

**QUANTUM LEAP: BNSF AND J.B. HUNT TEAM UP** p. 10

# Trains

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**THE magazine of railroading**

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Steve Sandberg, Railroading  
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officer, inspects the boiler shell of  
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Vol. 84 • Issue 8

# Welcome to Firecrown Media

By Craig Fuller

**MY COMPANY, FIRECROWN MEDIA**, has acquired Kalmbach's esteemed railroad magazines and media properties, including renowned titles such as *Model Railroader*, *Classic Trains*, *Trains*, *Garden Railways*, and *Classic Toy Trains*.

As the new custodians of these cherished and respected brands, we are committed to upholding their legacy and nurturing their growth.

Firecrown Media, a rapidly expanding media company, is dedicated to acquiring and stewarding magazine and digital media brands in the transportation sector. Our portfolio includes *Flying*, *Boating*, *Yachting*, and *FreightWaves*, among 50 other loved brands.

Firecrown Media is young; it has only been around for three years, but it is funded by a billion-dollar family office with a significant focus on media. After acquiring brands, we have invested over \$40 million in them.

As Firecrown's founder, I drive much of the passion and energy behind our media strategy.

I started in media in 2017 when I launched *FreightWaves*, a digital media company often called the "Bloomberg of freight." In just seven years, it has become the most prominent voice covering the freight industry, with deep news and analysis of the trucking, rail, air, and ocean container markets. *FreightWaves* is also one of the fastest-growing B2B media companies in the world.

While I am a digital native, I love print magazines. My love for print publications began when I was a boy; *Flying* was a magazine I grew up reading. So, when I had the opportunity to acquire it in 2021, I did. My purchase of *Flying* began as a passion project; after all, I am a private pilot.

My initial plan was to shutter the print magazine and focus on the digital edition. However, I remembered how I felt each month when I received my copy in the mail. Fully understanding and appreciating the power and love of print magazines, we soon realized that print magazines offered an experience for readers that digital couldn't match.

Unlike digital apps or websites, consuming print content provides the reader with an undistracted journey. When reading online, one is constantly distracted by emails, Slack messages, and social media feeds.

None of that exists in print.

Print magazines offer the reader an experience and a journey unparalleled in any digital format. In recent years, we've seen younger generations (the "Zoomers") start to prefer print magazines over digital. For them, print magazines are innovative and tangible, providing a premium experience compared to digital offerings.



After our success with *Flying* (revenues up 5x since we acquired it in 2021), we expanded our portfolio through 20 acquisitions and rebranded the company as Firecrown Media.

Firecrown's playbook for the Kalmbach titles will follow our experience with other publications and digital assets we've acquired.

We will invest significantly in print magazines, creating coffee table-worthy magazines with gorgeous photography and stories that engage audiences. Print magazines should be timeless and something that readers want to keep.

In addition to creating beautiful print magazines, we will also make

significant investments in the digital websites in our portfolio. This will include extensive upgrades to *Trains.com* and all of the affiliated properties.

Rest assured, we plan to keep the forums, but our roadmap includes significant upgrades to ensure their stability and functionality with a more contemporary aesthetic and experience.

We also have big plans for video products and plan to introduce new podcasts to serve and engage the community.

All of these investments will take time, but in a few months, you will start to see improvements in the online products, and over the next year, you will see a relaunch of the print versions.

You will also be glad to know that we are committed to the modeling community and the railroad brands we just acquired.

I am bullish on the future of modeling and its attractiveness for younger generations.

As a father of five children (ages 3 to 17), my wife and I spend much time and effort introducing our young children to hobbies that do not involve screens and devices. We want to find experiences that exist in the physical world.

Model railroading offers a four-dimensional experience that does exactly that. For example, I have a small Lionel layout that I have been building with my 5-year-old son.

It is an opportunity for the two of us to make something that is limited only by his imagination. Best of all, I can share my knowledge and love of the freight railroads with him as we develop and play with our evolving model railroad. As an entrepreneur, I love building things; he can help me participate in the journey.

I would love to hear your thoughts and ideas on improving the *Model Railroader*, *Trains*, *Classic Trains*, *Classic Toy Trains*, *Garden Railways*, and *Trains.com* experience.

You can find me on X: @freightalley. I



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## From the Editor



### Carl Swanson

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**A**mtrak threw a party in May of this year to mark the inauguration of a new intercity service. Named the *Borealis* (derived from Latin and meaning, basically, 'northern'), the train provides daily service between Chicago and St. Paul, Minn.

The *Borealis* operates on part of the Chicago-Seattle/Portland *Empire Builder* route. This fact, Bob Johnston notes in his coverage on page 8, means Amtrak already has stations at each stop and crews familiar with the line.

Even with these considerable advantages, the *Borealis* took three years to go from planning to reality.

It took a great deal of time, negotiation, and patience, but Amtrak pulled it off. And that's reason to celebrate — and hope for more.

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Trains Magazine (issn 0041-0934, usps 529-850) is published monthly by Firecrown Media Inc., 605 Chestnut Avenue, Suite 800, Chattanooga, TN, 37450. Periodicals postage paid at Waukesha, Wis., and at additional offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Trains*, P.O. Box 850, Lincolnshire, IL 60069. Canada Publication Mail Agreement #40010760.

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A BNSF Railway Q train rolls west near Trout Creek, Mont.

## 'Behind Big Skies & Iron Rails'

**"ANYTHING FOR THE SHOT."** It's the photographer's creed. But what does that really mean? Especially when it comes to railfan images captured by Trains.com's intrepid adventurer Tom Danneman, who often contends with extended exposure to wild weather, rugged landscape, and outright lethal creatures, too.

In this extended-length (nearly one hour, 20 minutes) BONUS VIDEO prepared exclusively for Trains.com Video viewers, you'll get a rare, insider's glimpse at what it takes to gear up and go trackside amidst the wintry, wind-swept mountains of Montana. Tom and his band of brothers willingly immersed themselves in this bone-chilling experience to capture great rail images.

Adventure in Big Sky Country is never easy. But when you factor cold, snow, and treacherous terrain into the mix, Tom and his fellow photogs wisely opt to trade their tents for cozy confines as their respite from the elements. Fortunately, you can watch the trek play out in comfort, all through this Trains.com exclusive, point-of-view video ... "Behind Big Skies & Iron Rails."

Want to see more action like this? Check out the entire *Big Skies & Iron Rails* series. Tom embarks on several railfan adventures each year, and enjoys sharing these experiences with our readers and Trains.com Video viewers alike.  
 — Trains.com Staff



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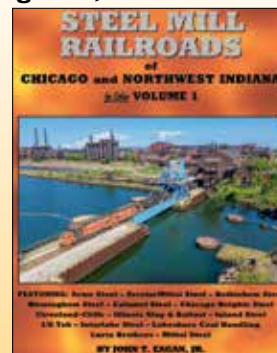
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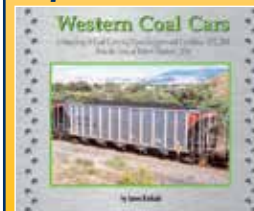


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## Norfolk Southern, Shaw come out ahead in proxy fight

Ancora bid for control fails, but lands three on railroad's board of directors

▲ SD40-2 No. 3557 leads north-bound Norfolk Southern train D32 through Blue Mound, Ill., at sunset on June 14, 2016. Two photos, Steve Smedley

**WITH A BRUISING PROXY** battle behind it, Norfolk Southern now must deliver on the promises the railroad has made to improve operations, service, and financial results, CEO Alan Shaw said just days after fending off activist investor Ancora Holdings.

Shareholders on May 9 delivered a mixed message at the railroad's annual meeting. They demanded change by electing three of Ancora's seven director candidates to the NS board — and ousting three incumbent directors, including independent chair Amy Miles. But they also voted to give Shaw & Co. more time to prove the railroad's "better way" strategy, introduced in December 2022.

"It was a good day for Norfolk Southern," Shaw said after the annual meeting. Shaw says the vote indicated that shareholders have confidence in the Norfolk Southern management team as well as its strategy, which relies in part on not furloughing train crews during downturns so that the railroad can maintain service levels and capture volume when freight demand returns.

"But they were also really clear: They want us to deliver results," he says. Shaw pledged to work with the five new NS board members, including the Ancora candidates who gained board seats. They include former Surface Transportation Board member William Clyburn Jr.; former Canadian National and Kansas City Southern executive Sameh Fahmy; and railroad financier Gil Lamphere.

Ancora fell far short of its goals of gaining control of the 13-member board and replacing Shaw and newly appointed Chief Operating Officer John Orr. The Cleveland-based investment firm was highly critical of Shaw, the railroad's pivot away from a short-term emphasis on the operating ratio, and its lagging financial and operational performance. Ancora also criticized the railroad's safety record and its response to the Feb. 3, 2023, hazardous materials derailment in East Palestine, Ohio, which through May had cost the railroad a record \$1.1 billion.

Ancora had sought a full-blown implementation of the low-cost Precision Scheduled

Railroading operating model at NS and said it could reach a 57% operating ratio within three years. NS's 2023 operating ratio, adjusted for the impact of East Palestine, was 67.4%, which was four points higher than the average of the other five Class I railroads.

During the 11-week proxy fight, NS bowed to investor pressure in several ways. First, NS said it would reach a sub-60% operating ratio within four years. Second, the operating ratio not only returned to the railroad's executive compensa-



A hostler moves locomotives at the NS yard in Decatur, Ill., on April 8, 2024. Unions were split on supporting current NS management in the proxy fight.





tion plans — it became the single biggest factor in determining their annual bonuses. Third, NS pruned its intermodal network. It dropped 15% of its origin-destination pairs, those with the lowest volume and growth prospects. Combined, the 53 discontinued lanes amounted to less than 1% of revenue. Fourth, NS replaced Chief Operating Officer Paul Duncan in March by hiring Orr, a former Canadian National, Kansas City Southern, and Canadian Pacific Kansas City executive with a background in Precision Scheduled Railroading.

Nonetheless, Shaw says the railroad's strategy still stands. "It's this balanced approach between service, productivity, and growth with safety at its core. I'm committed to that. And the implementation of PSR as our operating plan is designed to execute that strategy," Shaw told *Trains*.

Operating-ratio improvement was already baked into the prior executive compensation plan, he says, because of the emphasis placed on growing both revenue and operating income.

"We made a lot of improvements last year in safety and in service, and we started growing our most service-sensitive [intermodal] franchise, but we didn't deliver on productivity. I needed to accelerate our operational improvements, and so we hired John Orr," Shaw explains.

In the battle for board seats, Ancora's CEO candidate, former UPS executive James Barber Jr., received support from just 34.9% of the shares voted, while Shaw was backed by 64.1%. Railroad chief executives can typically count on overwhelming

shareholder support at annual meetings, such as the 99.9% backing CPKC CEO Keith Creel received this year. But in a contested election, Shaw's margin of victory amounted to a landslide as Barber's support ranked 19th out of the 20 board candidates.

Shaw thanked employees for their support during the proxy battle, and noted that customers, regulators, and elected officials all were aligned with the NS "better way" strategy.

"We have this unique alignment of support from all different constituents," Shaw says, pledging to work in the long-term best interests of shareholders, customers, employees, and the communities in which the railroad operates.

Leaders of labor unions that represent NS employees initially rallied around Shaw, saying that safety and morale improved after he became CEO in May 2022. But Ancora was able to gain support of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen after offering certain contract changes just six days before the annual meeting.

In bitter comments made during the shareholder meeting, Ancora Alternatives President James Chadwick criticized the major institutional investors who supported NS. "For the passive investors: If anything should go wrong here and there's another derailment and people die, this is on you," Chadwick said. "You ignored the recommendation of the proxy advisors, the unions, the largest customer of the company. You gave us literally no support and we still won three board seats without you. What happens to Norfolk Southern now is on your firms and your conscience."

The proxy battle at Norfolk Southern is the fifth that activist investors have launched against Class I railroads in the past 16 years. In every case — CSX in 2008, CP in 2012, CSX in 2017, CN in 2021, and NS in 2024 — the activists gained at least one board seat. They successfully installed their preferred CEO candidate two times, with E. Hunter Harrison taking over at CP in 2012 and then at CSX in 2017.

And while it doesn't count as a proxy fight, UP investor Soroban Capital in February 2023 went public with its complaints about the board's slow pace in finding a replacement for CEO Lance Fritz. Soroban spotlighted what it called UP's underperformance under Fritz, and urged the board to hire Jim Vena, the former CN executive who had served as UP's chief operating officer in 2019 and 2020. Vena became UP's



**Westbound RoadRailer train No. 255 leans into a curve at Lafayette, Ind., on March 26, 2023. NS pruned its intermodal network in response to the proxy battle.** John E. Troxler

chief executive in August 2023.

The lesson here? With just five publicly traded Class I railroads, it's easy for an activist investor to spot the company at the back of the pack. "Whoever falls in the doghouse ... it's a matter of time before a hedge fund goes after you," says former CN CEO J.J. Ruest, subsequently named NS board chairman. Ruest retired from CN in March 2022 after a settlement in its dustup with TCI Fund Management over its failed bid to acquire KCS.

With Norfolk Southern as an operating-ratio outlier last year, it was inevitable that an activist investor would pounce, Ruest says. The way to avoid a proxy fight is keeping your operating ratio within a couple of points of the average, he says.

"This was a big win for the home team," independent analyst Anthony B. Hatch says. The new board members all bring relevant transportation experience, Hatch says, and are independent of Ancora: "They'll bring a fresh perspectives to NS and put Ancora in the rearview mirror."

Yet investors, Wall Street analysts, and the media will closely follow NS to measure its progress eliminating the costs related to unplanned recrews, high terminal dwell, and stubbornly low merchandise train speeds. "It will be under watch," Hatch says.

East Palestine and its aftermath, as well as the proxy fight, were huge distractions for the railroad, Hatch says, and ultimately NS needs more time for its long-term strategy to play out amid a freight downturn that shows no signs of ending soon.

— *Bill Stephens*





Running 17 minutes late, the first westbound Amtrak *Borealis* — with four Horizon coaches and an Amfleet cafe-business class car — snakes through Milwaukee on May 21, 2024. The Milwaukee Brewers' ballpark, American Family Field, is visible in the background. David Lassen

# Amtrak adds second Chicago-St. Paul round trip

## New state-supported *Borealis* service finds immediate public support

**AN INSTANT HIT?** Civic officials and stakeholders involved in developing Amtrak's state-supported *Borealis* gathered May 21 at St. Paul Union Depot and other stations in Minnesota and Wisconsin to launch the new service. But the real story is that the service's debut has been met with immediate public acceptance.

The new trains — *Borealis* means “northern” — depart their terminals no more than four hours before or after the *Empire Builder* that operates on the same route. But in the first two weeks of operation, coach fares between many city pairs generally equaled and often exceeded prices charged for the *Builder*. Sound yield-management protocol dictates that fares rise as demand increases and available capacity diminishes. At one stroke, the new frequency has made passenger rail service from Milwaukee to the Twin Cities and the stops in between more likely to fit travelers' needs. The proof is in the patronage.

This is exactly how a new service should launch. Beginning in 2015, grass-roots efforts by advocacy groups such as the Great River Rail Commission and All Aboard Minnesota gained the attention of lawmakers and transportation departments in Minnesota and Wisconsin. Under the Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act of 2008, which requires state support for routes under 750 miles, state buy-in for operating grants and infrastructure investments for capacity improvements is mandatory.

Wisconsin was already an active Amtrak partner, co-sponsoring with Illinois the Chicago-Milwaukee *Hiawathas*. *Borealis* is an

extension of one of those seven daily round trips. But Minnesota was new to the game and did the heavy lifting. It had sponsored operating grants for a Twin Cities-Duluth, Minn., service variously named *Arrowhead* and *North Star* between 1975 and 1985 until state funding was withdrawn.

