

#998
AND COUNTING

BRIGHTLINE LAUNCHES ORLANDO SERVICE p. 6

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Trains

THE magazine of railroading

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Trains Photo Contest



2019 Grand Prize, Ben Duncan —
Go West!

**Power is
the 2024 theme.**

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2022 Grand Prize, Adam Horgan —
Still soldiering on

2021 Grand Prize, Philip Weibler —
Gray area

2020 Grand Prize, David Dupuis —
In the city



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The history and role of military railroads, and the return of passenger trains to Virginia's Fort Eustis. **Kevin Gilliam**

The making of Polar Express 'magic' p. 18

It's the biggest event of the year for many tourist lines: Here's a behind-the-scenes look at this holiday classic. **Nastassia Putz**



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Enhancing Amtrak's value to rural America p. 26

As the only public transportation for many small towns, Amtrak plays an important role. **Bob Johnston**

Best of Trains: The loops at Old Fort p. 36

The countdown to *Trains* 1,000th issue continues with a memorable look at Norfolk Southern's impressive crossing of the Blue Ridge Mountains. **Jim Wrinn**



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Images of winter railroading contributed by *Trains* readers

ON THE COVER:

Running 30 minutes late, train No. 5, the westbound *California Zephyr*, stops in the tourist town of Glenwood Springs, Colo., on July 20, 2021. August VanCleave

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Celebrating the timeless allure of holiday trains

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From the Editor



Carl Swanson

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I recently fielded a call from a reader trying to decide between air travel or a rail trip from Minneapolis to Seattle on the *Empire Builder*.

He was leaning toward taking the train, but he was concerned about its on-time performance. It's scheduled into Seattle about noon and he wanted to catch an evening flight out of that city.

He could make his connection provided the *Builder* wasn't running excessively late. What did I think?

I said I find long-distance rail travel much less stressful if I have no same-day commitments at my destination.

Should I have been more encouraging? Read Bob Johnston's Amtrak's update starting on page 26 and decide for yourself.

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Not all diesels are created equal

SOME HAVE SLIGHTLY BETTER TRACK APPEAL THAN OTHERS. *Trains* correspondents Chris Guss and David Lustig have given us their opinions on diesel paint schemes throughout the decades, and now it's your turn. To chime in, go to [Trains.com](https://trains.com) and click on the "History" section. You'll see many of these types of articles or "listicles" pop up over the next several months (*Trains* editors included). This is not meant to be a debate or place for hateful commentary, but rather an ongoing dialogue between enthusiasts of various opinions. Can't we agree to disagree? — *Nastassia Putz*

Plus

Swiss Spectacular

TRAINS SENIOR EDITOR DAVID LASSEN has returned from quite an adventure — three weeks exploring railroads in Switzerland, for future *Trains* articles and as part of the "Majestic Switzerland" tour by our partners at Special Interest Tours. Under the "Tourist Profile" tab, you can read about his experiences in a series of "Swiss Spectacular" blog posts. Get ready to travel alongside him on cog rail-

ways, electrified narrow-gauge lines, panoramic passenger specials, and what he calls "the single finest train-riding experience" of his life. (You'll have to read the series to see which train earns that distinction.) It may just inspire you to plan your own trip to the Alps, and if so, you're in luck: We're offering the tour again in fall 2024. Details are available at specialinteresttours.com — *Trains staff*



Left: A rainbow on a gray day in the Alps. Right: A Furka Cogwheel Steam Railway train pauses at Furka Station on Sept. 17, 2023. Two photos, David Lassen

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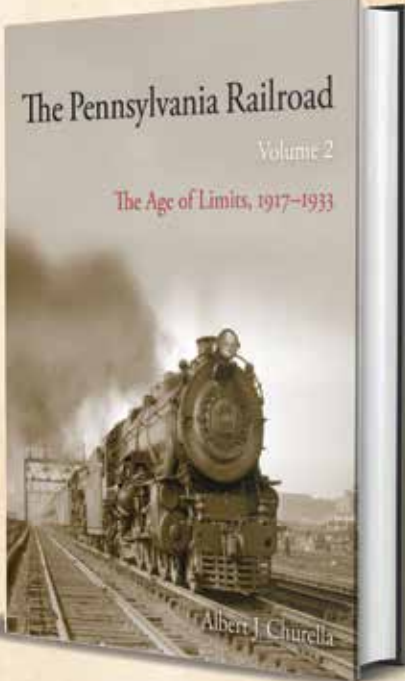
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Brightline launches Orlando service

Long-awaited extension begins with six daily round trips, then expands to 15

▲ A “BrightOrange” trainset is southbound as it crosses the St. Lucie River drawbridge at Stuart, Fla., on Sept. 24, two days after Brightline launched revenue service between Orlando and Miami. Two photos, Bob Johnston



Passengers crowd the Orlando station platform after the first Brightline train arrives from Miami on Sept. 22.

