

CHICAGO: LAST SHIFT AT 16TH STREET TOWER

July 2025

Trains®

How to *almost* kill a short line

Texas' Blacklands Railroad's public/private partnership won accolades — then it all went wrong

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From the Editor



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This, or so we believed, was the path to short line success. In the June 2014 issue, we profiled the Blacklands Railroad in East Texas. A group of Texas counties had pooled their resources, purchased a cast-off rail line, and hired an operator to provide much-needed rail service to local shippers. It was a simple arrangement and it worked beautifully. This month author Jeffrey Harwell brings us up to date, and it's not a happy picture. Just a few years after that initial article, Harwell notes, "things started to unravel — and when they unraveled, they unraveled in a big way." It's a tale of good intentions, of chasing economic expansion while, arguably, losing focus on the business of maintaining a railroad.

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CSX fights operating issues

Weather woes, detours from Baltimore tunnel project contribute to congestion

▲ CSX local train L620 (Hamlet-Raleigh, N.C.) passes the former Seaboard Air Line depot in Aberdeen, N.C., on March 26, 2024. Travis Mackey

CSX IS GRAPPLING with congestion and doesn't expect to get dug out until this fall.

Before the Feb. 1 closure of Baltimore's Howard Street Tunnel for a planned six- to eight-month clearance project, CSX had been struggling to recover from a string of harsh weather events that began during a devastating hurricane season and continued through winter.

Among them: The Jan. 21 storm that blanketed the Gulf Coast and Southeast in a rare snowfall. CSX's busiest hump yard, Rice Yard in Waycross, Ga., received more than 4 inches of snow and shut down for an unprecedented three days. Another shot of winter followed in mid February, raking the system from Memphis and Chicago to Baltimore and Selkirk, N.Y., and further snarling operations. Spring flooding then hit CSX's main Chicago-Waycross corridor.

The railroad cracked under the pressure, partly due to the roundabout detours related to the tunnel project and the closure of the hurricane-ravaged Blue Ridge Subdivision, the

former Clinchfield main in eastern Tennessee and western North Carolina. Hurricane Helene wiped 60 miles of the railroad off the map in September, and the line isn't expected to reopen until this fall. With Howard Street and the Blue Ridge Sub shut down, CSX is detouring about 12% of its overall daily road freights.

As terminal dwell rose and average train speeds dropped, CSX in March was forced to hold trains out of clogged yards. The slowdown prompted CSX to set up an operations command center and pull Dash-8 and -9 locomotives out of storage. CEO Joe Hinrichs in April told train crews the congestion was an opportunity for them to take on more work to help customers and earn more in the process. In a longer-term step, CSX is making investments to boost throughput at its hump yards in Avon, Ind., and Cincinnati, as well as in its former hump yard at Willard, Ohio.

But CSX was not expecting overnight improvement. "Until we get the Blue Ridge and Howard Street ... back, it's

going to be a grind," Chief Operating Officer Mike Cory tells *Trains*.

Despite the congestion, Hinrichs says customers gave the railroad high marks in its first quarter survey. "It's a testament to the work that's going into our customer service and the focus we have on communicating with customers," he says.

Rick Paterson, an analyst at Loop Capital Markets, says CSX's performance metrics are touching lows last seen during the 2021-22 service crisis that was caused by widespread crew shortages. The reroutes are proving difficult because they create domino effects across the railroad.

"Everything impacts everything else," Patterson says. "So when you change the natural flows in the system during a significant reroute like this, you need to be extremely careful with regard to properly forecasting and (over) resourcing every crew district, yard, and terminal on the route that will come under pressure. CSX clearly hasn't done this adequately." — *Bill Stephens*

FRA rescinds \$63.9 million grant for Texas high speed project

Transportation secretary calls Texas Central 'a waste of taxpayer funds,' also says FRA and Amtrak will take over Penn Station remodeling from New York's MTA

SAYING THE FEDERAL RAILROAD ADMINISTRATION AND AMTRAK AGREE the project "is a waste of taxpayer funds," U.S. Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy announced in April that the government was rescinding a \$63.9 million planning grant for the proposed high-speed rail line between Dallas and Houston.

A few days later, Duffy announced the FRA and Amtrak would take over renovation of New York's Penn Station, cutting about \$120 million in planning funds for that project while taking control away from the Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

TEXAS PROJECT LEFT TO PRIVATE SECTOR

"The Texas Central Railway project was proposed as a private venture," Duffy said in a press release. "If the private sector believes this project is feasible, they should carry the pre-construction work forward, rather than relying on Amtrak and the American taxpayer to bail them out."

Money from the grant awarded in September 2024 under the Corridor Identification and Development program will be returned to the general Corridor ID funding set-aside. An FRA spokesman said no information was immediately available on how the money might be used or a timeline for when that might occur. Amtrak did not respond to a *Trains* request for comment.

Kleinheinz Capital Partners, now identified as the lead investor in Texas Central, said in a statement the decision is "good news for the overall project. ... We agree with Secretary Duffy that this project should be led by the private sector, and we will be proud to take it forward."

Duffy called the Texas project "a distraction from Amtrak's core mission of improving its existing subpar services."

Amtrak announced it was partnering with Texas Central to evaluate the project in August 2023. Texas Central's original effort ran aground in the face of opposition from landowners and Texas lawmakers. The state



A computer-generated image from 2019 shows a Japanese Shinkansen trainset heading south from Dallas on Texas Central's proposed route to Houston. Texas Central

legislature continues to take aim at Texas Central, with current bills that would prevent public money from being spent to alter roadways to accommodate the high-speed route, as well as one demanding detailed corporate and financial information.

PENN STATION MOVE BRINGS SLAP AT MTA

The change of control of the Penn Station project was accompanied, Duffy said, by the "slashing" of federal funds awarded last November. It is the latest move by the Trump administration to claw back funds awarded under the Biden administration.

A DOT press release said that since the building is owned by Amtrak, there is no reason to delegate leadership of the project. It also contained a shot from Duffy at the MTA, subject of a fight with the Trump administration over congestion pricing.

"New York City deserves a Penn Station that reflects America's greatness and is safe and clean," Duffy said. "The MTA's history

of inefficiency, waste, and mismanagement also meant that a new approach is needed."

The MTA had received a \$72 million planning grant for planning under the Federal-State Partnership for Intercity Passenger Rail program. Amtrak received grants of \$72.5 million and \$71.9 million for different aspects of the project.

MTA CEO Janno Lieber said in a statement that New York Gov. Kathy Hochul "has prioritized the reconstruction of Penn Station for years, and we're glad the federal government is focusing on it now." Hochul's statement thanked Trump and Duffy "for taking on the sole responsibility to deliver the beautiful new \$7 billion station that New Yorkers deserve." She said the move would save some \$1.3 billion in state funds.

It was not immediately clear how the move might influence the project's direction, or if the Trump administration favored any of three existing, competing redevelopment plans. — *David Lassen*



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Eurostar trains are serviced at the Temple Mills shop in London. Access to the shop will be a key for potential competitors. Keith Fender

Competitors emerge for Channel Tunnel service

At least seven companies express interest in international service from London

NO LESS THAN SEVEN POTENTIAL OPERATORS

have emerged to become potential competitors to Eurostar in offering international services from London via the Channel Tunnel. At least three — all new startup companies — have begun the process of obtaining access to Britain's only maintenance shop that can handle the high-speed equipment required for such operations.

Competition has theoretically been possible since international rail service was deregulated by the European Union in 2010. Soon after, Germany's Deutsche Bahn said it planned service between London and Frankfurt. That effort was thwarted by the Channel Tunnel's complex safety and operating rules, plus the high cost of using high-speed tracks on both sides. The safety rules now reflect modern European high-speed trains, instead of requiring custom features. Costs are also less of a factor, as the private companies that operate the high-speed tracks in Britain and the tunnel seek more trains and are offering financial incentives.

Two other problems later emerged. The first was the UK's decision to leave the European Union in 2016, which added complexity at stations. Under changed immigration rules, the EU went back to physically stamping British travelers' passports, greatly increasing wait times. The UK has introduced an automated immigration system at stations and airports, and the EU is about to roll out a similar but more complex system that will register biometric information for non-EU travelers. Once both systems are up and running, current wait times should

reduce, easing station space constraints.

The other issue was the COVID-19 pandemic, which discouraged new service. Eurostar, the only operator from London, had to reduce trains to one or two a day and mortgaged its fleet to stay financially afloat. Eurostar ended the pandemic with around \$1 billion of extra debt, which it has been paying down from operating profits.

NEWCOMERS

The three start-up companies that appear most advanced in their plans are Spanish firm Evolyn, set up by investors who also part own transport group Mobico (formerly known as National Express); a new Virgin Group company called VTE Holdings; and Gemini Trains.

Another start-up based in the Netherlands, Heuro Trains, announced plans for services from Amsterdam to London in late 2023, and national rail operators in Italy, Switzerland, and Spain have all stated ambitions to run trains to London.

The state rail company that appears to be making the most progress is Italian rail holding company FS Italiane Group (owner of operator Trenitalia). It announced a joint venture with Evolyn in early April to start services to London by 2029. FS Italiane said it will invest up to \$1 billion alongside Evolyn and has a great deal of high speed know-how from its operations in Italy, France, and Spain. This combination appears to be in pole position to actually begin operations. Evolyn previously announced plans to buy 12 Alstom Avelia trains, but

this order has yet to be confirmed.

Most observers do not believe there is scope for six or seven operators on the route, especially if they try to run multiple trains a day. Similar on-rail competition has developed in Spain, but the three operators are suffering losses which will not be sustainable in the long term.

Virgin's lead manager told British media earlier this year, "We don't believe there is room for three operators on the [London-Paris/Amsterdam] route." It is unclear whether Virgin will proceed with its plans, which would require around \$900 million in funding, if Evolyn and its Italian backers are able to move faster.

SHOP ACCESS

Access to Temple Mills shop in East London, leased by Eurostar and opened in 2007, is the first hurdle for any new operator. It is only servicing facility in the UK that can handle the clearances for the wider, taller European equipment to be used through the Channel Tunnel.

Eurostar has offered access to "spare capacity" at Temple Mills to other operators for several years; some plan to perform significant maintenance at the site. Between them, those groups have asked Eurostar for access to five of the eight maintenance tracks, plus stabling nightly for up to 18 trains. An independent study commissioned by Britain's rail regulator established that there is some capacity at the site, but not enough for all three new operators. — Keith Fender



Eastbound BNSF track geometry and intermodal trains wait for a UP freight at Caliente, Calif., on Tehachapi Pass on March 12, 2025. William L. Steck

STB to address UP-BNSF Tehachapi fees dispute

Railroads differ dramatically on updated trackage-rights fees BNSF should pay

EVERY DAY UNION PACIFIC AND BNSF RAILWAY trains battle gravity and curvature as they wind across the former Southern Pacific main line through the rugged Tehachapi Mountains of Southern California.

Now UP and BNSF are engaged in a different sort of fight. They have been unable to reach a new trackage-rights deal, so UP brought the dispute to the Surface Transportation Board. Barring a settlement, regulators will determine how much BNSF will pay UP for its continued use of the line

linking Northern and Southern California.

UP says current payments are so low that it's subsidizing BNSF's operations. BNSF, which operates 20 trains per day over the line, says UP's proposal would significantly boost its costs and stifle competition.

The railroads agree the matter should be settled based on an Interstate Commerce Commission decision that aims to put the trackage rights tenant in the same position as the track owner in terms of variable and fixed costs as well as a return on

investment in the line.

But the railroads reach different conclusions on the annual interest rental payment that BNSF should make to UP based on the current market value of the line. BNSF says UP's proposal is 36 times higher than the current agreement and 22 times higher than what BNSF has proposed. UP notes that interest payment levels have not been adjusted since 1993.

The sides are so far apart partly due to how they view the tunnel clearance projects BNSF funded in the 1990s to allow

double-stack trains. BNSF says calculations for determining the line's current value should exclude earnings from double-stack traffic, as outlined in agreements with UP. But UP says BNSF should pay interest rental based on the Tehachapi line's fair market value, calculated by all traffic on the route.

BNSF's trackage rights over 67.8 miles of UP's Mojave Subdivision date to an 1899 Santa Fe-SP deal. UP says it should not be bound by "the terms of an ancient, expired, voluntary agreement." — *Bill Stephens*

Bill seeks to address rail cargo theft

AAR says thefts from trains spiked by 40% in 2024

RAILROADS AND RETAILERS are praising a bipartisan bill in Congress that aims to reduce cargo theft.

The Combating Organized Retail Crime Act (S.1404, introduced April 10), would create a coordinated federal response to a rising wave of sophisticated cargo thefts, many targeting consumer goods in containers carried on double-stack trains.

Association of American

Railroads CEO Ian Jefferies said in a statement that the "alarming trend" of attacks on the supply chain "affects every industry — including the nation's largest railroads, which experienced a 40% spike in cargo theft last year." Class I railroads estimate they were hit by more than 65,000 thefts in 2024.

The AAR says the bill would provide the tools to disrupt criminal networks and safe-

guard supply chains. Specifically, it would enhance federal law enforcement tools and establish a centralized coordination center that would bring together all levels of law enforcement, including railroad police, to counter organized theft operations.

Because thieves often bring trains to a stop by disconnecting air brake hoses, the thefts pose operational hazards, the AAR says. — *Bill Stephens*



Double-stack containers roll through Chicago on the Union Pacific. Containers have become targets of organized theft rings, with Nike shoes a particularly favored score. David Lassen



The 70th anniversary trip of VIA Rail Canada's *Canadian* approaches Kamloops, B.C., on its westbound journey April 26, 2025. Russ Grycan

VIA's *Canadian* turns 70

Flagship train has different route but same Budd equipment as its CP predecessor

APRIL 24, 1955, was what Canadian Pacific characterized as a “Red Letter Day,” marking the launch of the railroad’s new silver flagship, the *Canadian*, with daily departures from Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal.

Seventy years later, on April 23, 2025, VIA Rail Canada commemorated the occasion with a high-profile sendoff of its version of the train — featuring the same name and same passenger cars — that travels twice per week on a much slower schedule over a different route.

The ceremony at Toronto Union Station prior to the train’s departure for Vancouver, British Columbia, saw VIA CEO Mario Peloquin joined by other officials. Passengers were given a “Golden Ticket” keepsake, and the train’s signature *Park* observation car was outfitted with a custom tail sign acknowledging the anniversary.

LOOKING BACK

The *California Zephyr* provided the template for the train built by Philadelphia’s Budd Co. that marked Canadian Pacific’s rather late post-World War II entry into the streamliner market. A total of 173 cars were delivered.

Unlike the *Zephyr*, however, domes were limited to the *Park* observation-lounge-sleeper and a mid-train “coffee shop coach,” whose lower level was later transformed into the full-length Skyline lounge.

Toronto-based rail historian Greg Gormick tells *Trains*, “There was supposed to be a second large order after CP had a year

of results available for analysis following the 1955 launch.” It would have included dome sleepers similar to those on Northern Pacific’s *North Coast Limited*. “But the potential order kept getting trimmed,” Gormick says, “as Budd’s costs rose due to inflation, and in the end, CP couldn’t justify the second order.”

