

24 HOURS AT WILLOW SPRINGS

Inside the beating heart of BNSF,
where the trains are hot
and the pressure never relents





HOV





by Fred W. Frailey
PHOTOS BY MATT VAN HATTEM



IRS AT WILLOW SPRINGS

Inside the beating heart of BNSF, where the trains are hot and the pressure never relents



Heavy with stacks, the Denver-bound train waits at CP 176 to back into Willow Springs yard.

Measured by acres, Willow Springs is the smallest of BNSF Railway's four intermodal yards in the Chicago area, and next to last in loadings. But its role in the daily life of the railroad is phenomenal. Every train that enters or leaves Willow Springs is a star player that begins with the letter Z (for priority intermodal) and commands a premium price. Nowhere else in the world does such a place exist. Why, take away Willow Springs and the traffic it fires into the arteries of BNSF, and you'd have just another Union Pacific or CSX — an ordinary railroad, in other words.

Yet none but the relatively small cadre of folks who work there have the faintest idea how BNSF pushes up to a dozen trains a day out of Willow Springs on time (or ahead of it) with boring regularity, and unloads an



Nighttime hub manager David McCormack.

equal number. Willow Springs may as well be on Mars. In the post-9/11 era, access through the gate is tightly controlled. The best you can do is glimpse it for a second from the Tri-State Tollway. And forget photographic vantage points; TRAINS has never published a photograph taken there.

Now it is 5 o'clock on a sweltering Wednesday afternoon in July. Join us as we part the curtain and enter Willow Springs, the beating heart of BNSF Railway, to spend the next 24 hours. We promise you won't be bored.

TWILIGHT

Late afternoon through early evening is always intense. Everyone hustles to get four trains out the door in less than three hours. The first pulls away at 4:45 p.m., just before you arrive: Z-WSPLAC9 to Los Angeles (the "9" meaning don't even think about delaying this train). Phoenix-bound Z-WSP-PHX9 (ditto) is next out at 5:30, its departure delayed 45 minutes to set out a bad-order car found during the air test. Third out is Z-WSPALT8 for Alliance, Texas (Fort Worth), whose 6,550 feet of trailers and containers pulls away at 6:25, ahead of time, naturally (its 8 suffix means it's the second edition of a 9 train).

This leaves "the Denver," or Z-CHIDEN9. At 6:35, its front end, having



An overhead crane zips along track 1712 to load the final trailers aboard the "San Bern."

arrived from Chicago's Corwith Yard with the power and 54 double-stack containers, backs onto its train, even as an overhead Mi-Jack crane loads the last of its United Parcel Service containers. The train's two cuts are put together, and at 7:06 p.m. the radio on the desk of trainmaster Fernando Griffin chirps, "This is the Denver. We're set to highball!" Griffin replies, "OK, highball from the tower." That's four down, but there are four more to go before the sun comes up tomorrow morning.

You're sitting in the back of the three-story operations tower, near the middle of the yard. Beside you is Hub Manager David McCormack. McCormack, 27, got his start a decade ago checking trailers into BNSF's Logistics Park Chicago yard near Joliet, Ill. He continued with BNSF through college, and came to Willow Springs at the end of 2011. McCormack works in BNSF's intermodal business unit, part of the railroad's marketing arm. In front of McCormack, trainmaster Griffin, who represents the operating department, coordinates train movements with the yard switcher, the over-the-road crews and dispatchers, and two local freights based in adjacent Hodgkins Yard. To Griffin's left is John Pilat, coordinator for Pacific Rail Services, or Pac Rail, whose 40 on-site employees run the cranes and hostile



The last trailer is hoisted aboard the "San Bern." Fifteen minutes later the cars would depart the yard to back onto the rear cut a track over.



Train Z-ABQWSP9, 12 units strong, sets out cars.



Nighttime trainmaster Fernando Griffin.

the trailers, containers, and chassis. It's Pilat's job to decide how to load a train most efficiently, and he relays his decisions to the hostlers via monitors in their cabs. To Griffin's right is Brad Rivera, supervising the TTX Co. employees who perform all of the yard's mechanical jobs, such as car inspections, car repairs, and initial air tests.