“YOU SEE HOW SILKY SMOOTH it is at 125 mph, right?”

Arriving at the Orlando International Airport station aboard the train inaugurating service from Miami on Sept. 22, Brightline Chief Mechanical Officer Tom Rutkowski was justifiably proud of what began when he and about 10 other original staffers relocated to Florida nine years ago. The long-awaited expansion of the nation's only regular privately operated passenger service was an emotional event for all, but especially its employees.

Following a summer of crew qualification and signal system certification, Brightline began revenue service with six round trips extending beyond the West Palm Beach-Miami corridor it has operated since 2018. The debut followed more than a week of Federal Railroad Administration-mandated simulated revenue operation in which the complete daily schedule was run without passengers.

The approximately 30-mile,

125-mph east-west portion was good to go at launch. But because signal technicians were still finishing work on the recently double-tracked, 129-mile Florida East Coast main line south of Cocoa, Fla., to West Palm Beach, planned 110-mph top speeds were restricted to 90 mph. The temporary slowdown resulted in a 7-minute increase in running time.

Finishing touches were also being applied at one of the route's choke points: the single-track bridge over the St. Lucie River at Stuart, Fla. A bridge status app for boaters was activated and the bridge's mechanical and electrical systems had been rehabilitated before the September start. The U.S. Coast Guard issued a “temporary deviation” regulation in which mandatory once-hourly 10- and 15-minute openings are paired with a promise by Brightline/FEC to keep the bridge open for marine traffic at least 50% of the time between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m.

That schedule had to be al-

tered after a barge hit bridge pilings on Sept. 30. The accident briefly prevented bridge openings for marine traffic until inspections could take place, but the Coast Guard later said significant repairs were needed and added new limitations on openings between Oct. 9 and Oct. 27.

That did not keep Brightline from expanding service to 15 daily round trips Oct. 9, offering near-hourly trains beginning at 4:38 a.m. from Orlando and 6:41 a.m. from Miami.

From January through June 2023, Brightline carried 956,120 passengers between Miami and West Palm Beach (up 78% from the same period in 2022) on revenue of \$30.2 million (up 129%). As Fortress Investment Group and Brightline founder Wes Edens told *Trains* at the Orlando inaugural: “Doubters wondered if people in South Florida would accept our model? You can check that box.”

See a full report on the start of Orlando service in the January 2024 *Trains*. — Bob Johnston

Report details problems behind launch of new Acelas

Amtrak Inspector General critical of manufacturing process that has delayed new equipment

AMTRAK'S OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL

has issued a report highly critical of a defect-laden manufacturing process that has kept Amtrak from accepting any of the next-generation Acela trainsets built so far by Alstom at its Hornell, N.Y., facility.

Twelve of the 28 planned trainsets and 22 of 28 café cars have been produced at Hornell. While the first of the trains have been testing on the Northeast Corridor since May 2020, it will be at least three years after the planned 2021 introduction before any are placed in service.

The 38-page report released Oct. 3 and available at the Office of Inspector General website [<https://amtrakoig.gov/audits>] contains redactions of monetary amounts “due to [their] sensitive nature,” so the true cost of the errors has not been revealed for what was called a \$2.45 billion project when announced in 2016.

Since *Trains* attended an “open house” at the Hornell plant in June 2019, Amtrak and Alstom have only offered cursory explanations why none of the trainsets have entered service. The Inspector General's report confirms numerous issues, including:

- Alstom trainset designs have not yet met federal safety requirements, and each of the trainsets produced has defects Alstom is required to fix or modify before Amtrak launches revenue service.
- The inability to produce a validated computer model of the equipment's performance will result in indeterminate further delays. Predictions of performance from the computer model must be submitted to the Federal Railroad Administration as part of the qualification testing plan before the FRA will allow the trainsets to enter additional operational testing.



