

WINTER ON THE RAILS

The beauty and complexity
of snowy railroad operations





Fifty below at North Pole

When winter strikes the Alaska Railroad, and the temperature drops well below zero, nothing wants to move — except the falling mercury.

Story and photos by Art Chase



Our cold is like very few places on earth. In 30 seconds your face and hands already sting. Breathing takes on a new challenge. It hurts ... and don't breathe deep. Surfaces are so cold that touching them brings instant frostbite.

Light — all three hours of it — is a precious commodity. Little things that are usually taken for granted become cherished and coveted: A working heater at home, a septic system that doesn't fail, just being able to get the mail — things most folks don't even think about. But to those of us in Alaska's interior, each small accomplishment counts as a major victory when winter sets in. Railroadng isn't any different.

From my little chunk of the great land, I can hear the chant of EMDs long before they get to North Pole. "North Pole." A sleepy little hamlet, 15 miles down the Eielson Branch from Fairbanks on the Alaska Railroad. Nothing changes here. We have the Santa Claus House to draw in the many visitors who pass through. Military bases

on both sides of town provide employment for GIs and airmen. It's quiet and friendly. And in the eight months of winter, there's the cold. It is part of everything we do up here. Some people think it's cold year round. To outsiders, it probably is. We see a lot of coats on folks even in the summer.

But to us, cold is when the thermometer drops below zero. Yeah, zero. I like zero. It means that the truck is still going to run OK, and a light jacket or good windbreaker and sweater will do. I start my complaining when the temps drop past 20 below.

But then I'll hear the sound of diesel horns making their way through Fort Wainwright, 10 miles from North Pole. In the cold, the sound carries far. I'll have about 20 minutes to get in place. And the complaining, whether at home or at work, changes to an appeal. It goes like this: "Can I break away from the office for the rest of the day? Train's running late." Or "Honey, I have to run some errands."

The looks are always the same — it's too cold to be out there.



It's 50 below on Jan. 18, 2004 (main photo) as an empty oil train arrives at North Pole, Alaska. Conductor "B.J." braves the sub-zero weather on Jan. 19, 2005 (inset).



It's not the 45-below temperature that has a dog and its owner frozen in their tracks, but rather, a train of empties arriving in North Pole.



On cold days, locomotives idle in notch 3 to keep enough heat in the engines. Two GP40-2s hold at Chapados siding on Dec. 27, 2003.



A train waits by the refinery as air slowly pumps through the brake pipe on Jan. 10, 2004.

Where earth stands hard as iron

When trains leave Fairbanks bound for North Pole, they amble through neighborhoods, cut through an army base, and stroll across open tundra. It's not a speedy jaunt, and there are crossings, curves, and snowmobiles to contend with. Every year maintenance crews have to clear birch scrubs from the right-of-way owing to their rapid growth in the midnight sun. In winter, track that's laid on permafrost wiggles like two strings of licorice resting on top of Jell-O! The branch has a limit of 15 mph. At that speed, tank cars wobble but they don't fall down.

North Pole might be a little ice cube in this great big freezer, but it's home to the Flint Hills Resources refinery, the state's largest oil refinery and Alaska Railroad's largest customer. The track here isn't going to fascinate many people — just a simple siding that once served the town freight station. Nearby is Chapados, a $\frac{3}{4}$ -mile passing track parallel to the refinery where locomotives run

around their train. Once accomplished, the engines will drag the train back through North Pole, then gently, maybe reluctantly, shove the cars backward into the refinery. The move itself is uneventful, but to watch it in the grip of winter is amazing. The switch into the refinery is pretty sharp, and the rail is literally worn out each year from heavy use and the extreme weather. Slivers of steel are peeled right off the railhead! The sound of bitterly cold steel wheels on bitterly cold rail compares to the ice cracking when the Yukon River starts to flow each spring.

It's a defining moment when the train arrives in North Pole. The branch runs right through the heart of town, and I like to think maybe a railfan or two has been born while waiting for those cold cans to creep by. It might have even sparked a Christmas wish or two for a famous guy who lives here.

Train-watching takes on a whole new dimension in winter. You hope and pray that your truck has no problems — that the

square tires will thaw out enough to get you to the tracks, and that your engine will generate enough heat to make it into the cab, or that your fuel won't turn to gel and fail to flow. Before I leave the house, I let my wife know where I'm going, and I make sure I can survive should things get bad: Bunny Boots, two pairs of gloves, a parka, a couple of blankets, extra batteries for the camera, and my Carhartts — I don't go anywhere without that insulated canvas workwear. If the railroad men can wear 'em and get the job done, so can I!

At 20 below, you can last a while in the cold. At 40 below, it can be deadly. When it's colder than 50 below, life is just plain hard. Ice fog will form and make the air so heavy that light is sucked up completely. Day is turned to night; you're not even sure of the time. But the rewards are something else. The colors are exciting. Dull surfaces suddenly brighten up. Oranges are deeper, and purples dance on the edges of the sky.



The squeal is loud and constant as a train backs around the tight curve into the Flint Hills refinery. Ice fog forms in the distance.



Four layers of clothing is the norm for train crews working the North Pole turn in winter. Throwing switches and clearing snow from the tracks can tax even the hardest crew member. But the train's cargo of oil is vital, both to the railroad and the people of Alaska.

Big diesels, precious black gold

When the ice fog is thick, the railroad places flares at crossings to alert already-frazzled drivers. The locomotives sound more like ships at sea, foghorns warning of the oncoming mass. The blast of that sound has an eerie crispness that seems to want to crack the cold in defiance. Exhaust from the diesels lingers in the air, and condensation gives the effect of steam. Suddenly in my mind's eye, I can see United States Railway Administration Consolidations lugging freight and coal through town on the way to Eielson. In the '80s, I remember watching a pair of GP9s struggle to move two 100-ton tank cars that had been sitting in 60-below cold for a few days. Anywhere warm, it wouldn't have taxed the prime movers. But when the cold has soaked through steel, nothing wants to move. Nothing — except the falling mercury.

Oil cans make up most of the events on the Eielson Branch. Two trains a day shuttle from Fairbanks to North Pole and back, swapping empty cuts of tank cars for loads at the refinery. In the winter, one train will usually run in some kind of daylight. (In the summer, it's light out 24 hours a day.) Coal trains are unpredictable, but run more fre-



Alaska SD70MAC 4011, *Spirit of Denali* (the name is stenciled on the side of the locomotive's nose), leaves North Pole with an oil train on Jan. 19, 2005. Approaching the Peridot Road crossing, the sound of the air horns will carry up to 10 miles in the 29-below air.

quently in winter, headed to Eielson Air Force Base. Up until 2004, Alaska Railroad had been using GP38-2s, GP40-2s, and GP49s exclusively on the branch (and 10 years before then, first-generation Geeps and some of Alaska's original F units). Two units usually did the job, although sometimes the railroad would throw on three.

Of late, about half of the oil trains have been running with SD70MACs. At first they seemed so out of place. Large, new, and very quiet. Two MACs will easily handle a train, even when the temps fall to 58 below, as they do in January and February. Sixteen MACs came to Alaska back in 2000 and another eight in 2004. The original fears that the branch couldn't handle them were put to rest in September 2003 when unit 4015, the *Spirit of North Pole*, made a dedication voyage to her namesake city. She pulled a special train that carried half of North Pole's residents on some of the railroad's new double-deck cars out to a flood project bridge. Passenger cars hadn't run on the branch in many years. The 4015 even got her own sign dedicated at the city park.

Even with the MACs, a crew's biggest challenge remains getting the oil cans to cooperate in subzero weather. Air lines leak, brake shoes freeze, and retainers won't set up. On especially cold days, or when the trains are longer than usual, the railroad doubles up and runs with DPUs — with one or two engines on the back assisting the two or three up front. This helps keeps the air constant through the train "to the tropics," as we like to say.



A city sign pays tribute to SD70MAC 4015, named for North Pole. The Big Dipper appears on all MACs.

The importance of these trains cannot be measured just by counting the cars. Oil is lifeblood for Alaska. The black gold is pumped out of the state's North Slope. To get to North Pole, it travels almost 450 miles in the Trans-Alaska Pipeline. The folks at the refinery will tap this artery and process enough crude to fill a couple of trains a day. Usually 60 or so cars make up a train. A train crew in more temperate climates could switch the refinery quickly, but it easily takes a couple of hours in the darkness that enshrouds our long winter nights. Clearing ice and snow from the switches, or walking a

long train in deep snow, will sap the energy from a brakeman. Heavy work clothes make movement a regular workout. The turn from Fairbanks to North Pole and back will take a crew its full 12 hours to work. In the winter, that can be a really long day.

Once the two daily oil trains have arrived back in Fairbanks, they are combined and head south to Anchorage. Their precious loads will go to fuel jetliners, heat homes, and propel cars working off square tires. The business is vital to the railroad, too; it gets about one-third of its total revenue from hauling petroleum products.



In subzero weather, diesel exhaust condenses, and two SD70MACs conjure images of the 2-8-0s that once worked the branch.



The broom lodged in the snow will be put to good use by the crew switching cuts of tank cars on Jan. 1, 2004. In the cold and low light, the flat black oil cans come alive.

These magic moments

Around the winter solstice, the sun doesn't rise more than 10 degrees above the horizon. If the weather is clear, the only 3½ hours of light are tinged with the vibrant golds, oranges, and purples of a combined sunrise and sunset.

