. Titus to obtain a reasonably priced menu item became one of the most unusual and long-lived railroad advertising campaigns. This inkwell was one of many "Great Big Baked Potato" promotional & souvenir items. Photo courtesy of Sue Knous at Railroad Memories Auctions.

harvest had yielded tubers of such a large size that they were unmarketable to restaurants, whose patrons preferred a baked potato of more manageable dimensions. Facing a supply that heavily outweighed demand, the farmers were resigned to the fact that their only option was to sell the giant potatoes for use as hog feed.

With the task of obtaining quality food at a reasonable price for the Northern Pacific's dining cars, Hazen Titus saw an opportunity for a bargain, and before the train reached Seattle he had made arrangements to purchase a supply of Yakima Valley potatoes. The next hurdle that he faced was how to prepare them.

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Two of the rarer Great Big Baked Potato promotional items: an enameled metal watch fob and a brass child's charm bracelet with an enameled monad logo. Both photos courtesy of Sue Knous at Railroad Memories Auctions.

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The main problem encountered when cooking a potato that weighed over two pounds was that it would invariably turn out partially undercooked or tough. The chefs of the Northern Pacific commissary went right to work, and soon discovered that by slowly baking the giant spuds for two hours in an oven containing a pan of water, the resulting product was evenly cooked and delicious.

In February of 1909, the "Great Big Baked Potato" was added to the menu on Northern Pacific dining cars. By marketing the oversized potato as something novel, Hazen Titus had turned low-priced hog feed into something that was offered as a premium dish. However, it would take a clever advertising campaign before the potato became symbolic of the quality of the railroad's passenger service. Not long after its introduction, Titus arranged for postcards promoting the big potatoes to be distributed on trains, and for advertisements featuring the new menu item to be placed in various travel publications.

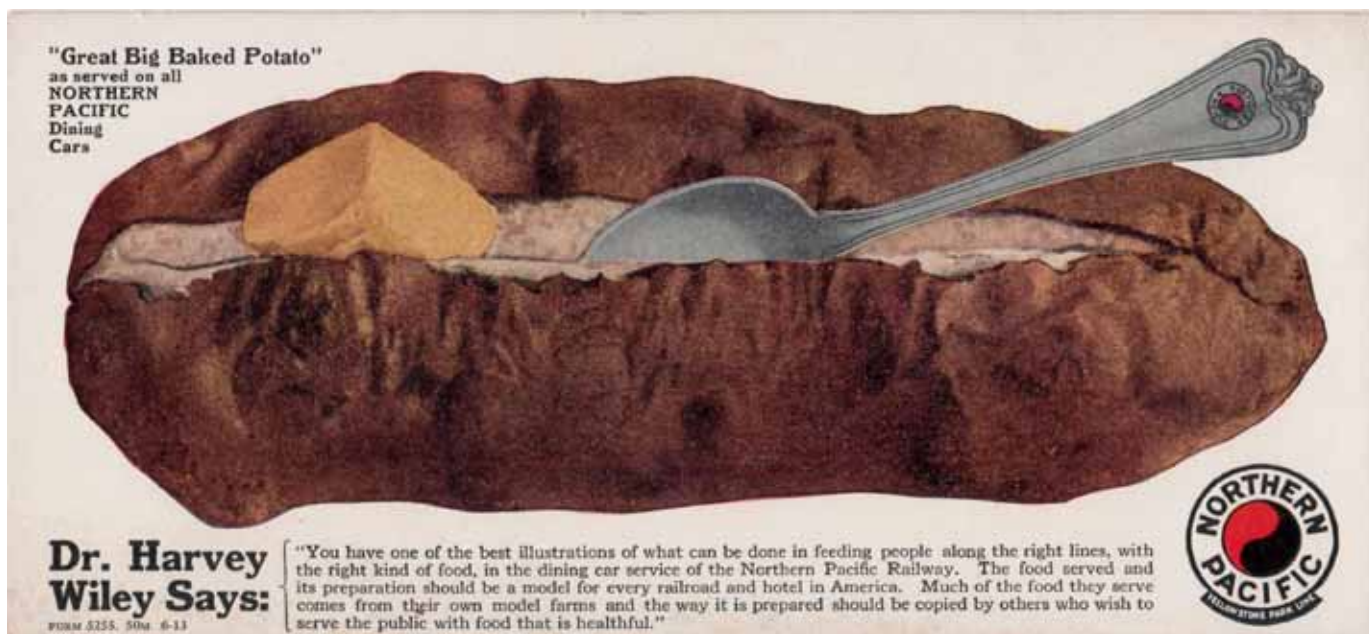
At first, some of the top brass of the Northern Pacific had their doubts about using something as foolish as a potato as the centerpiece of a promotional effort. However, on a trip east on the Pennsylvania Railroad, one official overheard a dining car patron mention to his companion that he wished he could order "one of those Great Big Baked Potatoes" that were served on the Northern Pacific. It was obvious that the big potato was having an even bigger impact on the traveling public's perception of the railroad, and the green light was given to advertise the Northern Pacific Railway as "The Route of the Great Big Baked Potato."



From left to right: Hazen J. Titus, Superintendent of the Northern Pacific Railway Dining Car Department; Dr. Harvey Wiley of the U.S. Food & Drug Administration; A.D. Charlton, Northern Pacific Assistant General Passenger Agent, and Dr. George Ainslee. Circa 1912 Bain News Service photo from the Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Collection, LC-B2-2693-4 [P&P].