The original *Canadian*, with separate sections from Toronto and Montreal joining at Sudbury, Ontario, trimmed 13 hours from the schedule of its predecessor, the *Dominion*, covering 2,704 miles to Vancouver, in about 70 hours.

VIA'S VERSION

VIA Rail Canada assumed operation of the train in 1978 and at first maintained the CP routing. It moved to Canadian National’s more northerly route following major government budget cutbacks in January 1990. The company converted the *Canadian* to head-end power as part of a mid-1990s “Silver and Blue” refurbishment upgrade and, despite the equipment’s age, has maintained it to a high standard ever since.

The only substantial configuration changes include converting one of four upper- and lower-berth sections to a show-er in each sleeping car, and creating the luxury “Prestige Class” out of 12 *Chateau* sleepers and four *Park* cars. But over time, the *Canadian* has seen hits to:

- Frequency. The train only runs twice per week after operating daily or triweekly for decades.



The *Canadian*’s crew gathers before departure from Toronto on April 23, 2025. Note the 70th anniversary drumhead. VIA Rail Canada

- Speed. At about 96 hours, the schedule is about a day longer than the CP original.
- Reliability. Delays of 8 hours or more due to freight congestion are commonplace.
- Capacity and affordability. Sleeping accommodations are often sold out and are pricey when available. Recent Toronto-Vancouver adult fares for one person ranged from Ca\$1,078 (\$775 U.S.) for a berth to Ca\$13,930 (\$10,000) in a Prestige bedroom. Coach tickets cost in the Ca\$600 range.

Nevertheless, sellouts at high prices reflect the *Canadian*’s enduring popularity, and the anniversary homage is well deserved. The market for the service remains strong, and VIA is actively looking for new equipment to replace the 1955 rolling stock. The challenge is to keep the train rolling until replacements arrive. — Bob Johnston

NEWS BRIEFS

Rocky Mountain Railroad Club to merge with Colorado Railroad Museum

The **ROCKY MOUNTAIN RAILROAD CLUB**, an influential and pioneering organization in rail preservation and excursions, will merge into the **COLORADO RAILROAD MUSEUM**, allowing the interests and holdings of the club to continue as it disbands after 87 years. A transition over several months will see the transfer of club assets, archives, and selected financial resources to the Golden, Colo., museum. The museum is the home of **RIO GRANDE SOUTHERN** 4-6-0 No. 20 and business car *Rico*, as well as a **DENVER & RIO GRANDE WESTERN** caboose preserved and donated by the club.

An arbitrator in April awarded **CANADIAN NATIONAL** train service employees represented by the **TEAMSTERS CANADA RAIL CONFERENCE** 3% annual raises in each year of a three-year contract, settling the matter sent to binding arbitration by the Canadian government after a brief strike in 2024. Changes in work rules sought by both sides were left unsettled, with arbitrator William Kaplan urging the parties to settle those issues through collective bargaining. A dispute between **CPKC** and the TCRC remains in arbitration; more meetings were scheduled for May 10-11.

AMTRAK announced its Gulf Coast passenger trains between New Orleans and Mobile, Ala., will be known as *Marti Gras Service*. Progress toward launch was delayed by platform construction issues in Mobile; service is now expected to begin this summer, although a date has yet to be announced. All necessary operating agreements are now in place.

The **METROPOLITAN TRANSPORTATION AUTHORITY** announced plans for a program to increase climate resiliency along a 20-mile stretch of the **METRO-NORTH RAILROAD**'s Hudson Line, rebuilding infrastructure such as culverts, draining systems, and retaining walls, while setting standards for future projects. Metro-North President Justin Vonashek said that by 2050, 80% of the route will face increased flooding risk because of rising sea levels and more frequent severe weather events.

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AN AMTRAK CREW-FAMILIARIZATION EXTRA featuring HHP8C cab cars, converted from Bombardier-Alstom electric locomotives retired in 2015, passes through Metuchen, N.J., on April 8, 2025. The former locomotives are nearing deployment in revenue service, allowing Amtrak to retire or bolster its fleet of ex-Metroliner cab cars for its increased push-pull operations on the Northeast Corridor. Adam Reich

Two more big transit agencies warn of major service cuts

Philadelphia area's SEPTA, Oregon's TriMet urge state legislatures to provide additional funding

THE SOUTHEASTERN PENNSYLVANIA TRANSPORTATION AUTHORITY and TriMet of Portland, Ore., in April became the latest major transit agencies to raise the specter of significant service cuts while calling for increased state funding.

SEPTA said it would have to cut service by 45% and raise fares by 21.5%, with interim General Manager Scott Sauer saying the cuts would "start the dismantlement of public transit for our city and region as we know it today."

The agency's detailed plan includes the elimination of five regional rail lines, closure of 66 stations, replacement of two trolley lines with buses, and an end to rail service after 9 p.m., as well as for special events. Some 50 bus lines would also be cut. Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro (D) and the Democrat-controlled Senate have proposed and approved additional funding each of the last two years, but it has been blocked by the Republican-controlled House.

TriMet provides bus, light rail, commut-

er rail, and paratransit services to Oregon's three most populous counties. The agency said it would have to cut service by 15% beginning in 2027, with additional 5% cuts every two years, until its deficit was addressed. Some 34 bus lines would be cut initially, while frequencies and hours of operation would be reduced for the rail operators.

The agency is seeking a 0.4% increase in the Statewide Transportation Improvement Fund, phased in over eight years. With that increase, a person of median income would be paying \$16.75 per month by 2032, TriMet said in a press release.

CUTS WOULD "START THE DISMANTLEMENT OF PUBLIC TRANSIT FOR OUR CITY AND REGION AS WE KNOW IT TODAY."

— SEPTA INTERIM GENERAL MANAGER SCOTT SAUER

Chicago-area transit agencies including commuter rail operator Metra, and Pittsburgh Regional Transit, have previously warned of devastating cuts as they seek additional state funding to offset decreased farebox returns since the pandemic, the end of federal funding to address pandemic funding, and political considerations that find transit operations competing for state appropriations. — David Lassen



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Fight over freight delays could hit Amtrak's wallet



Bill Stephens

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Analysis: Trains.com

Canadian National wants compensation for giving passenger trains preference

Ride Amtrak outside of the Northeast Corridor and there's a good chance you'll arrive late because freight traffic delayed your train — despite the law that gives passenger trains preference. Amtrak is challenging host railroads Union Pacific and Norfolk Southern with a pair of high-profile on-time performance cases that aim to put teeth into the 1973 preference law.

But what about delays that Amtrak's right of preference inflicts on freight trains?

This question puts the shoe on the other foot for Amtrak. Canadian National, in its long-running operating agreement dispute with Amtrak, argues that it should be reimbursed for costs that arise when its freights have to wait for meets with passenger trains. And now federal regulators have asked CN to tally its 2024 Amtrak-related freight delay costs.

The April request signals that the Surface Transportation Board is considering a dramatic expansion of what Amtrak is required to pay host railroads. The case could have wide-ranging implications for Amtrak's existing service, its plans for new routes, and its goal of reaching operational profitability.

Since its creation in 1971, Amtrak has paid host railroads for so-called incremental costs — defined as expenses the railroad could avoid if Amtrak wasn't running. Traditionally this has meant a per-mile fee to cover Amtrak's share of track maintenance.

But CN contends that there's a cost to the right of preference, too, because it has to keep its freights out of Amtrak's way. And so CN wants compensation for those delays.

This is not exactly news: The dispute has dragged on for 12 years. After CN and Amtrak were at loggerheads over a new operating agreement, Amtrak in July 2013 asked the STB to set terms and compensation for its use of CN lines. Six years later, the STB decided that incremental costs could include those related to freight train delays. These include extra crew, fuel, and locomotive and car-hire expenses, so long as CN can pinpoint them with data that can be quantified and verified.

The STB decision didn't endorse CN's proposed freight delay cost formula. But it did open the door to alternatives, like a higher per-mile charge. Either way, if the STB ultimately adds freight delay costs to the new operating agreement, the impact could be significant.

CN says Amtrak delayed its freights 680.48 hours in December 2019. The cost? A total of \$219,691 in extra labor, fuel, and locomotive and car expenses. If that's a typical month, Amtrak's tab would be \$2.6 million annually for its direct impact on CN's freight operations.

The other Class I railroads are watching. If the STB allows CN to recoup delay costs, they all would want the same treatment.

Last year Amtrak paid host railroads \$248 million. CN ranks fifth among Amtrak hosts with 1.4 million annual passenger train-miles, putting it way behind leader BNSF Railway (6.7 million passenger train-miles), UP (6 million), CSX (5.5 million), and NS (2.8 million) — all of which handle Amtrak on far busier routes.

You don't have to be a math whiz to realize this could blow a hole in Amtrak's plan to erase its \$705 million annual operating deficit. It also would put Amtrak's long-distance trains further into the red and make state-supported routes more expensive. Would states reduce service or absorb the higher cost?

Naturally, Amtrak favors the status quo. Its lawyers argue that Congress never intended incremental costs to include those associated with providing Amtrak trains with preference. Amtrak also points out that CN alone controls factors affecting the performance of its freight trains, including the growth in freight traffic, the single-tracking of the Illinois Central main line, and the operation of long trains that don't adhere to their own schedules. In other words, if CN tolerates delays of its own making, why force Amtrak to pay?

With government efficiency czar Elon Musk calling for the privatization of Amtrak, and Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy supporting the concept, the prospect of having to pay for freight train delays is the least of Amtrak's worries. But the CN case, which may be decided this year, bears watching. **I**



Amtrak train No. 59, the *City of New Orleans*, meets a Canadian National freight in Jackson, Miss., on Dec. 19, 2012. A Kansas City Southern train is in the background. David J. Stewart

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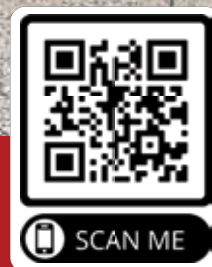
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Train music, or music in trains?

The essence of railroading is woven throughout the American songbook

▲ Jazz greats echoed the music of the machine and the rhythm of the rails. It was ingrained in them from years of travel aboard trains like this one, powered by J-1 Hudson No. 5271, which has paused for a photo along its namesake river. New York Central

RAILROADING — and its echoes — remain all around us, deeply embedded in language, culture, technology, and attitudes. It is less visible today than even 50 years ago, but it is there if you take a look. Or listen, because trains have been a major part of the American cultural soundtrack. There is music about trains. There is music mentioning trains. And then there is music which is technically neither, but the trains are there nevertheless.

LAUNCHING A THOUSAND TUNES

I'd be hard-pressed to describe a category formally understood as "Railroad Music" or "Train Music," any more than there is a neat definition for "Love Music." If that were the case, you could lump to-

gether the Liebestod aria from Richard Wagner's 1865 tragic opera *Tristan und Isolde* and *Stop! In the Name of Love* by Diana Ross and the Supremes a century later. They both may be music about passion and heartache, but they could not be more different.

Trains show up in music all over the place, and have for the last 200 years. Railroading and its rhythms inform many musical genres, sometimes explicitly, but often merely because the percussive 4/4 beat of well-set steam locomotive valve action happens to correspond to a basic musical time signature. By one count, nearly 1,000 train-related tunes have been sent forth into the musical landscape, to perish in obscurity or rise to the level of annoy-

ing cliché. Is everyone weary of *Chattanooga Choo Choo* yet?

The earliest I am aware of were *The Carrollton March* and *The Rail Road March*, composed in 1828 to celebrate the beginning of the B&O. And therein lies the rub. Both trains and music are so interwoven with American life that I cannot even begin to describe all the ways in a mere two pages. Trains offer a virtual buffet of tropes, paradigms, metaphors, settings, and evocations. As one example, like sea shanties and roots music murder ballads (think of *Hang Down Your Head*, Tom Dooley), railroading works well as a setting for story songs. The *Ballad of Casey Jones* is a classic story song. Katie Letcher Lyle does a fine job of exploring train wreck ballads in her book *Scalded to*

Death by the Steam.

Blues, ragtime, folk, bluegrass, and jazz music consciously evoke all sorts of railroad sounds. Scott Joplin's 1896 piano piece *Great Crush Collision March* paints a portrait of an intentional locomotive collision staged as a publicity stunt. The 1922 jazz piece *Farewell Blues* — especially as later interpreted by pianist Bob Milne — is likely to have anyone with a pulse rocking to its rolling and feeling like they at least ought to think about leaving. *The Last Steam Engine Train* by guitarist John Fahey is a gentle evocation of a 4-6-0 with a short train on a pleasant afternoon — at least to me.

Railroad influences are embedded more deeply than we realize in 20th century American music. They aren't hard to detect if you are open to the possibilities. Larry Tye, prolific journalist and author of the 2005 book *Rising from the Rails: Pullman Porters and the Making of the Black Middle Class*, makes that clear in his recent book *The Jazzmen: How Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and Count Basie Transformed America*.

Tye quotes these giants of jazz on how their music was often shaped by the sounds they heard, and the rhythms they felt, throughout years of traveling by train. They didn't need to write "train music" per se. Railroad's essence wove throughout their work and required no further explanation to early and mid-20th century audiences.

SHAPING A SOUND

Then there is George Gershwin, who likewise recalled how the miles he spent on trains offered a kind of sonic wallpaper that colored many of his compositions. In a 1931 interview, he described how the seeds of his 1924 jazz concerto *Rhapsody in Blue* came to him on a train between New York and Boston: "It was on the train, with its steely rhythms, its rattle-ty bang, that is so often so stimulating to a composer..."

That shouldn't be surprising. Many — perhaps, most —

composers and musicians perceive and process sounds differently from the rest of us. I think it works the other way, too. Anyone who has spent serious time on the railroad can hear when a steam locomotive is out of square, has worn brasses, or when a diesel might have a lame cylinder or a flat spot. We become attuned to the sounds of things that engage us. Listen to Gershwin's *Rhapsody* and hear the New Haven (or the New York Central, or the Pennsylvania). They are present.

Trains are not only common in jazz, country, or dance music. George Winston's piano instrumental *Corrina, Corrina* from his 1991 album *Summer* is his version of a traditional piece. But try to last more than half a minute before you start to gently sway side to side, as you would in a coach moving down a stretch of jointed rail at about 30 mph. It isn't identified as a train song. But its mild stride piano form and rock-solid 4/4 time recall a hundred years of jazz, blues, and folk influences, all shaped by a kind of railroad osmosis.

AN ALMIGHTY METAPHOR

You might not expect railroading to feature in church music, except when you hear it in Black and White gospel music alike. *Life's Railway to Heaven* may be the best known, but the idea that a railroad can transport you is a powerful metaphor for faith. It shows up in spirituals, ballads, work songs, laments, and suggests how deeply the idea of freedom to go away might be cherished, or longed for.