On those special occasions when things go right, and all the elements come together, you can create images that make you forget about the frozen fingers, stinging eyes, and numb toes. Sometimes you can't help but mess up a shot because there is no way to avoid the shivering. I've lost count of the number of times that I have frostbit my hands, toes, feet, nose, and cheeks. Then there was the time I froze my ears



The sun breaks the horizon just as the noon oil train arrives in town on Dec. 20, 2005.



The low sun shines a beam of light down the train's long string of tank cars.

On another 50-below day, two GP40-2s on an empty coal train hold at Chapados for a meet with the oil cans. It's high noon on Jan. 18, 2004, and ice crystals in the frigid air will soon turn to fog, blocking the sun.

solid. That meant two weeks without trains. (Still have the ears.)

But invariably, the urge to venture out becomes irresistible. If I'm lucky, I'll come home with that one image that makes it all worth it. I share it with those who think I'm crazy. Even they admit that it is "cool."

Crews make their trips, wave, and smile. I know they are probably having a few

laughs at my expense. One time the snow was chest deep when I caught a coal train leaving North Pole. It was 43 below zero, but with the engines loaded up, the exhaust was spellbinding. I had only my coat, and just enough time to pull to the side of the road, hop out of the truck, and take the picture. I dove into the snow. It went up my pant legs, under my jacket, and down in my shoes, stinging almost as much as the excitement of capturing the moment.

On a winter day in 2005, I was on my lunch break and decided to venture over to the Fairbanks yard to see what was going on. It was 54 below zero. The sun slipped above the horizon and threw pinks all over

the frost-lined tracks when some SD70MACs pulled into the southbound yard lead. I was shaking terribly.

Eighteen shots later, I captured the "one." My frostbit fingers hurt — really hurt — for two days. Guess I'd better wear gloves next time. **I**

ART CHASE works for the Federal Aviation Administration as a senior technician, maintaining and certifying ground instrument landing systems across the state of Alaska. He served as a volunteer fireman on the Heber Valley Railroad in the "lower 48," and in 2006 was chosen by the Alaska Railroad to create its annual painting.

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Railroading to



When you go railroading, you spend time at many terminals, some memorable and some not. I've been a Canadian National prairie railroader for the better part of 26 years, but my favorite job was on the lonely tundra in the province of Manitoba. For almost seven years as a trainman, conductor, and engineer, I was a Hudson Bay railroader. Let me tell you about this railroad that became as much a part of me as I was once a part of it.

the Arctic

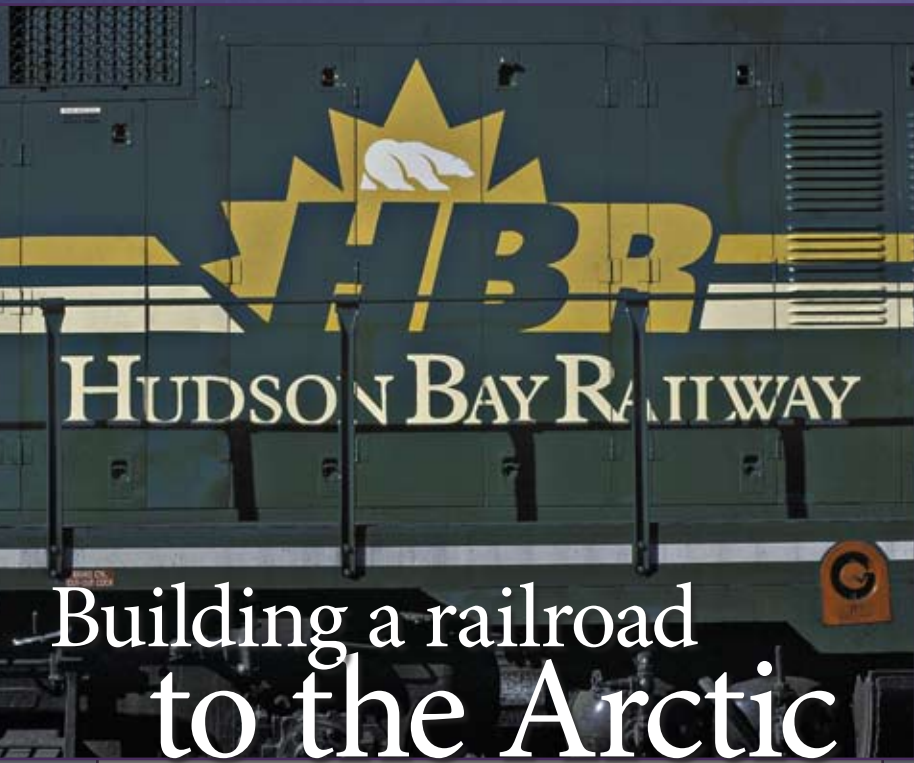
Life on Canada's spellbinder: the Hudson Bay Railway

STORY AND PHOTOS BY MARK A. PERRY

'Highball No. 294'

At 8:38, it is a sub-zero January 1986 morning at the station in Churchill. Inside, the agent is selling last-minute tickets to Native Canadian hunters who want to be dropped off at their trap line at milepost 419. Heavily bundled-up carmen are walking train No. 294's 14 cars, performing an air-brake test. On the head end, the engineman and brakeman are winterizing the cab of their breezy GP9 with cardboard and duct tape. In the caboose, the veteran conductor has the oil stoves burning in anticipation of cooking

breakfast upon departure. One elderly female passenger has already settled into her wooden, hard-backed seat in the heavy-weight combine, looking forward to a journey to visit her daughter-in-law in a distant section town. With all of the assigned tasks completed, conductor Dunc Kabel switches on the marker lights and yells over the radio, "Highball, No. 294." The mixed train departs southward for a tedious trek across the tundra. It's another Wednesday morning on the Hudson Bay Railway.



Building a railroad to the Arctic

The dream of early 20th century politicians, farmers, and grain companies, the Hudson Bay Railway has become one of the last little-known gems of Canadian railroading. Built to bring together the export grains of Canadian prairies with lucrative European markets, the Hudson Bay Railway wound up becoming a lifeline and a way of life for the people of an entire territory.

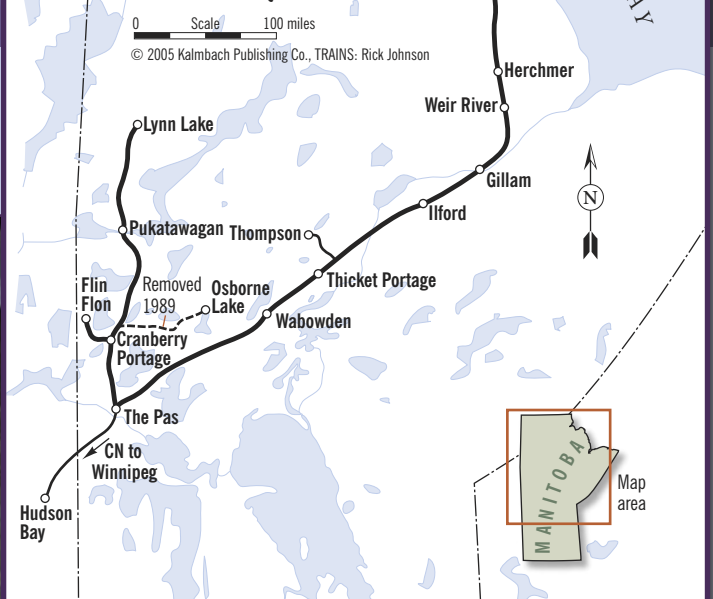
Despite high hopes for the railway, unforgiving politics have made the railway and its seaport of Churchill only marginally profitable and largely dependent on government subsidies.

At one point, the railway sat dormant with only 333 miles of track laid. Uncertainty over a port location, then World War I, and lack of interest by the parties involved stalled progress. As a reprieve, Canadian National Railway took over the uncompleted line in 1919 and finished spiking down the 510 miles of steel, from The Pas to the shores of the Arctic Ocean on the namesake bay. The determination of men like Hudson Bay Railway construction foreman Tommy Jack, who unceremoniously drove home a foil-covered last spike into a tie in Churchill on March 29, 1929, made the vision of so many a reality.

Canadian National operated the Hudson Bay Railway for almost 70 years, constructing some of the last Canadian branch lines built, to lucrative mining communities in northern Manitoba. Looking to scale back portions of its enormous network that were deemed unprofitable, CN in 1997 sold its controlling interest in the railway and seaport to American shortline conglomerate OmniTRAX. Soon, use of the long-dormant Hudson Bay Railway name resumed, along with green and yellow paint, a new polar bear and maple leaf emblem, and "HBR" initials. With this new start, talk has resumed about Churchill becoming a major shipping point.