Outside, the setting sun illuminates 11 tracks. From south to north (far to near), they are: main tracks 2 and 1, running track 1698, three 5,000-foot storage tracks (numbered 1601 to 1603), and five loading tracks ranging from 4,850 to 5,600 feet. The first, 1700, next to the storage tracks, can be worked only from the north (terminal) side by side-loaders (the yard has four). Then come tracks 1701-1711, 1702-1712, 1703-1713, and 1704-1714, all tend-

ed to by up to six of the yard's nine overhead rubber-tired Mi-Jack cranes. Each of the four track-pairs is really one continuous track separated by a wide grade crossing that lets cranes, hostlers, and other employees move about the terminal. Tracks 1701 to 1704 occupy the west side of the yard, and 1711 to 1714 the east. This arrangement permits, for example, tracks 1701-1711 to be used to make up a single train that will be coupled together, or to load two separate trains (if they're shorties), or cuts of trains, on each half-track.

Given Willow Springs' compact size, no train originates or terminates here. All crews go on and off duty at Corwith Yard, BNSF's southwest Chicago intermodal yard and locomotive terminal, 11 miles to the east. Westbounds leave Corwith with enough double-stack footage to fill out Z trains at Willow Springs to full size (up to 8,000 feet). They sail past the yard to its west end, at control point 176 (for milepost 17.6), then back onto the train they will

take west. Eastbound Z trains pull directly into the terminal, make that mid-yard separation, then depart for Corwith with whatever non-premium double-stacks have filled out the consist.

NIGHT

BNSF is about to fire two bullets toward San Bernardino, Calif. First out will be Z-WSPSBD8 at 10 o'clock (crews call this the "San Bern"). Ninety minutes behind it will be Z-CHISBD8 (the "Shy Spud"). How do these train differ? In the simplest sense, the Z-WSP is a Willow Springs train that gets a Corwith filler, whereas it's the other way around for the Z-CHI, which runs only Wednesday through Friday, the busiest nights. The plan is for the front of Z-WSPSBD8 to load on tracks 1702-1712 and the rear piece on track 1703, requiring the train to double. Willow Springs will load its portion of Z-CHISBD8 on track 1713 (behind the rear cut of the San Bern).

McCormack, the hub manager, was

21:50



Its setout complete, the Albuquerque train leaves Willow Springs to head to Chicago's Corwith Yard with 27 containers.

hoping to use the equipment from a “baretable” (empty flatcars) train stored at Chilli-cothe, Ill., 113 miles west. It's one of six baretables destined to Willow Springs to feed the late-week surge of business. But the train's planned afternoon arrival has been set back. So McCormack and Griffin agree to have the yard switcher pull empties from storage track 1601 to spot on 1702-1712. That's done by 6:45, and the loading begins, with FedEx trailers arriving every 60 seconds or so.

At 7:20, Griffin checks his computer and tells McCormack: “Corwith's coming out big on the San Bern. Nothing major, but he's big.” Sure enough, a few minutes later four General Electric locomotives and 32 double-stack containers (most belonging to J.B. Hunt Transport) roll by on the main track. “He's super-early,” remarks McCormack,

UNITED PARCEL ACCOUNTS FOR 40 PERCENT OF THE 500,000 LIFTS PER YEAR AT WILLOW SPRINGS

who consults with Pac Rail's John Pilat. Given that the Corwith fill is longer than expected, will some trailers have to wait for the second train? “It won't be pretty,” Pilat replies, but they should all fit within the 8,000-foot limit. Nearly an hour goes by before the TTX car inspectors release track 1702 and allow the Corwith section to back onto the first part of its train.

As the clock ticks toward 9, the last trailers are hoisted onto flatcars on track 1712, and the San Bern shoves back to attach the cars. Meanwhile, a baretable train from Memphis, Tenn., with almost a mile of empty trailer flats comes in on tracks 1704-1714 at 9:08 p.m. These cars will be loaded and heading west before dawn. At 9:15, the San Bern pulls forward, then backs against its rear cut on 1703. Now the entire 7,934-foot train is in one piece (116 Willow Springs trailers, plus those 32 containers from Corwith). While it performs an air-brake test, once-a-week Z-ABQWSP9 tiptoes into the yard at 9:32 from Albuquerque, N.M., with 12 locomotives (only a few of them running) and a modest-sized train of nine containers and 28 trailers for Willow Springs, plus 27 containers for Corwith.