New Acela trainsets sit at an Amtrak yard in Philadelphia in September 2023. A report from Amtrak's Office of Inspector General details production issues with the trains. Sol Tucker

• Alstom built more than half of all new Acela units without a finalized design. The report notes that unanticipated design changes uncovered during model validation will need to be retrofitted onto the already-produced equipment.

• The Inspector General found Alstom hasn't established a schedule for addressing defects. According to a press release summarizing the report, this “creates a secondary risk to the overall program schedule. Without more complete information, Amtrak cannot verify whether remediating the defects will impact the overall program schedule and revenue service launch.”

The failure of Alstom to produce and Amtrak to exercise oversight over new Acela trainset deployment comes more than three years after the company's Inspector General warned of “significant risk” to the project in a January 2020 report.

The problems also continue more than a decade of delayed or failed procurements that have plagued foreign manufacturers seeking to enter the U.S. intercity carbuilding market utilizing U.S. facilities. Those issues continue to negatively impact daily Amtrak equipment availability.

Spanish manufacturer CAF USA took

more than 10 years to complete an order for 125 Viewliner II diners, sleepers, baggage-dorms, and baggage cars; Talgo, also based in Spain, was unable to maintain its Pacific Northwest foothold after Wisconsin's Republican governor, Scott Walker, cancelled his predecessor's order for Series 8 trainsets.

Japan's Nippon Sharyo won a bilevel order for California and Midwest states with the low bid, then couldn't produce a prototype. That led to Siemens, a German company, landing a contract for single-level equipment to substitute for the bilevel cars; production issues with those cars required retrofitting that has slowed its deployment in the Midwest. At deadline, the California cars had yet to enter service, 11 years after the original Nippon Sharyo order and a year after Siemens and the state's Department of Transportation said Caltrans had accepted the first seven cars in that 49-car order.

However, Siemens has successfully built 10 trainsets for Florida's Brightline, has equipment entering service for VIA Rail Canada, and is in the process of constructing 82 Airo trainsets for Amtrak to replace nearly 50-year-old Amfleet equipment. — *Bob Johnston*



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FRA awards more than \$1.4 billion in CRISI grants

Funds go to 70 projects in 35 states; passenger projects receive biggest grants, but short lines see major benefits

CALIFORNIA'S HIGH-SPEED RAIL PROJECT, Amtrak's effort to relaunch service to the Gulf Coast, and passenger rail projects in Massachusetts and Virginia received the largest awards in September when the Federal Railroad Administration announced recipients of fiscal 2022 funds under the Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvement, or CRISI, grant program.

In all, 70 projects in 35 states received more than \$1.4 billion in funds under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law.

"The selected projects will tackle issues facing communities," FRA Administrator Amit Bose said in a press release, "and invest in a 21st century rail network yielding greater benefits — faster and more reliable deliveries of goods, safer communities, cleaner transportation, and more jobs and workforce development opportunities."

Bose noted that the CRISI program is the only federal grant program "prioritizing smaller, short line railroads," and indeed, the American Short Line and Regional Railroad Association pointed out that 47 of the projects selected were put forward by short lines or their partners.

"We are ecstatic to note that roughly half of the total available funding, or approximately \$720 million, was awarded to small-business freight rail projects," ASLRRA president Chuck Baker said in a statement. "... FRA's wise selections make clear that short line applicants and their partners provided fiercely competitive proposals that delivered on the USDOT's stated goals of providing infrastructure investment to improve safety, efficiency, economic vitality, and resiliency."

Many of those projects will address infrastructure upgrades. By the ASLRRA's count, 14 projects receiving a total of \$300 million will allow routes to be upgraded to handle industry-standard 286,000-pound railcars; another 20 involve bridge repairs or upgrades, including one in Tennessee



A BNSF train passes under a California High-Speed Rail Authority viaduct in Wasco, Calif., in November 2022. The high-speed project received a grant of more than \$200 million. Alex Gillman

that bundled together work on 42 bridges on 10 different railroads and received up to \$23.7 million in funding.

Seven grants address locomotive purchases or upgrades to address emission concerns. These include an award of up to \$2.06 million to California's Napa Valley Wine Train to replace seven older locomotives with three near-zero-emission units; up to \$15.7 million for Watco short lines in Kansas to convert eight units to battery power; up to \$11.6 million for three CSX battery-electric locomotives for the Port of Baltimore; up to \$12.6 million for New York's Livonia, Avon & Lakeville to rehabilitate six Tier 0 locomotives to Tier 3 emission standards; up to \$4.2 million for acquisition of two battery-electric locomotives for South Carolina's Palmetto Railways; up to \$4.1 million for Tacoma Rail to acquire two battery-electric switchers; and up to \$2.4 million for the Bighorn Divide & Wyoming Railroad to replace a Tier 0 locomotive with a Tier 4-compliant unit.