Canada's Hudson Bay Railway

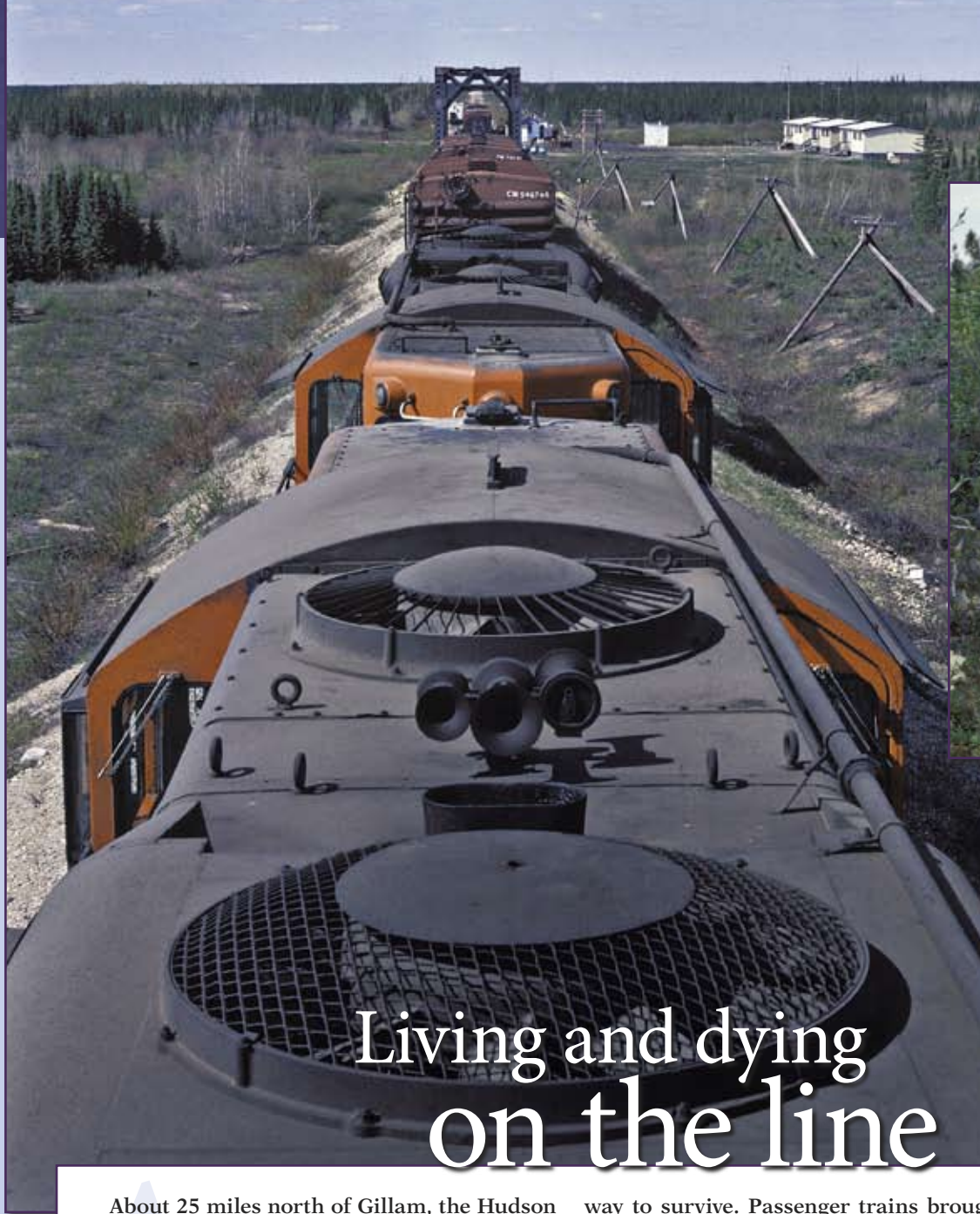


Monday morning at The Pas



The nerve center of today's Hudson Bay Railway lies along the banks of the Saskatchewan River in the town of The Pas (pah), a derivation of a native Cree word that means "wooded narrows." On a Monday morning in winter 2004, a yard goat makes passes on Pukatawagan-bound mixed No. 291's two combines in the coach yard, while Native Canadians load cardboard boxes of groceries and household goods into the waycar. VIA Rail's Churchill-bound train No. 693, the *Hudson Bay*, shares the platform. Carmen with torches try to thaw ice-encrusted brakeshoes on both trains, hoping to get them out on schedule. In the yard, ore train No. 991 awaits its turn to

depart for the northern mining community of Flin Flon. South of the depot, at the only active roundhouse in Manitoba, machinists and electricians try to get 291's diverse locomotive consist ready to come off the shop track. The five-stall structure has hosted notable locomotives such as Canadian Northern 2-8-0s, U.S. Army diesels in for cold-weather testing, custom-tailored CN Geeps, and today's ragtag fleet of ex-CN MLW M420s and reconditioned ex-Southern Pacific EMD refugees. The battered rails of the turntable leads have seen them all. In the two-story, cinder-block yard office, clerks process switch lists, while managers run the railway from their offices.



Living and dying on the line

About 25 miles north of Gillam, the Hudson Bay Railway begins its journey across the tundra, a land consisting of an unceasing layer of sloppy muskeg and swamps situated on top of permafrost. This is one of the most inhospitable terrains where man has constructed a railroad. In defiance to the quicksand-like qualities of the muskeg, three-legged telegraph poles, complete with green “H.B.R.”-embossed glass insulators, stand trackside. The section crews who maintain the line across the tundra are a resilient breed. For generations, Native Canadian section men and their families lived in three-house company communities at locations such as Weir River, Herchmer, and Mile 445. The section towns were isolated from the outside world in a land that has only three grade crossings in the 184 miles between Gillam and Churchill. These families counted on the rail-

way to survive. Passenger trains brought kids back from southern boarding schools and took them for summer holidays. The mixed trains brought fuel oil, food, and just about every other household item needed to make their solitude bearable. Motorcars carried men to work everyday, and, in emergencies, family members to faraway hospitals.

While many railroaders chose to leave the lonely tundra for more populated settlements, one soul has spent years on the secluded barren lands. He rests alone, memorialized in a fenced grave site, surrounded by scrub pine, a few hundred feet off the roadbed at mile 457. Employed on the initial track construction crews, the Polish man died two months shy of the rails reaching Churchill. Inscribed with penny nails, a weather-beaten cross reads: “HARRY HNATSCYN Died Jan. 29, 1929 RIP.”



Buffalo boxes

At dusk on a long summer evening in the town of Wabowden, operator Ernie Trach stands on the station platform inspecting a seemingly endless brown string of empty boxcars. He'll count 175 of them. For decades, because of appalling track conditions, the heaviest grain car permitted across the tundra was the 40-foot boxcar. Thousands upon thousands were assigned to carry the annual crop to Churchill. By the mid-1980s, with fleet numbers dwindling from age and neglect, Canadian National and the provincial government remedied the situation by rebuilding about 2,000 boxcars at CN's backshop in Winnipeg.

Railroaders soon dubbed the classic, friction-bearing cars "Buffaloes," because they gleamed in a snazzy new boxcar red scheme that featured the province of Manitoba's buffalo symbol. Still, the use of boxcars in grain service on the tundra, or anywhere else on the planet, was on its way out. At the close of the 20th century, hopper cars were trundling export grain to Churchill, and herds of the renovated Buffaloes, with barely 10 years of service behind them, were rounded up and sent to scrap.



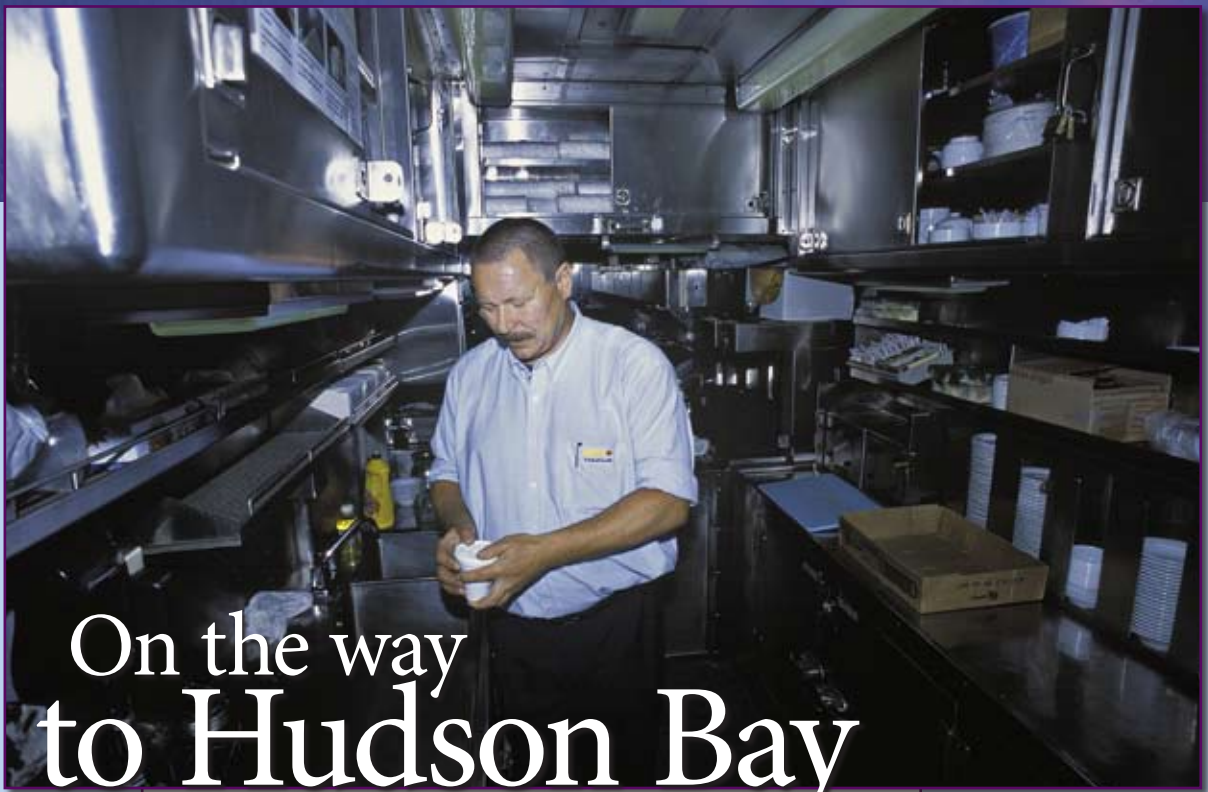
CN's 'Man of the North'