Like clockwork, just as the San Bern

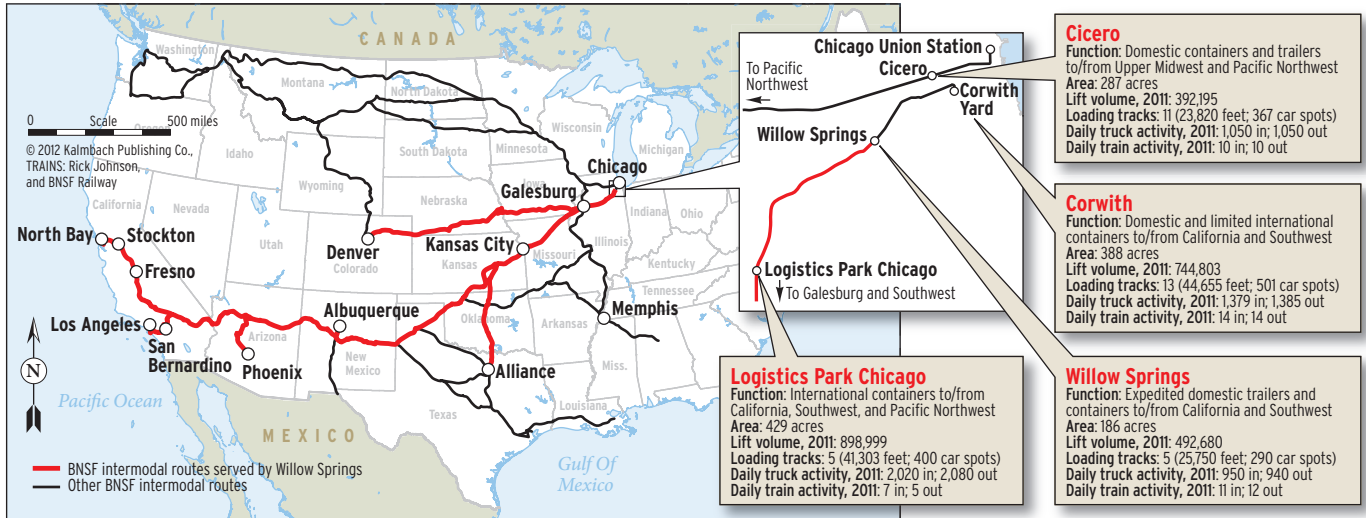
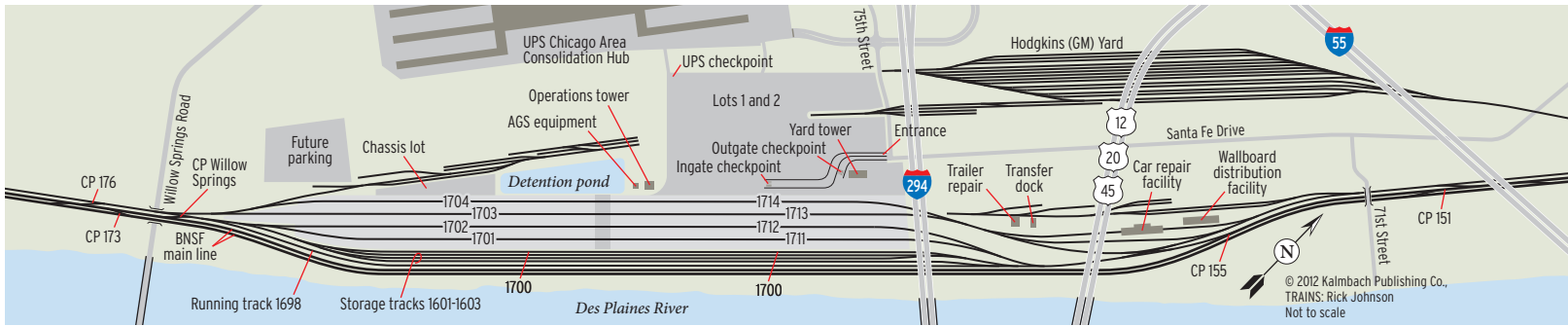
clears the terminal, the locomotives and front cut of the Shy Spud roll by at 9:50, stop west of CP 176, and wait for word to back in. Its cars are ready to go, and the crane operators and groundsmen are heading in for the 10 p.m. shift change. Just in time, too, because the skies, which had been pregnant with lightning all evening, let loose a blinding wall of rain that will continue, in fits and starts, all night. By 10:45, Z-CHISBD8 is put together on track 1713. “You may proceed when ready,” the TTX air-brake inspector radios the engineer, and off it goes, 45 minutes ahead of the game.