In addition to postcards and advertisements, a variety of baked potato souvenirs were offered, ranging from letter openers and luggage tags to more elaborate items such as potato-shaped inkwells and figurines. Large billboards depicting the "Great Big Baked Potato" were erected in Minneapolis, Seattle,

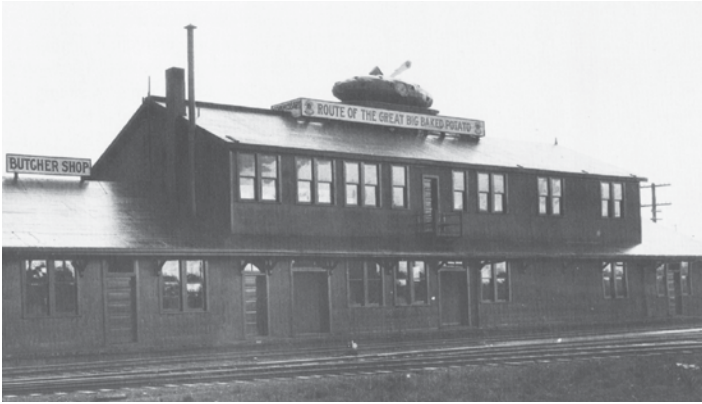
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One of an ongoing series of promotional ink blotters, this 1913 version contained an endorsement from Dr. Harvey Wiley of the Good Housekeeping Institute (and former U.S. FDA commissioner). Scan courtesy of Streamliner Memories website.

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Portland, and other major cities along the line. When the Northern Pacific's new commissary building in Seattle opened in 1914, it was adorned with a giant potato replica on the roof, which measured 40 feet long and 18 feet in diameter. According to a report in the *Railway Age Gazette*, the potato was electrically lighted so that its eyes would blink on and off, and the huge cube of butter would "glow intermittently."



The Northern Pacific's new 1914 commissary building in Seattle included a 40 foot long lighted replica of a potato on the roof. Scans courtesy of Streamliner Memories website.

Not satisfied with an advertising campaign based on the simple novelty of the potato's huge size, Hazen Titus also promoted the quality and nutritional value of the line's dining car fare. In 1913, he obtained the endorsement of Dr. Harvey Wiley, who had recently resigned as Commissioner of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to join the Good Housekeeping Institute.



Dr. Wiley praised the Northern Pacific's food as "a model for every railroad and hotel in America." The potato was briefly joined by fruit in the railroad's promotional materials, with an apple-shaped menu declaring "An apple a day keeps the doctor away."

Writer and lecturer Elbert Hubbard also spoke highly of the Northern Pacific Railway and Hazen Titus in particular in his "Little Journeys" series of books and pamphlets. In his 1915 *Little Journey*



A 2 1/8" celluloid button with a bead that could be rolled into the eyes of the potato - a game that would keep you entertained for many miles of train travel. Both photos courtesy of Sue Knous at Railroad Memories Auctions.

to the Yellowstone Park, Hubbard compared the dining car superintendent to the Roman Emperor Titus, and suggested that the opinion "that he performs this service in a kingly manner is beyond dispute." After his trip to Yellowstone via the Northern Pacific, Hubbard described his introduction to the unique menu item. The "platter is eight inches long. Sometimes the potatoes will be nine inches long and four inches in diameter. Bringing in one of these potatoes and placing it before a hungry man makes him look, and then he laughs, and everybody else in the vicinity looks and laughs too!" He declared that "this great big baked potato, the spud superbus, set a standard."

In an article in the advertising journal *The Poster*, the Northern Pacific's general advertising agent J.W. Stewart summed up the role of the potato: "We embarked in this campaign actuated by the old adage that 'the quickest way to a man's heart is through the stomach.' The great big baked potato has become justly famed, not only for its

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own intrinsic qualities, but as an index to the high character of our dining car and train service in general.” He noted that the gamble by Hazen Titus had been a success, and that the railroad had received “letters of commendation and congratulation from all parts of the world on our service, and the great big baked potato always comes in for a special commendation.”



An unusual cardboard advertisement that could be folded to make a whistle. Photo by Railroad Memories Auctions.

Over time, the “Great Big Baked Potato” proved to be a favorite menu item on the Northern Pacific, with dining cars serving 365,000 of them during the first year, and expanding to almost 790,000 potatoes by 1913. It was reported that two million potatoes were sought by the Northern Pacific commissary to supply trains during 1915, with the requirement that they weigh at least two pounds each. Farms in Washington, Idaho, and Montana, and the Matanuska Valley region of Alaska all contributed giant spuds to the cause.

Above, a souvenir 6” high chalk figurine of a Northern Pacific Railway dining car chef serving the famous potato. Below, a brass letter opener advertising the potato. Photos courtesy of Sue Knous at Railroad Memories Auctions.



By 1916, “The Route of the Great Big Baked Potato” had gained a reputation throughout the country for the superior quality of food in its dining cars. The huge potatoes were even served in restaurants, such as the dining room of the Fort Dearborn Hotel in Chicago, with each dish identified by a Northern Pacific label as being from the same stock as those served on the trains. The spur of the moment purchase of an undesirable crop had launched a most successful (and unlikely) advertising campaign, which showed no signs of fading in popularity.

However, as the clouds of war loomed on the horizon, it was apparent that many changes were in store for the nation’s railroads. In our next issue, we’ll continue the story of the Great Big Baked Potato, as the Northern Pacific Railway endured the strain of two world wars and entered the streamliner era.



As the big potatoes became famous, they were also marketed to restaurants and to the general public. Photo courtesy of Sue Knous at Railroad Memories Auctions.