

music comes in

Kaila: Welcome to Valley 101, a podcast from The Arizona Republic and azcentral.com where we answer the questions you ask about metro Phoenix. I'm your host, Kaila White.

Kaila: When it comes to the questions we explore, we know we're onto something good if more than one person asks about it. And that's the case with today's episode.

Kaila: Eric Andrews wants to know about the history of Phoenix's Union Station. Ditto with Trevor Huxham, who asked if there are any plans to restore Amtrak's service there.

Kaila: Answering those questions today is our editor, Katie O'Connell.

music fades

Katie: I grew up outside of Chicago. I was a 25-minute Metra ride away from Chicago's Union Station. And from there, I could take a train up north to visit family and friends in Milwaukee. I could head south and at the start of a new college semester. I could even ride as far as New Orleans ... which I did once ... or Washington D.C.

Katie: But that kind of train travel isn't possible in Phoenix. At least it's not today. Decades ago ... well, that's a different story. So let's go back to the beginning.

Katie: Phoenix had rail travel as early as the 1890s. Here's Jon Talton, a former columnist for The Arizona Republic and a local historian.

Jon 4:43 - Well, each railroad, when it came to Phoenix in the 1890s, built its own station around Central Avenue and the railroad tracks. These primitive stations had outgrown their usefulness. The city had grown a lot and they agreed to build a union station which would be served by both railroads, The Southern Pacific and the Santa Fe.

1920s music comes in

Katie: Phoenix Union Station officially opened on October 1, 1923.

Katie: More than 30,000 Phoenicians and other well-wishers from across the state joined the part. (layer in sfx of crowd noises) Attendees walked through the Spanish mission-style building. They strolled through train cars. Locomotive whistles rang. (layer in sfx of train whistle) The Mayor at the time, Louis B. Whitney, tied a key to a balloon with silk strings and sent it the sky. Four bands played while confetti streamed down. (layer in trombone sfx) Dancing and music continued well past midnight.

fade 1920s music

Katie: Phoenix Union Station opened in 1923, but it really took off in 1926 when a transcontinental line was added.

Jon 6:20 - It could take you anywhere in the United States through connections.

Jon 8:55 - But it was Phoenix's gateway to the world and it was the world's gateway to Phoenix. It's how people came in and it was served by multiple passenger trains a day.

Katie: Phoenix Union Station would play a crucial role in the city in the following decades. Its operators survived the Great Depression ... which meant they were fully operational when World War II started.

[World War II Railroad Publicity Film 00:58](#) - To a nation at war, nothing is more vital than transportation. For only that nation, which having efficient mass transport abilities, could hope to survive the modern conflict.

Katie: In Phoenix, troops arrived on locomotives to train at the newly-built Luke Air Force Base, then known as Luke Air Field. And when soldiers were done with their training, they shipped out to deployment on trains as well.

[World War II Railroad Publicity Film 1:17](#) - Fortunate are we to be a nation whose economy has ever been geared toward the steel rail and the driving locomotive. For this, as never before, is a war of movement.

Katie: German POWs were moved here by trains. And the city's cotton and citrus crops were transported across the country.

[Food Will Win the War Video 1:06](#) - And spread over this vast land are the farmers. Their wives and their children. 30 million. Twice as many as the Axis has soldiers.

Jon 14:18 - Now, remember, in those days, Phoenix was at the center of an agricultural empire. One of its nicknames was American Eden.

Jon 14:29 - I think at its height, at its height, we had six hundred thousand acres under cultivation.

Jon 14:36 - And anything would grow in the alluvial soil of the Salt River Valley. All you have to do is put water on it. And in addition to cotton and citrus, some of the finest surfers in the world, you could grow anything to Phoenix. And we did. And we shipped it out of the warehouse district, which was anchored by Union Station.

[Food Will Win the War Video 1:19](#) - These embattled farmers are armed. Their weapons are the panzer battle forces of food lines, farm machinery. Battalions of combines. Columns of

milking machines. And all of this equipment kept ready by farmers and their sons during the stress of war.

Katie: But something started to change in the 1950s.

Jon 15:29 - Well, there are big factors, and that is after World War II, the federal government started heavily subsidizing airports and the highways while the federal government and the states heavily taxed railroads. And this continued until 1980. And so this automatically put railroads at a terrible disadvantage.

[1950s Interstate Highway Promotional Film 00:45](#) - More and more and more cars. More on our roads than last year. And there'll be more next year.