Now the yard is quiet, but Griffin cautions you not to get lulled by the calm. He's busy finalizing a plan for the third-shift yard switcher that will get the early morning westbounds out of Willow Springs ahead of schedule. “On Thursday, the inbounds come heavy,” Griffin says. “One slipup on Wednesday night can throw off the plan for the whole Thursday. These are the days that will make or break you.” McCormack, meanwhile, checks the loads on hand for the next train out, 4½ hours from now to Northern California. “The thing with Willow Springs is, everything has to go,” he says. “If you're expecting 80 cars and you get



United Parcel Service's CACH facility. UPS

WILLOW SPRINGS AND BNSF RAILWAY'S INTERMODAL NETWORK



Hostlers bring trailers trackside for NBYS.

120, you have to be ready. You have to watch the volumes as they trickle through the gate." So far, he's got 61 trailers for the Fresno block, 71 for Stockton, and one for North Bay. "That's pretty normal," he says, "but if we were to go up to 90 or 100, I'd have to be making some changes right now."

Each incoming trailer has its picture taken at the gate. While gate checkers study the photos for equipment damage, an optical scanner matches the trailer number with its customer data. UPS will drive its loads right to the tracks, but other rigs deposit their vans in Lot 2, where hostlers retrieve them for loading. (Almost everything arriving by rail is picked up trackside by truckers.)

DAWN

Without Joe Nash, there might not be a Willow Springs today. He was Santa Fe Rail-

way's director of intermodal business development, which is to say United Parcel Service chaser. Nash was present when the first UPS trailer ran on the Santa Fe in the early 1970s. When UPS was preparing to establish routes to West Coast cities via Union Pacific, he was there again to talk UPS out of that nonsense and persuade it to route most of its West Coast business via his railroad.

Then in the late 1980s, UPS began scouting for land to build a super-sized sorting center somewhere in the Chicago area to handle not just local packages but ones from the Atlantic and Pacific coasts as well. The idea was, sort it once, for the final destination. "They needed a big building, with lots of space," Nash says, in a classic understatement. And he knew just where to take United Parcel. General Motors had announced it would close its gigantic Fisher Body plant in Hodgkins, Ill. The huge structure stood right next door to the Santa Fe main line in Willow Springs (imagine that).

Nash sold the idea of using the GM building twice, once to UPS and once to his own railroad, because this business came with a price: Santa Fe had to build a new intermodal terminal right beside the UPS facility. Willow Springs saw its first train on Aug. 8, 1994. Budgeted for \$40 million, it ended up costing Santa Fe \$73 million — by today's standards, still a bargain. The UPS Chicago Area Consolidation Hub opened



The final boxes from UPS's sunrise sort make their way through the CACH.

06:24



Corwith baretables follow arriving Z-PHXWSP9 east at CP 176 in morning fog.

the following year. By then Nash had been retired six years.

United Parcel accounts for 40 percent of the 500,000 lifts per year at Willow Springs. Now, during the UPS sunrise sort, you get your chance to see what goes on inside this humongous facility. In a few words, it is hot, muggy, noisy beyond imagination, and endless almost beyond understanding. Your guide, Tracy Koblich, says its outside circumference is 3.1 miles. Were you to stand the building on its end, she says, it would be twice the height of Willis Tower (formerly called Sears Tower), the tallest building in North America. Inside are 65 miles of conveyors and rollers that guide roughly 1.4 million packages a day to their designated outbound truck bay (for large parcels) or delivery sack (small parcels). Amazingly, once an arriving package is deposited on a belt, it takes as little as 10 minutes to go through the building to an outbound truck bay.