Sometimes, I hear things that may not have any conscious railroad origin, but that powerfully evoke a familiar response. Creedence Clearwater Revival was a roots-rock band with a brief, but consequential, career in the late 1960s. The first cut on their 1970 album *Cosmo's Factory* was a rocking, bluesy number titled *Ramble Tamble*. After a bright intro, it included a four-minute slow instrumental breakdown of gradually increasing tempo, then concluded with a brisk,

Test your knowledge

SEE IF YOU CAN MATCH these snippets with their artists and songs:

"He died in the wreck with his hand on the throttle"
"Waiting for a train, a thousand miles away from home, sleeping in the rain"
"I pulled out from the platform, nobody raised a hand"
"Platform ticket, restless diesels, goodbye windows"
"This train is bound for glory, this train"
"Charlie couldn't get off of that train"
"Let the Midnight Special shine a light on me"
"That little choo-choo train that takes me, away from you ..."
"Listen to those rails a-thrummin'"
"Please don't miss this train at the station"
"Riding on that New River Train"
"Look a' yonder comin', comin' down the railroad line ..."
"Train I ride, sixteen coaches long"
"I bet there's rich folks eatin' in a fancy dining car"
"If you miss the train I'm on, you will know that I am gone"
"Can't jump a jet plane, like you can a freight train"
"Countin' every mile of railroad track, that takes me back"

AND THE ARTISTS associated with those few examples?

In order: Vernon Dalhart, *Wreck of the Old 97*; Jimmie Rogers, *Waiting For a Train*; John Fogerty, *Cross Tie Walker*; Cream, *White Room*; Woodie Guthrie, *This Train*; Kingston Trio, *M.T.A.*; Huddie Ledbetter, *Midnight Special*; Al Jolson, *Toot, Toot, Tootsie*; Duke Ellington, *Take the A Train*; The O'Jays, *Love Train*; Pete Seeger, *New River Train*; Bill Monroe, *Orange Blossom Special*; Elvis Presley, *Mystery Train*; Johnny Cash, *Folsom Prison Blues*; Peter, Paul, and Mary, *500 Miles*; Gordon Lightfoot, *Early Morning Rain*; and Glenn Miller, *Sentimental Journey*. — J.P.H.

almost rollicking, ending.

I cannot hear CCR's *Ramble Tamble* without being transported back to trains I was on clawing up the Allegheny Front. To me, the song is a musical incarnation of a steam train working its way up a heavy grade, then cresting for a downhill run. Not effortlessly, as they might do on the Union Pacific, but the traditional Appalachian way, fighting for every foot with as much tonnage tied behind as someone thought they could get away with. Was *Ramble Tamble* a train song? I doubt John Fogerty or the band consciously thought so, and it may not even matter. It became one for me.


LOSING THE RHYTHM

I suspect the days of new train songs have pretty much passed. It is difficult to imagine a soulful "Ballad of Precision Scheduled Railroading," and there isn't much rhythm in Tier

4 prime movers or welded rail. We will find other ways to memorialize the disasters like East Palestine or Lac-Mégantic, and I dare even the most creative Nashville poet to come up with a stirring musical account of a brave autonomous rail vehicle.

Someday, if we are fortunate, a brilliant musicologist who is also a railroad enthusiast and a decent cultural historian (a triple threat if ever there was one) will take on that task and write the books that need to be written. The dots are all there in plain sight. They just need to be connected.

We have enough interesting railroad music to keep us engaged until the railroad itself is a mere memory — the ultimate "train done been here and gone" lament. Keep an ear open for what might sound (or feel) like a railroad rhythm or an offhand reference. There is a good chance it wasn't entirely accidental. — John P. Hankey



FUNICULAR FACELIFT

Horseshoe Curve system reopens
after \$150,000 upgrade

Story and photos by Dan Cupper

THE PARK AT AMERICA'S OLDEST TRAIN-WATCHING SITE — the landmark Horseshoe Curve, on Norfolk Southern's Pittsburgh Line near Altoona, Pa. — is again accessible to all visitors with the reopening of its funicular.

Late in 2024, the Pennsylvania Department of Labor &

Industry made a final inspection and gave the OK to reopen the ride, designed to lift visitors up a steep hillside to the track-side viewing area. Mechanical, operational, electronic, and software issues had plagued the inclined-plane railway, which closed at the end of the 2019 season.

The site, a National Historic Landmark, has been a prime attraction almost since it opened in 1854, completing the Harrisburg-Pittsburgh main line of the then-fledgling Pennsylvania Railroad. The Railroaders Memorial Museum administers the site, 5 miles west of Altoona, from

its main office downtown in the former PRR Master Mechanic's Building.

Seen from the park, the triple-track NS main line handles 50 or more freight and helper moves each day, plus Amtrak's daily east- and westbound *Pennsylvanian* passenger train between



Pittsburgh and New York.

The funicular carries patrons from a ground-level visitor center and parking lot to a track-level park, rising the equivalent of a 10-story building. That allows visitors to skip a climb up an adjacent 142-step stairway. The nearly five-year closure turned away thousands

of visitors who wouldn't take the stairs — or couldn't because of age or disability.

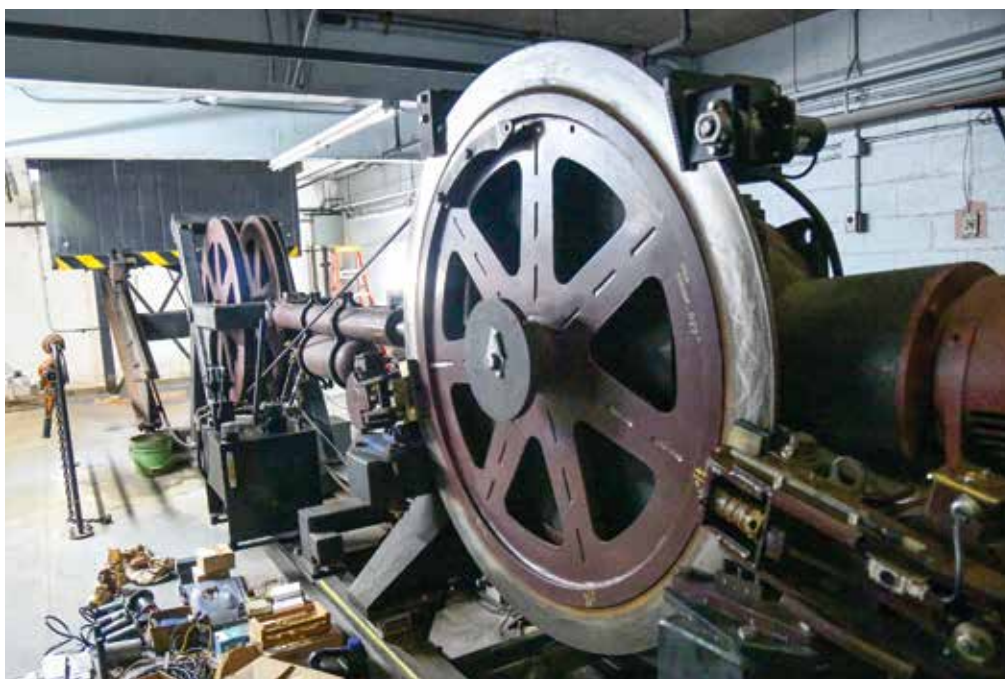
Painted Tuscan Red with gold pinstripes to honor the passenger-car livery of the former PRR, the funicular's twin cabins carry 12 passengers each along a 270-foot-long single track, ascending 99 feet

in 2 minutes. One car rises as the other descends, with passing-track frogs at midpoint. The ride was custom-built for the site by POMA of America, Inc., as part of the \$5.8 million construction of the visitor center, opened in April 1992. Fabricated in the shops of the Durango & Silverton Narrow

Before the lengthy shutdown, the Horseshoe Curve visitor center is the backdrop as the twin funicular cabins have passed each other on the single track with passing siding on May 27, 2013.



A westbound Norfolk Southern train of empty tank cars climbs the grade at Horseshoe Curve, kept to 1.86% thanks to the lengthy curve. Just visible at the right is former Pennsylvania Railroad GP9 No. 7048, on display at the trackside viewing site.



Shown on Aug. 24, 2024, the propulsion and braking system that controls the Horseshoe Curve funicular is mounted in the basement of the visitor center.

Gauge Railroad, the cabins worked well for 27 years.

During the shutdown, the combined Altoona museum and Horseshoe Curve sites attracted 30,000 visitors a year, with the Curve being the greater draw by a 2-to-1 margin, according to museum Executive Director Joe DeFrancesco. With the funicular reopened, he foresees visitation rising to 40,000 or 50,000.

MULTIPLE ISSUES LED TO DELAY

Contributing to a protracted delay were the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020; technological advances that rendered the original equipment obsolete; the unique, site-specific custom design that used few off-the-shelf replacement parts; and the hindrances of a supply-chain channel requiring parts from France, the Nether-

lands, and China.

In addition, the museum encountered difficulty in finding licensed engineers to certify both the mechanical side and the software that governs propulsion and braking systems. Retirements and staff changes further hindered the hunt. When the problem seemed to defy resolution, DeFrancesco and his board considered a stopgap measure

of buying golf-cart-like vehicles to ferry visitors up a maintenance access road.

Finally, a volunteer at the Duquesne Incline in Pittsburgh — one of two on that city's Mount Washington, overlooking the Steel City skyline — came to the rescue. He recommended two qualified firms that satisfied state-mandated safety rules, which, DeFrancesco said, "got it over the finish line." He likened the technology to that of a ski lift.

DeFrancesco named James "J.P." Prough, the museum's facilities manager for three years, to the new position of funicular supervisor, responsible for overseeing calibration, inspection, and maintenance. "I'm deeply excited to be part of this," Prough said. "I'm thankful that it's working. It's been a long road."

Site supervisor Teresa Feathers, who staffs the admission desk and gift shop, added, "With the ['funicular closed'] signs down, people are coming in; we're not turning them away. It's so great because it allows people to go up [to trackside] who were not able to go before."

AN OWNER'S MANUAL

As part of the overhaul, DeFrancesco said, Prough compiled a thick operator's manual to address any circumstance. Procedures were in place before, he said, but the combined needs of an aging system overwhelmed the organization's ability to keep it running.

The \$150,000 cost of restoring service was shared equally by the museum and several grants totaling \$75,000 from the North American Railway Foundation. NARF is the charitable arm of the Brotherhood's Relief and Compensation Fund, which provides income protection for railroaders. The foundation also funded a facelift of the museum's downtown event-space venue, opened in April 2024.

Reopened in November, the funicular ran through the rest of 2024 before the visitor center closed for the winter, as it does each year from January through March. The combina-

tion of harsh weather — ice, sleet, and deep snow — and mountainous terrain makes accommodating visitors more difficult. DeFrancesco said the museum used the break to perform routine maintenance, including ordering minor fittings, consumables such as grease, and wearing parts.

“Visitor reaction [to reopening] has been nothing but 110% positive,” said DeFrancesco. “The turnout from first weekend [was that] we had over 700 visitors over a three-day period. It’s a very strategic element to the Curve operation, and we’re hoping that with its return, we’ll be able to expand our event offerings.”

A “Santa at the Curve” event, with the red-coated star arriving via NS helper locomotive, attracted 400 people, 100 more than the previous year when the stairway was the only option. “The return of the funicular has been worth the effort,” said DeFrancesco. “We’re very glad to welcome the people back who couldn’t come before.

“It’s a humbling reminder of why we do what we do. It’s

to share it with other people. We’re here to preserve railroad history but equally to serve the public. Seeing the reaction of people who come to see a beloved attraction is priceless.”

The ride is included with admission to the site, currently \$13 for adults (a reduced rate was in effect during the closure). Discounts are available for youth, college students, senior citizens, and military personnel. Admission is also available in a combination ticket with the downtown museum, or on an unlimited annual pass with a \$45 museum membership.

A HISTORY AS A TOURIST DESTINATION

Opened by the PRR on Feb. 15, 1854, the Curve was hailed as an engineering marvel, allowing trains to scale the spine of the Alleghenies without resorting to the slow, cumbersome, and dangerous inclined planes of the state-owned Allegheny Portage Railroad.

Designed by Chief Engineer (and later PRR President) J. Edgar Thomson, the curve tackled



Funicular supervisor J.P. Prough, at the control panel, and Joe DeFrancesco, executive director of the Railroaders Memorial Museum, watch the two cars in operation on Nov. 3, 2024.

the ascent by looping along one side of a valley, making an 1,800-foot-diameter U-turn, then traveling back up the other side. This reduced the grade to a maximum of 1.86%, enabling trains to climb from 1,178 feet at Altoona to 2,161 feet at the top of the mountain in Gallitzin, Pa., 12 miles away.

The first recorded work to make the site a destination came in 1879, when PRR plant-

ed flower beds. In 1940, a New Deal program built a small gift shop. In 1967, the National Park Service designated the site a National Historic Landmark. From PRR days through the Penn Central (1968-1976) and Conrail (1976-1999) eras to today’s NS operations, the daily battle of machines against gravity attracts thousands of visitors, railfans and the general public alike. **I**

A predictably large crowd is on hand as Nickel Plate Road 2-8-4 No. 765 leads an eastbound excursion train downgrade at Horseshoe Curve on May 27, 2013, as part of Norfolk Southern’s “Steam for the 21st Century” program.



How to *almost*



by San Serif

kill a short line

Blacklands Railroad revisited

Commentary and photography
by Jeffrey A. Harwell



The closest thing Blacklands had to a paint scheme adorns GP8 No. 201, switching Mount Vernon, Texas, in 2005. The railroad simply relettered the existing paint scheme inherited when the unit came from Kansas' Garden City Western Railway. There never were enough profits for Blacklands to splurge on a corporate image.

After reading the Blacklands Railroad article in the June 2014 issue of *Trains*, you probably came away with the impression it was a Cinderella story of shortline railroading. Blacklands was so successful it earned the short line of the year award in 2011 from *Railway Age* magazine.

At the time, the railroad had an ideal relationship with the government entity that owned the right-of-way on which it operated. This entity, a study by the Texas A&M Transportation Institute noted, was regarded as one of most successful rail districts in the state. You could argue the whole arrangement was so ideal that it should be used as a template for all public/private rail partnerships moving forward.

But just a few short years later things started to unravel — and when they unraveled, they unraveled in a big way. There was even a million-dollar lawsuit on the table for a while. When there's a lawsuit on the table, it likely means a relationship isn't going well. When the two groups finally did part ways, you couldn't help but ask what went wrong? How did a railroad go from short line of the year to plaintiff?

Rural rail districts

A Rural Rail Transportation District is the government entity owning the right-of-way. These districts are unique to Texas. Legislation passed in 1981 gave the state's counties the ability to form special districts to prevent rail lines from being abandoned. Where applicable, RRTD's possible functions can also include promoting economic growth through rail service and advocating for passenger rail.

However, there is one significant drawback to the creation of these districts: There is no funding source to support them once they are formed. Each district must drum up money to finance its appointed mission. Since 1981, only a handful of the districts have been able to purchase the right-of-way they are trying to protect, and each of these was accomplished through some form of special action by the legislature or by obtaining a federal grant or loan.

Through appropriations and grants, the Northeast Texas Rural Rail Transportation District, abbreviated NETEX, is one of the districts that succeeded in purchasing its right-of-way. Between 1995 and 2001, it garnered enough support to purchase the former Cotton Belt right-of-way between Wylie and Mt. Pleasant in northeast Texas. By this time, the western-most 31 miles had already been abandoned and salvaged by the previous owner. That left the district owning 65.6 miles of right-of-way with rails still intact.