Gillam, an isolated division point at mile 326, has for years provided employment for hundreds of railroad-

ers furloughed elsewhere. In the last years that Canadian National operated the line, the yearly Churchill grain rush meant a flood of names on the station's big, red crew call board from July to October. Tack on a number of other seasonal employees such as carmen, laborers, sectionmen, bunkhouse attendants, operators, and engine watchmen, and the employee

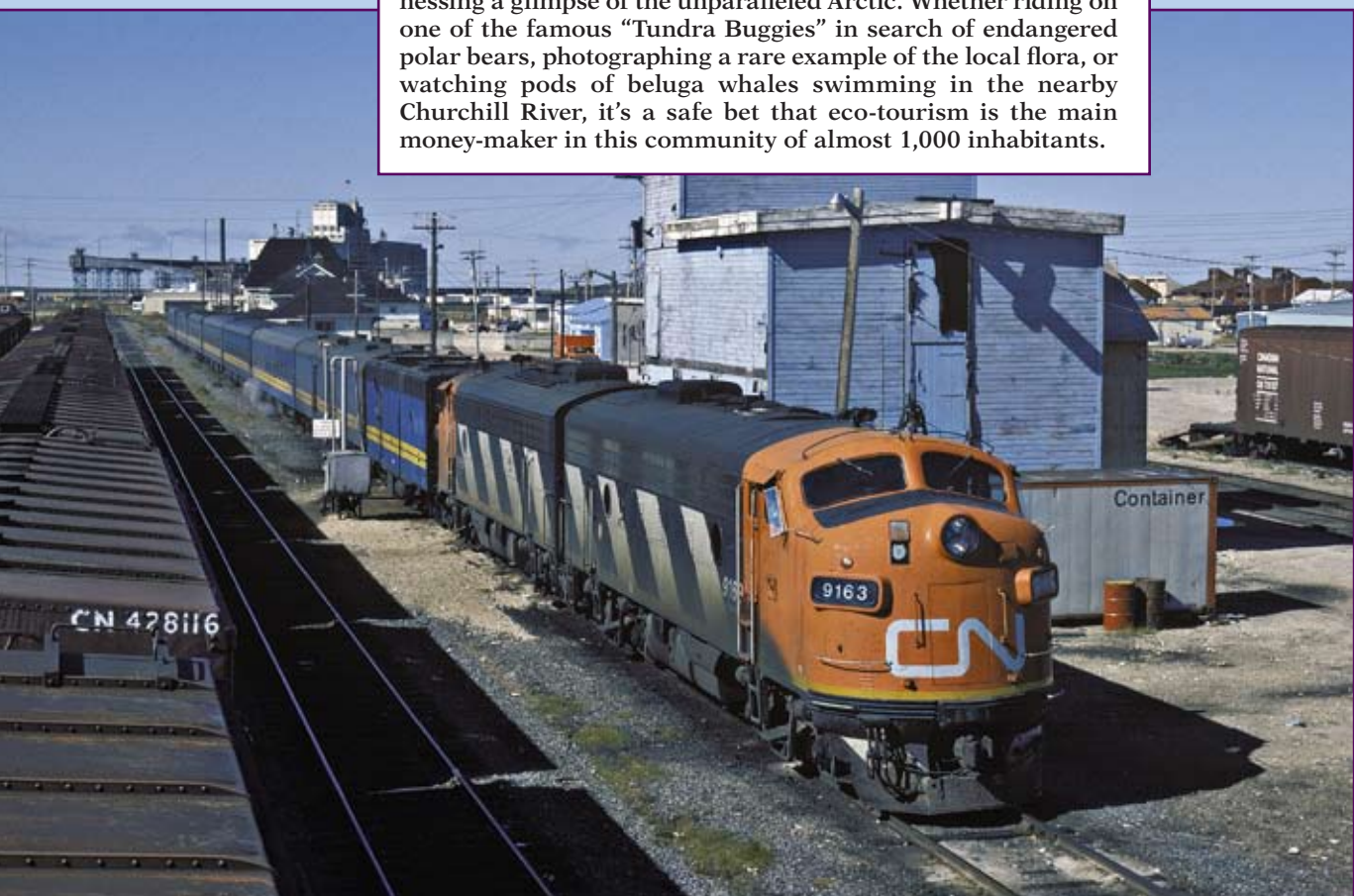
population in Gillam ballooned.

At the heart of it all, one man ran the show for almost 30 years. After booming around for a few years, Bob Semenchuk bid on the Gillam agent's job in 1967. Semenchuk's seniority got him the position when the bulletin closed on April 4. He never looked back. Semenchuk oversaw 29 prairie grain harvests, the movement of construction materials to three hydroelectric dams, and the constant re-supplying of the north region. When he retired in October 1996 from the same job, CN presented him with a plaque inscribed, "Bob Semenchuk, CN's Man of the North."



On the way to Hudson Bay

A half-hour south of arrival at Churchill, VIA Rail Canada Assistant Service Coordinator Ralph Schipper grabs a cup of coffee in the Budd diner (above) and walks the aisles of the coaches, cafe car, and sleepers of the northbound *Hudson Bay*. He alerts sleepy passengers that their 1,055-mile, 36-hour journey from Winnipeg to the train's namesake terminus is about to conclude. On arrival, Schipper heads uptown to a warm bed in a hotel while excited passengers from all parts of the world step onto the station platform. They're here in hopes of witnessing a glimpse of the unparalleled Arctic. Whether riding on one of the famous "Tundra Buggies" in search of endangered polar bears, photographing a rare example of the local flora, or watching pods of beluga whales swimming in the nearby Churchill River, it's a safe bet that eco-tourism is the main money-maker in this community of almost 1,000 inhabitants.



The 'steam doctor' is in

With the *Hudson Bay* laid up for the day on the station track (below left, in CN F-unit times), the train is in the capable hands of the "steam doctor," engine watchman Charlie Lavelle. A First Nation Indian, Lavelle was always tinkering with and trying to keep the cantankerous, ice-covered steam-generator units (car behind the Fs) running in horrendous winter weather. January temperatures average minus 13 degrees Fahrenheit and have reached as low as minus 40 degrees F. The yearly average temperature for Churchill is 20 degrees above zero. Holding down the last car-department job in Churchill, Lavelle changed employers when OmniTRAX took over the Hudson Bay Railway, and his paychecks now have a VIA symbol on them, replacing the CN noodle.



Of grain, weather, and polar bears

At the town's tallest building, the grain elevator is working overtime to accept and ship out Western grain to foreign markets. Grain-handlers, dockworkers, and tugboat captains make a fortune in wages during the four-month grain rush. The Hudson Bay Railway is no different and employs a yard engine to supply the elevator with the yields from prairie harvests. The yard crew works 18-hour shifts, seven days a week, feeding the elevator with prairie grain. While it is one of the highest-paying assignments on the line, the job has its drawbacks. Yard crews are always battling Churchill's notoriously unpredictable weather. One minute it can be sweltering as the hot spot of the day in Canada, but 15 minutes later a snow squall will blow in off the Bay, plummeting the temperature 50 degrees. The most dangerous aspect of working in Churchill is the carnivorous kind. With the town situated squarely on their annual migratory path, polar bears congregate in large numbers in the fall. Despite the jocular sticker on the VIA F-unit nose (left), switchmen working on the ground must be wary of the dangerous white beasts roaming the yard.



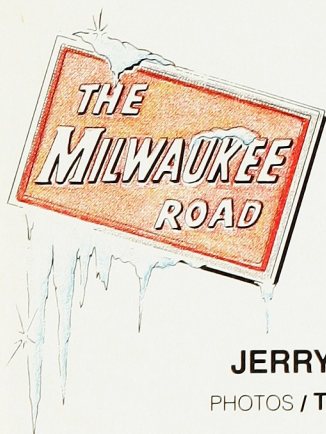
MARK PERRY lives with sons Keith and Drake in Dauphin, Manitoba, and is in his 26th year of working for Canadian National on the prairies.

Spellbinder on the tundra

Like every railroad in North America, the Hudson Bay Railway has witnessed far-reaching changes through the years. Steam power and the 40-foot grain boxcar have faded into history as diesel-electrics and covered hopper cars became the norm. Fax machines and new operating rules eliminated jobs at Cranberry Portage, Ilford, and Wabowden, all stations whose windows are boarded up. Majestic F units and steam-heated passenger trains vanished with the arrival of boxy F40s and refurbished stainless-steel cars. While section men still fight the never-ending battle with the tundra, their section towns sit abandoned as the crews and their families have moved to larger communities.

One thing is certain: The extraordinary personas of Hudson Bay railroaders remain unchanged. Imagine a brakeman hanging kerosene marker lights on an ancient wooden flanger on the end of a mixed train. Or an operator typing out train orders for a Royal Canadian Mounted Police officer responding in his blue-and-white motorcar to a disturbance call on the line. Think of the section men enduring a spine-wrenching ride on a Russell snowplow, bursting through hard-packed snowdrifts. Or an engineer hanging on to the bounding walkway of a dying Alco at speed, determined to keep it running at 40 below.

When CN left northern Manitoba, most employees stayed with the company and moved south. Today's Hudson Bay Railway rosters are filled with locals, furloughed railroaders from faraway lines, or former retirees. Many young railroaders drawn north into this mysterious land came searching for work. The majority left to return home. A few chose to stay, some until retirement, drawn by charm, charisma, and mythology. The Hudson Bay Railway and its spellbinding ways will do that to an individual. **I**



“The part of railroading I could do without”

A difficult winter trip on Milwaukee’s “Southwestern”

JERRY PYFER

PHOTOS / THE AUTHOR

I THUMP-THUMP-THUMP. “Pyfer. . . PYFER!”