That history was reversed in 2021, when the Twin Cities-Milwaukee-Chicago project



Minnesota Lt. Governor Peggy Flanagan, Amtrak CEO Stephen Gardner, and Ramsey County Commissioner Rafael Ortega mark the start of service in St. Paul. Steve Glischinski

received \$10 million for capital improvements from the Minnesota legislature, helping match a \$31.8 million Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvement grant finalized in 2022. Support continues, as Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz included more than \$5 million in the state's 2024-2025 budget. The *Borealis*' initial success confirms the wisdom of those investments.

But the May 21 debut wouldn't have

been possible without cooperation and commitment of Canadian Pacific Kansas City, which agreed to the service launch without first demanding construction of infrastructure improvements. This was one of the chips exchanged when Amtrak agreed to support the merger of Canadian Pacific and Kansas City Southern in 2021.

Most of those upgrades will involve powered switches facilitating an additional main track through Winona, Minn. But a *Trains* round trip to that city from Chicago on the westbound inaugural *Borealis*, returning on the *Empire Builder* the next day, showed CPKC dispatchers managed to keep the passenger trains and plenty of freight traffic rolling on the largely single-track route west of Milwaukee. The host railroad became a true partner in public mobility — in contrast to New Orleans-Mobile, Ala., machinations involving CSX, Norfolk Southern, Amtrak, and the Surface Transportation Board that still haven't produced two round trips after more than eight years of conflict that have squandered taxpayers time and money in a shroud of secrecy.

A new state-supported train on a portion of a long-distance route doesn't debut every day. The last time was when the state of Virginia doubled daily options between Washington, D.C., and Lynchburg, Va., on the *Crescent*'s route on Oct. 1, 2009. Service has since been extended to Roanoke, Va., with a second round trip added. With stations, speeds, and operating crews already intact, *Borealis* makes a strong case for launching extra frequencies on existing routes elsewhere. — Bob Johnston





**FIRST OF THEIR KIND** The first locomotives to wear the Canadian Pacific Kansas City paint scheme — ES44ACs Nos. 9375 of Canadian Pacific and 4805 of Kansas City Southern — bring northbound Kansas City-St. Paul train 251 through Davenport, Iowa, on May 25, 2024. No. 9375 had debuted the design, chosen by a vote of employees, at an event with touring CP 4-6-4 No. 2816 in Kansas City a week earlier. Chris Guss

## NEWS BRIEFS

### Three railroads sue to block STB's reciprocal switching rule

**CANADIAN NATIONAL, CSX TRANSPORTATION**, and **UNION PACIFIC** filed suit in federal court to block the **SURFACE TRANSPORTATION BOARD's** new reciprocal switching rule, which would allow shippers served by a single railroad to request access to a second operator if service falls below certain standards. The rule, adopted in April, applies only to carload traffic under tariff rates and involves commodities subject to board regulation — a small portion of all traffic — but the railroads claim it is unlawful.

President Joe Biden nominated former Federal Railroad Administration Administrator Ron Batory and Elaine Clegg, CEO of the Boise-area Valley Regional Transit, to serve on **AMTRAK's** board of directors. Both nominees will address the board's geographic requirements, while Batory would bring rare rail-industry experience. It is uncertain whether the Senate will act on the nominations prior to November's election.



**CSX TRANSPORTATION** unveiled its 14th heritage locomotive (above), this one honoring **SEABOARD COAST LINE**, created by the 1967 merger of the Seaboard Air Line and Atlantic Coast Line. CSX

Colorado Gov. Jared Polis signed into law two notable rail-related bills — one introducing new freight regulations and one to fund passenger operations. The first bill requires wayside detectors and creates an **OFFICE OF RAIL SAFETY**, although it sets no requirement for spacing of those detectors and dropped original provisions limiting train length and prohibiting blocking grade crossings for more than 10 minutes. The other will use a rental-car "congestion im-

pact fee" to provide money for matching-fund requirements to attract federal funding for projects including the Front Range and Mountain Rail passenger operations.

**SURFACE TRANSPORTATION BOARD** chairman Martin J. Oberman retired May 10, following more than five years on the board, including more than three as chairman. He oversaw approval of the Canadian Pacific-Kansas City Southern merger, among other major decisions. President Joe Biden designated Robert Primus as the board's new chairman.

**NORFOLK SOUTHERN** will pay more than \$310 million to settle claims and cover costs resulting from the Feb. 3, 2023, derailment in East Palestine, Ohio, the **U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE** and **ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY** announced. About \$15 million of the amount is a penalty related to violations of the Clean Water Act. A court must still approve the deal.

# BNSF and J.B. Hunt try a Quantum leap

New premium intermodal service aims at untapped market



**Bill Stephens**

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Analysis: Trains.com

**I**ntermodal analyst Larry Gross is fond of pointing out that rather than creating a truly competitive intermodal service that can attract freight from the highway, the Class I railroads have for too long relied on outside forces like truck driver shortages or high diesel fuel prices to push freight their way.

The strategy — or lack of one — hasn't played out so well recently. You can see this in the market share that domestic intermodal lost to long-haul trucking from 2017 through 2023. Had railroads simply kept up with trucks, they would have carried 13% more containers and trailers in 2023, Gross says. Put another way, railroads left more than a million loads and \$2.7 billion in revenue on the table.

In a move designed to counter this trend, J.B. Hunt and BNSF Railway in November unveiled a new premium domestic intermodal service dubbed Quantum. It's a day faster than traditional intermodal, shoots for 95% on-time performance, is built around each customer's specific transit-time needs, and offers flexible pricing that sits between regular intermodal and over-the-road trucking rates. This seems to be the combination necessary to attract the highly service-sensitive freight that has never ridden the rails.

In other words, this bespoke service opens up a brand-new intermodal market. And it's a big one: J.B. Hunt and BNSF estimate that Quantum can convert 7 million to 11 million truckloads to intermodal. To put that into perspective, consider that J.B. Hunt handles a total of 2 million intermodal loads per year now and that overall U.S. domestic intermodal volume was 7.6 million containers and trailers last year. "Quantum is really about going after a

market that's untapped," BNSF CEO Katie Farmer says.

Winning and keeping Quantum traffic will hinge on how well J.B. Hunt and BNSF meet their service commitments. The early results are promising. Since launch, Quantum has met the 95% on-time performance standard. And through late May this year Quantum loads posted an impressive 99%-plus on-time performance record from door to door despite tighter schedules and some harsh weather events, like the record Texas wildfire that closed the Southern Transcon for 38 hours and created a single-track bottleneck for the following 47 hours.

Quantum's faster transit times come largely from trimming fat from the dray moves at origin and destination. Inside of terminals, think of Quantum freight as first-class passengers, who are guaranteed seats, pay more for getting extra attention en route, and are the first ones off the train upon arrival. Every load is monitored by a team of BNSF and J.B. Hunt employees working shoulder to shoulder in the railroad's headquarters in Fort Worth.

"The performance, recoverability, and watch tower communication have all helped customers transition OTR freight to intermodal with success," BNSF spokesman Zak Andersen says.

A key question, of course, is whether BNSF and J.B. Hunt can maintain stellar on-time performance once the railroad and its terminals get busy. Erratic service will drive Quantum traffic back to the highway faster than you can say traffic jam.

In the last week of October, J.B. Hunt sent record volume across the BNSF network. To handle the surge, BNSF had to pull equipment out of storage and add train starts. It was a volume flex test — and one that BNSF aced, according to J.B. Hunt.

BNSF aims to make its intermodal service immune from swings in volume. It's doing this by adopting new technology that should keep terminals fluid, as well as capitalizing on capacity expansions in terminals and out on the main line.

Quantum revives a name that Santa Fe and J.B. Hunt initially applied to the TOFC service that sprang from a 1989 business-car handshake deal between ATSF President Michael Haverly and J.B. Hunt himself. Hunt saw the potential of intermodal, and his trucking company became the first to align itself with a railroad. It's now by far the largest domestic intermodal company.

Is the new Quantum service the biggest thing to happen in intermodal since The Handshake aboard Santa Fe hotshot QNYLA? "I think that it is," Haverly says. **I**



A BNSF intermodal train, with a solid cut of stacked J.B. Hunt containers up front, crosses the Chippewa River between Trevino and Mears, Wis., on the busy St. Croix Subdivision. Tom Danneman




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**1974**

Using the name of a famous New Haven Railroad train, Amtrak's Boston-New York *Yankee Clipper* sprints though Old Saybrook, Conn., on Aug. 24, 1974. Two photos, Scott A. Hartley

# A half-century of New England high speed rail





**AMTRAK'S BOSTON-NEW YORK** *Yankee Clipper* is accelerating as it approaches Old Saybrook, Conn., on weed-grown Penn Central tracks on a hot and hazy August 1974 afternoon. At the time, United Aircraft's TurboTrain was the fastest thing on steel wheels in New England. After hitting a record-setting 170.8 mph on a 1967 test run on Pennsylvania Railroad tracks in New Jersey, two of the turbine-powered speedsters had entered revenue service on Penn Central's former New Haven Railroad tracks in 1969, where they were held to 90 mph over most of their 231-mile route.

United Aircraft, better known for Pratt & Whitney jet engines and Sikorsky helicopters, had high hopes for its modern trains, but sold a total of just seven to Canadian National and the United States Department of Transportation.

Amtrak would take title to DOT's pair and acquire a third trainset from CN. The low-slung TurboTrain, with its tilt capabilities, seemed like a natural fit on the curvy Shore Line route. When the Turbos were rolled out, Boston-New York services consisted of aging passenger cars hauled by tired former Pennsy E8s and GG1s. Even in 1974, Amtrak's first Amfleet cars were a year away, and F40 diesels a year after that. As it turned out, standardized trains of the newer equipment would sideline the fast TurboTrains in late 1976.

But for the 23 years after the Turbos' retirement, diesel-hauled Amfleet consists would be New England's contribution to

Northeast Corridor "high speed" service.

Fast forward nearly 50 years from that hot day in Old Saybrook, and we're standing at the same vantage point on a 19-degree January afternoon. A lot has changed: The New Haven Railroad had been an early proponent of mainline electrification, but its early-20th-Century efforts ended at New Haven, Conn., 75 miles east of New York. It would take another 85 years for today's Northeast Corridor owner, Amtrak, to fill in the final 157 miles to Boston. And with a completed 457-mile Washington-Boston electrified corridor came a new high speed train: the Bombardier/Alstom Acela. No turbines this time, just modern high-horsepower electric technology. Amtrak allows Acela trains to gallop at 150 mph in several locations in New Jersey, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts. Their speed through Old Saybrook is "just" 110 mph, but even that can be dramatic as an Acela blasts through the high-level station platforms there.

The Acelas have been the face of America's high speed rail for 24 years, far outlasting the TurboTrains' seven years of service. Now waiting in the wings are Alstom second-generation Acela trains, which will carry on the New England high speed tradition. — *Scott A. Hartley*

**2024**

At the same location on Jan. 21, 2024, nearly 50 years later, an Amtrak Boston-Washington *Acela* cruises at 110 mph under catenary completed in 1999.





VIA Rail Canada train No. 185  
waits at Roberts, Ontario, for  
two eastbound CPKC freights.  
Use of RDCs on the train may  
be nearing its end.





# By RDC to THE GREAT LONE LAND

600 miles on VIA's last Budd Cars

Story and photos by Douglas J. Fear







▲ RDC4 No. 9251 leads Canadian Pacific train No. 418, which is just leaving Franz, Ont., 48 miles into its 300-mile trip on Sept. 26, 1976. The season's first snow is falling. George A. Forero

**W**ith only five serviceable Rail Diesel Cars remaining on VIA Rail Canada's original 86-car roster, the days of the Budd Car in mainline daily service are numbered. As the new Siemens Venture passenger cars and SC42 locomotives displace the current mix of stainless steel and LRC coaches, P42s, and F40s on the Windsor-Quebec City corridor, much of that aging fleet will potentially be available to replace the RDCs operating between Sudbury and White River, Ontario. Clearly, it was time to experience a trip on VIA's RDCs while there was still time.

#### BUDD CARS AND REMOTE SERVICE

At one time, the VIA fleet was composed of assorted RDC1, 2, 3, 4 and 9 models, the latter a powered trailer with no control cab. These originally belonged to Canadian National (Grand Trunk Western); Canadian Pacific (Dominion Atlantic); Boston & Maine; Lehigh Valley; Duluth South Shore & Atlantic; Missouri-Kansas-Texas; and Chicago & Eastern Illinois. Sixteen were built under license by CanCar in Montreal.

Remaining are one RDC1, two RDC2s, and two RDC4s. Six cars were thoroughly rebuilt by Industrial Rail Services in Moncton, New Brunswick, and

released to VIA in 2013, although only four are assigned to Sudbury-White River service. RDC4 No. 6251 is not assigned; RDC2 No. 6208 was sacrificed at CAD Rail in Montreal for structural testing in 2023 when the integrity of VIA's stainless steel fleet came into question. It passed but was rendered scrap as a result.

Repowered with Cummins diesels and Twin Disc transmissions, the remaining RDCs are comfortable, quiet, and clean. RDC4 No. 6250 is entirely dedicated to baggage, making it ideally suited to transport canoes, foodstuffs, backpacks, and trip gear.

The service on which they operate traces its history to creation by Canadian Pacific in the 1950s as trains 417 and 418, the *Lake Superior*. Their schedule varied through the 1960s, according to employee timetables; they aren't indicated at all in 1967, Canada's centennial year.

By the mid-1970s, CP's pub-

lic timetables show daily operation of Nos. 417 and 418 had resumed. During the off-peak season, November through April, trains departed Sudbury on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. They returned Wednesdays, Fridays, and Sundays, similar to today.

In 1977, operation of passenger service in Canada was assumed by Crown Corporation VIA Rail, a move similar to the establishment of Amtrak. By the mid-1980s, the Sudbury-White River trains, now Nos. 185 and 186, were deemed an essential service by the Canadian government.

Considered a lifeline for people living in the small hamlets and communities in this area of Northern Ontario, VIA's flag-stop service provides access to provisions, large-city amenities, and medical attention in Sudbury and beyond [see "Passenger trains where roads don't go," February 2013]. Further, the trains provide a

#### VIA'S REMAINING RDCS

No.	Prior No.	Model	Configuration
6105	CN D105	RDC1	Cab, 90-passenger coach
6217	CP 9115	RDC2	Cab, coach-baggage
6219	CP 9111	RDC2	Cab, coach-baggage
6250	CN D151	RDC4	Cab, baggage (previously baggage-RPO)
6251*	CP 9251	RDC4	Cab, baggage (previously baggage-RPO)

\* — Not currently assigned to trains 185-186





◀ 20 years prior to the photo at left, on Aug. 13, 1956, No. 9251 leads train No. 18, then a 550-mile run between Fort William and Sudbury, the third-longest RDC run in North America. Elmer Treloar, Nickel Belt Rail Collection

vital supply line to remote private camps, cottages, and fishing lodges, some of which have existed for decades. With road access at only six locations in the 130 miles between Chapleau and White River, the trains connect communities otherwise accessible only by air. This reflects the profound expanse of Ontario, which covers 415,000 square miles, compared to the 268,000 square miles of Texas.

The portion of the Canadian Shield over which train Nos. 185 and 186 travel was originally a mountainous region with peaks estimated to reach 39,000 feet. "The Shield" is a geological area of exposed continental crust composed of igneous and metamorphic rock. The final retreat of the last Ice Age scoured the landscape, leaving lakes, muskeg, rocky outcroppings and very little soil, upon which only boreal forests can take hold. Tamarack, jack pine, and birch trees thrive with few hardwoods to produce the vibrant fall reds and oranges one might expect.