The 3:30 to 7:50 a.m. sunrise sort is one of four weekday sorting windows at CACH, and BNSF's Willow Springs trains are scheduled around those sorts. Leaving CACH, you are torn between two feelings. You couldn't wait to see what it's like, and now you are in no hurry to go back.

MORNING

You watched 6,742-foot Z-WSPNBY8 leave for North Bay, United Parcel's San

Francisco area sort center near Richmond, Calif., at 3:10 a.m., and a much briefer Z-WSPKCK9 (only 27 trailers and containers) head for Kansas City at 4:50, both nicely ahead of schedule. The brightening sky at 5:30 reveals an empty terminal, except for a long string of trailer flats on tracks 1702-1712 that will become the 11 a.m. Z-NYCLAC7 to Los Angeles (a 7 means a noncritical arrival day, i.e., the weekend).

But an onslaught is headed your way: six inbound trains (including a delivery of hot cars from Norfolk Southern) before noon, during which time the terminal also has to dispatch two westbound Z trains. The first of those inbound, Z-SBDWSP6 from San Bernardino, noses its way into tracks 1701-1711 at 6:16 a.m. to drop off 47 trailers.

Now a new cast of characters occupies the tower's third floor. Hub manager Guy Shively (who goes by Tony) replaces David McCormack, and day trainmaster Nick Kelly relieves Fernando Griffin. At the Pac Rail desk, Geraldine Davis takes over from John Pilat. Plus, trainmaster Shawn Pambianco arrives to break in as Kelly's replacement (Kelly having been promoted to division trainmaster at Eola Yard in Aurora, Ill.). Smitty (you never learn his full name) shows up at the TTX desk. Shively is on the phone with the Pac Rail ramp supervisor: "Looks like a busy Thursday, as usual. The Phoenix is 33 cars. We're going to bring him

06:57



NS IS TRYING TO DELIVER THAT TRAIN OF BARETABLES, 6,700 FEET. WE'VE GOT NOWHERE TO PUT IT.