When NETEX purchased these segments of right-of-way, the roadbed was not in bad shape. It had been a mainline until 1990, when Cotton Belt shifted all traffic over to the parallel Union Pacific line between Dallas and Big Sandy. The biggest problem was the number of remaining rail customers. You could count them on one hand with a few fingers left over.

Enter Blacklands

By owning the right-of-way, NETEX was able to choose its own operator. The first operator was unable to expand business, which sent the district looking for its second operator a few years later. NETEX took a gamble on a new name in the shortline industry. Kansas City native Wayne Defebaugh was looking to get started as a short line operator and, in 1999, he created the Blacklands Railroad to operate the NETEX trackage.

For the next 20 years there was relative harmony between the two entities as Blacklands carved out a decent living in a rather hostile environment. The line traversed a rural portion of northeast Texas, where consistent traffic sources were few and far between. Defebaugh made ends meet by providing good service and emphasizing nontraditional traffic sources such as car storage and transload operations.

Transload operations at the turn of the century were not as sophisticated as they are today, and that was okay. Neither Defebaugh nor the rail district had any extra money laying around to spend on a high-dollar facility.

Defebaugh created transload options where none existed before. When a customer needed something more complicated, Defebaugh would scour surplus lots near and far to come up with an economical solution. He became a transload MacGyver on a budget. Blacklands and the rail district would not have survived without the transload income.

The NETEX/Blacklands relationship was unusual from the start, with NETEX financially responsible for maintaining the right-of-way. To fund that work, the district collected a fee/lease payment from Blacklands for each carload it handled and for each car it had in storage. The collected money represented the maintenance-of-way budget for the roadbed, with Blacklands requesting money from NETEX

► **Wayne Defebaugh, Blacklands Railroad president, is on the ground giving a roll-by inspection at UP's Mt. Pleasant yard in 2003. Defebaugh was a proponent of a new transload facility on the east end of the railroad to supplement existing transload operations in Sulphur Springs, but in the end, controversy within the NETEX board scuttled the project.**

throughout the year to handle any and all maintenance-of-way work.

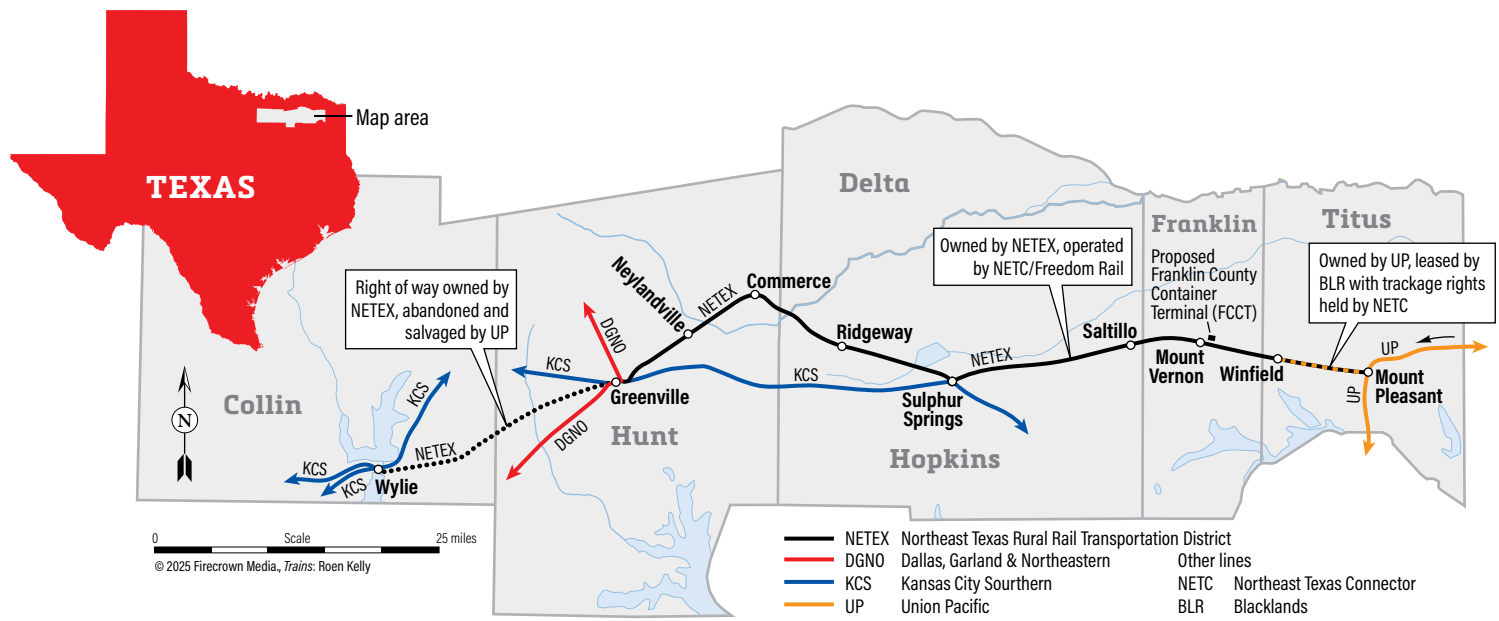
Origins of a controversy

The groundwork for controversy was laid back in 2012. NETEX was interested in restoring rail service on the 31 miles of right-of-way between Wylie and Greenville that had been salvaged in the 1990s. It also realized additional money would be needed to maintain the rest of the right-of-way that still had rails and active service.

To fund its goals, NETEX entered into an agreement with a public/private infrastructure company that wanted the 31 miles of right-of-way as part of a bigger plan to build a toll road from the Dallas suburbs to Greenville.

The road's path would take it through an area where significant growth was expected. The project would leave enough





space for the district to reinstall its rail line using proceeds from the agreement.

The next year and a half were spent trying to drum up support for the controversial project. Only a handful of folks — mostly businesses — wanted any part of a toll road. In the end, there was so much opposition and a general lack of support from government entities that the toll road project was abandoned.

The origins of the next controversy were innocent in nature. In 2017, a local group wanted to build a transload facility adjacent to a Lowe's distribution center just outside Mt. Vernon, Texas. While Lowe's would be the major tenant, planners envisioned other industries joining up soon thereafter.

The facility would be served by the Blacklands Railroad. In addition, the area Economic Development Corp. had secured more than \$1 million in grants to build the facility. Everything seemed ideal. But in March 2018, things started to go south.

To understand the events that followed, I am indebted to the coverage appearing in the Sulphur Springs *News-Telegraph*, which printed a number of articles on the events taking place over the following months. NETEX had been using the services of consultant Phil Davila for a number of years and eventually made him the organization's executive director. Davila made a pitch to the city of Mt. Vernon to become project manager for the new facility, but the city

declined. He also made a similar offer to the Mount Vernon Economic Development Corp., and they too passed.

A couple of months later, Davila gave a presentation about the transload facility to the Franklin County commissioners court (the project was located in unincorporated Franklin County outside the city of Mt. Vernon). According to records, commissioners felt there was uncertainty over who was going to run the project and decided to withdraw the county's support. Instead, the county would pursue its own version of the project on land adjacent to the original project site — and they were going to team up with NETEX to complete the project.

At this point, the Franklin County version of the project was no longer referred to as a transload facility. It had become the Franklin County Container Terminal (FCCT).

According to press accounts, essentially the county turned over all aspects of the FCCT project to NETEX, with Davila as the project manager. The financial catch was that the \$1.2 million grant for the project was made out to the local Economic Development Corp., not NETEX. If NETEX and Franklin County wanted to continue moving forward with their version of the project, they would have to come up with another funding source.

For this, the *News-Telegraph* reported, Davila obtained a letter of intent from

Sustainability Partners, an Arizona-based infrastructure investment company willing to invest \$11 million for construction of the FCCT. NETEX would own the land, Sustainability Partners would own the improvements and collect a fee for each container handled through the facility.

The investment is reported to have been contingent on several items, including obtaining the cooperation of Union Pacific. If so, this would be a notable hurdle, since any new container facility would be in direct competition with UP's own Dallas Intermodal Terminal in Wilmer.

Legal ramifications

In its April 27, 2018, board meeting, NETEX announced it was teaming up with Texas A&M Commerce for a build grant to help fund the FCCT. That announcement was upstaged by the news Blacklands operator Wayne Defebaugh had in his back pocket. Later in the meeting, he revealed he had filed a lawsuit against the NETEX board. At the same time, he filed notice with the Surface Transportation Board that he was applying for a Discontinuance of



▲ The Blacklands name lives on thanks to decisions Defebaugh made prior to the NETEX controversy. Blacklands MP15DC No. 1544 brings 11 sulphur loads into Winfield in 2024 on the 7.9-mile segment leased from Union Pacific.

► A Freedom Rail light-engine passes an \$800,000 brush cutter working to get Sulphur Springs siding back in service in October 2024. Neither NETEX or Freedom Rail were able to pay for this equipment outright, and neither was able to take out a full loan for the equipment by itself. In the end, both organizations took separate loans to obtain the brush cutter.



NETEX budget for the past 11 years

| | FY 2013-14 | FY 2014-15 | FY 2015-16 | FY 2016-17 | FY 2017-18 | FY 2018-19 | FY 2019-20 | FY 2020-21 | FY 2021-22 | FY 2022-23 | FY 2023-24 |
|---------------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Revenue | \$56,231 | \$78,814 | \$195,377 | \$122,481 | \$125,460 | \$100,563 | \$87,420 | \$115,803 | \$702,991 | \$132,492 | \$58,074 |
| M. of Way | \$375,925 | \$11,250 | \$5,387 | \$2,130 | \$9,212 | \$6,642 | \$1,250 | \$7,446 | \$173,982 | \$575,491 | \$267,500 |
| Exec. salary | \$30,730 | \$85,268 | \$80,913 | \$78,307 | \$44,625 | \$55,391 | \$74,890 | | | | |
| Salary % of Income | 54% | 108% | 41% | 64% | 35% | 55% | 98% | | | | |
| Admin. | \$20,420 | \$28,307 | \$11,998 | \$7,811 | \$26,336 | \$30,400 | \$84,547 | \$44,450 | \$31,231 | \$43,078 | \$16,722 |
| Total | \$427,075 | \$124,825 | \$98,298 | \$88,248 | \$80,173 | \$92,433 | \$160,687 | \$51,896 | \$205,213 | \$618,569 | \$284,222 |
| Net | -\$370,844 | -\$46,011 | \$97,079 | \$34,233 | \$45,287 | \$8,130 | -\$73,267 | \$63,907 | \$497,778 | -\$486,077 | -\$226,148 |
| | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 | 2024 |
| Carloads | NA | 1,748 | 1,887 | 1,558 | 1,327 | 1,451* | 1068* | 1,224 | 1,479 | 1,313** | 694** |

Source: Financial data provided by NETEX

NA — Not Available

* Estimate

**Carload totals effected by closure of railroad east of Sulphur Springs between November 2023 and June 2024 to repair five bridges that would not pass FRA inspections. UP connection could not be accessed during this time.

Notes: Income sources are primarily from operator lease payments and right-of-way easement payments. FY 2021-22 represented lump sum right-of-way payment for large residential development. Admin expenses include attorney fees, general liability insurance for property, individual insurance for board members, food for luncheons, board member travel, contract administration, audits, FCCT survey work, membership dues, newspaper/magazine subscriptions, flowers, and public relations materials (brochures). The operating lease payments collected from Freedom Rail stopped after 2023.



Blacklands today

With everything Wayne Defebaugh had been through, you might think that he'd be ready to throw in the towel when the Blacklands era ended in northeast Texas. While he finally did step down in 2024, the Blacklands Railroad still exists today thanks to two decisions Defebaugh made before problems started surfacing with the rail district board.

Back in 2005, Defebaugh was able to pick up the lease on the 7.9-mile segment of track between Winfield and Mt. Pleasant, Texas, from Union Pacific. While it's not much track, it's a lot fewer headaches. Service is generally provided once a week for the lone sulphur customer located at the midpoint of the line. Rail car storage and transload services are also offered at Winfield.

When the NETEX board was pondering severing ties with Blacklands, it wanted one of two things: for UP to donate the 7.9-mile segment to NETEX, or STB oversight to come up with a reasonable solution. NETEX believed nothing good could come from its former operator leasing the one segment of track NETEX needed to reach the UP interchange.

In the end, the STB ruled that it had no say on who leased the segment. NETEX still has trackage rights over this line to reach UP in Mt. Pleasant, and if problems do arise, NETEX can bring the case before the STB.

The second decision made by Defebaugh took place in 2009. He agreed to lease a 15.7-mile northeast Texas branch line between Overton and Henderson from the Rusk County Rural Rail District. The line — known as the Henderson Overton Branch Railroad (HOB) — had no active customers, and was on the verge of abandonment when the rail district got involved.

Reviving the line has been a long slow process, but perseverance has paid off. You can now count upwards of two dozen active customers producing around 3,000 carloads in 2024. On top of that, the railroad was able to secure an \$8 million grant to improve the line — something that NETEX had tried to do for a decade without success. — *J.A.H.*



▲ **Humble beginnings for the Blacklands Railroad:** In the beginning, the railroad had a makeshift headquarters in a former Sulphur Springs gas station, pictured in 2002.

► **Wayne Defebaugh, Blacklands Railroad president,** is photographed at his desk in 2003. The railroad would later move into the former St. Louis Southwestern depot when it became available.



Service over Blacklands NETEX trackage.

Did Defebaugh really want to leave? In a later meeting, Defebaugh answered that question. He said, according to the *News-Telegraph*, “We don’t necessarily want to leave. Based on the board’s actions, it’s not giving us any choice.”

In a later meeting he would add further clarification: “This board was going down a path we didn’t think was going to be good for us or the railroad. [The FCCT] project would not happen anytime soon, and by focusing on the project, the board lost sight of improving its current infrastructure.”

The board action referred to by Defebaugh was its insistence on getting into the transload/container business. The contract between Blacklands Railroad and NETEX,





he said, gave the railroad the exclusive right to market and operate all industrial and commercial development.

The lawsuit also alleged the board was attempting to find another operator for the NETEX trackage, in violation of the contract. In 2016 and again in 2018, the board sent out requests for proposals for new operators. In doing so, the lawsuit contended, NETEX released proprietary information to competitors, customers, and potential customers. The NETEX contract with the Blacklands ran through 2021 and the current operator could only be removed for cause with respect to the contract. Up until that point, NETEX had made no public claims against Blacklands.

In June 2018, NETEX/Franklin Coun-

ty's efforts to build the FCCT were dealt another blow. An email from UP reportedly surfaced that read, "An intermodal/container facility at this location does not make sense for UP." Despite this and the pending lawsuit, in August, Davila announced the Franklin County Container Terminal was still moving forward, with groundbreaking set for February 2021.

Boiling point

The controversy started coming to a head in fall 2019. In its September meeting, the NETEX board looked at a proposed budget for 2020 that was \$225,866 in the red. At the same time, Phil Davila's proposed executive director's compensation package as consultant/project manager for

Local officials in Sulphur Springs were able to tap into the defunct Franklin County Container Terminal project funds to build a new transload facility just east of town. A NETC/Freedom Rail GP38 gingerly returns to Sulphur Springs after working the facility in October 2024. Since Blacklands Railroad had already been performing this type of work in the downtown area, carload numbers for Freedom Rail are similar to the final Blacklands years.

the upcoming year was to be \$100,000, with another \$6,800 for meals, mileage, and lodging.