My eyes open into the pitch darkness of my cubicle, also known as my motel room.

“Yah, I’m awake,” I answer, my voice raspy as I reach for the lamp switch.

The dull, muffled, deep voice comes through the door again: “You’re called for Number 252 at 7:30 a.m.”

Now awake and having gathered my belongings and myself together, I leave the comforting warmth of the room. As I open the door to reality, the cold, sharp wind steals my breath away. My eyes water. *This* is the part of railroading I can do without!

A rare daylight run

It’s 5:30 a.m. on a cold and windy December 9, 1977, in Savanna, Ill., a hub for my employer, the Milwaukee Road. I

meet the rest of our crew in the motel lounge, and we gang ourselves into our conductor’s auto and head downtown. The conductor, Richard “Beaver” Iverson, peers through the peepholes in the frosted-up car windows as we head for breakfast at an all-night greasy spoon.

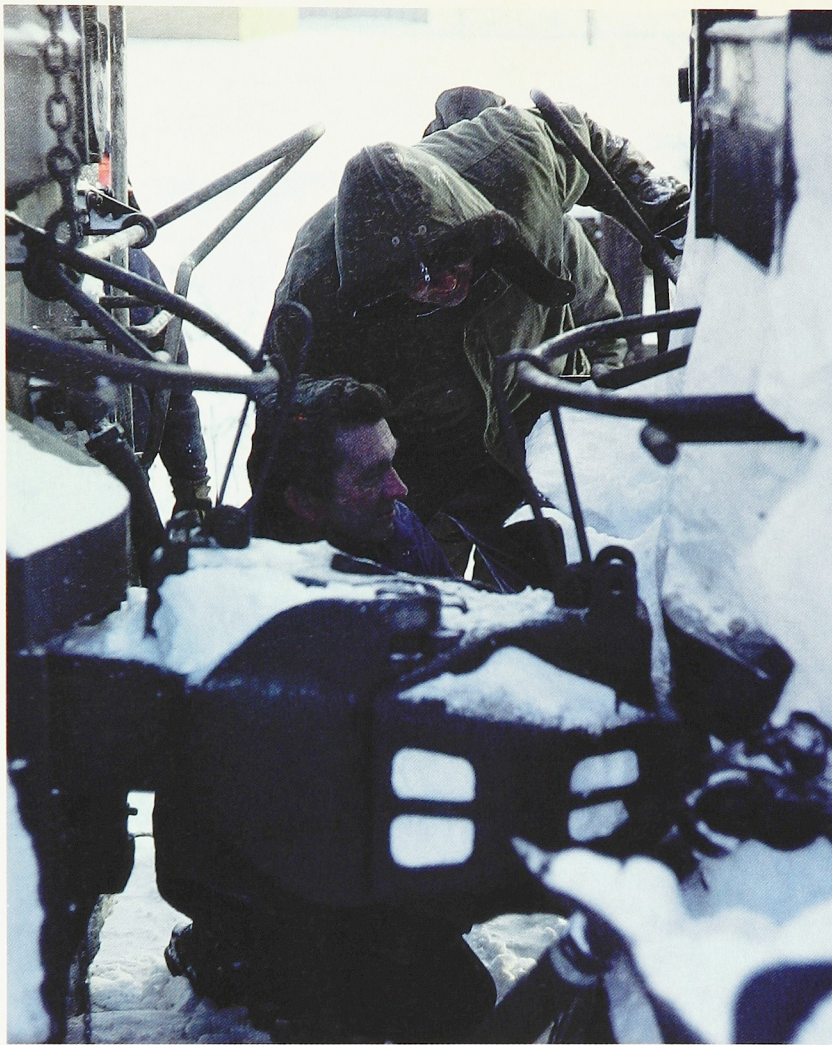
A Burlington Northern crew at a nearby table relates their trip down from La Crosse, Wis. It was *cold*, even in their new EMD SD40-2’s. That’s just great, since we’ll be getting bottom-of-the-roundhouse power.

After a hearty, greasy, covered-with-ketchup breakfast, Beaver drops the engineer, Frank Hobbins, and me, the head-end brakeman for the trip, at the caller’s office near the roundhouse. Rear brakeman Tony Charland and conductor Iverson will drive on to the yardmaster’s office to get the train’s waybills and train orders. Checking into the caller’s office, Frank gets the consist list—the motive power. It’s a mixed set of GE’s and EMD’s: U28B’s 5505 and 5509, GP40’s 2016 and 2022, and GP30 1011.

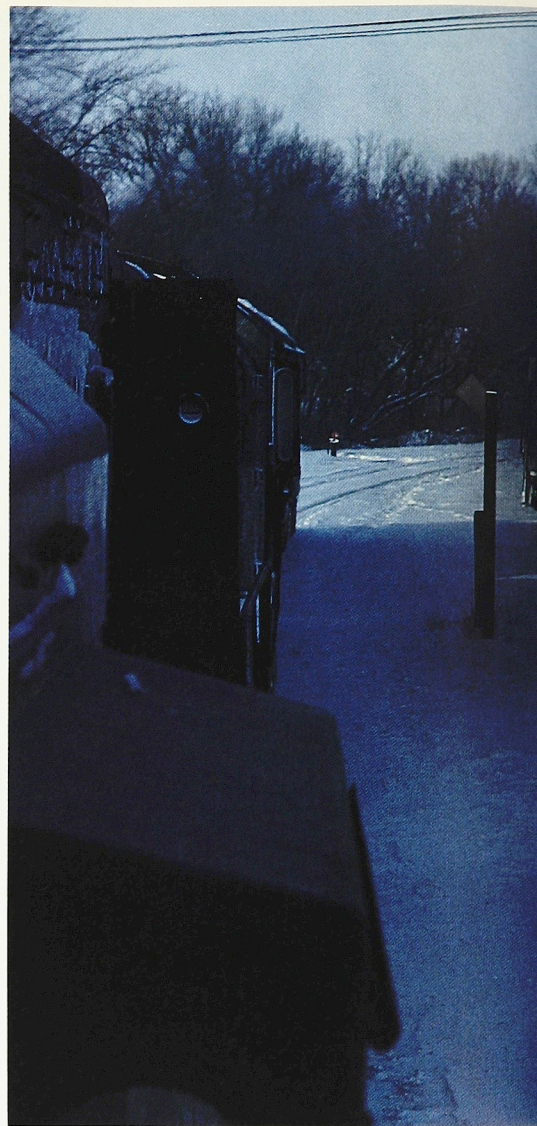
They’re middle-aged units begging for routine maintenance. Frank checks them over and radios the yardmaster for



WINTER strikes the Southwestern. Above: "More than minor-league stuff" is encountered coming into Florence. West of Freeport, "we break another drift, and the sound of alarm bells fills the cab." After Frank brings the train to a stop (opposite page), "we find that 5505 has tripped a ground relay button."



At Freeport (right), 251—its units buried in snow-slides by on the main as we wait in the siding. At Durand (above), engineers Frank Hobbins (kneeling) from our train and Jerry Knickle from the Extra East ponder how more braking air can be sent back to the train.



permission to come out of the roundhouse area. Once we have clearance to do so, we run the units down to the yard office to get a train list and a set of the train orders for our trip home from Savannah to Milwaukee.

We head out on the mainline past Plum, the east end of the yard, and the Savannah operator aligns the power switches so we can back down into “C” yard. We tie onto our train, and I make the airhose coupling to cut in the air brakes. *Man, are these hoses stiff.*

We start pumping up the air, putting pressure in the system so the brakes may be activated. As I walk up to the lead unit, the sun is just creeping over the horizon. At least we’ll have a rare daylight run across the frozen farmlands of northwestern Illinois and southeastern Wisconsin.

Old-man winter has struck early and hard this year. The snow already blankets the countryside. As the conductor calls over the radio for an air-brake test, we’re busy “winterproofing” the 5505’s cab by putting duct tape around the drafty windows and doors. There isn’t a Milwaukee Road engineer who doesn’t carry a roll or two of wide duct tape in his grip during the winter.

As we complete the air test, Beaver informs us that 251, our westbound counterpart on the Milwaukee-Savanna run, is out of Sturtevant, Wis., but that the dispatcher has not yet set up a meeting point. Further, an extra eastbound will be called two hours behind us. “The brakes are released. High-ball, 252.”