06:58

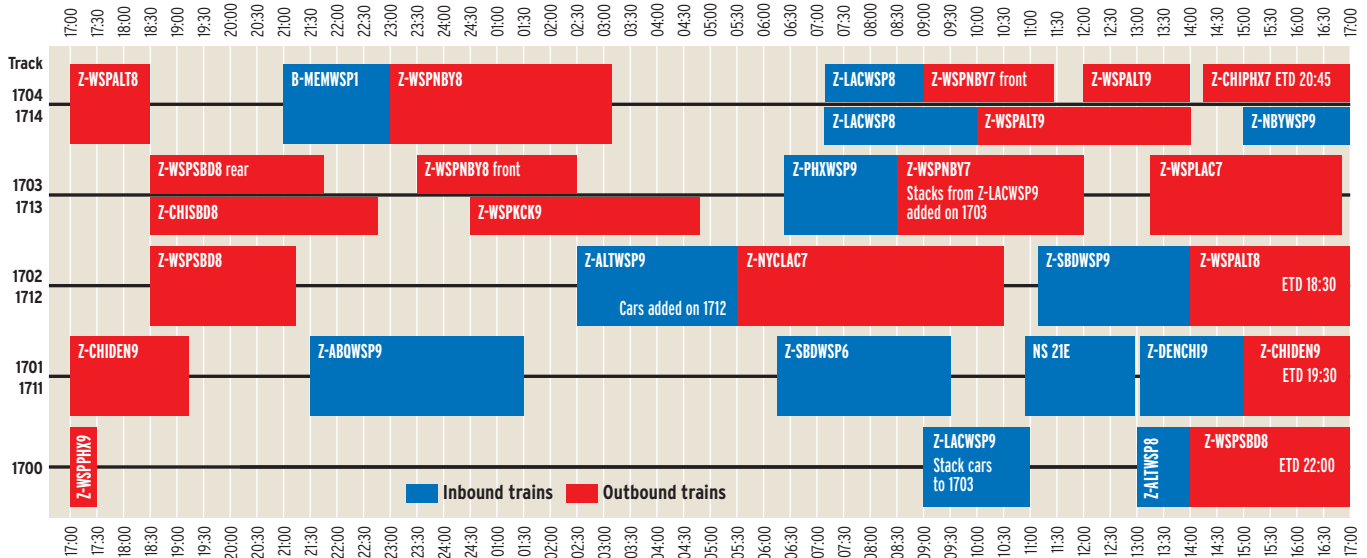


Guy Shively and crew. Two photos, Fred W. Frailey

into 3 and 13, and drop him in a hurry to get to the LA8. It's an inbound day here."

By 6:20 vans are already being positioned trackside for Z-NYCLAC7, which doesn't leave for another 4 hours. Minutes later you see Z-PHXWSP9 ease into tracks 1703-1713. A Mi-Jack crane is waiting to pick off its trailers so the cars can quickly be moved out to make room for another inbound. Kevin Rainey, the terminal manager and top operations person in the yard, comes in. "It's going to be a challenging day," Shively tells him. "Lightning took the signals out at Corwith, so getting trains past there is a problem." Rainey delivers bad news of his own: "NS is trying to deliver that train of baretables, 6,700 feet. We asked them to come at 2 this afternoon. We've got nowhere to put it."

FEW IDLE MOMENTS: TRACK OCCUPANCY AT WILLOW SPRINGS OVER 24 HOURS



Just before 7 a.m., Shively clicks the mouse at his desk and says to Smitty: “I just put Plan A in your in-box. Look for mistakes, please.” At 7:10, Z-LACWSP8, the first of two big trains from Los Angeles (LA9 is 2 hours behind), arrives with eight locomotives and an all-trailer consist. Shively hardly notices. He’s on the system intermodal conference call, and his turn to report has come: “We have 761 units inbound the next 24 hours. Two of the six baretable trains are in. All of our inbounds will operate direct to spot [not be held out].”

Mi-Jacks grab hold of the LA8. As quickly as a trailer is grounded, a UPS tractor backs against it and runs toward the CACH, to make the sunrise sort before it ends.

With his conference call over, you ask Shively to explain Plan A for the day. It’s not so much his creation as the culmination of informal planning sessions between McCormack and Griffin from the previous shift, with Shively’s alterations to deal with changing circumstances. The goal, Shively explains, is to find places for the inbound trains while making room to load the outbounds as scheduled. The best way to do this, he says, is to build a westbound train with equipment that just got unloaded from an eastbound train. “Our flatcar mix to and from L.A. and Denver, for example, is consistent in both directions. Therefore, we try to turn these trains back the way they came



The remote-control yard job pulls empty flatcars at the east end of Willow Springs.

to minimize switching,” he says.

Shively’s plan for each track, from now into the evening hours, will have most of the inbound trains turn as outbounds on the same track. If nothing goes wrong (and when does anything *ever* go wrong on a railroad?), there will be a place for every arriving train, plus room to build the outbounds. And as the day rolls on, you marvel: It works! To give credit where it’s due,

BNSF has software, developed by its intermodal people, that helps hub managers create complex plans of this sort.

You only have one question: Plan A has a track set aside for Norfolk Southern’s “Mail 9” to Willow Springs. But what is Mail 9? Shively grins: “Conrail called it that.” Even though Conrail was split apart in 1999, most people here still use the old name for successor NS’s modern incarna-

QUIZ: WHAT DO MI-JACK CRANES LACK? ANSWER: BRAKES. THEY'RE SO TOP-HEAVY THAT A SUDDEN STOP COULD TOPPLE THEM.

11:48



Its Willow Springs setout complete, eastbound Z-SBDWSP9 departs the yard and heads for Corwith, passing a westbound near CP 151.

WHEN BNSF PLAYS SANTA CLAUS

At no time is Willow Springs more under the gun than from the Monday after Thanksgiving until the last United Parcel Service sort before Christmas — “peak season,” when UPS processes packages at top volume and sends its stuffed trailers over to BNSF Railway, which is committed to providing perfect service. A wild and crazy time?