According to published accounts, while some board members questioned if the district could afford an executive director, board member Davis replied, "I couldn't



recommend a severance from the executive director position. That's the person we have that's capable to do those kind of things."

At a special meeting later that month, the *News-Telegraph* reported audience members, including rail customers and other local government officials, took aim at what they perceived to be the root causes of the controversy. One audience member said, "We think it's irresponsible to pass a budget with a professional category three times the revenue. We also think it's irresponsible to have a \$100,000 consultant and only budget \$10,000 for track repair." Another said, "I'm here to encourage you, the board, to at least attempt to salvage the business relationship with Blacklands Railroad."

At the end of the meeting, the board passed a negative budget, but reduced the deficit to \$93,875. It did this in part by cutting Davila's proposed pay package to \$70,000, with \$4,000 for expenses, and by zeroing out the railroad's maintenance-of-way budget for the rest of 2021 and all of 2022. In defending his salary, Davila said the reason for the larger request that year was the work he was having to do related to the lawsuit. "If the lawsuit settles, a bunch of these things go away," he added.

Extending an olive branch

While the lawsuit was successful in bringing attention to the maintenance-of-way issue and problems associated with

the board, Defebaugh dropped the suit, saying that pursuing it further might harm the local economy. As a peace offering, Defebaugh announced in early 2020 he was teaming up with an infrastructure investment company that would provide immediate capital for right-of-way improvements. The company would provide \$42 million for the improvements in return for a long-term lease.

While some NETEX board members were excited about the possible infusion of money into the physical plant, others were skeptical or downright opposed. Defebaugh asked to keep exclusive rights as operator while the pieces of the deal were put together, but the board opted to open the bidding to all prospective operators.

In summer 2020, the NETEX board announced a new operator, Northeast Rail Connector (NETC) owned by Freedom Rail out of Mustang, Okla., which pledged an initial investment of \$12 million to \$15 million to upgrade the physical plant for an expected increase in traffic. On July 11, the Blacklands ceased being the operator for the NETEX line after 25 years.

The proposed Franklin County Container Terminal quietly faded away in the following months.

The city of Mt. Vernon, fed up with whole ordeal, gave up on any kind of facility and returned its share of the grant money. Phil Davila apparently stopped coming to meetings in February 2020.

A complicated scene at the former SSW Sulphur Springs depot: NETEX rail district owns the track, trains are operated by NETC/ Freedom Rail, right-of-way leases are managed by a third party, right-of-way maintenance is funded by NETEX and Freedom Rail on an ad hoc basis, and the depot is owned by former operator Wayne Defebaugh.

The aftermath

In the early days of NETEX, the board separated itself from other rail districts by being one of the most active in the state. But somewhere along the line, the board lost sight of its primary responsibility — ensuring the continued economic success of the rail line it saved from abandonment.

Rather than being frugal with what little income there was, the board began spending money on items that didn't have a clear contribution to maintaining the existing right-of-way. The toll road project and the replacement of those missing 31 miles of track had a low probability for success, but required money for lawyer fees and took attention away from maintaining the existing railroad.

Keep in mind the majority of the board approved the controversial spending measures. For two of the key votes on the most controversial issues, the measures passed each time by a slim 6-to-5 margin — meaning not everyone on the board agreed with its direction.

In the early days of the Blacklands' existence, the NETEX board understood it



In the early days of the Blacklands Railroad, you could find representatives from each of the big three locomotive builders at railroad headquarters in Sulphur Springs. Two of the three are represented in this 2005 scene.

would have to help Blacklands with maintenance-of-way items. Although the 2011 contract in effect at the time of the controversy stated the contractor must pay for all maintenance-of-way costs, the board routinely budgeted and provided money to help with that expense. Low carload totals didn't allow for any other option.

Trains recently examined the financial records of NETEX from the last 11 years to evaluate how much money it spent on items not related to railroad maintenance (see page 25). Noteworthy is the average of 65% of income consumed by its consultant's professional fees. Over the 11 years, the executive director's compensation totaled \$450,000. Attorney fees accounted for a further \$180,000. Add in the other administrative costs, and there was little money left over to help maintain the district's track.

Northeast Texas crisis

Why is this important? Annual carloads are believed to have peaked at around 5,000 in 2009. By 2015, that number had dropped below 2,000 and, in 2018, it fell to just over 1,300 as a number of businesses closed down or stopped shipping by rail. Surface Transportation Board documents

show that Blacklands was losing between \$320,000 and \$620,000 annually during those final years.

Some time ago, short line consultant Roy Blanchard came up with his Rule of 100. He said a short line needed 100 carloads per year for each mile of track to ensure profitability. NETEX operators have had trouble just trying to break the 2,000-carload barrier, much less trying to top the 6,500 carload number needed to meet the Rule of 100.

Fewer carloads meant the rail district was putting less money into its own budget, and the events of the previous decade drained what extra money may have existed within district coffers. In short, there was no rainy-day fund of any kind.

Less revenue meant less money was being put back into maintaining the railroad. For the last decade the main line has been categorized as excepted track — the lowest track standard recognized by the Federal Railroad Administration. One of the more recent FRA inspections found more than 90 violations.

NETEX now finds itself in a crisis. There's an immediate need for capital to address the deferred maintenance issues that have piled up over the years. Freedom Rail estimates it will take upwards of \$30 million to bring the railroad back to where it needs to be. In short, NETEX's rainy day has arrived and its empty rainy-day fund has come back to haunt the board.

While the board's actions alone didn't create the current crisis, it played a role in getting to this point.

Wayne Defebaugh was strongly in favor of a transload facility in the Mt. Vernon/Mt. Pleasant area to tap new markets and provide additional revenue. The board's actions arguably squandered that opportunity.

At one point in the past decade, NETEX bank accounts stood at \$850,000. By December 2024, that number was down to \$75,000 — of which only \$22,000 was in the operating account. One way to look at the situation: the railroad is one big customer away from financial success. Another way to look at it: the rail district is one major bridge failure away from insolvency. With more than 70 bridges to contend with, that day may be closer than one might think.

The one possible bright spot in northeast Texas came from a state legislator in 2024. Rep. Jill Dutton announced the state will vote on a \$25 million appropriations bill for Texas short line infrastructure improvements during its 2025 session. How that money will be divided has yet to be determined.

At one point, NETEX was the envy of the other rail districts in Texas. That is no longer the case, and the current board is attempting to rectify that. But without financial intervention, NETEX and Freedom Rail face an uncertain future. **I**

A towering farewell



▲ Metra Rock Island District train No. 513 eases past 16th Street Tower at 9:34 p.m. on April 11, 2025. Wires to the signals had been disconnected for the cutover to remote operation about an hour earlier, leaving the tower's operator to talk the train through the crossing. David Lassen

After 124 years, Metra shuts down Chicago's 16th Street Tower

by David Lassen

J.D. Danton's shift at Metra's 16th Street Tower on April 11-12, 2025 was nothing new. Yet the dilapidated structure had never seen anything like it — and never will again.

Danton was the operator on duty when the interlocking tower, in active duty south of the Loop since 1901, relinquished control over the diamond crossing of Metra's Rock Island District and Canadian National's St. Charles Air Line. The interlocking is now operated from Metra's Consolidated Control Facility at 15th and Canal streets — little more than 3,000 feet away, although on the opposite side of the Chicago River.

The latest deletion from the ever-dwindling number of operating U.S. towers leaves Metra with three:

- A2, at the complex junction of tracks

where Metra's Milwaukee North and West districts intersect with Union Pacific's main line (Metra's UP West route) on the way to Union Station and the Ogilvie Transportation Center, respectively.

- B17 in Bensenville, Ill., where the Milwaukee West connects to a UP line that brings CPKC traffic into Bensenville Yard.

- Lake Street Tower, which controls access to the Ogilvie Transportation Center, the terminal for Metra's UP (ex-Chicago & North Western) lines. That tower also remotely handles what used to be operated from Clinton Street Tower.

While the handoff from tower operators occurred about 3 a.m. on April 12, the cutover process continued through the weekend, and operators were on duty for another day as a backup. Some work will

go on for months as temporary measures to facilitate the handoff are replaced in more permanent fashion.

But essentially, the handoff early on a Saturday marked the functional end for the aged facility. The structure had been in service for more than half of the history of American railroading, noted Tom Hunter, chief signal engineer for contractor Modern Railway Systems.

Danton now usually works in customer service at Metra's Millennium Station. But because of a shortage of qualified operators, he was called back for the tower's final shift. And he felt the significance of the moment.

"Clerks have worked in this tower seven days a week, 24 hours a day, for 123 years," he said. "Even if the trains weren't running ... we were still here, because this is our



Tamara Baynes, who spent 6½ years at 16th Street, works a shift in December 2024. Just a handful of the more than 100 levers once needed for operators were still in use at the end. Cate Kratville-Wrinn



▲ J.D. Danton watches as a Metra train from LaSalle Street Station approaches on April 11, 2025. Danton was the tower operator on duty when control was handed off to Metra's Consolidated Control Facility early on the morning of April 12. Five photos, David Lassen

home. So it's a little melancholy."

Earlier in the evening, operator Wanda Rivera had been the last to line signals for a train — Metra Rock Island train No. 511 to Joliet, which left LaSalle Street station at 8:25 p.m. and passed by the tower at 8:30 p.m. Within five minutes, wiring to the signals had been cut to be rewired for the remote operation. "There go my track circuits," Rivera said, looking at the lights on the tower's model board.

From then until the handoff to the CCF, Rivera and Danton spent the night talking trains past the inoperable signals — which mostly still glowed red but occasionally were dark altogether.

Rivera — who, like Danton, had come to Metra from CN and had been working at the tower for five years — called the night "bittersweet."

"People are afraid of changes," she said. "And I'm one of those people. I could do

this in my sleep. ... But on to new things." Rivera plans to train to become a dispatcher.

At its closure, the tower handled a relatively simple crossing of two tracks on Metra's Rock Island District and one on the St. Charles Air Line. That was not always the case. A 1902 catalog from Taylor Signal Co. — "Manufacturer of the Electric Interlocking System," the cover proclaims — features the then-new facility. A map placed the tower at the center of a maze of trackage resembling a five-pointed star, with two to five tracks radiating in each direction. Those tracks belong to the Rock Island; Illinois Central; Chicago, Madison & Northern (soon part of IC), and Lake Shore & Michigan Southern (eventually part of the New York Central). At one time, operators had more than 100 levers to manipulate. The maze of wiring on the tower's first floor attests to the junction's past complexity.

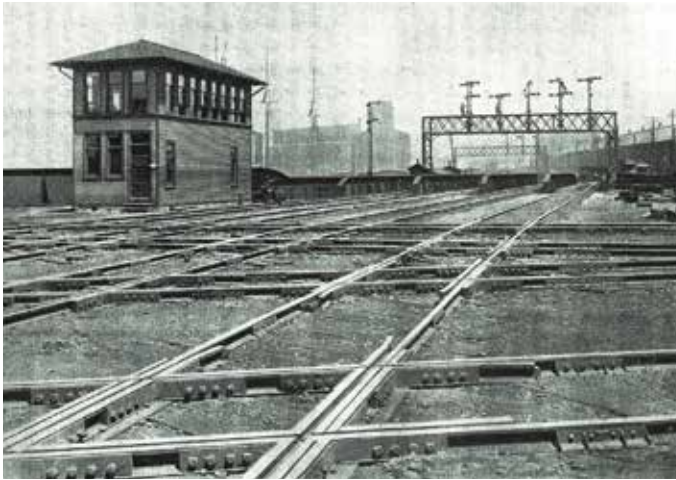
The tower has existed so long that even the area's basic geography has changed. The Chicago River once ran much closer to the building, but was rerouted in the 1920s by the city of Chicago.

At the end, the tower hardly looked like the image from that catalog. Virtually all of



▲ The model board shows the relatively simple crossing the tower controlled at its closure, a far cry from the five-way, multi-main junction at its birth.

the windows on the upper floor have been covered over; a door and windows on the first floor are also gone. As a result, visibility was so restricted that when Rivera was talking trains through on the final night, she had to leave her desk, go down an outside stairway on the side away from the Rock Island tracks, and walk to the end of



▲ A 1902 photo shows the complex junction of that era, as well as a landscape that had the since-rerouted Chicago River nearer to the building. (Ship masts are visible behind the structure.) Few of the windows and doors in that image survived to 2025. Left photo, Taylor Signal Co.

the building to make sure the previous train had physically cleared the diamond.

In its final days, the building was not exactly rock-solid. Rivera said that on particularly windy days, “you’re actually rocking back and forth. I’m like, ‘Are you kidding me?’ You actually get nauseous. It’s crazy.”

But enormous wooden beams on the first floor helped keep the tower together, and its foundation was far newer than the rest of the structure. The Chicago Transit Authority’s subway Red Line passes immediately beneath the building, and Red Line construction led to the tower being jacked up and placed on a sturdier concrete base. Still, you can clearly hear every Red Line train that passes below.

The tower at its closure was a virtual museum of technology as much as a working railroad facility. Danton pointed out a spot next to the desk that is a collection of phone jacks and other wiring, bearing testimony to, as he put it, 60 years of communication technology. (There were also traces of the former telegraph lines if you knew where to look, he said, but they were not readily apparent).

And there’s that unbelievable maze of wiring and relays on the first floor. Given the way the junction had been simplified over the years, much of it was superfluous. But as Tim Pitzen, Metra senior roadway engineer, pointed out, why risk taking anything out and disturbing the ancient equipment that still did its job?

Mixed among the wiring and relays were records of the tower’s human history. Various signal maintainers literally left their mark on the building, carving messages into the woodwork that supports the relays and other electrical gear.

Metra has designs on donating the interlocking machinery to a museum. While the entire structure deserves to be preserved, relocation would be physically impossible — not only because of its condi-

tion, but because its dimensions would prevent it from clearing the bridges it would encounter if moved in any direction.

So, at some point, 16th Street Tower will come down. For the time being, it will continue to stand guard over the tracks it has protected for more than a century.

For the first time, though, it will do so without human occupants. The rodents that have coexisted with them will, for now, have the run of the place. **I**

The original version of this article, including video from the final night, is online at Trains News Wire. Search for “An old soldier passes: Metra closes 16th Street Tower.”

► The relays and wiring that kept the tower working until its closure may not have been original, but they were far out of date. Some no-longer-needed equipment was kept in place simply out of concern that its removal might affect the still-working relays.

▼ Messages carved into the woodwork around the tower’s relays attest to those who help keep it operating for 125 years.





SWITZERLAND'S METER-GAUGE MARVEL: PART 2



More than passenger trains





Containers for grocery chain Coop make up most of the traffic for a Rhätische Bahn freight train at the famed Landwasser Viaduct on July 30, 2024. Scott Lothes

Freight, car transports, and heritage help shape Rhätische Bahn

Story and photos by David Lassen

Additional photos by Scott Lothes

To better understand the operations of Switzerland's Rhätische Bahn, or Rhaetian Railway, start with two defining characteristics.