Construction of the CPR right-of-way was difficult and expensive. Long, deep cuts were blasted and fills created to traverse lakes and ponds en route to the shores of Lake Superior through hundreds of miles of Precambrian rock. Although the Canadian Rockies stood as the most formidable obstacle to the completion of the Pacific railway, the Canadian Shield

north of Sudbury was no less challenging. On the recommendation of James J. Hill, the Empire Builder, first CPR President George Stephen hired the great railroad builder William C. Van Horne for the daunting task of finishing the railway.

Van Horne, in his creative brilliance, set up three mobile dynamite factories supplied by boat along the shores of Lake Superior. Turning out a ton a day, they manufactured the explosives to complete blasting through the Shield and across the north shore of Lake Superior. The White River Subdivision was one of the last constructed, laid in sections across lakes and rivers, and through insect-infested forests between Missanabie (milepost 57.9) and Girdwood (MP 100.1).

At Van Horne's instance, no grade exceeds 1%; the line — once traveled by CP's flagship *Canadian* — remains the backbone of CPKC's route to the Pacific Coast. Wrote CPR General Superintendent John Egan during construction, "The scenery is sublime in its wildness; it is magnificently grand; God's own handiwork stands out boldly every furlong you proceed. The ravines and streams are numerous and all is picturesqueness itself ... the work, it will remain an everlasting monument to the builders."

This is what I was inspired to experience when I made reservations on trains Nos. 185

and 186 for a late-winter, 600-mile round trip aboard the remaining Budd Cars.

### WESTBOUND NO. 185: SETTING OUT

Riding the train is an adventure; it is about the journey, not necessarily the destination. In the warm summer months, train No. 185 is the jumping-off point for many seeking communion with the wilderness or with visions of "landing the big one." With 300 miles ahead over more than 8 hours and only snacks available on board, it is highly recommended that you bring your own food and beverages. Similarly, it is strongly advised that you book accommodations at one of the two motels in White River

▼ The entrance to the waiting room at the former CPR station in Sudbury, with a board showing the schedule for the RDC run to the left.



# RDCs to THE GREAT LONE LAND







before purchasing train tickets.

Thus prepared, with my travel partner Jerry Bertoldo, a volunteer engineer and conductor with the Adirondack Railroad, we drove about 350 miles to Sudbury. The next morning, we arrived early at the VIA station downtown, one of three in the Greater Sudbury area. Sudbury Junction and Capreol are served by VIA's version of the *Canadian*, on CN's Ruel and Bala subdivisions.

CP crews originally operated Nos. 185 and 186, but in July 2014, VIA Rail assumed that responsibility. Currently, operation is from Sudbury to White River on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, with a "turn" from White River on Wednesdays, Fridays, and Sundays.

During the summer season, there may be as many as 80 to 100 passengers, with up to 18 canoes stuffed into the RDC4 with packs and provisions. On this off-peak trip, there were about 17 travelers aboard our train of three RDCs: a couple of fellows to detrain at nearby Cartier; a family of five destined for their camp; a couple of moms and their young children headed for Chapleau; a resident of Biscotasing heading home; a young man off to Franz for work at a nearby mine; and three of us for White River.

With tickets downloaded to our phones, we boarded about 8:45 a.m. and settled into lead RDC2 No. 6217, as directed by Lise Dugas, VIA service manager and gregarious en route tour guide. Completing the crew were engineers T.J. Parkman (formerly with CN) and Ryan Rushton (formerly with CP).

## THE CARTIER SUB

Sudbury is located at MP 79 on the Cartier Sub, which now begins at MP 69.1, Coniston, just east of the city. Once part of CP's transcontinental route, the Cartier Subdivision ran from North Bay through Sudbury to Cartier. The portion between Coniston and North Bay is now Genesee & Wyoming's Ottawa Valley Railway. Our trip would take us from Sudbury northwest across the Cartier, Nemegos, and White River subdivisions to White River.

CP's dispatching offices are now centralized. Our operating authority would be provided by a Rail Traffic Controller (dispatcher) from the Operations Control Centre in Calgary, Alberta. As we departed Sudbury station, radio communications alerted us to a "Special Control Zone" for the 34 miles to Cartier. Cruising westbound, we saw Signals and Communications employees along the right-of-way replacing the decades-old searchlight signals with new equipment. Normally, for a small area of work, a Track Occupancy Permit would provide workers the necessary protection against train movements. Due to the size and scope of installation and testing work for new Centralized Traffic Control signals, the Special Control Zone granted train movement authority to a Site Supervisor, who cleared trains through an expanded work zone. Thus relieved, the RTC could dispatch other subdivisions.

Departure time is 9 a.m., though we left Sudbury 10 minutes late and held briefly as



CPKC train 421 cleared. VIA 6217 West finally departed Sudbury at 9:20. The RDCs quickly reached track speed on continuous welded rail. There's no "clickety-clack" here, nor would there be for our entire journey, reminding us we were indeed on CPKC's main line to western Canada. The subdivisions on our route are all CTC controlled, and the RTC would advise how many trains we would meet, where, and how long we might be waiting.

From Sudbury, pole lines still stand, an anachronism defying the radio systems now used to transmit CTC data packets to wayside control points. Intermittently strung with telegraph wires and CTC code line, they populated the right-of-way for the length of our trip. Most still displayed mile boards relied upon by operating personnel.

Averaging 40 to 60 mph for the duration of the trip, the RDCs briefly hit about 72 mph in the 75-mph section between Azilda (MP 86.2) and Chelmsford (MP 91.3). Despite our engineer's best efforts, we arrived in Cartier at 10:10 a.m., 20 minutes late. On-time performance is the intent of our VIA crew, but not necessarily a priority of the RTC in Calgary. CPKC freights are generally given precedence.

## THE NEMEGOS SUB

At Cartier, we entered the 136-mile Nemegos Sub, and signs of civilization began to disappear. Rocky cliffs, outcroppings, and a few hardwood trees were visible as the three RDCs wound through the Shield along

◀ **ABOVE LEFT:** The interior of RDC2 No. 6219, vacant on this day, as it looks following its rebuild by Industrial Rail Services in Moncton, New Brunswick.

▲ **ABOVE:** The baggage area of RDC2 No. 6219, the middle car in the three-car train.

**DURING THE PEAK SUMMER SEASON, THERE MAY BE AS MANY AS 80 TO 100 PASSENGERS, WITH UP TO 18 CANOES STUFFED INTO THE RDC4 WITH PACKS AND PROVISIONS.**

► T.J. Parkman calls the stop to the train's other engineer, Ryan Rushton, as the train prepares to drop off a family heading to its cabin a mile or more from the tracks. Parkman will hand down their baggage.



the banks of Spanish River. A few cottages and cabins, some winterized and inhabited, hugged the lakeshores, but they too became more sparse as we headed westward. Although track direction is east-west, it seemed more northward and southward as the territory and vegetation changed.

Dugas kept us apprised of upcoming stops, some of which were simply the trails of "frequent flyers" into the woods toward their cabins and camps. The crew knew where these little paths were, having stopped many times previously. Asking the passengers when they plan to return, the crew would then be prepared to look for their "flag stop" at the wayside. Some locations, but not all, were marked with a picnic bench or small clearing.

Our next stop was at an unmarked trail near MP 28.9. A man, his daughter and son-in-law, and their two daughters detrained to hike a mile and half to their camp for a few days. The camp has been in the

family for more than 60 years. Slowing a few miles west of Sheahan (MP 22.5) our engineer knew just where the trail was located. Parkman stood in the doorway of the baggage car, called the stop, and prepared to hand down packs and supplies. The enginemen also act as baggagemen, loading packs, supplies, snowmobiles, four-wheelers, and the occasional new barbecue.

After confirming the day of their return, Parkman slid the door closed and we were off again, winding through the snowy landscape on a splendid sunny morning.

The Spanish River flowed alongside of us for several miles from its headwaters in Biscotasing (MP 54.4). Evergreens clung to the stony shores. The stark beauty of the landscape was evident around every curve. Little snow remained; what there was hadn't yet melted under the sheltering canopy of evergreens.

A resident of Biscotasing soon engaged us in conversa-

tion, regaling us with tales of fishing on frozen lakes, snow-machine adventures, and other anecdotes that come from living in such a remote community. His description of freshly barbecued perch made my mouth water. Crossing a short bridge, we passed another "put-in" point for canoes on the Spanish River. Soon the three Budd Cars motored across the causeway on Biscotasi Lake, stopping at a dirt road crossing at the north end where the gentleman disembarked and boarded a four-wheeler driven by his daughter. It was 11:28 a.m. and we were back on time.

Westward into the bush we glided along the silky smooth welded rail, through undulating terrain and twisting reverse curves. Meandering water courses disappeared across boggy landscapes while distant tree lines beckoned exploration. About 10 miles later, we diverted onto the siding at Roberts (MP 60.6), stopping short of the west switch for a meet with two eastbound freight trains — No. 420, a mixed manifest, as well as one of CPKC's parade of lengthy stack trains from the West Coast, equipped with a KCS distributed power unit. Parkman stood trackside for the roll-by inspection while Rushton watched from the cab.

At 12:44 p.m., we were out and running through forests, making our way across curved fills and short bridges linking streams and lakes. Despite the best efforts of Rushton, we were exactly an hour late at Kinogama (MP 110), thanks to the meets at Roberts. Entering Chapleau, we stopped to top off the RDCs, spotting each alongside the fuel truck to take on about 420 gallons of diesel, before finally pulling up to the station at 2:25 p.m.

We exited to ogle CPR No. 5433, a Class P2h 2-8-2 (Canadian Locomotive Co., 1943) displayed adjacent to the station. The two moms and their children disembarked as Parkman handed off their baggage while Rushton went to the yard office to collect new bulletin orders for the White River Sub. With only a few minutes





to stretch our legs, we met Kaarlo, a local railfan who regularly assists the crew loading and unloading baggage. He is genuinely happy to help and always greets the VIA crew during their brief stop.

### THE WHITE RIVER SUB

Departing Chapleau, we passed the sprawling Green-First Forest Products mill on the southwest side of town, which annually produces 135 million board feet of spruce, pine, and fir dimensional lumber. It was the last vestige of civilization for 60 miles.

We took the siding at Esher, MP 8.8, for another eastbound. By 3:05 p.m. we were on the main and the territory began to change. Conifers bordered the lakes as the landscape became more stark and scrubby, appearing to seek unity with the leaden sky. I listened to the drone of the Cummins diesel and the sound of steel on steel beneath the floor, watched the bleak landscape pass beyond the coziness of our Budd Car,



and imagined the hardships experienced by those who built the railway across what author Sir William Francis Butler called "The Great Lone Land."

Approaching MP 58, we rolled past the village of Missanabie on the shores of Dog Lake. Once a Hudson's Bay Co. fur trading post, Missanabie First Nations Reserve 62 is located a short distance across the water on Rabbit Island. It

was just west of here, in March 1885 upon reaching end of steel, that 3,000 Canadian troops were required to march through forests, over long rocky outcroppings and muskeg, on their way west to quell the Second Metis Uprising in Saskatchewan. After reaching "Desolation Camp" a day's march away, they resumed their rail journey aboard flatcars to reach the frozen shores of Lake Superior, crossing sections on foot.

West of Missanabie and Dog Lake it became apparent why building the route had been so difficult. The tracks began to weave through towering cuts, hundreds of feet long, dwarfing the RDCs and leaving no doubt where Van Horne's dynamite was needed in spring 1885.

At the south end of Lochalsh, MP 66, we were stuck for one more meet with CP 8759 East and eased through the 14,569 foot "super siding" to MP 68.1. As most freights are now in excess of 10,000 feet, there are few places an RTC can arrange meets. At present,

▲ The view from the cab of train No. 185 during a stop at Roberts siding to meet two eastbound CPKC freight trains.

◀ Parkman waves as he provides a roll-by inspection for the first of the two trains during the RDCs' stop at Roberts. The meets put the train about an hour behind schedule.





▲ Its headlights dimmed, an intermodal train — the first of two meets at Esher siding — crosses the siding's west switch.

▼ The train heads to the yard to be tied down for the night at White River, Ont., while the author and travel partner Jerry Bertoldo await transport to their motel.

Lochalsh is the only “super siding” on the White River Sub, while Roberts on the Nemegos has been extended to 14,040 feet. CPKC plans to extend Amyot (MP 110) on the White River in 2024.

Slowing for our last stop before White River at Franz, we crossed the site of what was

once a diamond with the Algoma Central Railway. Recently, however, the diamond was removed, leaving only a connecting track from the south. Sadly, there is little traffic on the line, now Watco's Algoma Canyon Railroad; what exists is confined to the north end, from Hearst to

Oba. To the south, Watco operates the Agawa Canyon Tour Train from Sault Ste. Marie, Ont., to Canyon, at MP 113.9. While a great seasonal success, 80 miles of track have essentially been abandoned.

At Franz, our passenger, a man of about 20, his face etched with trepidation, departed to a van ready to whisk him to a remote mining camp.

A little after 6 p.m., we arrived at White River, about 55 minutes late. Jerry and I disembarked with the other remaining passenger, a gentleman who called White River home. Dugas had called ahead for the local shuttle to take us to our motel a mile or so away. We were greeted by the former mayor of White River, Angelo Bazzoni; the “shuttle” was his crew-cab pickup. He would return to collect our engineers once they had tucked the Budds away. A true entrepreneur,







VIA RAIL SUDBURY-WHITE RIVER SCHEDULES (AS OF APRIL 8, 2024)				
WESTWARD ▼			EASTWARD ▲	
No. 185			No. 186	
9:00 a.m.	Dpt.	SUDBURY, ONT.	Arr.	3:50 p.m.
9:10	Dpt.	AZILDA	Dpt.	3:05
9:15	Dpt.	CHELMSFORD	Dpt.	3:00
9:19	Dpt.	LARCHWOOD	Dpt.	2:51
9:30	Dpt.	LEVACK	Dpt.	2:45
9:45	Arr.	CARTIER	Dpt.	2:30
9:50	Dpt.		Arr.	2:25
10:05	Dpt.	BENNY	Dpt.	2:10
10:12	Dpt.	STRALAK	Dpt.	2:03
10:25	Dpt.	POGAMASING	Dpt.	1:45
10:30	Dpt.	SHEAHAN	Dpt.	1:41
10:40	Dpt.	FORKS	Dpt.	1:31
10:50	Dpt.	METAGAMA	Dpt.	1:15
10:55	Dpt.	SINKER	Dpt.	1:10
11:20	Dpt.	BISCOTASING	Dpt.	12:45
11:30	Dpt.	ROBERTS	Dpt.	12:37
11:45	Dpt.	RAMSEY	Dpt.	12:20
12:05 p.m.	Dpt.	WOMAN RIVER	Dpt.	12:05 p.m.
12:20	Dpt.	SULTAN	Dpt.	11:50
12:35	Dpt.	KORMAK	Dpt.	11:31
1:05	Dpt.	DEVON	Dpt.	11:00
1:20	Arr.	CHAPLEAU	Dpt.	10:32
1:35	Dpt.			
1:50	Dpt.	ESHER	Dpt.	10:15
2:00	Dpt.	MUSK	Dpt.	10:02
2:10	Dpt.	NICHOLSON	Dpt.	9:55
2:30	Dpt.	BOLKOW	Dpt.	9:35
2:45	Dpt.	DALTON	Dpt.	9:20
3:10	Dpt.	MISSANABIE	Dpt.	9:00
3:30	Dpt.	LOCHALSH	Dpt.	8:40
3:50	Dpt.	FRANZ	Dpt.	8:20
4:00	Dpt.	SWANSON	Dpt.	8:10
4:25	Dpt.	GIRDWOOD	Dpt.	7:45
4:35	Dpt.	AMYOT	Dpt.	7:35
4:50	Dpt.	O'BRIEN	Dpt.	7:15
5:05 p.m.	Arr.	WHITE RIVER, ONT.	Dpt.	7:00 a.m.