Katie: In the 1950s, our roads were treated as an item of national security. Fueled by Cold War tensions, President Dwight D. Eisenhower wanted to make it safer for those in cities to evacuate in case of an attack.

[1950s Interstate Highway Promotional Film 1:06](#) - Today, many of our highways are already obsolete. What would happen on them during a national emergency? The entire population, under panicked conditions, trying to escape?

Katie: Congress passed the National Interstate and Defense Act, otherwise known as the Federal Highway Aid Act of 1956. Here's how Federal Highway Administrator Bertram D. Tallamy described the project.

[1950s Interstate Highway Promotional Film 2:20](#) - Bertrum D. Tallamy: The program involves the construction of 41,000 miles of expressways, connecting every segment of the United States. In addition to that, it includes the construction of many of hundreds of miles of state highways and of secondary roads.

Katie: Some new interstate routes were built, while others were expanded. Major roadways in Arizona were part of that plan, including Interstates 10 and 17.

Katie: The Federal Highway Aid Act of 1956 had many effects. In some areas of the country, it further enforced segregation. My teammate Taylor Seely is working on an episode that explores whether that happened in Arizona. But we can say this definitively. In 1945, there were just over 154,000 cars registered in the entire state. But our population grew exponentially after World War II. According to a 2011 Arizona Transportation History report from the Arizona Department of Transportation, by 1969 ... 22 years later .. there were 1.2 million cars registered in our state. That's almost nine times the number of cars in just over two decades.

more somber music plays

Katie: Phoenix Union Station was still an important part of the bustling warehouse district in the 50s and 60s. Jon has fond memories of visiting it as a child.

Jon: [00:11:07] I went down there as a boy as many times as I could get my grandmother's name to watch the trains come and go. [00:11:14][6.6]

Katie: But the government stopped using trains to move mail in 1968. It was a huge blow to the locomotive industry. Combined with the boom in highway transportation and the ease of air travel from Phoenix's Sky Harbor airport, train transport in Arizona would steadily decline.

Katie: That brings us to 1995.

somber music fades

Katie: By 1995, there was one interstate passenger train running through Phoenix, Amtrak's Sunset Limited. The route stretched from New Orleans to Los Angeles.

Katie: Amtrak may have operated the trains that ran on that route, but they didn't own the tracks themselves. Those were owned at the time by Southern Pacific Lines.

Jon 19:43 - Southern Pacific, which own the rails that Amtrak used, ask the state to pay for part of rehabilitating the line west from Phoenix to Whelton, which is just to the east of Yuma, where it joins the southern mainline and rehabilitate this line. So it would be up to higher speed train service like seventy five miles per hour.

Katie: Those updates would've cost anywhere between \$25.7 million to \$27 million. And once the lines were improved, it would've cost \$2.5 million annually to keep them in shape.

Katie: Amtrak couldn't afford that price tag. In fact, a Republic article from June 24th, 1995 said that Amtrak was facing a *\$240 million* shortfall that year. That's almost *ten times* the amount of money repairs would've cost. But if the money wasn't raised, Southern Pacific would shut down that portion of rail.

somber music starts

Katie: Then, on Oct. 9, 1995, an Amtrak train on its way from Phoenix to Los Angeles derailed.

AZ Family 1:22 - It felt almost like being shook to your feet by an earthquake.

AZ Family 1:42 - Fire Department? We have an emergency Amtrak Train. Tell me that mile post again? 847.0

Katie: 1 person died and more than 100 people were injured.

Katie: FBI agents suspected sabotage. There was a possibility that it was an act of domestic terrorism. Joe Arpaio was the Maricopa County Sheriff at the time. He said that a one- or two-page message signed “Sons of Gestapo” were found at the site of the derailment. Two men were seen running from the scene.

(pause, let music play out for a bit)

Katie: The saboteurs had removed 29 spikes along a section of the track. And they’d bypassed the electrical sensors that would’ve warned Amtrak that something was wrong.

Katie: It had been 18 hours since a train ran on that line. With the right tools, authorities said the crime would’ve taken 10 minutes.

Katie: The crime remains unsolved today.

somber music fades

Katie: The train derailment wasn’t the reason Amtrak stopped its service ... but it highlighted the poor condition of the tracks.