First, its 385-kilometer (240-mile) meter-gauge network is densely populated with trains. The RhB runs about 800 trains a day, mostly between 5 a.m. and midnight. Second, the vast majority are passenger trains. In 2023, the railroad carried almost 16 million passengers, accounting for more than 431.1 million passenger-kilometers (267.9 million passenger-miles).

Its two marquee operations, the *Bernina Express* and *Glacier Express*, accounted for more than 550,000 riders.

But non-passenger operations, while a fraction of the overall activity, complete the picture of the RhB. Its small freight service addresses some specific needs. A car transport operation through the 19.1-kilometer (12.4-mile) Vereina

tunnel moves more than 500,000 vehicles annually. These account for about 15% of the railroad's revenue, compared to 56% for passenger operations.

Proud of its place in the history of its canton (the Swiss equivalent of a state), the RhB maintains a fleet of 76 pieces of heritage equipment, operating a daily heritage train and other excursions with historic equipment. This, the second of a two-part look at the RhB, examines the freight and car-transporter operations, as well as the RhB heritage fleet.

Freight: small but seeking to grow

The RhB's largest freight terminal is in Landquart, where the railroad has its principal shops. This is also where freight can be exchanged with SBB, the standard-gauge Swiss Federal Railways. (Only about 5% of freight traffic is interchanged.)

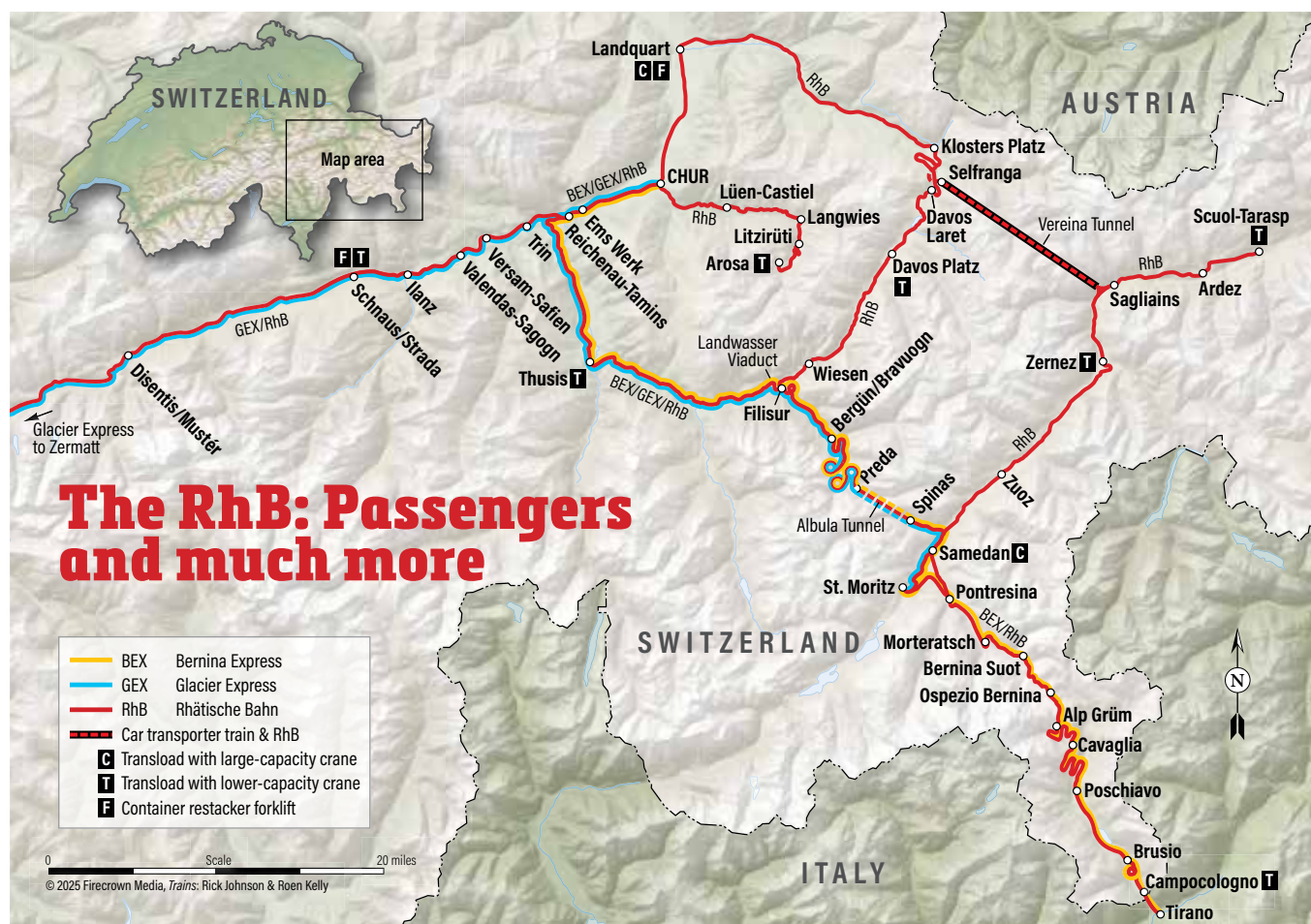
However, when it comes to freight and the RhB, large is a

relative term. During a tour, Simona Sutter, the deputy head of freight company Bündner Güterbahn, and Martin Vital, head of the Landquart terminal, note it handles about 80 to 100 containers a day.

"We are small!" Sutter says.

Measured against million-lift-a-year intermodal terminals in the United States, it's hard to argue. Landquart has a single crane, and one large forklift-like restacker. This is sufficient for a railroad that runs about 52 scheduled freight trains per week. In a relatively compact country (Switzerland's 15,940 square miles are roughly the size of Vermont and New Hampshire combined) with limited heavy industry, it's generally easy to ship by truck. It's also less expensive.

"If we have a lot of goods, we can transport cheaper than the truck," Vital says. "But if a customer comes and has one truck a week, or one truck a month, the truck is cheaper. That's a problem."





Passenger trains are the RhB's bread and butter. A train bound for Arosa waits at Litzirüti to meet a train to Chur (from which this photo was taken).

So is the intensive passenger schedule and overnight maintenance on the mostly single-track RhB, which leaves only so much track time for freights.

"If a customer were to come to us and ask for a train," Sutter says, "it would not be that easy to get that train — to get the locomotive, to get the track. ... The tracks for the freight transport are very regulated. We have early mornings; we have evenings." Just a handful of freights operate by day.

Realistically, a customer requesting a train is unlikely. Vital says the company has to "ask more and more and more" prospective customers to switch to rail.

What does the railroad move? Among its key customers are the nation's two supermarket chains — Coop, virtually everywhere in Switzerland with some 2,429 retail outlets, and Migros, with 1,196 stores.

"They deliver it here," Sutter says, "and we transport it to the Engadin" (a region in the south-east). "It's a big advantage be-

cause we can start here at about 4 in the morning, so the goods will already be in Samedan around 6 in the morning." A curfew keeps trucks off the road until 5 a.m., which means they would not reach Engadin markets before opening. "The morning trains are very good, quite long," she says. In fact, the three trains that depart in the 4 a.m. hour — two from Landquart, one from nearby Chur — are at capacity. "We have a lot more goods that we cannot put on," Vital says.

Food-and-beverage traffic is

the largest segment of the freight business. Another major customer is postal agency Swiss Post. There's a decent amount of timber traffic, and the RhB itself is a major customer. Its infrastructure and construction projects account for 15% to 20% of all cargo movements.

Given the financial primacy of passenger operations, freight is understandably secondary in railroad decision-making. Consider the fleet of 56 Stadler Capricorn electric multiple-unit trains that have become the backbone of passenger op-

erations. The four-car trainsets began arriving in 2019, and among other features, introduced automatic coupling. This was good for passenger operations — it aids the ability to split or join trains mid-route — but bad for cargo: RhB freight cars are not equipped with automatic couplers.

"Before that, we had the ability to connect every wagon [railcar] with any train," Sutter says. "Now most of our transport is a 100% freight train." (There are a few exceptions, mostly on the Arosa and Berni-



The largest Bündler Güterbahn terminal, at Landquart, includes one lift crane and one forklift-like restacker, here lifting a container tank for road salt. Only Landquart and Samedan have these large-capacity cranes.



An RhB freight train (with refrigerated containers for grocery chain Migros just visible behind the first car) prepares to head into the helical tunnel at Bergün on Aug. 2, 2024. It will soon appear on the track below at left, heading the opposite direction.

Two photos this page, Scott Lothes

A passenger train from Scuol-Tarasp brings along freight traffic as it passes through Ardez on Oct. 17, 2018. Mixed trains, once common on the Rhätische Bahn, are now limited because the couplers on the new EMU trainsets are not compatible with the company's freight cars.





na lines.) “This is more expensive for us. In a mixed train, the locomotive is paid already [by passenger operations] and the person who runs the locomotive is paid. In a freight train, we have to pay everything ourselves. So, for example, a train to Scuol” — the system’s northeasternmost point — “costs about 1 million [Swiss francs] a year.” (At this writing, a Swiss franc is worth \$1.21.)

Why not convert the freight car fleet to automatic couplers? Cost. “It was not even a discussion to invest in automatic couplers,” Sutter says. “It was way [beyond] what we could ever be able to take in.”

So freight and passenger operations are now largely divorced. But there’s another issue.

“Our wagons are not the newest — some of them are 50 years old,” she says. “They have a very long lifespan, but at some point, they are not capable anymore.” Replacing the freight fleet is estimated to cost 90 million Swiss francs; that’s in addition to annual funding for a railroad owned 51.3% by the canton, 43.1% by the federal government. “So we are now discussing with the government if we would get 90 million, 70 million, or 50 million,” she says. The lower figures partially address the problem but push back the ultimate day of reckoning. They also mean the railway would no longer have enough equipment to serve all its customers.

This would conflict with government charges to convert traffic from road to rail, and for the freight division to increase income. “At the moment, we are gaining about 14 million (Swiss francs) a year,” she says. “We have to increase until 2030 to about 16 million.” New equipment could help meet both goals.

By the way, when the RhB refers to scheduled freights, it means just that. The railroad’s remarkably comprehensive website (featuring 10 languages, with German — Graubünden’s primary tongue — predominant) includes a downloadable freight train schedule. This portion of the site — look for “Treasure trove for railway fans” — also includes daily locomotive assignments and, for modelers, a place to order company plans for structures such as bridges and stations.

Car transport: a shortcut for vehicles

The railway’s heaviest trains probably make the shortest trips on the RhB, and are not Bündner Güterbahn freights.

These are the car-transport trains through the Vereina Tunnel. They mostly run every 30 minutes, providing an all-weather alternative to the seasonal Flüela Pass, which crests at 7,822 feet (2,384 meters) and is prone to avalanches. In 2023, the service moved 535,000 vehicles and generated more

net revenue (16.7 million Swiss francs) than the entire freight operation (12.2 million). (Passenger trains brought in 118.6 million francs.)

Traffic far exceeds the 400,000 vehicles projected when the tunnel opened in 1999. Between the transport trains and expanded passenger schedules, the tunnel — single track, except for a 2-kilometer passing track in the middle — is at capacity.

“It should have been double tracked from the beginning,” says Markus Zaugg, RhB’s head of fleet management. “The amount of traffic was way underestimated.”

This is one of several car-transport trains in Switzerland, using major tunnels so vehicles can bypass mountain roads. Standard-gauge railroad BLS operates one between Kandersteg and Goppenstein through the 14.6-kilometer/9.1-mile Lötschberg Tunnel [see “Finishing the job,” April 2025], and another between Brig and Iselle, Italy, through the 19.8-km/12.3-mile Simplon Tunnel. (A seasonal, reservation-only transport includes passage through both tunnels, about a one-hour trip.) The meter-gauge Matterhorn Gotthard Bahn — RhB’s partner in the *Glacier Express* — runs one through the 15.4-km/9.6-mile Furka Base Tunnel.

What’s different about the Vereina operation — beyond the fact it uses the world’s longest meter-gauge tunnel — is that it is the only one able to carry 40-ton trucks, the largest allowed on Swiss roadways.

The largest trucks move on open-air flatcars at one end of the train, which otherwise feature 13 rounded-top, Bombardier-built transporter cars, with a locomotive at one end and a cab car at the other. At the transport trains’ Selfranga terminal, Zaugg, Simon Rohner — head of the car transporter operation — and I watch one large truck loaded onto the open-air car. It is then grounded to the railcar with what look like heavy-duty jumper cables — a safety measure for the electrified operation.



Cars drive off a transport train at Sagliains on Sept. 11, 2024. The blue locomotive is wrapped with an ad for the Davos hockey team.

Car transporter facts

Route: 19.1 kilometers (11.9 miles) through the Vereina tunnel between Selfranga, near the junction city of Klosters, and Sagliains, about 19 kilometers from Scuol.

Schedules: Daily service begins at 5:20 a.m.; the last train arrives about 10 p.m. in summer and 1 a.m. in winter. Trains run hourly early and late, half-hourly for most of the day. On peak dates, a third train can increase frequency to every 20 minutes.

Cost: In summer 2024, vehicles up to 3½ tons paid 34 Swiss francs (about \$41); prices increase by weight, with a 40-ton truck paying 230 francs (\$278) in summer, 300 francs (\$362) in winter. Regular users can buy a discount card with a 2,000-franc value for 1,300 francs, a 35% discount.

Volume: The service moved a record 535,000 vehicles in 2023; the single-day record is 4,954 on Feb. 21, 2004. — David Lassen

Smaller trucks can mix with the automobiles on the covered cars. One such truck whips aboard without hesitation as we watch, a sign the driver makes this trip regularly. A smaller recreational vehicle loads far more slowly, the driver intimidated by the close quarters.

As loading winds down, Rohner drives his vehicle

aboard while Zaugg and I walk to the locomotive for the approximately 18-minute trip through the tunnel. Zaugg, a train driver before promotion to his current position, says shifts at the throttle of the transport trains can be difficult.

“The greatest challenge is to stay concentrated the whole day,” he says. “Because it’s

always in the same direction, it’s all straight, and it’s dark the whole day.” A shift consists of three or four trips, a break, and another three or four trips, he says: “You keep that as short as possible just so you can keep concentration.”

In winter, wet, slippery rails are also an issue. “It can be very challenging to bring the trains

up to the highest point in the tunnel,” Zaugg says. In the direction we are traveling, that point is about two-thirds of the way through the trip, after a grade of 1.5%. The portal at Selfranga is at 1,281 meters (4,202 feet); the highest point is 1,463 meters (4,800 feet); and Sagliains is at 1,432 meters (4,698 feet).

Up to five trains can be in the tunnel at one time. In the short double-track section in the middle, we meet the car transporter running in the opposite direction

Tunnel safety measures include a pair of diesel-powered rescue trains — one with a space for evacuating passengers and another with a large water tank for firefighting — but they have never been needed.

“We have had some minor incidents ... we have been very lucky in that regard,” Zaugg says. “If there would be a fire, temperatures rise up over 1,000 degrees.” In 2022, the railway bought two new firefighting and rescue vehicles for use in the tunnel, in cooperation with the local fire departments.



A driver maneuvers his truck onto one of the auto-transport train's open flatcars for the trip from Selfranga to Sagliains. The RhB's train is the only one in Switzerland that can transport 40-ton trucks, the largest allowed on the nation's highways.