Bazzoni owns the Continental Motel where we and the crew stayed — as well as the adjoining dining room, a local gas station, a souvenir shop, and two massive four-axle tow trucks to recover wrecked or otherwise distressed transport trucks.

White River is a CPKC division point where crews occasionally trade off, while others operate nonstop between Schreiber (119 miles west) and Chapleau. The township *claims* to be the “Coldest Spot in Canada,” having recorded a temperature of minus-72 Fahrenheit and an annual snowfall of 100 to 125 inches.

With a population of about 600, White River’s biggest claim to fame is being the home of Winnie-the-Pooh. In August 1914, Lt. Colonel Harry Colebourn of the 34th Fort Garry Horse and Canadian Army Veterinary Corps stopped in White River en route to the Eu-

ropean Front. He purchased an orphaned black bear cub near the station platform for \$20 and named her after his hometown of Winnipeg. The bear became mascot of the Corps, but once deployed to France, Lt. Col. Colebourn was forced to leave her on loan in the care of the London Zoo. Winnie became one of the zoo’s most popular animals, and upon his return to London, Colebourn realized his beloved bear had found a permanent home.

The little bear was visited by many, including British author A.A. Milne and son Christopher. Soon after, Milne and illustrator E.H. Shepard gave the world the treasured stories of Winnie-the-Pooh. White River continues to honor Pooh and friends with an August festival including a parade, activities, and souvenirs (which are rather scarce in the off-season). Winnie is a source of enjoyment

and financial benefit to the Township of White River.

After a brief dinner at the Continental Dining Room, we stretched our legs, visited Winnie’s statue and souvenir shop, and turned in early.

#### EASTBOUND NO. 186

With the change to Daylight Saving Time, it was still dark when the 6:30 a.m. shuttle whisked us to the RDCs, just pulling into the station. The crew had been on duty an hour. It was quiet as we found our seats with six other passengers, all bound for Sudbury. Two miners were headed home wanting sleep, and a grandmother and her daughter with two young children were seated at the car’s far end as Jerry and I took our seats near Dugas’ work station.

The predawn light began to break on the train’s left side. As our exhausted mining compan-



▲ Fueling at Chapleau is a requirement in each direction. Here, each of the RDCs gets about 420 gallons on the west-bound trip.



▲ The sun has just risen as we pass the west end of Dog Lake approaching Missanabie, Ontario. The lake flows into the Michipicoten River, which empties into Lake Superior.

**I WAS NOT THE FIRST VISITOR TO THE EAST SWITCH; A RATHER LARGE WOLF HAD PRECEDED ME. HIS TRACKS WERE FRESH, AND HIS PAWS WERE THE SIZE OF MY HAND.**

ions dozed quietly to the rhythm of the RDCs, we enjoyed fresh coffee brewed by Dugas. Cupping my eyes to the glass, I could discern frozen lakes cast in shades of light grey and azure blue as the first sunshine began to peek over the tree line.

With so few aboard, Dugas sat down to become our eastbound tour guide. She regaled us with stories of others who travelled great distances seeking game or good fishing. We learned it was not uncommon to see the occasional moose, or for one to become an unfortunate statistic on the tracks. Deer are not common due to the lack of food required to support them.

Dugas told us of the three lodges on Esnagi Lake at Swanston (MP 88). During high season, the RDCs stop to detrain or board fishermen at one of Ontario's best locations for fishing. Most are from the United States.

The lodges pamper the fishermen with excellent service, comfortable modern accommodations, a box lunch for their day on the water, professional guides, and outstanding food. Lodge 88, named for the Swanston milepost, is a short boat ride from the siding, as is Mar-Mac Wilderness Lodge Resort. The Northern Way lodge is a 30-40 minute boat ride farther up the lake, near the best fishing. An abundance of walleye, northern pike, perch, and whitefish populate Lake Esnagi. Those seeking muskie need to go farther into northwestern Ontario. While some take the train to Esnagi's lodges, others can afford fly-in service.

The sun began to cast a warm light, promising a beautiful day, as we passed Missanabie. Our speed became inconsistent as we followed an eastbound freight, eventually overtaking CPKC train No. 420 in the siding at Musk (MP 18.3).

We scooted past, clearing Esher at 9:46 — about a half hour ahead of time!

We arrived at Chapleau early and the engineers swapped duties. Typically, they split the run four times: White River to Missanabie, Missanabie to Chapleau, Chapleau to Biscotasing, and finally Bisco to Sudbury. Westbound they reverse the order.

We stretched our legs on the platform at Chapleau while Rushton went for our Tabular General Bulletin Orders (or TBGO, a summarized list of train orders) for the Nemegos Sub. We pulled east of the station to top up our fuel and were on our way at 10:24 a.m., 6 minutes ahead of schedule. Historically, rules prohibited a passenger train from leaving early, but with a passenger manifest provided through advance ticket sales, we were able to depart and stay ahead of train No. 420. (Tickets can be purchased on the train, but doing so is more expensive, and travelers had best be at the station early in case the train is, too.)

The day was unusually warm. Messages from hotbox detectors (six on the White River Sub, seven on the Nemegos) indicated an ambient temperature of 7 degrees Celsius (45 Fahrenheit). At Aubrey (MP 84.5), we had our first meets of the day. At the east switch, I detrailed for photos of our train before No. 113 cleared at 11:53 and No. 101 passed us at 12:25.

With the train stopped by a running brook, I discovered I wasn't the first visitor to the



► VIA's accommodating crew poses for a team photo. From left, Engineer T.J. Parkman, Service Manager Lise Dugas, and Engineer Ryan Rushton.



east switch today; a rather large wolf had preceded me.

His tracks were fresh, and his paws were the size of my hand. I boarded the train looking back to see if my friend was anywhere nearby. Rushton estimated his shoulder height to be about 32-35 inches and remarked he was likely quite a big fellow. We departed Aubrey having fallen behind schedule.

At Forks we came to a stop. Still 31 miles west of Cartier, we could only figure it was for a track foreman who hadn't canceled his Track Occupancy Permit in a timely fashion. The delay wasn't long; I had a chance to grab a photo or two while we held the main. Parkman told me of a nearby cabin owner who would sometimes bring freshly barbecued pickerel to the crew, much to their delight.

Soon we crossed a bridge at MP 24.2 over an old log flume and a marked portage on the Spanish River as the topography changed with each passing mile. It was getting rocky and rugged again as we approached the division point at Cartier.

West of the Cartier station, we had a meet within the yard and eased into the passing track at Restricted Speed (Canadian Operating Rule No. 105). A freight, facing us with lights extinguished, held back some 30 cars distant. A westbound soon passed on the main; once it was past, we were authorized to reverse onto the main and proceed eastward. The process was quick and efficient.

Now running about 40 minutes late, we sailed past the Cartier depot, again entered the foreman's Special Control Zone, and were cleared the remaining 34 miles into Sudbury.

About 14 miles later, pacing the busy Trans-Canada Highway, we passed Onaping Falls, where revered Canadian Group of Seven artist A.Y. Jackson created many of his famous paintings. Onaping Falls is located on the edge of the Sudbury Basin, created about 2 billion years ago when a 10-mile-diameter meteorite hit the region. This created a hole 20 miles deep, uplifting and exposing the metals and ores that make Sudbury one of



▲ Train No. 186 — VIA 6450 East for CPKC dispatchers — waits for two freights near the pot signal at the east end of Aubrey siding.



◀ A radio provides a sense of scale for the wolf print found during the stop at Aubrey.

the planet's richest mining areas. At one time, Sudbury produced 80% of the world's nickel, hence the "Big Nickel" displayed on a hilltop west of town. We made a brief passenger stop at Chelmsford at 4:07 p.m. and flew the last dozen miles into town.

We arrived about 35 minutes late at 4:30 p.m. We loaded the car and said goodbye to our gracious and accommodating crew. We may also have said our final goodbyes to the last of VIA Rail's operating RDCs, but that story has yet to be written. I





# The Promise

The largest 21st century  
steam restoration project  
is happening in Illinois

Story and photos by Steve Glischinski

Steve Sandberg, Railroading Heritage of  
Midwest America president and chief  
operating officer, inspects the boiler shell of  
Union Pacific 4-6-6-4 No. 3985. Behind him is  
the sheet that holds the Challenger's flues.  
Looking toward the rear, we can also see the  
stay bolt array securing the firebox.





of Silvis





**A**spen Welker is hard at work. He's cutting stay bolt caps off a massive steam locomotive, inside an equally massive steam backshop. He's part of a crew overhauling two steam locomotives receiving Class 1 repairs. A Class 1 repair, according to the United States Railway Association's 1918 repair classifications, is to include the following: "New boiler or new back end. Flues new or reset. Tires turned, or new. General repairs to machinery and tender."

Although Welker is working in a steam shop, it's not 1918 — it is 2024. Welker is 19 years old, and he's working for the non-profit Railroading Heritage of Midwest America — better known as the Friends of the 261 — in its Silvis, Ill., shop. Welker is

part of a mostly young team undertaking, with apologies to Union Pacific Big Boy No. 4014, the largest steam locomotive rebuild of this century. It beats out No. 4014's revival, as RRHMA is rebuilding two large steam locomotives simultaneously.

In fact, No. 4014's revival had a direct bearing on what's happening at the former Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific Silvis shop. A few years ago, well before No. 4014 was rebuilt, John J. Gray, who headed Rail Management Services, one of America's largest intermodal terminal operators, proposed rebuilding a Big Boy in time for the 150th Anniversary of the Golden Spike ceremony at Promontory, Utah, in 2019. He offered to partially finance the rebuilding through his UP In Smoke Foundation, dedicated to the preservation of UP steam locomotives. While UP was open to the idea of rebuild-

**Aspen Welker, age 19, cuts stay bolt caps off Union Pacific Challenger No. 3985 at RRHMA's Silvis shop on Jan. 19, 2024.**

**Welker is part of a small, young team working to return two big steam locomotives to operation simultaneously.**

ing a Big Boy, it said no thanks to his offer, choosing to pay for the project itself. UP acquired No. 4014 from California's RailGiants Train Museum, rebuilt it at Cheyenne, Wyo., and, along with 4-8-4 No. 844, sent it to Utah in a successful commemoration of the Golden Spike ceremony.

With its revival, No. 4014 attracted well-deserved glory as the world's largest operating steam locomotive. Another UP steam locomotive previously held that title: 4-6-6-4 Challenger No. 3985. Stored at the end of the steam era in the Cheyenne roundhouse, in 1975 it was placed on display next to





Union Pacific Challenger No. 3985 (left) and 2-10-2 No. 5511 sit inside the cavernous former Rock Island backshop in Silvis, Ill. Having been designed as a workspace for steam locomotives, the facility is proving to be an ideal home for these two massive rebuilding projects.



In November 2022, UP operated a hospital train bringing donated equipment from Cheyenne, Wyo., to Silvis, Ill. The train switched to the Iowa Interstate Railroad from Council Bluffs, Iowa, to Silvis. On Nov. 19, 2022, the train crosses the Cedar River at Moscow, Iowa, in a snow squall.

Cheyenne's passenger station. Its display period was brief. In 1979 a group of UP employees, with the railroad's blessing, moved it back to the roundhouse and rebuilt it in time for a 1981 trip to Sacramento, Calif., marking the opening of the California State Railroad Museum. For 29 years, No. 3985 served as a giant steam ambassador for UP, traveling the western United States and even making a foray east to stand-in for long-scrapped Clinchfield Railroad Challengers pulling the CSX/Clinchfield Santa Train in November 1992.

No. 3985 made its last trips in 2010 when it was sidelined for repairs. With UP working on the Big Boy overhaul, No. 3985 languished in storage. UP did not need three operational steam locomotives, but some far-sighted UP managers, including retired Senior Vice President—Law Mike Hemmer,

hoped to see No. 3985 preserved. Gray and Hemmer suggested an alternative: find an organization that was willing to undertake No. 3985's preservation and restoration. The UP would donate the engine and was willing to sweeten the pot by also donating dormant 2-10-2 No. 5511, EMD DDA40X No. 6936 — the last operating Centennial, the world's largest diesel locomotive — plus miscellaneous excess passenger and business cars. What organization could handle this big project, and where could it be done?

### Enter RRHMA

Those interested in preserving the equipment sought out an organization with a proven track record. This led to Railroad-

ing Heritage of Midwest America/Friends of the 261, based in Minneapolis. Steve Sandberg, president and chief operating officer, has led the organization since its founding in the 1990s, and headed a team that successfully rebuilt Milwaukee Road 4-8-4 No. 261 twice: initially in 1992-93, and again in 2012-2013. The organization has gathered an impressive fleet of passenger equipment to be pulled by No. 261 or made available for Amtrak charter use. Despite Amtrak's draconian cutbacks on special train and private car charters in 2018, RRHMA has continued to prosper.

RRHMA has a proven track record of courting donors, including coming up with the financing to purchase No. 261 from the





**The huge shop at Silvis, Ill., once serviced Rock Island's large fleet of 4-8-4s. Outside the main shop building in autumn 2022 is equipment from Loram Maintenance of Way and a Canadian Pacific unit being serviced by NRE Locomotive.**



**After its move to the RRHMA Silvis shop, Union Pacific No. 5511, a 2-10-2 built by Baldwin Locomotive Works in 1923, is slowly rolled into the backshop building. You may recognize No. 5511 from its supporting role in *Last of the Giants*, the 1950s documentary on the Big Boys.**

National Railroad Museum in Green Bay, Wis., in 2010, paying for the engine's overhaul, and helping purchase an ex-Milwaukee Road E9A. Sandberg was willing to take on the huge new project, but there was a catch — RRHMA's Minneapolis facility, home to No. 261 and the passenger fleet — was too small to handle the work and store all the equipment. A much bigger facility would have to be located.

Surprisingly, it was the E9 acquisition that led to the Silvis shop. Sandberg was looking for E-unit parts when he learned National Railway Equipment had some similar units at its shop in Silvis. It turned out the Es had been scrapped, but Sandberg learned the complex was to be closed and put up for sale. Silvis met just about every qualification RRHMA was seeking. It is designed to overhaul steam locomotives, is big enough to handle both the overhaul and equipment storage, and is served by three railroads: BNSF, CPKC, and Iowa Interstate. "Before we accepted [the UP equipment donation], we met with several donors who were interested in the preservation of this equipment," Sandberg says. "All our donors are the secret to our current and future success. We never would have accepted the donation unless we felt like we could financially bear it. We recognize that this is by far the largest project we have ever undertaken. We can't rely on single individuals to fund it. We have to rely on a variety of outside funding sources for it to be a success."

### **Remembering the Rock**

In the steam-era heyday, every Class I railroad worth its salt had big shops to maintain its locomotives. In 1902, Rock Island chose Silvis as the site of its largest locomotive repair facility, a central hub for its network that would eventually include a



general stores department, repair shop, roundhouse, and large freight yard. Silvis was home to the Rock's 80 R-class North-erns — the largest U.S. fleet of 4-8-4s. While the majority of large steam-era shops are gone, somehow the Rock Island's major shop — which went out of business 44 years ago — is among the survivors.

Silvis' importance to the Rock didn't end with the arrival of diesels. From the 1950s into the 1970s the financially ailing Rock maintained an extensive diesel rebuild program. A portion of this work was done in the Silvis facilities. The Rock seemingly bought diesels from just about anyone: at one point, Silvis shop forces were maintaining the products of eight builders.