Bogging down

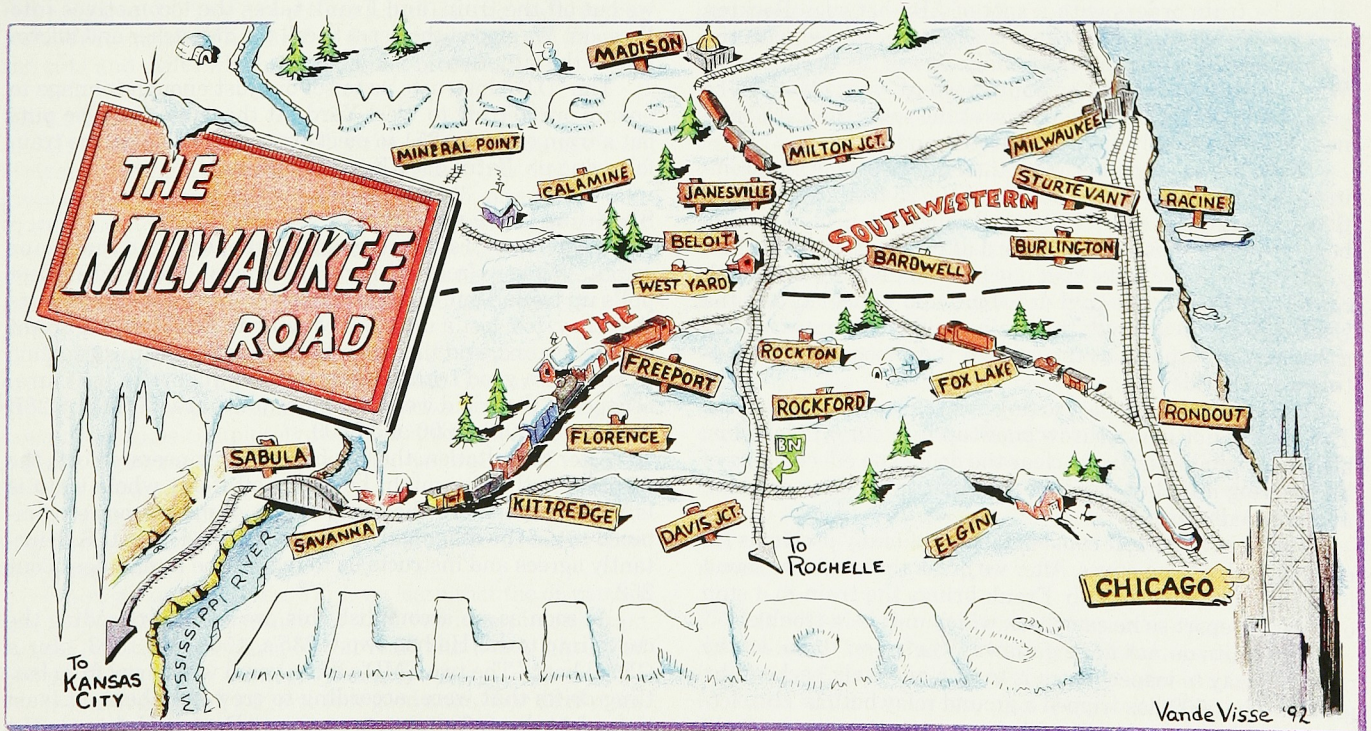
Frank cracks the long GE throttle open a couple of notches, and the idling orange-and-black units come to life. The slack in the train (caused by the couplers) stretches out, and we’re on our way. Beaver radios us that the caboose has cleared the yard, and Frank “skins ‘em back” as we begin the assault up Red Barn Hill. The gurgling and burbling from the GE’s sounds like an old John Deere “A” tractor with a 10-bottom plow tied to its tail.

The first 26 miles out of Savannah are over the Dubuque & Illinois (“D&I”) Subdivision’s double-track mainline to Kittredge, where we diverge onto tracks of the “Southwestern.” The 50-mph D&I is governed by Rule 251, meaning each track has a specified direction, eastbound and westbound mainlines. The line is protected by Automatic Block Signals (ABS) in the form of semaphores.

We slog up Red Barn Hill at a steady 20 mph as the 13,850 theoretical horsepower strains at the drawbars. I have made trips when you have to drive a stake in the ground to see if the train is moving.

Aware that I take photographs as a hobby, Frank tells me the Milwaukee is planning to replace the old semaphores with searchlight type signals. “Better get your pictures before they’re gone.”

The D&I is quiet, and we approach Kittredge to find the signal displaying Diverging Clear, or green-over-red to most train-watchers. We sway gently through the crossovers to get





"CLIMBING Freeport Hill, drifts broken by 251 were already filled in." The view above looks forward from unit 5505. At Durand (right), "the winter sun is setting as we stop to check the air system. We've come 56 miles, and four of our eight units are dead."



onto the Southwestern's rails, where travel becomes a bit more difficult.

All night long, the winter winds have been drifting snow over the rails and into the lineside cuts. We'll be the first train through since yesterday. The 30- and 40-mph "Southwestern," formerly the Racine & Southwestern Division and now called the 13th Subdivision of the Illinois & Iowa Division, is governed by train orders with a spot of ABS between Rockton and Beloit Junction, Ill., where the route is shared with the 14th Subdivision, which runs from Rockford, Ill., to Janesville, Wis. On some places on the Southwestern, your train can be going up two hills and down three at the same time. An engineer does not simply open the throttle and go.

We begin to encounter more than minor-league stuff coming into Florence. The cut here is about 25 feet long, and it's filled with crusted snow. Plowing through the drift, the units bog down a bit, but charge onward after breaking through.

"Oh, boy, I don't like that one bit," comments Frank with concern. "With the ice-cold drawbars and knuckles, and the slack running in and out, this train could break in two at any time. Not only that, but the guys in the caboose will be getting a rough ride."

Bucking snowdrifts is exciting and scary at the same time. The small pilot plows throw snow up into our windshields, blocking visibility until we clear the drift. The effect is sort of like peering into the porthole of a churning washing machine at the laundromat.

The next snowdrift causes the first of many problems for our vulnerable locomotives. After we break that drift, the sound of alarm bells fills the cab. Frank brings the train to a stop outside Freeport so he can check which unit is in trouble.

The units do not have gangways between them, so the only safe way to inspect them is to stop and walk back on the ground. The 5509 has tripped a ground relay button. The electrical problem is more than likely wet traction motors from

the swirling snow coming in while we went through the drifts. We take the 5509 off-line, leaving it to run in "idle" the rest of the way. This adds 130 tons to what the other units now have to pull.

Considering the profile of the line, we feel the remaining four units will not be able to handle the train into West Yard in South Beloit, especially if another unit should go down. So we cut off the train, and Frank takes the locomotives into Freeport. We stop at the depot to call the dispatcher and inform him of the situation.

The "D.S." instructs us to set out just enough tonnage to ensure our getting to West Yard. At the same time, he puts out a train order for 251 to meet our train, 252, plus the train following us, Extra 5507 East, at Freeport.

Shedding some weight

We get our train and go into Freeport, and make our setout. While we're awaiting 251's arrival, Extra 5507 East pulls up behind our caboose. Engineer Jerry Knickle reports that they, too, lost a unit, but coming up Red Barn Hill right out of Savanna, and that their remaining units are struggling to maintain good trainline air (proper air-brake pressure) because of the frigid weather. Their units are all GE's: U28B 5507 and U30B's 5600 and 5609.

After consultation, the two hoppers (engineers) inform the dispatcher that we might be better off if one whole train is left at Freeport and the two consists of motive power combined to get the other train over the railroad. The D.S. reluctantly agrees and instructs us to reduce the remainder of our 252.

As soon as we accomplish this, we see 251 rounding the curve into town. He has two GP35's, 1505 and 1503, plus a GE "U-boat." The two EMD's are covered with snow from battling drifts that were, according to crew members, at least three feet deep. Comments engineer Dennis Hale over the



radio: "This is ridiculous. They should have run a plow train."

Since the east end of Freeport siding is filled with the cars we have set out, we must back out of the siding as soon as 251 leaves town. This accomplished, we couple our locomotives in behind those of Extra 5507 East, so we have in effect become their helper engine.

With eight units, two of them not on-line, we head into the countryside. The diesels are handling the train rather well. We're surprised at how fast the strong winds are filling in the cuts and drifts which 251 had just broken.

Come on, baby!

Halfway up Freeport Hill, bells start ringing again. A crewman riding aboard the 2022 reports it has died, which gives us five working units. I am on the 5505, now fourth unit in the consist. Watching ahead as we explode through drifts, I see snow being thrown in all directions. A brakeman from the other train is riding with me, and he notices that the units are working harder than normal and that our speed is dropping.

It's been a long day already. As we pull up to the west end of Durand, only 56 miles out of Savanna, the sun is setting. The air is not properly charging the brake system enough to keep the brakes completely released after application-and-release. Since the 2022 is now dead, we drain it of water to prevent it from freezing up.

At this moment the 1011 gives up, too, leaving us with only four good units. The idea of combining trains at Freeport is paying off.

When we arrive at West Yard, we learn that the dispatcher has left word for us to make another reduction in our train consist. By now it is dark, but at least the winds have died down.

Out of West Yard, we have four good units, four dead units, and only 45 cars. Because of the federal 12 hours of service

law, we are on short time now, "going dead" at 7:30 p.m. The other crew, however, can go on another two hours.

As we drift down Springfield Hill west of Burlington, the unit I'm riding, 5505, trips a ground relay. *Three good units—come on, baby, only 50 miles to go and this trip is over.* A ground relay doesn't kill a unit, but it does make it useless to provide power. I stay aboard 5505, but the heat in the cab isn't as great as it would be from a working unit.

The dispatcher, aware of the short time of the Extra's crew, tells us to set out our remaining cars at Sturtevant, where we'll enter the Chicago-Milwaukee mainline, and try to bring just the locomotives into Milwaukee before we run out of time.

At Sturtevant Yard, we do just that, and our crew indeed runs out of time there. With the other crew still working and our crew just riding along, we get a Diverging Clear onto the 60-mph, CTC mainline, and highball for Milwaukee.

Before this winter of 1977-1978 would end, Milwaukee Road would file for bankruptcy. Nearly 45 percent of its locomotives would be out of service, bad-ordered. The following years would not be kind, either, and eventually the proud old orange-and-black units would be scrapped or turned into "rotten pumpkins" with a quick paint-over by Soo Line, which would buy the Milwaukee Road in 1985.