The locomotive driver's view as an auto-transport train bound for Sagliains begins its trip through the mostly single-track Vereina tunnel. A trip through the 19.1-kilometer (11.9-mile) tunnel takes about 18 minutes. Drivers and passengers stay in their cars for the trip.



Emerging from the Vereina tunnel, our auto-transporter train meets a passenger train from Scuol-Tarasp. Cars waiting to make the return trip through the tunnel are lined up in the covered waiting area at the left; the green traffic light is above the exit lane for arriving vehicles.

In Sgaliains, we rejoin Rohner, who shows us some of the features that help ensure the tunnel remains incident-free. On the roadway that leads from the nearby highway to the car-loading area, vehicles pass through a series of sensing devices:

- Thermal scanners read vehicle temperature, looking for overheating brakes or engines. “If they are too hot, it’s a fire danger,” Rohner says. Vehicles that trigger a heat warning must cool before they are loaded.

- Laser scanners measure vehicle dimensions, to see if they will fit in the regular transporter railcars, need to go on the open car for the largest trucks, or are simply too large. “If it’s too high — over 4 meters is the limit — there’s an alarm,” Rohner says. Workers will see if the truck has air suspension that allows it to be lowered to fit the height restriction. If not, it must stick to the highway.

- A tablet computer in the terminal office receives the scanner data, matched with a camera image, to ensure identification of problem vehicles. The system has been in place

for about seven years.

If there are no issues, the vehicles drive aboard the string of auto carriers. A train can take up to 58 regular automobiles, fewer when the mix includes trucks or other large vehicles. The train trip takes about a half-hour less than driving over the pass.

Normally, vehicles take the first train after they arrive. During peak travel periods, they may not be so lucky. “It’s not unusual there are three-hour waiting times” on about 10 winter days a year, Rohner says. Electronic signage indicates wait times to arriving drivers; the information is also available online and is included in local radio traffic reports. (For those who wait, there’s a cafe and children’s play area at Selfranga; the more constrained space at Sgaliains offers vending machines.) Reservations are not an option. “It’s first come, first served,” Rohner says, calling the service “a rolling highway.”

On the busiest days, the RhB operates a third trainset, normally a standby to the two in regular service. “Some years on these special, strong days, we traveled with four trains,”

Rohner says. That’s no longer possible because of increased passenger-train frequency, although a proposal for new signaling and other technology would increase capacity by allowing trains to travel more closely together. “Maybe we can travel with four trains in a few years,” Rohner says.

Also not possible: lengthening the transporter trainsets. Their current length of 340 meters (about 1,115 feet) is the maximum the loading tracks can accommodate.

While a double-track tunnel

would have avoided these capacity issues, adding a second track now is not an option — because of stricter safety regulations, as well as the cost. “You would have to build a completely new tunnel,” Zaugg says.

A few operating changes are planned. The next generation of transporter rolling stock will increase the number of open flatcars for the largest trucks from one to three, better meeting demand. Also planned are trains with a locomotive at each end. “We can’t go longer, so it won’t help with that,” Zaugg



The play area at the Selfranga car-transport terminal includes this apparatus resembling one of the RhB’s historic “crocodile” electric locomotives. One of the transport train railcars is in the background.



A cab car leads one of the transporter trains into the Selfranga terminal; immediately behind is the open flat car for large vehicles (with a truck onboard barely visible). Plans are replace the cab car with a locomotive, and to add more open cars to meet the demand for truck movements.



The RhB runs a daily heritage train between Davos and Filisur, featuring coaches and first-class cars dating to the 1920s as well as open-air cars. Normally operating with one of the railroad's two crocodile electrics, with those sidelined for maintenance in 2024 it featured the oldest of the Ge 4/4 I locomotives.

says, "but it will help with acceleration ... in wintertime, when the rails are slippery, you can't all the time go to the speed limit." (Maximum speed in the tunnel is 100 km/h, 62 mph; the transport trains have a limit of 80 km/h, or 50 mph.)

At the conclusion of our visit to Sagliains, Rohner drives his car back onto the transporter train to return to Selfranga, this time with Zaugg and me riding along.

"It's not too often you can ride as a passenger on a freight train," Zaugg says. Here, however, it is a regular fact of life.

Heritage: a cultural responsibility

In the U.S., Union Pacific is justly celebrated for maintaining Big Boy No. 4014 and 4-8-4 No. 844. Now consider the Rhätische Bahn's commitment to history.

Roughly a sixth of the railroad's rolling stock — some 76 pieces — belongs to its heritage fleet. This includes steam and electric locomotives, passenger and freight cars. The railroad runs a daily heritage train, usually featuring one of its vintage "crocodile" electric locomotives and 1920s-era passenger cars, between Davos and Filisur. Other equipment operates in occasional excursions.

The railroad has long been committed to preservation, having kept its first locomotive and two cars from its first passenger train.

"We have one of the greatest collections of operating historical trains in Europe as a sole company," says Zaugg, who oversees the heritage equipment in addition to his role as head of rolling stock. It is, he says, a recognition of the responsibilities of the mostly government-owned railway. "In the end, all this belongs to the people of the state. So we have an obligation to the people to hold this cultural heritage."

Some of this equipment is in a 19-stall roundhouse at the main shops in Landquart, which Zaugg calls "probably the most famous railway spot in the whole of Switzerland." Two stalls date to 1889; the



One of the RhB's two operable 2-8-0 locomotives is stored (next to a crocodile electric) in the Landquart roundhouse. Not visible: the steam engine's bright green cab and tender.

rest came a year later.

Inside is one of the railroad's two operable steam locomotives — 2-8-0 No. 107, built in 1906 by SLM, the Swiss Locomotive and Machine Works. (Sister No. 108 is kept in the south, in Samedan.) “They were absolutely high-tech at that time,” Zaugg says. “The locomotive works in Winterthur, they actually suggested a little downgraded locomotive, and the Rhaetian Railway said, no, we want to have the luxury version. ... You couldn't get anything better than this.

“It's a really, really beautiful locomotive. It runs so smooth and it's so powerful.” There were no steam excursions in 2024, primarily because of a driver shortage that also forced revisions to the RhB's passenger schedule, but they have returned this year. As of March, trips were scheduled with No. 108 and a 2-6-0T, No. 11, known as “Heidi” for its use in the movie of the same name.

The roundhouse also contains several of the railroad's still-active, classic B-B electric locomotives — Ge 4/4 II units, in Swiss style of classification [explained at right]. Twenty-three were built by SLM — yes, the company that built those steam engines — and electrical firm Brown, Boveri & Cie between 1973 and 1985. Seventeen remain in service, but they are likely to be retired by 2030.

“They will be like 55, 60

years old,” Zaugg says. “And a refit with the purpose to operate them more than 20 or 25 [additional] years, it's just not economical.”

He will miss the little engines (at 42 feet, 6 inches in length, they are slightly shorter than a U.S. SW1), which pack about 2,200 hp and are capable of 90 km/h (56 mph).

“They're working so good every day; they're so reliable,” he says. “But as always, the electrical part of the locomotive is end of life. You have to replace it, and it's just not economical to do for all of them.” At least one will join the historic fleet; that locomotive has been repainted from the signature RhB bright red into a green from earlier in the railroad's history.

More of the locomotives are in a storage yard Zaugg calls his “garden.” (“Other people have flowers in their garden,” he jokes. “I have railways.”) The space is packed with locomotives, passenger cars, and other rolling stock, some active but only used occasionally. Most, however, represent what Zaugg calls “an unsolved problem.

They may become heritage, or be sold to a museum, or whatever.” Reluctantly he adds, “Or they'll go for scrap.”

The land where this equipment sits is being reclaimed by the community of Landquart for civic purposes, meaning the rolling stock has to find another



Ge 4/4 II No. 620 emerges from the Landquart roundhouse and onto the turntable, with its flower planters. The locomotives, built between 1973 and 1985, are the mainstays of the RhB fleet.

Swiss locomotive classification

SWISS RAILWAYS USE A LOCOMOTIVE CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM

that seems, well, foreign to an American. The primary locomotive on the RhB is labeled a Ge 4/4 II; a freight unit on the Swiss Federal Railways might be an Re 6/6. Markus Zaugg, the RhB's head of rolling stock, was good enough to explain. Let's use the red Ge 4/4 II shown above as an example.

- **G** indicates this is a narrow gauge locomotive; on a modern standard gauge unit, the first letter would most likely be R, for rapid, indicating this is one of the fastest locomotives.
- **e** indicates an electric unit. Other possibilities here include m (motor, for a diesel); d (dampf, German for steam), or t (for battery power).
- **4/4** indicates four powered axles, out of four total. We would consider this a B-B; a 4/6 would be equivalent to our A1A-A1A. (During this trip, I encountered a preserved BLS Railway 8/8, an articulated electric with four powered two-axle trucks. And I recently saw a picture of an 8/14.) The RhB's 2-8-0 steam locomotive is a 4/5.
- **II** indicates this is the railroad's second series or generation of Ge 4/4 units. — *David Lassen*

er home. Storing the heritage equipment is already a problem; it is scattered around the RhB, when ideally it would be in a single location for display and as an excursion base.

Such a facility “needs a lot of political debates and a lot of money,” Zaugg says. “... There's a lot of vehicles that we want that are on the brink of becoming historic. But I'm very careful at the moment because I don't want to have more vehicles, because we don't have the place to put them. We can't

operate them because we don't have the personnel for that, and we don't have the tracks, because the main task for the Rhaetian Railway is local trains for the people. When there is a place on the tracks, we can go with the historical trains. That will be more and more difficult in the future.”

He points out two passenger cars definitely ticketed for the heritage fleet. “These two cars, along with a traction car — a locomotive where you can basically sit in as well [as a passen-

ger] — were built in 1939, and they were called the *Flying Rhaetian*. They were a special train where you can move fast, with comfortable seats, and as a special feature, they were painted in red.” So debuted the railroad’s signature color.

At one point, I ask Zaugg if he has a favorite piece of heritage equipment. He says yes,

and a week later, we meet in the village of Pontresina to see it.

Pontresina’s shop building primarily stores historical equipment. Most is from the Bernina Line, which runs south from here and operates on a different electrical system (1,000-volt DC, compared to 11,000-volt AC elsewhere).

Among its treasures: a Bernina

Line crocodile locomotive, two beautiful vintage electric motorcars, and historic freight cars. After we admire these, Zaugg brings me to his pride and joy: the world’s only operable self-propelled steam rotary snowplow, which has just completed a multi-year restoration. “Such a unique engine, and it has its own soul,” he says.

“Every other steam-propelled snow plow in the world has to be pushed by another vehicle,” Zaugg says. “This one can drive itself.” Another product of SLM, from 1910, the builder described it as “a steam locomotive with the option to plow snow.” An 0-6-6-0, it has six cylinders — two mounted on each side between the sets of drivers to power those wheels, and two more to drive the rotary plow.

Mounting the cylinder for the first set of drivers behind the wheels, instead of in front, keeps the front wheels as close to the rotary as possible, which is crucial to its effectiveness: “We don’t want the propeller to swing out of the line of the tracks,” he says.

It is an amazing piece of machinery. [A more detailed examination — including video — is at [Trains.com](https://www.Trains.com).] Testifying to its durability, while it is 115 years old, it has only been part of the RhB heritage fleet for six years. Before that, it was still in active service, a backup to newer plows. “Until about 10 years ago,” Zaugg says, “we had it fired up in October and shut



A future piece of the RhB heritage fleet, Ge 4/4 II No. 611 — captured at the station in Chur — has been repainted into an earlier Rhätische Bahn paint scheme for the remainder of its life in regular service. The 1960s-era electrics are expected to be retired by 2030.



On its final excursion trip before its three-year renovation, the RhB steam rotary takes a spin through Bernina-Suot on Feb. 23, 2020. Scott Lothes

it down in April. So it was warm the whole winter, and we used it about 10 to 12 times during the winter season.”

When I suggest it looks like it could still be used in an emergency, he smiles, recalling a weekend in 2006 when a British enthusiast group chartered the plow for excursions.

“Saturday and Sunday we were to run,” he says. “Friday evening, there was an avalanche at the Morteratsch station. They couldn’t bring the plow from the south side because it was damaged, and another derailed right outside there. So we get a call: ‘Hey, is your machine prepared?’ ... We go there and we were there all night long, driving there and plowing out the avalanche.” The excursion still went off as scheduled.

After admiring the rotary, we return to the two bright yellow motorcars. Like the snowplow, these had a long, active life; built in 1908 and 1910, respectively, they were in regular service until about a decade ago, although everything about them emphasizes they come from another era. Their wood bodies are covered with tinplate; their roofs are sail fabric covered with wax. The first-class compartment is ornate, with plush, comfortable seats; second class is hard wooden benches. Passengers board through the operator’s compartment — which has no seat. Workers weren’t supposed to be too comfortable in those days, Zaugg says.

As a driver, Zaugg operated these motorcars. He says he would leave the door open between the cab and the first-class compartment “so the people can see, or you can talk with the people.”

He asks if I would like to see them run. Well, duh.

He opens the shop door, and we climb aboard. Up goes the pantograph, and we glide outside. As I climb down to take pictures, a *Bernina Express*



Two motorcars built for the Bernina Line in 1910 and 1908, respectively, make a quick trip outside of the Pontresina shop building. The cars, which remained in regular service into the 21st century, now operate on occasional excursions on the Bernina Line.



A northbound *Bernina Express* — part of a *Trains Magazine*/Special Interest Tours Swiss itinerary — stops at Alp Grum on Sept. 16, 2023. Alp Grum and its station restaurant are the destination for excursions with the RhB’s vintage Bernina Line motorcars, as well as a popular starting point for downhill hiking.

passes; to my disappointment, I see no one pointing excitedly or grabbing a camera. Clearly, it’s not a train of railfans.

While the cars have dynamic braking, they do not have the modern ability to send the power back into the electrical system. “You just produce heat,” he says. “You have to be very careful so it does not overheat the resistors. Back in the ’50s or ’60s, one of these completely burned down at Alp Grum because [the driver] was using the dynamic brake too much. As

long as he was driving, the wind cooled it down a little. He stopped at Alp Grum, and it was about 10 or 20 seconds and it goes whoosh. In two or three minutes, the whole car burned down to the ground.”

Today, these cars run 10 to 15 times a year, he says: one weekend a month in summer, and on some winter nights. “Every time there is a full moon in the winter, you can make a run to Alp Grum at night, have dinner there, and go back. When it’s all snow in the full-

moon light, ah, it’s stunning.”

The same is true of the cars themselves — and everything else about the RhB heritage program. **I**

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More on the web:

PLANNING A VISIT?

• “If You Go” travel information, a look at that steam rotary, a tour of the Rhätische Bahn shops, and more is online at [Trains.com](https://trains.com)

The hound dog engineer



A homeless pup grabs the right-hand seat

by Arthur “Bud” Hoekstra

IN THE LATE SEVENTIES, I worked at Joliet (Ill.) Yard, which was on the Gulf, Mobile & Ohio side of the Illinois Central Gulf. Joliet needed an engineer and the GM&O guys didn’t want it for some reason. I was working the Chicago Terminal engineers extra board and was ready for a rest as that extra board protected everything on the Chicago Terminal, including commuter service.