Even as it declared its final bankruptcy in 1975, Silvis overhauled locomotives as part of the Rock's Capital Rebuild Program. Illinois Central Gulf's Paducah, Ky., shop and Morrison-Knudsen at Boise, Idaho, also did contract work for the program. In total, the railroad overhauled more than 100 GP7s, GP9s, GP18Ms, and upgraded GP40s to GP40-2s. Silvis' paint



**UP Challenger No. 3985 has been stripped of its piping, appliances, and cab in preparation for the boiler to be lifted off the driving wheels. Work on the locomotive has revealed the different maintenance techniques employed since it entered service in 1943.**



**RRHMA volunteers assemble on the temporary work stairs leading into the boiler of 4-6-6-4 No. 3985. The restoration work is being completed by a small professional staff — currently five — and a larger team of volunteers. Most of the crew members are young and are gaining technical experience through their efforts. Establishing a steam learning environment is among RRHMA's goals for the Silvis shop.**



shop repainted units white and blue — the final Rock Island paint scheme, nicknamed “Bankruptcy Blue.”

Rock Island continued to use the shop until March 1980. Chrome Crankshaft, later Chrome Locomotive, acquired the shop, reopening it in January 1981. In June 1990, Chrome Locomotive was sold to National Railway Equipment, which announced in 2021 it would close Silvis, consolidating operations to Mount Vernon, Ill., and Paducah.

On Jan. 10, 2022, with assistance from the UP In Smoke Foundation and other donors, RRHMA announced it would take over the Silvis complex. The 90-acre facility has nearly 10 miles of track and a 400,000-square-foot shop building with multiple overhead cranes. Under the agreement, a portion of the shop is leased back to NRE over a five-year period, generating revenue that helps offset the acquisition cost. The lease has been shortened to three years, with NRE planning to leave in 2025. NRE pays the shop utilities.

Between 60% and 70% of the track at the complex is serviceable. RRHMA is rebuilding more track — in the first three years, 4,000 ties have been installed. Among the first projects was rebuilding the track into the shop building, including straightening curves so the Challenger could be moved inside.

Cleaning out the building was a major task before any equipment could be moved in. The building had no machinery when RRHMA arrived, so acquiring equipment to overhaul steam locomotives was a must. Recently a quartering machine — used to “quarter” steam locomotive crankpins to ensure side rods are in precise locations — was added, as was a machine from Illinois Railway Museum used to make firebox components. A swaging machine — designed by Sandberg’s late father, Frank — used to shrink boiler flues, was relocated from the Minneapolis shop. Other large equipment has been added, including circa-1950s vertical turret lathes, mechanical saws, and milling machines.

The objective is to restore equipment, and eventually convert the shop into a museum, which could host revenue-generating events. RRHMA is also pursuing rail-car storage on the site and contract work, like painting passenger cars and truck overhauls. Loram Maintenance of Way, Inc. is leasing space at Silvis to store and service its equipment.

## Paying It Forward

In spring 2024 RRHMA Silvis had five full-time employees, which it hopes to expand to 17 shortly. The employees, plus a legion of volunteers, are mainly young people. At least six of them are under 30 — with some as young as 18. A few start-

ed with the Friends of the 261 in the Twin Cities and its annual North Pole Express at St. Paul Union Depot, serving as coach attendants, cleaners, or elves, but now have moved up to working on the locomotives at Silvis.

This “youth movement” is born out of both circumstance and necessity. RRHMA has attracted young people who grew up with trains — many trace their interest to when Thomas the Tank Engine appeared on public television. Many skilled steam mechanics have been swept up in other steam projects, making youth recruitment necessary. This is part of RRHMA’s mission, according to Sandberg. “When I began the restoration work on Milwaukee Road 4-8-4 No. 261, I was 25 years old,” he says. “Now I’m 58. We need to bring younger people in to carry on and learn about steam like I did when I was younger. It’s our duty to mentor and nurture these young people.”

Case in point is Welker, who has an outgoing nature and an infectious enthusiasm for steam. He began volunteering at the St. Louis, Iron Mountain & Southern, in his hometown of Jackson, Mo., at age 5. His experience was with diesel locomotives until July 2023, when he visited Little Americka amusement park in Marshall, Wis., home of the Whiskey River Railway live steam railroad. After a few days with the

mechanics, Welker stopped in Silvis for a volunteer weekend and met RRHMA Shop Superintendent Alex Beams, who had worked several years at Whiskey River. Beams encouraged him to volunteer, and Welker began helping out on weekends and later became a “full-time” volunteer. In January 2024 he became a full-time employee.

Beams manages the day-to-day shop operation, working directly with employees and volunteers. He broke into steam through miniature locomotives like those on the Whiskey River. He got his full-size steam

credentials on Iowa Interstate’s Chinese QJ Class 2-10-2s beginning in 2010. He was then invited north to Minneapolis for the rebuilding of No. 261. Now Beams is working on two full-size UP steam locomotives. When he started in Silvis on Labor Day weekend 2022, he was the only employee for months. It was a lonely job cleaning the building to receive the donated equipment that November.

Beams and crew are focused on the Challenger, which is a daunting task. They have encountered different repair styles and techniques that were used on the locomotive over the years. That includes finding a railroad tie under the cab when it was lifted off the locomotive. “But the boiler is just like the days when UP ran it in regular service,” Beams says. “There was hardly any scale in the thing.” A considerable help to



Alex Beams



The terms of Union Pacific’s equipment donation included RRHMA rebuilding Big Boy No. 4014’s original tender and converting it from carrying coal to oil. Currently, No. 4014 uses No. 3985’s tender. In early 2024, the Big Boy tender was repainted in primer at Silvis.





the project has been the set of plans and mechanical drawings provided by the Union Pacific Historical Society.

Among the larger 2024 projects is lifting No. 3985's boiler off the frame using the huge shop cranes. "We want to lift the front of the boiler up enough so we can roll the front engine out," Beams says. Another big job is installing all-new wheel sets on No. 4014's tender. Converting the Big Boy's original coal tender to oil was part of the agreement with UP for the equipment donation. Once complete, No. 4014's tender will be sent to Cheyenne, UP's steam base, and swapped for No. 3985's tender.

Working on the Challenger is like working on four locomotives, says Beams. "With all the piping and lube lines, it's just so complex." By contrast, No. 5511 is a simple machine — and in better shape, Beams says. "The asbestos was removed from the engine, but other than that it was largely untouched and kept indoors since its retirement." The boiler will still need an ultrasound inspection, but he says the firebox "looks amazing." The running gear needs some work. It is a friction-bearing engine that relied on grease cakes to keep

the bearings lubricated. It's likely an oil pressure system will be installed, replacing the grease system.

### More than steam

Silvis is more than steam work. CPKC contracted with RRHMA to do body work and repaint Kansas City Southern's business cars. While losing the *Southern Belle* colors to Canadian Pacific maroon, they retain their KCS lettering. RRHMA former Southern Pacific business car *Stanford* received SP two-tone gray with a black roof and an upgrade to Amtrak standards. Ex-Santa Fe B40-8W No. 537, a 2023 BNSF Railway donation, was repainted in the Santa Fe Warbonnet scheme.

RRHMA's passenger car fleet is the bailiwick of Justin Young, who hired on in 2007 at Minneapolis. He has remodeled several cars in the fleet with projects as varied as installing generators, carpet, wood paneling, and electrical work. If you've been lucky enough to ride in Milwaukee Road skytop observation car

**Centennial DDA40X No. 6936, parked inside the Silvis shop in January 2024, is one of 47 6,600-hp units built by EMD for UP from 1969 to 1971. They are the most powerful diesel locomotives built on a single frame. RRHMA returned No. 6936 to operation in 2023.**

*Cedar Rapids*, you've seen his handiwork, as he oversaw restoration of the car's interior to its as-built appearance. Another example is lounge car *Wisconsin Valley*. Working with fellow employee and long-time volunteer A. J. Murphy, Young stripped the car from the windows down and installed mahogany wood.

Young spends most of his time in Minneapolis, but does work several days each month in Silvis. This involves some back and forth. To install a generator on one of the UP coaches, Young traveled to Silvis, measured the car, then sent the data to the Twin Cities staff, who produced CAD drawings for the generator. Young ordered the parts, which were delivered to Silvis. Sometimes, Young notes, he will route parts for Silvis to Minneapolis and



Justin Young





truck them south himself, depending on timing and cost of shipping.

Sandberg would like to have up to 18 full-time staff members at Silvis. Currently, some bigger jobs, like welding, are contracted out. Sandberg would like to bring this in-house. Skill acquisition happens, however, by working on a live steam locomotive — something not currently available at Silvis. Hence, RRHMA is seeking a smaller steam locomotive for Silvis, which would aid with training and allow short excursions.

Part of the Silvis expansion plan and shift to a museum focus is reinstalling a turntable. The Rock Island once had a 90-foot table to handle its big 4-8-4s. You can still see the remains of the pit on Google Earth. Recently, CPKC donated the 110-foot former Milwaukee Road Bensenville, Ill., turntable, but RRHMA located a 135-foot turntable better suited to its needs. Also in the works is a storage building for the passenger cars on the property.

RRHMA plans include diesel power as well. Already on hand are UP DDA40X No. 6936 and No. 537 — the first preserved GE B40-8W. Sandberg hopes to acquire more diesels — especially former Rock Island units.

Before the Silvis project became a reality, RRHMA pursued several other ideas handled by volunteers such as Erik Hoofnagle. Hoofnagle works for an Illinois-based general contractor that rebuilds roads and bridges, and does railroad work, including earth and track projects for the higher-speed line between Chicago and St. Louis. For years, Hoofnagle has been RRHMA's jack of all trades, handling the details and backstopping Sandberg. Hoofnagle has now become involved with the trackwork both inside and outside the Silvis buildings, as well as the buildings themselves. In essence, while Beams manages the projects inside, Hoofnagle is the property manager, handling the structures and surrounding land.



**Erik Hoofnagle**

**Bundles of new boiler flues, manufactured in Germany, are stacked on the floor of RRHMA's shop awaiting installation in Challenger No. 3985 and 2-10-2 No. 5511. Supply chain issues continue to affect the work schedule, with projects being juggled based on when parts arrive.** Jerry Huddleston

During the first year at Silvis, Hoofnagle ensured the track on the property's west side was serviceable for the incoming UP equipment — especially the Challenger. Now he's working on rebuilding several tracks on the east end. The goal, Hoofnagle says, is to rebuild enough track "so we can eventually run a short passenger train from one end of the property to the other." Being local, Hoofnagle also meets with city officials, local politicians, and speaks at service organization luncheons, spreading the word about RRHMA's Silvis operations and plans.

### When will it be done?

There is a palpable excitement around the Challenger restoration, with the mind-blowing possibility its return could bring a chance to see it teamed with Big Boy No. 4014. Sandberg says there is no firm answer to that question — yet.

"We still have supply chain issues," Sandberg says when asked about completion dates. "Getting materials in a timely fashion is hard to predict, so you end up bouncing from project to project. You can end up on the 5511 for a couple of days, then parts come in for the 3985, so you switch to that, and so on."

When No. 261 runs in Minnesota, another problem — albeit a good one — crops up. Many of the Silvis team will head north to help with the trips, taking time off from the southern projects. Currently, there are no plans for relocating No. 261 to Silvis.

### Sharing knowledge

Projecting out a decade or more, Sandberg says the site will house a museum. The two UP steam engines will be there, along





with a technical and learning center to teach younger people about steam. “We are working toward building classrooms at Silvis,” he says. “We’ve been approached by several entities that would like to us to teach about railroads [and] passenger car maintenance. We already have an apprentice program for union iron workers here. They bring in apprentice bridge builders and they learn about riveting and other processes. We see Silvis as a historic preservation site [that] could also be an educational institute.”

For now, the complex is closed to the public, but RRHMA is planning several

events allowing visitors a glimpse of what is happening inside.

The example for RRHMA and the Silvis project, Steve Sandberg says, is the evolution of the historic Spencer Shops that make up the North Carolina Transportation Museum. “I’ve explained to the young guys about Spencer and how far it has come over the decades,” Sandberg says. “I told them I won’t be here, so my job now is to put them on a path or trajectory [so] where what they want it to be in 30 or 40 years can come to fruition ...”

For fans of steam railroading and rail preservation, the projects at Silvis are excit-

ing and filled with promise. Now it’s up to Railroading Heritage of Midwest America to turn the promise of Silvis into reality. **I**

*For more information about RRHMA and the Silvis project, to volunteer, or contribute to the effort, please visit: [rrhma.com](http://rrhma.com).*

▼ **Of UP’s 144 2-10-2s, only No. 5511 survives. In 1957-58, it was used as a temporary steam boiler in Ogden, Utah and Green River, Wyo. It was stored in the roundhouse there until a move to Cheyenne around 1970. It sits inside the massive Silvis shop building in January 2024 as its operational restoration continues.**



Based in Parkersburg, W.Va., the Little Kanawha River Rail, Inc., (LKRR) is a true short line — its two SW1200s serve 5 miles of track inside a business park.



# Small but mighty

## Little Kanawha River Rail, Inc., keeps busy serving industrial customers

Story and photos by Isaac Miller

**F**ew people can say they run a railroad, but Trent Elliott is one of those who can make the claim. Elliott is the president of Little Kanawha River Rail, Inc., an industrial short line in Parkersburg, W.Va.

Parkersburg, on the Ohio River, was once a major hub for the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad. Today, the city is served by three railroads. CSX's Huntington-Wheeling Ohio River Subdivision passes through town and includes a small yard along the Ohio River called Low Yard. The Belpre Industrial Parkersburg Railroad operates out of High Yard near downtown and serves industries on the Ohio side of the river. The LKRR is located along its namesake, the Little Kanawha River, on the south side of town.

The term "short line" is particularly apt for the LKRR.

"We are an extremely short railroad," Elliott says. "We have about 5 miles of track."

The LKRR services a business park, a large facility along the river with tracks branching all over. There is a road-to-rail transload facility and a place to load and unload barges. Customers include an acid neutralization plant, as well as one that produces pollution-control products for coal-burning power plants.

"We handle steel, aluminum, and things like that," Elliott says. "We move approximately 300 to 500 cars a month."

The railroad connects with CSX near the mouth of the Little Kanawha River. The line hugs the river as it sweeps into the south

side of Parkersburg. The LKRR's yard is located here, as well as the business park.

The LKRR was formed in 1989, but the route is much older. The line was a Baltimore & Ohio branch built in the 19th century that extended from Parkersburg and into Wirt County. CSX operated the line into the late 1980s, but when it sought to abandon the route, the Elliots bought it to keep serving the business park.

For motive power, the railroad uses a pair of vintage EMD SW1200 switchers, Nos. 1205 and 1147. The former is the railroad's original unit and is of Norfolk & Western heritage, while the latter arrived in 2014 and is of Missouri Pacific heritage.

"The reason we like SW1200s is because of the power they have," Elliot says. "We can pull 40 cars with one of them."

Engine crews begin their day with a safety briefing with trainmaster Scott Parsons, and then it's time to head to work. A locomotive, typically No. 1147, heads up the line to see if CSX has left any cars. The engineer and crew inspect the cars and bring them to the yard. Cars are then sorted for customers, and once those customers are serviced, outgoing cars are returned to the interchange track with CSX.

"We have a busy, busy day," says Paul Walker, one of the three LKRR engineers.

For many years, LKRR operated with only one locomotive, No. 1205. Concerns over possible breakdowns increased as that





1



2



3



4

**1** On paper, the Little Kanawha River Rail's two Electro-Motive Division SW1200s are identical locomotives, but crews say the No. 1147 is both more powerful and easier to operate than sister No. 1205.