“Actually, no,” says Leatrice Taylor, BNSF’s senior hub manager at Willow Springs. “We don’t work differently. Peak season for Willow Springs is the same as every other day.” Volume at the terminal during December rises almost 15 percent from the average of 41,000 lifts a month, but it’s all absorbed by the regular roster of Z trains, save for one added eastbound train.

In fact, absent winter storms or derailments, peak season is the best month of the year to run trains over BNSF. That’s because capital maintenance is suspended in December on all UPS routes. There should be no work curfews or maintenance slow orders whatsoever. Moreover, train volume drops off a bit during December. These factors make schedules easier to meet.

If all else fails and UPS loads are in danger of missing a sort, BNSF will part the waters, to the point of “straightlining” a late train so that it never has to go through a turnout, and thus slow down. In the event an intermodal car is set out en route, the railroad has been known to make repairs and chase the original train with a one-car extra section. — Fred W. Frailey

tion. “It has no U.S. mail anymore, either,” Shively adds. NS’s symbol for the train is 21E, originating in Morrisville, Pa., with a pickup at NS’s intermodal mixing center in Harrisburg, Pa. “Some of the train is for the UPS sort next door,” Shively says. “The rest we’ll unload and put on the Z-NYCLAC7 and perhaps other trains. Then when it’s unloaded, NS will head back east with the empties.” Speaking of misnamed trains, BNSF’s Z-NYCLAC train doesn’t originate in New York City, as its symbol implies, but gets its name from some of the trailers reloaded from Mail 9 ... make that 21E.

LATE MORNING

You go downstairs in the tower to visit Leatrice Taylor, senior manager of hub operations at Willow Springs, and her boss,



Leatrice Taylor, senior hub manager.

John Clement Jr., the regional director of hub and facility operations, who oversees all four Chicago terminals. Taylor defines the word “overachiever.” Raised in Chicago, she enlisted in the Navy at age 17, and upon being discharged was asked by a friend, who worked for Chicago & North Western, whether she had considered working for a railroad. Two weeks later she was a Burlington Northern trainee conductor. From there she became a yardmaster, locomotive engineer, and trainmaster in the operating department, then transferred 11 years ago to the intermodal business unit. She has run Willow Springs since September 2011.

How do you decide lengths for each train in advance, you ask. “We rarely leave anything behind,” she says. “We look at our historical data. Each day of the week tends to repeat itself. It usually doesn’t vary too much — at the most two to five cars. We know what we do for each train each day of the week going back weeks and months. We talk to UPS, but only to ask about container volume.”

What’s most stressful about her job? “The timing. Everything is important to us here. So when you have heavy inbound trains arrive, not only do you want to meet the expectations of those customers, but you also want to get the equipment cleared, so you can load the next train out on that track. So what’s most stressful is coming up with a

balance that keeps everything on time.”

That balance became more difficult to achieve on Sept. 1, 2011, when UPS began replacing its trailers with white 53-foot containers. Until then, Willow Springs had been 99 percent trailers. Now containers account for one of every five lifts. (J.B. Hunt also delivers a handful of containers daily, but only for trains to Denver and Phoenix.) “Trailers require only one move to load and unload,” Taylor says. “Now [with containers] we have to spot chassis beside the train. Plus, a train may come in with 20 cars of conventional [trailers] and 20 of stacks, but if we turn the equipment, going out we may need 40 conventionals and no stacks. This causes more switching, creates more complexities.”

The conversation turns to baretable trains. What’s up with six of them streaming into Willow Springs last night, today, and Friday? “It’s amazing how fast we use the cars,” Taylor replies. She says the yard tries to keep at least 8,000 feet of empty double-stack cars on hand, and almost twice that length in trailer flatcars. Come Sunday and Monday, Willow Springs will actually send out baretables accumulated from a weekend of mostly inbound traffic. BNSF’s three other Chicago intermodal hubs perform similar balancing acts. John Clement breaks down each terminal’s function for you: Willow Springs is all premium-priced, expedited business, primarily for UPS and scheduled