For once I was in the right place at the right time and was able to transfer to the Joliet board.

Joliet handled anywhere from one to three daily coal trains, which originated at either Cow Creek or Decker, Mont. While the mines were near one another, interestingly, they ran over two different routes — one via Minneapolis/Saint Paul, while the other passed through Galesburg, Ill.

These trains ultimately arrived at Eola Yard (Burlington Northern in Aurora, Ill.) and would be turned over the Elgin, Joliet & Eastern for the 25-mile trip to Joliet.

The “J” would give us those trains at Collins Street and we would spot them at the Commonwealth Edison Power Plant in Plains, Ill., between the Des Plaines River and Santa Fe’s Pequot Line. The GM&O had trackage rights between Joliet and Pequot, a railroad location near Coal City. Plains is 3 miles south of Joliet.

One fine day my crew was waiting for the “J” to show up at Collins Street with about 105 car loads of black diamonds. A young lad of about 10 and his dog — a young beagle — came over and sat down near the tracks. The kid told us that he had to find a new home for the dog as his parents wouldn’t let him keep it. I didn’t think that I could keep the dog either, but thought I could find someone to provide a good home. That was good enough for the young man. Then the train showed up. Have you ever tried to climb up on a locomotive with a wiggling, squiggly beagle in your clutches? It’s not easy.

I managed to get the pup into the cab

Illinois Central Gulf coal trains passing through Joliet, Ill., were not popular with the locals in the 1970s. Imagine, however, if a hound dog was engineering. One would just have to laugh. Thanks to our author, a dog did take the right-hand seat. Gerry Dobey

and the first thing he does is to jump up on the engineer’s seat. My sense of humor immediately took over. How would the good citizens of Joliet react when they spied this 14,000-ton behemoth coal train being operated by a beagle?

The pup stayed in the seat, I stayed back and pulled the throttle out, setting the train in motion. Now all I had to do was pull out the bell button and the beagle was on his own. He stayed right where he was as if he was getting paid to run that coal train.

Coal trains weren’t really popular around Collins Street, but if anyone forced to wait for our train had seen that pup up there sitting in the engineer’s seat, he would have laughed until he cried. It also didn’t make us railroaders look too smart. I mean if a dog will do it for nothing, why should the railroad pay us the wages they so vehemently contest?

By the way, the pup went home that day with our capable chief clerk, Amy Nelson — a good home indeed! **I**

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Tools for finding trains

Railroad photography requires research, persistence ... and luck

▲ Norfolk Southern's H23 local works the Lititz Secondary near its Pennsylvania namesake. Finding this train on the lightly traveled former Reading Co. line required map study, several trips to scope out locations, consulting internet sources regarding times and day of operation, plus a little bit of luck. Brian Solomon

RECENTLY, I BEGAN TEACHING A series of classes at the Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania titled Railroad Photography 101. I cover the basics in this two-hour course, beginning with a short digital slide show encompassing more than 60 years of photography. I also provide a list of 10 basic tips — things like making sure batteries are charged, storage media is present and functional, focus and exposure settings/modes are where you want them, the camera is switched on, the lens cap is off, and the lens is clean.

I delve into the issues of subject matter such as moving trains, landscapes with trains, and people with trains. Then I briefly discuss different types of equipment, ways to approach composition, how refine technique, work with light and make the most of foreground and background elements.

However I missed one key element in my syllabus. During my first class, one of the attendees asked how I got about find-

ing trains. A good question and one requiring a long answer.

How to find trains and the challenges you face depends on the railroads and territory you intend to explore.

Where railroads are busy and trains run frequently, locating a safe place with an unobstructed view of the railroad may be the challenge. By contrast, on lightly used lines, simply finding a train in daylight can take time.

I'm always on the lookout for places to observe railroads and make photographs. I find it an ongoing challenge, much like an enormous, ever-changing puzzle with lots of little pieces. Obtaining the pieces and fitting them together is part of the fun. The best way to solve this puzzle is to study, observe, listen, take notes, be patient, learn when to act, and recognize when you get lucky.

Railroading is a very complex business and trying to absorb it in its entirety might take a lifetime. It's best to start

with the basics and patiently fit together one puzzle piece at a time. In other words, focus on a railroad line or specific operation and research it thoroughly.

THE QUEST OF A LIFETIME

Before the Internet, I'd begin my research by reading histories and *Trains* articles, devouring maps, and scouring available railroad literature, especially employee timetables.

The topographic maps produced by the U.S. Geological Survey were a great resource in those days. I'd make photocopies and use those to follow the railroad and make notes on key locations including interlockings (also known as towers or control points), passing sidings, bridges, tunnels, yards, and stations.

I'd pay close attention to grade profiles and study special instructions in timetables to better understand operations, including maximum authorized speeds and permanent speed restrictions.

Today, many of these resources are available online, and third-party applications contain more information than was easily available in the past.

For a visual overview, I start with Google Maps. The satellite view (available with the Layers toggle control) is especially useful as you can use it to virtually inspect railroad routes and establish a general sense of where the tracks run and how they interface with highways, rivers, and other geographic features. Zooming in allows me to locate crossovers, yards, engine terminals, access roads, and other infrastructure that relates to operations. The Google Maps Street View function is a great way to seek public access trackside locations, such as grade crossings, without the necessity of an in-person scouting visit.

Another site is the Historical Topo Map Explorer, which allows you to drop a pin and then search back through a catalog of USGS maps. It also has a satellite view and you can use a slider-toggle to go back and forth between historic maps, modern views, and satellite images. Topo maps also provide a sense of the terrain.

For details on infrastructure try <https://rail.guide/>, which provides detailed color coded railroad overlays for North American lines. This website shows railroad lines by operator, identifies control points, stations, automated defect detectors and other useful information, similar to employee timetables in an interactive format.

UNDERSTANDING THE RAILROAD

Understanding the railroad is key to figuring out when and where trains run. Monitoring a programmable scanner may be helpful — and you can find lists of railroad frequencies online — however, changes to signaling and radio transmission systems result in less useful information than was broadcast decades ago.

Regularly scheduled passenger trains follow published schedules with times for intermediate stations as well as end terminals. In addition, many passenger operators provide Internet resources that track trains and offer updated information [see Travel, May 2025].

Freight railroading is more challenging. Most freights do not adhere to strict schedules between intermediate points, but many trains have established crew call times and tend to follow repeated operational patterns. Through careful repetitive observation, you may establish time parameters when freights pass locations along the line, while determining the days of operation.

You'll need to learn the differences between local freights and through trains. Many locals operate as round-trip "turns" to make carload deliveries and switch customers. Through freights typically work



An easy way to catch trains on the move may be a visit to a busy line or popular hot spot. This view from the station footbridge at Fullerton, Calif., shows a pair of BNSF double-stack trains working west on the former Santa Fe. Brian Solomon

from terminal to terminal. Observe where trains routinely make meets, work lineside yards or industry, or stop for other reasons. Take note on how long a brake test takes to perform and how long it might take for a train to depart its home terminal.

Unscheduled moves or special trains are the hardest to find. Social media groups that focus on a specific line may be helpful in gaining advance word on special operations. Striking up conversations with fellow observers along the line can also be useful.

A keen railroad observer can obtain thorough understanding of operations, although perfecting this skill may take years of patience. — Brian Solomon

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THE MILWAUKEE ROAD



▲ During flood cleanup a new mural detailing Charles Andrew Crawford's life was installed. Created by Le Mars, Iowa, artist Jonas Lynch, it tells of the dangers faced by shop workers. Crawford, a shop hostler, was killed on his first day with the railroad. Sioux City Railroad Museum

Sioux City Railroad Museum reopens

Flood damage tops \$2 million

A LITTLE MORE THAN EIGHT MONTHS following a horrific flood, the Sioux City Railroad Museum reopened to the public March 1. On June 23-24, 2024, the Big Sioux River sent up to 10 feet of muddy water raging through the museum grounds in Sioux City, Iowa. During the ensuing cleanup, the equivalent of 256 truckloads of flood-damaged contents, corn stalks, building parts, and debris were removed.

The flood waters caused structural damages exceeding \$1.5 million, says Larry Obermeyer, museum president. An additional \$500,000 is estimated in artifact damage. Most of the museum's exhibit cases were waterlogged, necessitating replacement.

During cleanup, the museum hosted several special events, including Falloween and the 12 Nights of Christmas, which combined drew more than 17,500 patrons.

NYC No. 3001 reaches 50% of first funding goal

Air compressor swap aids restoration effort

FUNDRAISING TOWARD RESTORATION of New York Central 4-8-2 No. 3001 has netted more than \$325,000, which will cover moving the locomotive from Elkhart to Fort Wayne, Ind., for further work, says Kelly Lynch, vice president of the Fort Wayne Railroad Historical Society.

Project partner FMW Solutions, working with the Abbeville (Ala.) Foundation, arranged an exchange of air compressors between No. 3001 and Florida East Coast No. 253, currently undergoing a cosmetic restoration in Alabama. The swap gives No. 3001 a newer, recently refurbished compressor. — *Trains staff*



NYC No. 3001's air compressor is removed during a February work session. Inoperable due to freeze damage, the unit was traded for the pump on FEC No. 253. FWRHS

PRESERVATION BRIEFS

T1 frame completed; No. 1309 running again



THE T1 TRUST says the new welded frame for **PENNSYLVANIA RAILROAD T1 NO. 5550** is complete. Dover (Ohio) Tank & Plate fabricated the 71,000-pound, 64-foot-long frame, putting construction of the 51st 4-4-4-4 T1 over the halfway mark. Work continues on new cylinders. The Trust also partnered with several other large steam locomotive operators to construct a new version of the Nathan 4000c steam injector. The project was successful, with the first unit installed on **NICKEL PLATE NO. 765**. The T1 carries two injectors each capable of placing 14,000 gallons of water per hour into the boiler. T1 Trust



WESTERN MARYLAND SCENIC RAILROAD 2-6-6-2 NO. 1309 returned to service in May. The ex-Chesapeake & Ohio locomotive was sidelined in 2024 for a number of planned maintenance projects, including cylinder and piston work. The locomotive, per WMSR officials, is now positioned for reliable, long-term operation. Kevin Burkholder

Dormant since 2019, the **DELAWARE & ULSTER RAILROAD**, a New York tourist line, returned to operation on May 10. The line had been closed for track rehabilitation, which continues. Trains will now depart Arkville traveling east toward Fleischmanns and Highmount, N.Y. Since 2001, trains had run north to Halcottsville and Roxbury, N.Y.

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boulderrailroadmuseum.org

702-486-5933

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NEVADA STATE RAILROAD MUSEUM

2180 South Carson Street, Carson City 89701



The Nevada State Railroad Museum, Carson City, is a cultural resource dedicated to educating the community about Nevada railroad history. The museum contains an extensive collection of significant locomotives, rolling stock, artifacts, photographs, and memorabilia. In addition to static exhibits, select pieces of equipment in the collection are restored and operated throughout the year to demonstrate steam and early gasoline technology and provide visitors with an immersive experience. For more information, visit carsonrailroadmuseum.org.

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www.facebook.com/theoldhotelothello 509-488-5936

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CLOSING DATES: September 2025 closes June 23, October closes July 22, November closes Aug 20.

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RAIL SHOWS AND EVENTS

JUNE 8, 2025: 49th Annual Kane County Railroadiana and Model Train Show. Kane County Fairgrounds, 525 South Randall Rd., St. Charles, IL. Sunday, 10:00am-3:00pm. Admission: \$6.00 w/tax. Tables starting at \$65.00. Information: 847-358-1185, RussFierce@aol.com or www.RRShows.com

JULY 19, 2025: Rail Fair, Copeland Park, Rose & Clinton Streets, La Crosse, WI. 10am-4pm. Admission \$8.00, 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

All listed events were confirmed as active at the time of press.
Please contact event sponsor for current status of the event.

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TOP DOLLAR PAID for steam/diesel or electric builder plates. mr_slides@hotmail.com Telephone: 216-321-8446

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In the August issue



CSX digs deep in Baltimore

By increasing clearances, CSX's **HOWARD STREET TUNNEL** project will open the door to new double-stack routes. The 91-mile **MACARONI LINE** in southern Texas changed Kansas City Southern's fortunes. Recalling the mid-1970s, when Southern Pacific went **BICENTENNIAL IN A BIG WAY.**

On sale July 8, 2025

Retro moment

Other GE ES44C4s on the Florida East Coast Railway roster have appeared in the line's new paint scheme, but Nos. 806 and 812 still wear the Champion scheme, reminiscent of the classic passenger train. The two locomotives, with a liquefied natural gas fuel tender, are hauling train No. 210 north through the St. Augustine, Fla., marsh on April 26, 2024.

Andrew Faulk





Nature's tunnel

Norfolk Southern train No. U40 with GE ET44AC No. 3614 up front exits the Natural Tunnel near Duffield, Va., on Nov. 22, 2024. The tunnel, carved over millions of years by groundwater bearing carbonic acid, is up to 200 feet wide and 80 feet high in some places. Two photos:

Travis Mackey



Hawkeye springtime

The Cedar River, swollen by spring rains, is flowing rapidly and cresting its banks in Cedar Falls, Iowa. Above the waters, the Iowa Northern Railway's Butler Turn passes on May 10, 2024, with a mix of power: GP38s Nos. 3807 and 3805, road slug No. 3953 and GP40-2LW No. 4001.



Automobiles passing planes on trains

Midwest spring flooding caused an unusual sight along Mason Street in Fort Collins, Colo., on April 1, 2019. BNSF Railway detoured several trains, including this one transporting Boeing 737 Max 8 fuselages from Wichita, Kan., to the Renton, Wash., assembly plant. Robert Jordan



The desert bloom

A westbound BNSF manifest, led by ES44C4-T4C No. 4236, is witness to the phenomenon of a desert bloom on April 13, 2023. Captured near Warren, Calif., on Union Pacific's Mojave Subdivision, the bloom occurs only when unusually high rainfall reaches seeds and bulbs in a dormant state, causing them to germinate and colorfully blossom. Alex Gillman

On the Mesabi

Bracketed by a pair of SD40-3s, a Northshore Mining ore train bends around a curve near Beaver Bay, Minn., on May 25, 2024. The 47-mile private line runs from Silver Bay, Minn., on Lake Superior, to the mine near Babbitt, on the Mesabi Range. Matt Coffin

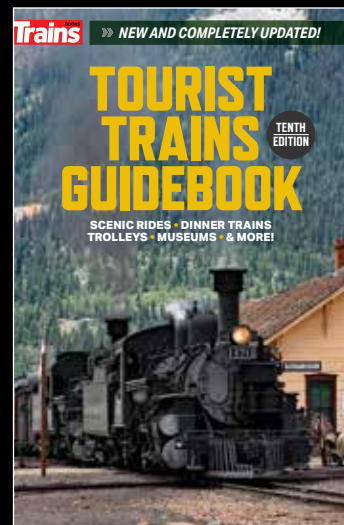


Last light

The sun is casting its final light for Aug. 23, 2014, on the mountains around Home Valley, Wash., as BNSF Railway C44-9W No. 5354 leads a Pasco to Tacoma, Wash., manifest freight west. Drew Mitchem



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