Except for small portions, the Southwestern would be abandoned and given back to farmland. Through freight would go via Chicago. Railroading on the Milwaukee Road wasn't always fun, especially in winter, but it is certainly worth remembering. **I**

JERRY PYFER worked for the Milwaukee Road 1971-1978, then Illinois Central Gulf 1978-1982, before leaving railroading to work for the U.S. Postal Service. He lives in Loves Park, Ill., with his wife, Cindy, and three sons. This is his first TRAINS byline.

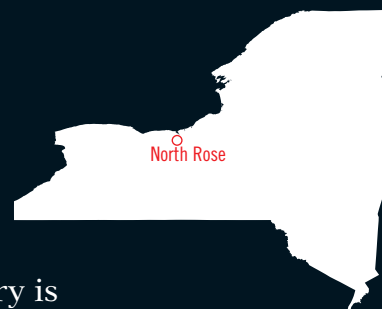
3:30 p.m.



Train *vs.* snowmobile

What it took to pull an Alco
iced by snowmobiles back
from the brink

Story and photos by Fred B. Furminger



A constant problem for railroads in snow country is that of snowmobilers trespassing on the right-of-way. Snowmobiles pack ice and snow into flangeways, and bad things happen when the cold mess hardens. Such was the case on March 5, 1994, on the Ontario Midland Railroad, a New York state short line. On this day, it was enough to derail and topple an Alco.

On that Saturday, about 8 a.m., an engineer and conductor departed the railroad's headquarters in Sodus, N.Y., and headed east on the former New York Central Hojack Branch. They had a "light engine," just Alco locomotives 40 and 36, a snowplow-equipped RS36 and an RS11, respectively. Both units were running backwards. They were bound for Wolcott, N.Y., 12 miles away, to pick up empty cars at a plant. Heavy snowpack made the crew cautious, so they proceeded at only about 6 mph.

At 9:30 a.m. the units crossed Covell Road at North Rose. A quarter of a mile east of the crossing, the railroad runs across a fill about 80 feet high. Halfway across, No. 40's lead truck hit hard-packed snow and lifted the locomotive off the rails. The unit veered to the left and rolled onto its side, coming to rest on the north side of the embankment, its wheels pointing skyward. The conductor, riding on the fireman's side, was thrown on top of the engineer, but neither man was seriously injured.

The engineer shut down the locomotive, and both crewmen scrambled to safety through the fireman's-side cab window, fearful the unit would continue to slide down the remaining 60 or so feet to the bottom of the embankment, perhaps rolling as it went.

When 40 went off the tracks and rolled over, it uncoupled from 36. Because of the slow speed, the second unit came to a quick stop when the air dumped and did not leave the rails. No. 40 was in a bad position, though, one that could become worse.

Later that day, Marvin Winter, president of Winter's Rigging Inc., in North Collins, N.Y. (for whom I worked part-time), called and asked me to go with him to help recover the Alco. Winter explained that Alco expert George Hockaday had called, requesting assistance in picking up and returning the unit to the rails. A second call from Hockaday provided more details about the locomotive's location on the steep embankment and its position being almost upside down. Hearing this, Winter felt it would be wise to take a look at the problem himself before bringing in equipment and men.

We met Hockaday at his house, and he led us to the wreck site. After looking at the situation, Winter pronounced the job to be enormous. Only a few small trees were stopping the 125-ton Alco from sliding to the bottom of the embankment, and there was no way to secure it until heavy equipment could arrive, which most likely wouldn't be



7:30 a.m.



8:15 a.m.



11:30 a.m.

The problem: A 125-ton Alco diesel toppled down a slippery embankment (opposite page) after hitting ice-filled flangeways that had been packed down by snowmobiles. **The solution:** Tear out a 225-foot section of track (top), dig down several feet until you hit stable soil. Thus, Marvin Winter of Winter's Rigging can take a good look at the situation (middle), attach several bulldozers to the errant unit, and pull it out of harm's way (bottom).



As Marv Winter directs, lifting his hands like a conductor, the winching begins (top). With the power of two bulldozers and two side booms, No. 40 begins to right, and a loud cheer goes up from the recovery crews and the railroaders (middle). Tears of joy streamed down one Ontario Midland employee's face. Finally, No. 40 is swung toward the center of the right-of-way (bottom) so the relatively uncomplicated re-railing process can begin.



until the next day. To complicate matters, the top of the fill was narrow, only about 12 feet wide, and the drop-off was just as severe on the far side as it was where the Alco rested. This limited the working room for side-boom dozers and standard bulldozers.

Moreover, Winter was staring at a deadline. A pair of his side-boom dozers had been cleaning up a wreck on the Conrail main line at Harbor Creek, Pa. They and a third side boom were needed there first thing Monday with fresh crews to relocate crossovers and lay some track — about 250 miles away from the Ontario Midland wreck site.

So, Winter moved the equipment in late Saturday afternoon, including a crew that had been in the Williamsport, Pa., area clearing snow slides off Conrail's Buffalo Line. He planned to have his men and his equipment ready to go to work at sunrise the next day. But what happened next threw the entire plan into disarray.

As we were leaving the wreck site, Winter's wife, Maryellen, called on his



12:45 p.m.

Up to its trucks in mud, but at least safe, No. 40 has survived the mishap. Renumbered back to 408, the Alco has been accident-free and remains on the roster.

cell phone. "Conrail just called," she said. "They have another wreck on the main line in downtown Erie." With that, Marv Winter pulled to the side of the road to rethink his plan.

A quick call to Conrail in Erie revealed that three empty cars were involved, and that they wanted two side booms and a bulldozer for the job. So, Winter ordered the equipment at Harbor Creek and another bulldozer from North Collins to the latest Conrail wreck site. We headed there ourselves, and arrived about 9:30 p.m. to find that an additional six cars had derailed when a crew pulled the remainder of the train through a broken switch.

Winter talked the job over with the Conrail people and decided all that was needed was one side boom and the equipment truck. We went to work, and by 1 a.m. we were done. Workers broke down the equipment, loaded it on trucks, and headed to North Collins to pick up additional chain, hooks, and supplies.

I drove so Marv Winter could sleep. By 3:30 we were leaving North Collins, heading back to Ontario Midland No. 40. In the meantime, fresh crews were on their way with the two side booms and equipment trucks needed to right the locomotive.

We stopped for breakfast, and by sunrise were ready to go to work. The big D-8 and D-9 type bulldozers were already fired up and heading down the right-of-way to where No. 40 rested. Overnight, the engine had slid five or six more feet down the embankment.

In order to get No. 40 back on the track, the recovery crews had to follow this procedure:

First, they tore out 225 feet of track parallel to No. 40.

Second, they excavated the right-of-way and embankment down a depth of six feet.

Finally, they rolled the locomotive over onto its wheels, upright, and

hauled it back up to track level.

From the photos, you can get an idea of the effort it took to retrieve the unit. No. 40 reached the rails at 1:20 p.m., a little more than 28 hours after going down the embankment.

Most of the damage to the unit was cosmetic. It was repaired, but because the number 40 had been so unlucky (it had been involved in another rollover and four separate encounters with heavy trucks, including one that was hauling a load of eggs), the railroad gave the Alco back its original Norfolk & Western number, 408. It has not been involved in a serious mishap since ... in any of the four seasons, most especially winter. **I**

FRED B. FURMINGER is a retired newspaper sales executive and short-line railroader who also worked part-time for Winters Rigging. He and his wife, Phyllis, live in Depew, N.Y.



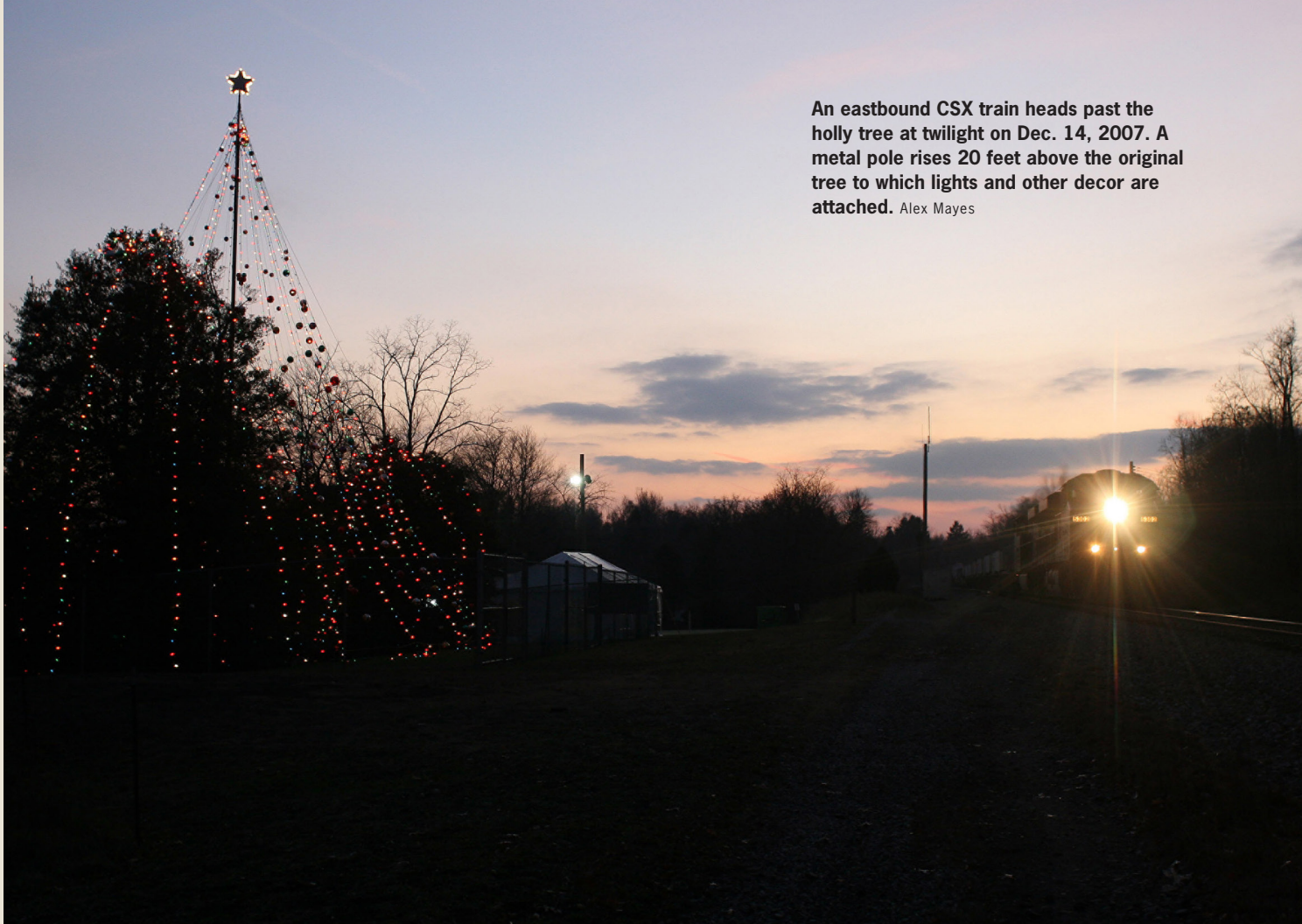
Baltimore & Ohio E8 No. 30 pulls an employee special from Baltimore to the railroad's tree-lighting ceremony. This photo also adorned the cover of the December 1956 issue of *B and O Magazine*.