Katie: Ultimately, the city of Phoenix said it couldn’t help repair the tracks. It was dealing with a budget fallout on its bus system and couldn’t afford to help in this regard. The state declined to help too. After all, only 21,000 people were riding it annually. That’s 9,000 people less than attended the station’s opening in 1923. Unable to afford the repairs, Amtrak stopped using that portion of track, which is now abandoned.

Jon 20:29 - And it’s a terrible tragedy, a terrible lost opportunity. All over the country cities and states have joined with private railroads to build the proper infrastructure for these trains. Arizona didn’t do it.

Katie: On June 2, 1996, Amtrak’s Sunset Limited left Phoenix for one last time. Four bands may have played at the station’s opening, but when the last train departed, two choruses of “Auld Lang Syne” awld lang zahyn were sung ([layer song here](#)). Taps were played ([taps sfx](#)).

Katie: With that closing, Phoenix became the largest metropolitan city in the U.S. without passenger-rail service. It’s descriptor remains true today. Now, if you want to catch an Amtrak train, you have to head to the city of Maricopa instead.

music comes in -- perhaps something lighter, more playful

Katie: So that's the history of Phoenix Union Station, as well as the reason there isn't Amtrak service to it today. But Trevor also asked about the future of Amtrak service. Could it return to Phoenix Union Station?

Katie: Phoenix Union Station is on the National Register of Historical Places, as well as Phoenix's Register of Historical Places. The building itself isn't going anywhere. Currently, it's owned by Sprint and it houses equipment for the company. But I asked an expert if it could ever be used for train travel in the future.

music fades

Audra: [00:02:51] Audra Kester Thomas and I'm the Transportation Planning Program Manager at the Maricopa Association of Governments. [00:02:59][7.6]

Katie: Right now, there *are not* any plans to bring Amtrak service back to Phoenix. But there are other ways that building could be reused. It could be a part of a commuter rail system that Audra and her team have been studying for ten years. The system would repurpose about 110 miles of freight train tracks that already exist.

Audra: [00:08:47] And that's one of the reasons it's a unique opportunity. So there's a lot of infrastructure in place. [00:08:54][7.0]

Katie: The system would have two lines. One would run from Buckeye, through downtown Phoenix and then all the way out to Florence. Another would start in Wickenburg in the northwest Valley, running through Peoria into downtown, and ending near Wild Horse Pass and I-10 south of Tempe. If those routes are created, they could -- hypothetically -- roll through Phoenix Union Station.

Audra: [00:13:08] I mean, it's it's a really attractive option, but it's certainly not a cheap option. The capital costs alone, we're estimating, for the entirety of the one hundred and ten miles would be between two and a half to three billion dollar total with annual operating costs of approximately 40 million dollars a year for the entire system. [00:13:31][22.6]

Katie: Given that price tag, I asked Audra if it was a viable option.

Audra: [00:16:22] You know, I'm not sure. We're looking already at, you know, easily a 60 billion dollar deficit in terms of needed transportation investments over the next 25 years and known revenue sources. And so, you know, this is one of those options our policymakers will be considering this fall and winter weighing against different tradeoffs, the outcomes we really want in this region. [00:17:16][54.3]

Katie: But, if those in power opt into this plan, Phoenix Union Station could be given new life.

Audra: [00:22:55] Well, I think, you know, it is a historic place and there is some novel about return service to a facility at its original purpose in a different era. [00:23:07][11.6]

theme music comes in

Katie: Well Kaila, I hope that sufficiently answers Eric and Trevor's questions. My key takeaway from this is that as a region, we've invested a lot in our roadways. So it'll take a lot for us to pivot from other forms of transportation. That means that Union Station might not have trains passing through it anytime soon, although the option is still there.

Katie: Anyway, one quick note before I'm done here today. Audio in today's episode came from the 1944 railroad publicity film "Lifeline of the Nation," the 1942 Walt Disney and U.S. Department of Agriculture film "Food Will Win the War." Additional archival audio came from the 1957 Interstate Highway Promotional Film, "We'll take the high road," and AZ Family.

Kaila: Well Valley 101 listeners, that's all we have for today. We know you have a ton of other transportation questions. We're tackling an episode about why Grand Avenue runs on a diagonal in a few weeks. But if there's anything else you want to know, let us know on Twitter at valley101pod or online at valley101podcast.azcentral.com.

Kaila: Thanks so much for listening to Valley 101, a podcast from The Arizona Republic and azcentral.com. I'm Kaila White, signing off for today. We'll be back next week with more.