**2** For many years, SW1200 No. 1205 was the railroad's sole locomotive. It steps in when No. 1147 requires service and on busy days, both locomotives will be active. **3** The railroad facility includes a area dedicated to loading and unloading barges on its namesake river. **4** Although small in track miles, Little Kanawha River Rail provides a full slate of services, including a road-rail transload facility.

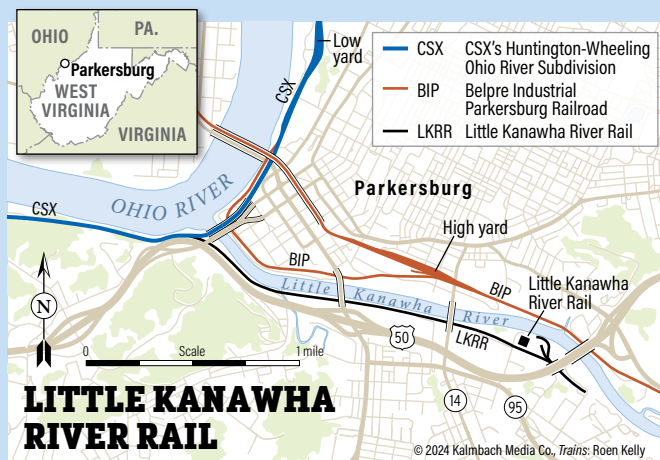
unit grew older. Those concerns, as well as growing business, prompted the need for a second locomotive, leading to the purchase of No. 1147 in 2014. While the units are both SW1200s, Walker says there are differences.

"The 1147 has a little more power than 1205 and is easier to operate, in my opinion," he says.

No. 1205 has not been forgotten and continues to see use, although on a limited basis. No. 1205 steps in when No. 1147 needs its FRA-required servicing, and there are times when both locomotives operate at the same time.

"We may split both units up when we're busy," Parsons says. "We'll use 1147 out on the main line and use 1205 to bump cars as we unload them."

Even a railroad as small as LKRR can provide significant operating challenges. Repairing and maintaining the track is not cheap or easy. The railroad faces increasing costs for such basic commodities as crossties, the cost of which have increased by more than 100% in the past five years. And having a section of track out of service for repairs can impact the railroad's ability to operate. The railroad maintains its own section gang to address these issues.



"We have a crew that repairs track every day," Elliott says. "They work on the railroad all the livelong day."

Railroading also provides Elliott and his coworkers the chance to meet and work with railroaders from other companies. LKRR is on good terms with fellow Parkersburg-based short line Belpre Industrial Parkersburg Railroad (BIP), whose owner, Casey Cathcart, runs a car repair facility at LKRR's location.

"We do some things together to try and develop business both on our track and on BIP," Elliott says.

Both men also attend an annual conference in Florida for short line railroad owners and operators.

"The people you meet in the railroad community are just the nicest people," Elliott says. And, he says, there's one significant reward to running a railroad: "It's fun." **1**

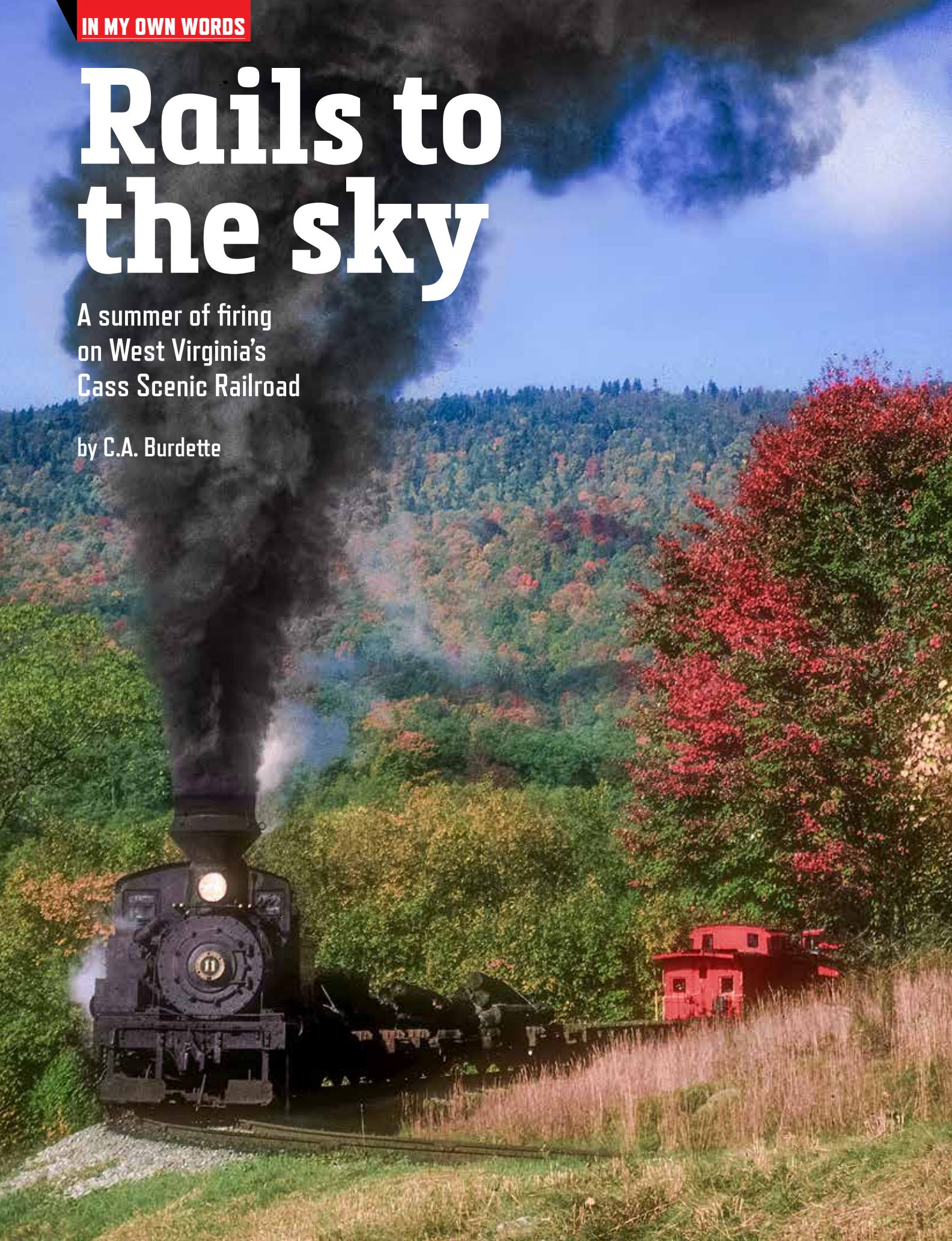


IN MY OWN WORDS

# Rails to the sky

A summer of firing  
on West Virginia's  
Cass Scenic Railroad

by C.A. Burdette







**THIS IS A STORY ABOUT ONE SUMMER** in the life of a fireman on the Cass Scenic Railroad in Cass, W.Va. I was hired in 1972 as a shop hand and extra fireman. I worked about six months in the shop and then was put on as regular fireman on the short run — a 4-mile trip up Cheat Mountain, with grades up to 10%, three times a day. The regular engineer was a man who liked to run fast and with the Johnson Bar full forward for maximum power. I had my work cut out for me to maintain water and steam in the boiler. The engine I drew was 80-ton Shay No. 4, which was a good steamer.

#### THE FIREMAN'S DAY

My day started long before the first tourist appeared. Each morning, I first checked the boiler water level, then blowing down the water glass to see if it was working properly. Next, I would open the firebox door and look for leaks or any kind of bulge in the boiler. Then I would put the screen on the smokestack to keep hot cinders from setting fire to the right-of-way.

Leveling out the fire and shaking the grates until the ashes fell in the ash pan was

next, followed by going under the engine and raking out the ash pan.

By now steam pressure would be rising. Back in the cab I added a little more coal to the fire and checked both injectors to see if they were working. As I waited for steam pressure to rise, I would sweep the cab roof and running boards. Then, if there was time, I'd shine the bell and number plate.

With the steam up, it was time to make up our train and head for the depot. On my first run up the mountain I did everything my father, a lifelong railroad man, had taught me years before.

No. 4 was a good steamer, but the engineer showed me no mercy on my first day. I fought all the way for steam and water and made it without stalling.

I got better with each trip, learned the grade, and knew what the engineer was going to do before he did it. I was known as the fireman that did not make smoke and could lift No. 4's safety valves at any time.

I played a trick on our conductor by being on my seat, looking out the window, when the train was in a long curve allowing him to view the fireman's side. One day, in the shop, he said a fireman who worked back in log train days could fire an engine and stay seated half of the time. "Now," he said, "Burdette can fire one of these engines and sit on his seat all of the time."

What he didn't know was I fired before the curve, making sure the stack was clear

The one remaining original Cass engine, three-truck Shay No. 5, heads up a freight just below Whittaker during Railfan Weekend 2014. Built for the Greenbrier & Elk River Railroad in 1905, it is the second-oldest Shay in operation. Two photos, Kevin Gilliam

in time to be in my window watching the scenery when we reached that curve.

#### NO. 4 ON THE GROUND

Once, on the day's first trip up the mountain, we came out of the first switchback and into Gum Curve, which is on a heavy grade. Suddenly No. 4 began to spin its wheels wildly and jumped the track.

We climbed down and discovered the line shaft had come apart just behind the cylinders. That rendered the rear two trucks useless, as they were receiving no power. The broken line shaft landed on the track and derailed the front truck.

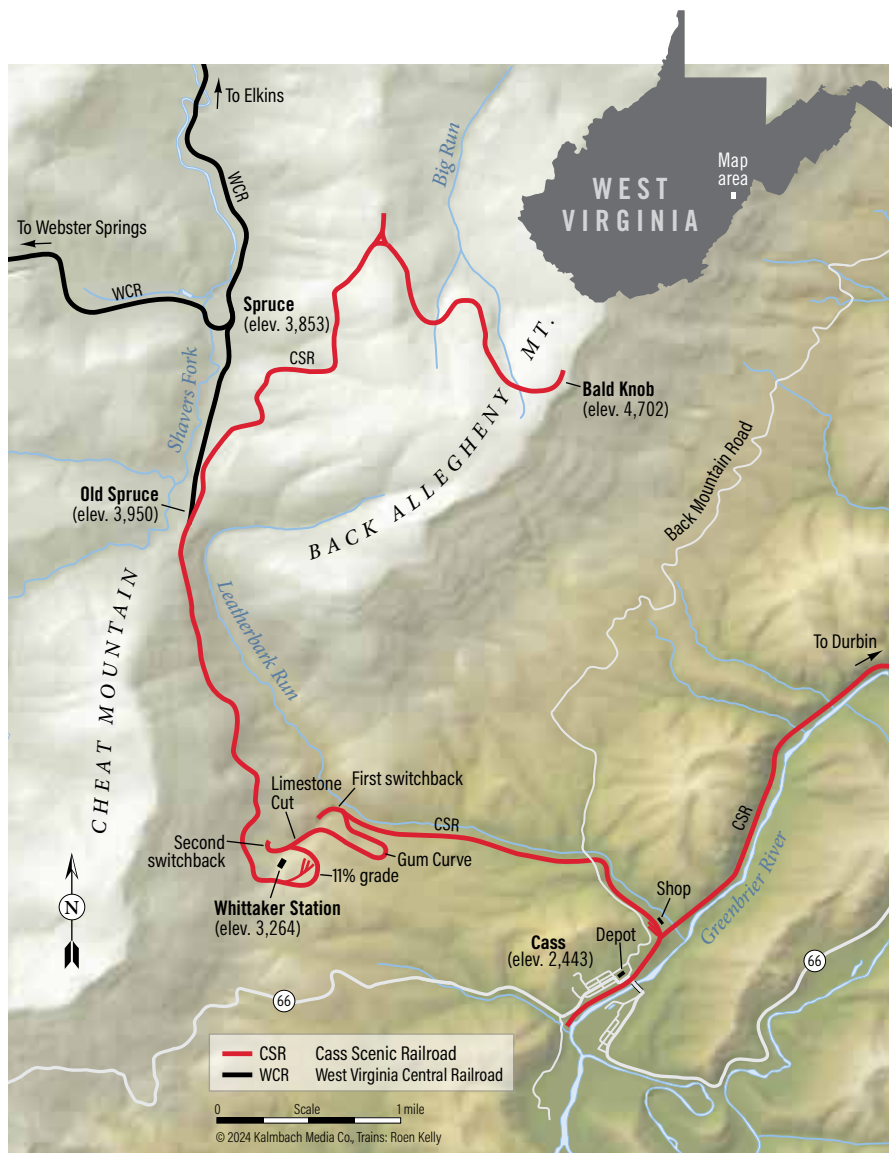
We waited until the Bald Knob train came up. They took our passengers and returned to Cass. We put down the rerailers and, with the front trucks for power and the downhill pull of the cars, rerailed No. 4. We got her back to the shop on her own power.

#### TOUGH NO. 5

The next day I fired No. 5. She was known to be hard to steam — if the engineer abused her. I knew I was in trouble by the time we passed the shop. I watched the engineer open the throttle wider and my

◀ Shay No. 11 rounds Gum Curve pulling a photo freight in October 2002. The newest Shay on the roster, No. 11 came from the San Diego Railroad Museum in operational condition, entering service in 1999. The oil burner was converted to coal in 2001.





steam pressure go down 25 pounds. No. 5 is a 90-ton Shay with the safety valve set to pop at 200 pounds of pressure. I had 175 pounds of steam and the grade was getting steeper. Something had to be done quickly. I began to think of things my dad told me to watch when steam pressure dropped quickly. I got the fire hook down from the tender, turned it upside down, and began running it all over the firebox. It didn't take long to discover two large holes in the front of the fire.

I shut off the injector, raked hot coals back on the bare grates, and put several shovels of coal in that area. The injector couldn't be left off too long or I would have low water and low steam. I waited until the needle on the steam gauge started to move upward, and then put the gun (injector) back on. All the way to the first switchback I kept the injector off, thereby not losing any pressure from opening of the fire door.

Pulling into the first switchback, the engineer closed the throttle, and No. 5 lifted

her safety valve. My water was on the mark.

Now came the real test. A Shay is harder to fire when it is backing up, and it's about a mile to the next switchback. As we began moving backward, I waited until the smoke cleared from the stack, then turned my shovel upside down and stuck it in the fire door, turning it in different directions. This made the fire "lay down," allowing me to see its condition. My fire was pool-table level.

After the first hard pull, the fire was white hot, and I began my firing routine again, never firing against the gun but jerking it on with one sweeping motion each time the last full shovel of coal went through the fire door. The steam pressure stayed right at 200 pounds. I would not allow the safety to pop, or for the steam to drop.

As we backed through what is known as Limestone Cut, I could not resist any longer. It's a hard pull through this cut and most firemen, if they don't watch carefully, will lose 15 to 20 pounds of steam. Today, as No. 5 got down on her knees, the pop

valves lifted with a mighty roar. We backed on up to the second switchback with the pop valve just ready to release.

Next, I was facing a 11% grade and five curves into Whittaker Station. As we came forward out of the switchback, the engineer really opened the throttle wide. I shut off the gun and bailed coal into the firebox. The gun stayed off until we entered the first of the five curves and began ascending the 11% grade. The steep grade is getting the better of the engine. It is slowing down, and the safety is about to pop off. I put the gun back on, keeping steam pressure at 200 pounds.