B&O Railroad Museum

A BIG SENTIMENTAL RAILROAD

The Baltimore & Ohio's holiday tree grows into people's hearts

by Peter A. Hansen



An eastbound CSX train heads past the holly tree at twilight on Dec. 14, 2007. A metal pole rises 20 feet above the original tree to which lights and other decor are attached. Alex Mayes

In 1870, long before American Flyer and Lionel, before “Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus,” and almost as far back as the Baltimore & Ohio itself, a farmer planted a holly tree in Maryland, just northeast of Havre de Grace in Jackson. In time it became the tallest such tree in the East and a holiday tradition in its own right, thanks to the B&O.

The B&O holly tree was planted by Evan G. Sentman, a farmer who found it on a fishing trip when it was a small seedling and placed it on his land. The B&O laid its tracks near the tree in the late 1880s.

The B&O took tradition seriously. This was, after all, the first common carrier in America. To reinforce that status in the public mind, the company saved more 19th century rolling stock than any other railroad. The equipment went to world’s fairs and B&O’s own centennial pageant in 1927, and then the railroad created a permanent museum for it on the site of America’s first train station. B&O’s corporate culture was crammed with tradition, and the company believed in preservation before preservation was cool.

So maybe it was inevitable that George M. Shriver, a senior vice president of the railroad, saw an opportunity in the tree. A horticulturist, he had noticed it on his fre-

quent trips between Baltimore and New York, standing a stone’s throw from the tracks, but not on railroad property. B&O bought a 1.1-acre parcel around the tree in 1930, and the company installed a section foreman in a farm house on the property. The foreman looked after the tree in exchange for a break on his rent.

It was a magnificent specimen: almost 60 feet tall; dense, with shiny, dark green leaves; and covered with bright red berries. It screamed Christmas, and in time, B&O would come to think so, too. In December 1947, the company began clipping sprigs from the tree for the front-line employees to wear during the holidays. Ever mindful of preservation, the railroad hired Davey Tree Experts to cut the sprigs scientifically, and tree trimmers were careful not to take too much: remote outposts of the railroad’s 13-state territory got their holly from local florists. Davey also planted some 70 male hollies nearby in order to ensure pollination.

Ticket agents, conductors, stewardesses, and waiters (imagine that splash of red and green on a waiter’s starched white coat) all wore the sprigs in their lapels, and a new tra-

dition was born. Ticket stuffers, menu cards, and station posters explained where the holly had come from, and concluded, “The wearing of the holly is our way of saying, ‘A very Merry Christmas to you and yours from B&O’s 60,000 men and women.’”

Passenger response was enthusiastic, and so, too, were the news media’s. NBC Radio’s Morgan Beatty was the first to give it national exposure, followed quickly by the Mutual network and the Associated Press. Within days, news of B&O’s holiday gesture had spread nationwide.

It was such a success, the railroad expanded the celebration the following year. The documentary record doesn’t suggest that

B&O acted out of cynical, commercial calculation. No, this was exactly what it appeared to be: a railroad getting into the holiday spirit.

Beginning in 1948, the tree was decorated with 1,000 balls and 1,358 lights; the big, old-fashioned kind. Electricians and sheet metal workers from

the Mount Clare shops fabricated a three-foot illuminated star, and B&O arranged for a ceremony to switch on the lights. A special train traveled from B&O’s Mount Royal Station in Baltimore, bearing president R.B. White, the B&O Glee Club and



Afflicted by a fungus about 15 years ago, the original tree is flanked by two other healthy holly trees, and all are adorned in lights every holiday season courtesy of the Cecil County Historical Society. Alex Mayes





The holly tree was featured throughout the 1950s on the cover of *B and O Magazine*. Railroad employees wore sprigs of holly on their lapels that were professionally cut from the tree. B&O Railroad Historical Society

Women's Music Club, and hundreds of employees and their families. Under a full moon, and with a nationwide radio audience listening in, White threw the switch, the lights came on, the crowd of 3,000 gasped, and the choirs broke into song.

Writing from a snowbound farm near Winnipeg, a Canadian listener told White how moved he had been. "I think the fact that your program reached us on the bank of the Red River ... might be of some interest to you."

The tree's (and the railroad's) reputation spread even further than that. In 1952, the tree drew 19,000 visitors, with another 30,000 the following year. By 1954, some 56,546 visitors from all 48 states and from 20 different countries came to admire the tree. B&O trains were under slow orders past the site, not only for safety's sake, but to give passengers a longer look at the now-famous ilex. Today's holiday air travelers, frazzled and hassled and stuffed into their aluminum tubes six miles up, can only imagine such a civilized ritual: a railroad slowing its trains and dimming the lights in order to present its patrons with a living Christmas card.

"Last night I rode the *Marylander* from New York to Baltimore," a stockbroker wrote in 1951. "I had heard a lot about your holly tree, so I was on the lookout for it The tree was lovely, but what impressed me most was this. As we got in sight, there was a lone figure there that cold night, and as the train went by, he took off his hat and made a long, sweeping bow as if greeting the passengers on the train and welcoming them to the beautiful sight. I would like to know who that man was." The railroad cared enough to investigate, and they found

WANT TO SEE THE SPECTACLE?

Take **U.S. Route 40** east from Perryville, Md., two miles. Turn left on Jackson Station Road. The Baltimore & Ohio holly tree is located where this road intersects with CSX's Philadelphia Subdivision, a quarter mile north of Route 40. (To locate this site on a map search engine, type in "Jackson, Md.")

The B&O holly tree is located inside a fenced enclosure about 100 feet east of CSX's Philadelphia Subdivision at milepost 54.5. There are three holly trees in the enclosure; the original B&O tree is the middle one. It consists of two very thick trunks and a minimal amount of branches, since it was afflicted with a fungus about 15 years ago and was extensively pruned to prevent further spread of the disease. The other two holly trees are healthy. All three are decorated for the holidays every year. Hit the road for this holiday treat! — Alex Mayes

it was one Henry S. Rector, a watchman the company employed at the site, going above and beyond the call of duty.

Perhaps a TV journalist put it best in 1953. Riding an employee special on its way to the lighting ceremony that year, he wrote, "The tree, of course, is decorated for the enjoyment of passengers on B&O's trains and for the thousands of people who visit it from far and near. But insofar as our train ride was concerned, here was a great corporation going to a lot of trouble and expense for the primary purpose of giving a group of its employees a happy evening. It was an acknowledgment by the B&O that each man and woman in its employ is not merely a labor unit, but a person with human as well as economic needs So when the holly tree blazes again this year, it will light up, as it has lighted for a number of years past, more than a short stretch of the B&O tracks."

In a bit of self-congratulation that was nonetheless true, the employee magazine chimed in that "the Baltimore & Ohio, the nation's oldest railroad and one of its largest,

is a warmly human institution."

It was not to last. B&O lost its independence early in the modern merger movement, absorbed by Chesapeake & Ohio in 1962. Whether because of declining passenger revenues or because of a mandate from C&O, the tradition died out. Happily, the tree is still decorated at Christmastime, thanks to its current owner, Cecil County. The tree was transferred to the Cecil County Department of Parks and Recreation in 1972.

During the tree's glory years, the B&O Glee Club cut a record in 1954 of holiday music, and it's on the Web at www.cchistory.org/hollytree/index.htm. So find yourself a quiet place, get a cup of holiday cheer, and listen to a song or two from that scratchy old record. It's the sound of a big, sentimental railroad, still wishing you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. **I**

PETER A. HANSEN is a freelance writer in Lenexa, Kan., and editor of Railroad History, the journal of the Railway & Locomotive Historical Society.