Four GE locomotives stand by while the crew attaches the front portion of train Z-WSPLAC7. It will be on its way to L.A. at 4:55 p.m.

less-than-truckload carriers. Logistics Park Chicago, west of Joliet on the former Santa Fe to L.A., is 100 percent international containers, even for trains to the Pacific Northwest, which first run west to Galesburg, Ill., then turn north. The business mix at Chicago's Corwith Yard is 80 percent domestic, 20 percent international. Crews for all three terminals go on duty at Corwith. Finally, Cicero, located on former Burlington Northern trackage, handles both expedited trailers and domestic double-stack traffic for Minneapolis-St. Paul and the Pacific Northwest. This includes UPS business, which is trucked over from the CACH.

AFTERNOON

Well, so much for Plan A. You go back upstairs to discover that the deck had to be reshuffled. The yard switcher (a remote-control assignment with two leased EMD GP38-2s and a former BN GP25) couldn't get a signal to clear the Phoenix cars off tracks 1703-1713, owing to congestion east of Willow Springs. That meant Z-LAC-WSP9 needed a new berth, and this affected where and how outbound Z-WSPNB7 to North Bay would be assembled. But Shively drew up a new plan and so far, so good.

The inbound arrivals have been relentless: the LA9 at 8:58 a.m., Norfolk Southern's 21E (Mail 9) at 10:50, Z-SBDWSP9

from San Bernardino at 11:10 a.m., Z-ALT-WSP8 from Fort Worth at 12:58 p.m., and Z-DENCHI9 from Denver at 1:17 p.m. In the midst of all this, Z-NYCLAC7 slipped out of town ahead of its 11 o'clock schedule, and the North Bay train left on time at noon. Two hours, 10 minutes later, train Z-WSPALT9, with a long string of double-stacks from Corwith, highballs for Fort Worth, 5 minutes to the good.

You peer out the window at 3 p.m. Willow Springs is going full tilt: Train Z-WSP-SBD8 for San Bernardino (due out at 10 p.m.) waits to load on track 1700 with cars that turned from Z-ALTWSP8. The Z-CHIDEN9 for Denver (7:30 p.m.) waits on tracks 1701-1711 with equipment from Z-DENCHI9. Z-WSPALT8 for Fort Worth (6:30 p.m.) is on 1702-1712 with the cars that came in on Z-SBDWSP9 from San Bernardino. Z-WSPLAC7 for Los Angeles (5 p.m.), almost all UPS loads today, occupies 1703-1713 with empties off a storage track. And Z-CHIPHX7 for Phoenix (8:45 p.m.) is on 1704-1714 with the inbound cars from Z-NBYWSP9, which showed up a few minutes ago. It's the last eastbound arrival until 8 tonight. (Well, not quite. An oddball "reposition" train is coming in from Denver, carrying empty trailers for UPS, Hunt, and LTL truckers. When it shows up, there will be nowhere to stow it but storage track 1602.)

At the Pacific Rail desk, Geraldine Davis assigns incoming trailers to their spots on Z-WSPLAC7, the next train out. She started railroading for the Burlington Route in 1969, making her the senior person at Willow Springs in terms of experience. On the table between Davis and Kelly, Taylor lays out the afternoon's snacks: grapes, popcorn, popsicles, and ice cream cakes. "When I worked at Corwith with Leatrice," Shively says, "it was crazy. She'd bring us hamburgers for breakfast." The pile of food diminishes steadily as the afternoon ticks by.

Your time at Willow Springs is drawing to a close. You go trackside with Taylor, to the west end. Z-WSPLAC7's power from Corwith waits clear of CP 176 for a signal to back up. A Mi-Jack moves to and fro, like a mother hen. (Quiz: What do Mi-Jack cranes lack? Answer: Brakes. They're so top-heavy that a sudden stop could topple them.) At 4:24 p.m. the last container is plopped onto the train, a blue flag derail comes down, and the locomotives, four of GE's finest, back against the train. It slips away a few minutes shy of 5 o'clock.

Today, the yard met all of its customer commitments. Tomorrow will be an even bigger challenge as the weekly business cycle reaches its peak. Do you care to guess whether the men and women of Willow Springs are up to it? **I**