I got up on my seat, and watched the scenery go by. It is all up to the engineer now — my steam pressure and water were right on the mark. The engine got down to a crawl and you could feel the locomotive shudder as it strained against the load. Whittaker Station is in sight. It feels like my father and grandfather are riding with me. In a way they were, because my firing was





just as they had taught me years before. In the days that followed, there was no trouble in keeping No. 5 hot.

#### **TAKING ON NO. 6 — A HEISLER**

I fired No. 5 for about a month, then got the No. 4 back. About a week later, No. 4 had to go into the shop. This time I drew No. 6 — a 100-ton Heisler locomotive, which was known to be a tough engine to keep hot. No. 6 had a long firebox, and a fire door close to the cab floor. This combination forced you to bend way over when shoveling coal, making it exceedingly hard to reach the firebox front.

Additionally, No. 6 was easy to flood — put too much water in the boiler and it will end up in the cylinders.

As we went around the water tank on my first No. 6 trip, I promptly lost 25 pounds of steam. I knew I was in trouble because we were just starting up the mountain.

A mile up the mountain, at the first road crossing, steam was still down to 175

pounds and the grade was getting tougher. I fought for every foot of track. My water level was dropping as well as my steam pressure and the engineer would not ease up on the throttle and give No. 6 and I a chance to catch up.

We limped to the first switchback with 150 pounds of steam and low water. Here I thought the engineer would let me catch up on water and steam, but instead he reversed the locomotive and began backing up the steep grade into Gum Field.

The water was too low for me to knock off the gun. We made it to Gum Curve — and stalled. Knowing the engineer would try to make up for lost time, I made no attempt to raise steam until enough water was in the boiler. Once we started to move, having plenty of water would allow me to leave the gun off a bit. This way we might be able to limp into the next switchback, while gaining a little more steam and maintaining water. We sat there stalled for what seemed like an hour to a red-faced

**Heisler No. 6 hauls a train at the Twin Bridges over Shavers Fork during Railfan Weekend 2015. Out of service since the late 1990s, it received a new boiler in 2004. The Radley-Hunter stack from the Meadow River Lumber days was reinstalled in 2019.** Kevin Gilliam

fireman, but was only a few minutes.

The engineer waited until steam pressure reached 200 pounds and then pulled out. We made it to the second switchback with enough water but low steam pressure. Now it was a different story. The gun could stay off. As we came out of the switchback going forward, I could see No. 6 was getting hot.

As we went into the S curve at the base of the grade, No. 6's safety was trying to pop but I wasn't going to allow it and put the injector on. Still, she tried to pop. I began fanning the fire door — opening and closing it, letting cold air enter the firebox.

I kept the safety from lifting until we got up over that section of track then, just for the heck of it, let her pop!





I fired No. 6 many times after this and while she remained a cranky old lady, she never stalled on me again.

### OIL-BURNING NO. 3

The next engine I fired at Cass was No. 3, an oil-burning, 100-ton Shay. No. 3 was a good steamer and rode easy. She had a large all-weather cab, and all the firing controls were easy to reach from the fireman's seat. The water glass and steam gauge were also easy for the fireman to see. I fired the No. 3 for a long time before returning to my regular engine, No. 4.

### ONE FAST WEEKEND

One day as I was going to my car after work, the boss stopped me and said I was to report the next day as fireman on the lead engine for the "long run" — the train

that goes to the top of Cheat Mountain with grades up to 12%. He told me I would be on No. 2, a 100-ton oil-fired Shay. My engineer would be a retired man coming back to work for just one weekend.

The next morning found the engineer bragging that he was going to get to the top of Cheat Mountain 30 minutes ahead of the regular arrival time.

No. 5 was serving as the helper engine today. I got No. 2 ready, and we were at the depot on time. As departure time grew near, I wondered what the trip would be like.

At five minutes before departure time, No. 5 coupled on to our tender. Up in No. 2's cab I made some last-minute adjustments. My water was right where I wanted it; the steam gauge read 199 pounds.

The conductor gave us the highball signal as he came out of the depot. I turned

**Shay No. 2 climbs to the first switchback tail track with a June 2016 *Trains* Photo Special. Built in 1928, it came to Cass from Mayo Lumber Co. on Canada's Vancouver Island in May 1972. The engine has burned wood, oil, and coal in its life.** Two photos, Kevin Gilliam

and relayed it to the engineer, who reached up pulling the whistle cord twice, released the brakes, and opened the throttle. We left the depot right on time.

He gave her time until we reached the locomotive shop and then the throttle really came out! No. 2 shot smoke and steam sky high, and the drivers began to spin wildly. He didn't let up on the throttle, he just put more sand on the rails. The noise in the cab was like I had never heard before. I thought surely No. 2 would tear apart in the middle. Turning the oil valve almost closed, I got down on the gangway, putting sand





through the firebox door to clear the soot out of the flues. I glanced up at the steam gauge and had lost 25 pounds in the time it took to do this. I grabbed the oil valve, turning it wide open, and watched for what seemed like a long time before the steam pressure started back up. By the time we crossed the first road crossing I was back up to 185 pounds on the pressure gauge.

From here to the first switchback, it was a battle to maintain water and steam. We pulled into the switchback with 175 pounds of steam, but the water was good. As we backed between the first and second switchbacks, I was only able to hold the 175 pounds of steam.

If I could limp into Whittaker Station — where we would stop for about 30 minutes — maybe I could catch up. Well, he hogged her into Whittaker Station ahead of time. As we sat there, I went back to the



pusher engine to see how they were doing and talk about what a ride we were taking. The engineer of No. 5 said, “Hell, man, you are taking the whole train. It’s all I can do just to keep up.”

When the trip resumed, I was back at it, maintaining my water level but unable to get above 185 pounds of steam. Although we arrived at the top 30 minutes early, as my engineer had boasted, I knew he would try to beat that the next day.

Lying in bed that night, I tried to figure out why I couldn’t get No. 2 above 185 pounds of pressure. I remembered adjusting the controls didn’t seem to make a difference but when I sanded the flues it helped steam pressure for a while. I decided, there in bed, to do more sanding of the flues and leave the controls set in a good position.

The next morning, I made sure the sandbox in No. 2’s cab was full. We went to the depot on time and when we got there, two railroad officials from Charleston, W.Va. climbed up in the cab and told the engineer what a fine job he had done the day before. I knew today was going to be a fast ride!

I went back to the No. 5 pusher engine and relayed what had been said, warning them to expect an even faster trip. I had No. 2 ready when No. 5 coupled up. I glanced back at the pusher fireman, who wiped his face as if already sweating.

We left on time and, again, as we cleared the shop area, the No. 2’s throttle was pulled wide open. This time I was ready. I left the oil valve alone but put about 5 gallons of sand through the fire door. Much to my surprise, the hand on the steam gauge rose steadily towards the 200-pound mark, which was where the pop valve would lift. I could now cut back on the oil valve and control the pop valve.

**Western Maryland No. 6, the last Shay ever built and the largest in existence, climbs Cass Hill in May 2009. The 150-ton, three-truck Shay spent its regular service hauling coal on WM’s Chaffee Branch in Maryland, and was returned to service at Cass in 1981.**

For the rest of the trip, whenever steam pressure would lag, I knew it was time to sand the flues.

Our two trips to Bald Knob on Cheat Mountain that weekend were the fastest ever to the summit — a record that still stands today. I learned a Shay will take a good amount of punishment and keep on going.

## HOMEcoming

I’m no longer with the railroad but I return each summer and fire at least one trip up the mountain. On some weekends I have fired the mighty No. 6 Shay, acquired from the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad Museum following my departure from Cass. It is the last Shay built and weighs in at a whooping 162 tons. No. 6 is a good steamer and rides like a rocking chair.

I have many of good memories of my railroad days and will never forget the smell of valve oil mingled with steam.

My favorite engine to fire? That’s easy: No. 5. She’s the oldest engine at Cass, arriving new in 1905 and has spent her entire life on Cheat Mountain. She has seen a lot of engineers and firemen come and go. My dad engineered No. 5 for many years and was the first engineer to put her on top of Bald Knob.

No. 5 is like one of the family to me. I try to return each summer to shovel a little coal into her firebox and listen to her soft exhaust as she works her way up Cheat Mountain on rails that seem to reach the sky. **I**



## GREAT RAILFAN ROADS

# U.S. 460 ACROSS VIRGINIA

A 225-mile adventure along the former Norfolk & Western mixes rail and non-rail attractions

by John Friedmann

## U.S. 460 ACROSS VIRGINIA

has all the elements of a great railfan road: tracks often within sight, a legendary grade, interesting endpoints, rail attractions, and reasonable train density (including several Amtrak routes). Unique cuisine and non-rail history along the way make the journey palatable for the non-railfans in the car. The 225-mile trip between Roanoke and Suffolk is an easy day's

drive even with numerous rail-road-related distractions.

"460" parallels the former Norfolk & Western (now Norfolk Southern) main line across the state. The N&W was once a coal funnel from the Appalachian coalfields to the piers in Norfolk, but mergers and economics have changed the traffic mix. Coal trains are fewer, and most loads now use NS' parallel and lower-grade former

Virginian Railway halfway across the state, while empties return on the N&W. Intermodal — mostly from the Port of Virginia in Hampton Roads — is now a huge player on what NS calls its Heartland Corridor between Norfolk and the Midwest. Passengers are again big business along the N&W: Lynchburg–Roanoke sees four daily Amtrak trains, and Petersburg–Suffolk hosts six.

At the west end of the trip, Roanoke has enough rail attractions to merit a trip itself, including NS' sprawling yards and Shaffer's Crossing locomotive shops, the Virginia Museum of Transportation (home to legendary N&W steam engines Nos. 611 and 1218), and the formerly N&W-owned Hotel Roanoke hard by the tracks. Start your trip by admiring the N&W photographs at the





▲ A westbound empty coal drag running the former Norfolk & Western climbs Christiansburg Mountain west of Roanoke, Va., in the small town of Shawsville on May 24, 2014. Kevin Gilliam

O. Winston Link Museum located in the former N&W Roanoke station, then head east.

Once out of Roanoke, U.S. 460 follows the N&W up Blue Ridge grade (9 miles, up to 1.3%), and then plays tag with the railroad until Bedford where 460 and the railroad take different routes to Lynchburg.

Now dominated by Liberty

University, Lynchburg used to be a big-time railroad town at the intersection of the N&W, Southern, and Chesapeake & Ohio main lines. NS's former Southern Montview Yard is the most active in town, but the yard and the adjacent double-  
wye connecting the former N&W and Southern mains are tough to see. Instead hunt



The color position light signals still protected Norfolk Southern's former Norfolk & Western main line in May 2016, as a westbound intermodal train crests Blue Ridge Summit. Scott A. Hartley

down Southern's Kemper Street passenger station, a unique multi-level structure built in 1912 and still serving Amtrak passengers. CSX's former C&O main line claimed the low grade through town along the James River, and the Depot Grille in the former N&W freight house is within a stone's throw of CSX action. Both Southern and N&W have photogenic bridges in Lynchburg. [See Trains.com's online "Hot Spots" for more on Lynchburg.]

The former Virginian from Roanoke joins the N&W at Abilene, increasing train density going east. At Burkeville, Norfolk Southern's branch to Richmond diverges and the Virginia Southern division of the Buckingham Branch Railroad connects. The Buckingham Branch runs irregularly, so catching it in Burkeville is a rare event.

Crewe, the only yard of any size along this part of the former N&W, is just a few more miles east. Some Roanoke-Norfolk trains change crews in Crewe, and there is a small railroad equipment display adjacent to the yard. The local police are quick to ticket speeders. Slow down and pay attention!

The railroad and Route 460 stay close to one another between Crewe and the outskirts of Petersburg. NS has two parallel routes through Petersburg — the old main line to the

north and the Petersburg Belt Line to the south (most trains take the belt line). Along the belt line, NS connects with CSX's former Atlantic Coast Line mainline just north of CSX's Collier Yard (containerized trash is a big part of the interchange) and Amtrak trains to Norfolk use a 2012-built connection in the northeast quadrant between the two lines.

## A must

**Stay at the formerly N&W-owned Hotel Roanoke. Across the tracks is the Railwalk to the Virginia Museum of Transportation, passing the 2017-vintage Amtrak station along the way. Want more variety? Clifton Forge is home of the C&O Historical Society and less than an hour's drive.**

You can also see Norfolk Southern's "car lot" (N&W-speak for automotive distribution terminal) near control point Poe on Petersburg's east side. Highway 460 uses Interstates 85 and 95 to cross Petersburg — watch signs carefully.

The 52-mile tangent between Petersburg and Suffolk was a raceway for N&W's J-class 4-8-4s. Freights roll up to 60 mph, Amtrak trains hasten through the small towns on





**Paralleling U.S. 460, an auto rack train from Norfolk, Va., bound for the Midwest, follows the former Norfolk & Western main line out of Roanoke through Shawsville, Va., on May 7, 2016.** Two photos, Kevin Gilliam

the line at 79 mph, and U.S. 460 is close to the tracks for most of the way.

Suffolk, with its three railroads and two stations, is worth a quick visit.

NS still uses the brick former N&W depot and serves its former Norfolk, Franklin & Danville Railway branch with a local based here. CSX's former Seaboard Air Line station boasts a distinctive turret and is now the Suffolk Seaboard Station Railroad Museum (closed indefinitely, but check Facebook for updates). Genessee & Wyoming's Commonwealth Railway is the third carrier in town. Its primary traffic is double-stacks in conjunction with both Class I roads from the Virginia International Gateway container terminal in nearby Portsmouth.

### WORTH A STOP

#### • D. WINSTON LINK MUSEUM:

Located in Roanoke's Raymond

Loewy-remodeled former N&W station, the museum showcases the famed railroad photographer's art, the modern architecture of the station, and Roanoke history. Trains pass frequently and are visible from the museum.

• **HIGH BRIDGE:** This 2,400-foot-long, 125-foot-tall bridge near Farmville hosted trains until 2005. The route became a rail trail in 2012. The bridge is an easy 0.3-mile hike from the Camp Paradise trailhead.

• **CSX/NS CROSSING IN PETERSBURG:** CSX's busy former Atlantic Coast Line main line crosses above the NS belt line in Petersburg. While NS pictures can be tricky, CSX's nearby Collier Yard provides additional activity. Vaughan Road provides the best access.

### IF TIME IS SHORT

Roanoke to Lynchburg is just over an hour's drive, but



**A westbound coal train climbs Christiansburg Mountain at Montgomery Tunnel, east of Christiansburg, Va. The former Norfolk & Western color position light signals were still active in this 2012 view.**

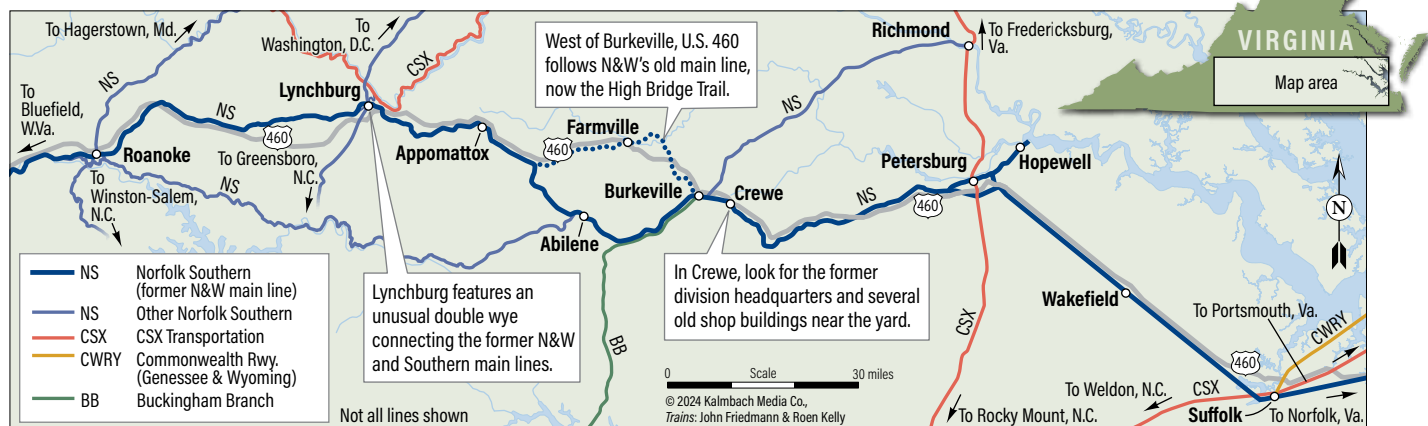
both endpoints have volume and variety of rail attractions. Blue Ridge is worth a quick stop just to kick the ballast and imagine N&W steam engines slogging upgrade.

### BESIDES THE RAILROAD

• Both the former N&W and Route 460 pass through the town of Appomattox Court House, where Robert E. Lee surrendered to Ulysses S. Grant on April 9, 1865, effectively ending the Civil War. A highly rated national park commemorates the surrender and the be-

ginning of Reconstruction.

• Virginia peanuts (the kind sold in ballparks) are a thing along the N&W. The Hotel Roanoke's menu features Peanut Soup and Suffolk calls itself the "Peanut Capital of the World." Peanut stores dot the eastern portion of route selling all flavors and forms. Plantation Peanuts' Salt and Pepper variety is highly recommended — look for them across the street from the peanut-themed Virginia Diner in Wakefield. **I**







# Traveling through time

Museums are fascinating windows into the past, present, and future

▲ Great Southern Railway's No. 800 *Maedb* was one of three similar 4-6-0 locomotives built by Dublin's Inchicore Works. Small compared to late-era American *Superpower*, this class of locomotive was the largest in Ireland, and it remains a popular attraction at the Ulster Transport Museum at Cultra. Three photos, Brian Solomon

**WHEN I WAS YOUNG**, I loved museums. My favorites were history, science, and especially railroad museums. The thrill of experiencing antique technology on display inspired me to learn more about how people, technology, locomotives, and places developed. Absorbing exhibits I saw made me want to share my excitement through my early photography. In this regard, I've never grown up!

Recently, my wife Kris and I visited the Ulster Transport Museum at Cultra near Belfast, Northern Ireland. Previously, I've explored this wonderful museum on several occasions, and I was excited for Kris to experience it in person. We traveled there by NI Railways train from Belfast Great Victoria Street and spent several hours enjoying the displays.

Among the variety of preserved locomotives is No. 800, *Maedb* (pronounced Maeve), the largest Irish steam locomotive ever built. This large-boiler 4-6-0 was built in 1939 by the Great Southern Railway's Inchicore Works in Dublin for ex-

press passenger service between Dublin and Cork.

It is small compared to the gargantuan machines that roamed American rails at the same time, which says a lot about the comparative scale of Irish trains and railroads.

In addition to locomotives, the museum's railroad displays touch upon railroad development in Ireland through photos, maps, diagrams, and a great variety of equipment. We sat in a narrow-gauge coach, studied a vacuum brake air-flow diagram, and wandered among the collection of Belfast double-deck trams (streetcars) that once roamed the city's streets. I was especially struck by the signaling displays, which included such curiosities as Harpers Block instruments.

These wood-encased telegraphic apparatuses were used to safely separate train movements on directional double-track lines. Although antique, I recall observing these instruments in service on a visit to Irish Rail's Waterford Central Cabin (tower) many years ago.

Two weeks after our Belfast visit, I was in Harrisburg, Pa., on invitation of Dan Cupper from the National Railway Historical Society Harrisburg Chapter and a longtime *Trains* correspondent. I was there to give an illustrated presentation on railways in England and Ireland, and Mr. Cupper arranged for a visit to two former Pennsylvania Railroad installations preserved by the Harrisburg Chapter. For me these opened fascinating windows on the past. Like the Ulster museum, both of these are reachable by train.

Harris Tower & Museum is located at 7th and Walnut streets, just a few blocks west of Amtrak's former PRR Harrisburg station. No longer an operational control center, this is an exceptionally well-preserved example of a large railroad signal tower with much of its vital equipment restored to working order. This experience carried me back in time because, over the years, I'd spent countless hours in active signal towers in the United States, Ireland, and elsewhere. Central to Harris





Dan Cupper absorbs the technical detail displayed by the boards of the preserved Pennsylvania Railroad Power Director's Office located on the second floor of the Harrisburg, Pa., station.



Jim Nowotarski provided a detail explanation and a thorough working demonstration of Harris Tower — preserved by the Harrisburg Chapter of the NRHS. This exhibit recreates the atmosphere of a large interlocking tower.

Tower is the Union Switch & Signal 113-lever electropneumatic interlocking machine and the illuminated model board above it. Between 1930 and 1991, this controlled switches and signals at the west end of the Harrisburg Station.

The interlocking machine was designed to allow safe movement of trains through the plant by preventing the levermen, who worked the plant, from accidentally lining conflicting routes. To enable demonstrations of how the tower functioned, the Harris interlocking machine is connected to a computer that simulates the movement of trains through the plant in real time. The program is based on the zenith of traffic in the mid-1940s when the tower controlled 87 switches and 106 signals, and operation required five employees: a tower director, two operators, two levermen as well as a signal maintainer.

To complete the effect of an active tower simulation, recorded voices are used to emulate communication with other control facilities. Although the tower was closed in 1991, a continual parade of freights (and Amtrak's daily *Pennsylvanian*) still roll by, their movements governed from afar. Harris is normally open to the public seasonally on Saturdays in spring and summer, and at other times by appointment.

For me an even more fascinating example of the Chapter's railroad preservation is the restored PRR's Power Director's Office located on the second floor of the station. This has retained its late-1930s appearance and to my senses seemed like the control room for the world's largest Lionel electric train set. It was here that the railroad controlled the flow of electricity to the western end of its electrification, including the main line between Philadelphia and Enola. Enormous model boards present a schematic of the railroad's electrified tracks, substations, and the wires that fed the network. For me it is a stark reminder of the end of electric freight during the Conrail era, when PRR's freight lines deenergize and traffic largely shifted to non-electrified routes, followed by surgical abandonment of once vital low-grade routes. In this role, the preserved PDO serves as a shrine to this lost infrastructure and PRR's vision of efficiency swept away in the era of consolidation.

For details regarding visits to both installations contact the Chapter at: NRHS.Harrisburg@gmail.com. — *Brian Solomon*

*Special thanks to Jim Nowotarski and Brad Anderson's demonstrations of the Harrisburg facilities.*



## In the September issue



## Slow path to high speed

Inside the quarter-century effort to establish **110 MPH RUNNING** on Amtrak in Illinois. Recalling the final Conrail passenger move on **NEW YORK CITY'S** West Side Freight Line. New Jersey Transit's heritage locomotives and **COLORFUL PAINT SCHEMES**. The ex-Southern Pacific Placerville, Calif., line sees **NEW LIFE** on an old branch.

**On sale August 13, 2024**





# C&NWHs opens new archive facility

New building located on the Illinois Railway Museum grounds

▲ Following the dedication, C&NW Historical Society members pose in front of the new Archives Research Center at the Illinois Railway Museum. The event highlighted the society's 50th anniversary celebration. The new building is situated along the museum's replica 1950s Main Street. Two photos, Steve Smedley

**THE CHICAGO & NORTH WESTERN HISTORICAL SOCIETY** celebrated the opening of its new archive and research facility on May 18. The 8,000-square-foot building is located on the grounds of the Illinois Railway Museum in Union, Ill. The dedication ceremonies were attended by several hundred people and coincided with the historical society's 50th annual convention.

The archive houses thousands of documents from the C&NW, including a significant map collection. A sampling of the collection includes locomotive, freight, and passenger car drawings; promotional materials; and selected depot drawings. An extensive library of railroad books is available. Additionally, the Wimmer Collection of railroad employee timetables, reported to be among the largest holdings of this document type, is part of the C&NW collection housed at IRM.

The C&NW Historical Society archive is 40 years old and was previously housed in a Berwyn, Ill., facility. As holdings expanded, the Berwyn space was outgrown. An agreement was reached with the

IRM to construct the new building on the museum grounds in April 2021. Fundraising to support the project continued as architects and contractors worked on the new facility. Society members raised over \$1 million, allowing the building to open debt-free and to be constructed without the support of any government funding.

The Chicago & North Western was one of the Midwest granger railroads. At its peak,

the C&NW ran on more than 11,000 miles of track and served 11 states. C&NW lines radiated from Chicago, fanning out across the upper Midwest and even reaching into Wyoming. It was absorbed by the Union Pacific in 1995.

For more information on the C&NW Historical Society and the new archive facility, visit [cnwhs.org](http://cnwhs.org) or email the archives committee at [archives@cnwhs.org](mailto:archives@cnwhs.org). — Steven J. Bahnson and Bob Lettenberger



IRM rolled out its C&NW power for the society. Included in the May 18 lineup were No. 1518, the first EMD GP7, and Alco RSD5 No. 1689.



# The life of Pay Car F

**WHAT STARTED SEVERAL YEARS AGO** as just about a pile of boards is being returned to the status of an operating narrow-gauge passenger car by the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad. But what of this car's identity? Built in 1879 by Billmeyer & Small of York, Pa., the car has been configured as a payroll car, a coach, a business car, and an outfit car for maintenance of way use.

Zell Olsen, C&T master carpenter, indicates the car is being restored to its 1916 state, which was a 24-seat coach. You may recognize Olsen in the field of wooden car restoration. He was responsible for much of the car reconstruction at the B&O Railroad Museum after its 2003 roof collapse.

When the C&T began restoring the car, work was done in a large outside tent. The tent has been replaced with a new permanent building, and the car has advanced to nearly two-thirds complete. Currently, Olsen is working on the car's interior.

For more information on the Cumbres & Toltec or the life of Pay Car F, please visit: [cumbrestoltec.com](http://cumbrestoltec.com). — *Bob Lettenberger*



The rebuild on Denver & Rio Grande Pay Car F is about two-thirds complete inside the new Cumbres & Toltec car restoration shop at Antonito, Colo. Bob Lettenberger

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[www.socalrailway.org](http://www.socalrailway.org)



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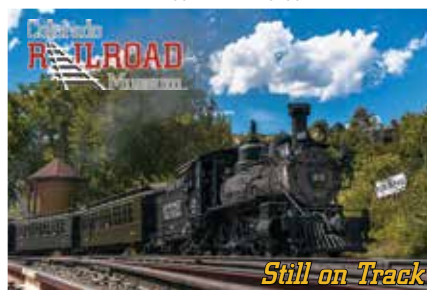
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[www.wfrm.org](http://www.wfrm.org) (850) 623-3645

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[boulderrailroadmuseum.org](http://boulderrailroadmuseum.org) 702-486-5933

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**NEVADA STATE RAILROAD MUSEUM**  
2180 South Carson Street, Carson City 89701



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[www.nationalrrmuseum.org](http://www.nationalrrmuseum.org) 920-437-7623

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## RAIL SHOWS AND EVENTS

**JULY 13, 2024:** Rail Fair, Copeland Park, Rose & Clinton Streets, La Crosse, WI. 10am-4pm. Admission \$5.00, under 12 free w/adult. Railroad Show-Flea Market-Swap Meet. Model, Toy & Antique Trains, Memorabilia, Railroad Exhibits & Displays. 608-781-9383, 608-498-9522. [www.4000foundation.org](http://www.4000foundation.org)

**AUGUST 3-4, 2024:** Central Indiana Division/NMRA announces the Franklin Train Show. Johnson County Fairgrounds, 250 Fairground St., Franklin, IN 46131. Saturday 10am-4pm, Sunday 10am-3pm. Admission: \$7/person, 16 and younger free w/adult. NMRA members (show membership card) \$5/person. Demos, Displays, Operating Layouts, Door Prizes, Free Parking, Food available. Info/table rental: Michael Roderick, 317-833-3556, [FranklinTrainShow@gmail.com](mailto:FranklinTrainShow@gmail.com) or [www.cidnmra.org](http://www.cidnmra.org)

**AUGUST 18, 2024:** 12th Annual Elkader Model Train Show-Swap Meet. Sunday, 10:00am-3:30pm. Johnson's Reception Hall, 910 High Street, Elkader, IA 52043. Adults \$5, children 6-12 \$2, under 5 FREE. Free parking, lunch stand available. Information: Larry Lerch, 563-880-2066 or 563-245-3345

**OCTOBER 20, 2024:** 33rd Annual Chicago Railroadiana and Model Train Show. Sunday, 10:00am-3:00pm. Kane County Fairgrounds, 525 South Randall Rd., St. Charles, IL. Admission: \$6.00 w/tax. Tables starting at \$65.00. Information: 847-358-1185, [RussFierce@aol.com](mailto:RussFierce@aol.com) or [www.RRShows.com](http://www.RRShows.com)

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## BOOKS AND MAGAZINES

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## MISCELLANEOUS

**NYC RAILROAD BOOKS** and NYC HO model railroad equipment for sale. E-mail for list to: [widewire13@comcast.net](mailto:widewire13@comcast.net)

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**6:22 P.M.**

## **Red sky at night**

As the sun ducks below the horizon on Nov. 12, 2012, illuminating the sky as if it was on fire, a single CSX GE Dash 8-40CW leads train No. Q635 toward Marion, Ohio, along the Columbus Subdivision. Brandon Townley





**9:48 P.M.**

## Anticipation

Waiting for traffic to clear and a green signal, an eastbound Union Pacific coal train sits near the Global III intermodal yard outside Rochelle, Ill., on April 16, 2010. Once cleared, the train will make a run up grade toward Creston, Ill. Global III was closed in July 2019. Lance Wales





**12:46 A.M.**

## Ribbons of light

Canadian National ES44AC No. 2967, with train No. L563, waits in the siding at Nechako, British Columbia, on Sept. 13, 2018. The night sky displays thousands of stars and a colorful exhibit of the aurora borealis.

Eric Bouwman



**7:42 A.M.**

## First rays

A fall sunrise greets the road to Paradise, as Strasburg Rail Road Decapod No. 90 hustles west on Oct. 18, 2020. It's Strasburg's 60th anniversary celebration. No. 90 has been backdated to its 1960s paint featuring gold striping and the "egg" logo on the tender. Michael Wilson

**7:36 A.M.**

## Another glorious day

March 16, 2022, begins in Clymers, Ind., under a spectacular orange-tinted sky. Norfolk Southern train No. 121 heads westbound with loaded auto racks and mixed freight, just as the Wabash did on this line in decades past. John E. Troxler







**8:14 P.M.**

## Roll on big river

The Cuyahoga River rolls along under a maze of bridges through Cleveland. Above Norfolk Southern train No. 307 from Buffalo, N.Y., crosses the big river and The Flats via the former Nickel Plate drawbridge on April 9, 2015. Brandon Townley

**6:02 A.M.**

## Sky fire

Wildfire smoke accents the sunrise over Keenesburg, Colo., on July 29, 2021. Amtrak's westbound *California Zephyr*, led by GE P42DC No. 186, is running slightly ahead of schedule as it races along BNSF Railway toward Denver. Derek Brown



**10:17 P.M.**

## **Not a starry night**

The fury of an approaching thunderstorm silhouettes the Hereford, Texas, grain elevator along BNSF Railway on May 25, 2009. Despite appearances, the storm brought 30 mph winds to town, but left no rain. Travis Dewitz





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