Purchase of three Tier 4 freight locomotives was also part of a \$31.9 million award to Sonoma-Marín Area Rail Transit; that grant also helps fund installation of positive train control on the SMART system between Windsor and Healdsburg, Calif., to expand SMART's freight capacity.

The biggest-ticket items, however, had passenger-rail implications. The largest awards were up to \$201.9 million for grade-separation projects in Shafter, Calif., for the

California High-Speed Rail project; \$178.4 million for track, signal, and grade crossing projects on the Amtrak Gulf Coast route between New Orleans and Mobile, Ala.; more than \$108 million improvements to Massachusetts' corridor between Springfield and Worcester, also known as the West-East Rail project; and up to \$100 million for Virginia's Franconia-Springfield Bypass Project, which will create a flyover bridge allowing Amtrak and Virginia Railway Express trains to avoid at-grade crossing of a CSX Transportation freight main line.

In all, Amtrak received almost \$200 million in CRISI funding, with projects for Northeast Corridor fencing, a job apprenticeship program, and grade-crossing improvements along the route of the *City of New Orleans* in Mississippi and Louisiana also selected. Amtrak CEO Stephen Gardner said the grants "will help launch new and expanded service, advance critical safety and reliability improvements, and provide opportunities for the workforce, marking another big milestone as we continue to advance a new era of passenger rail."

Another notable passenger project to receive funding is a third-track project between Sacramento and Roseville on California's Capitol Corridor, which received up to \$42.5 million.

California led in the number of programs to receive awards, with six. Florida and New York each had five programs receive funding. — David Lassen



A rainbow appears as the *Mark Twain Zephyr* trainset is re-trucked in Trego, Wis., — after decades without wheels — on Sept. 11, 2023. Steve Smedley

Mark Twain Zephyr trainset is re-trucked, receives new springs

After decades without wheelsets, former CB&Q streamliner takes major step toward return to operation

THE RAINBOW RETURNED on Sept. 11 during work to place the five-car, shovel-nose streamliner *Mark Twain Zephyr* back on its rebuilt truck sets at the Wisconsin Great Northern Railroad in Trego, Wis.

The moment recalled the day power car *Injun Joe* was trucked to Trego three years earlier, after the WGN saved the train from scrapping. Then, a double rainbow appeared over the train after a 2-day drive from Gateway Rail Services in Madison, Ill., where the train sat for years.

"This is an exciting day for rail preservation, as the long-awaited restoration of the *Mark Twain Zephyr* comes one mega-step closer to operation," says Greg Vreeland, WGN general manager.

Rebuilding the trucks had been slowed by supply-chain issues over the last 18 months, Vreeland says, with the delay particularly related to the custom-fabricated leaf springs being manufactured in Minnesota. Wisconsin Great Northern had stripped, cleaned, repaired, and repainted each truck set at a shop near Earl, Wis. The train's articulated design features car ends sharing a single truck set.

With the trucks finally complete, work to re-truck the trainset began early Sept. 11. Former Duluth, Missabe & Iron Range Railroad 250-ton wreck crane No. X-7 was on one end of the observation car *Tom Sawyer*, as the WGN's former Canadian Pacific 100-ton Kershaw crane was placed on the opposite end during the first of five lifts to place the historic train back on its trucks.

While awaiting that process, work continued on the train's interior and is 90% complete. Each car has its own new head-

end power connections, air conditioning and heating units, and new carpeting and seating installed. "We've even cooked pizza for the staff in the rebuilt kitchen area of the *Huckleberry Finn*," Vreeland says.

The *Mark Twain Zephyr*, built in 1935, is one of nine stainless steel passenger trains constructed by the Budd Co. for the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy, and operated until 1958. Since 1959, the equipment passed through several owners who had dreams of restoring it to operation, with Wisconsin Great Northern taking ownership in June 2020. The train had been off its trucks and in storage for at least three decades.

"I was volunteering with Greg at the Lake Superior Railroad Museum in Duluth, when he had dreams of owning his own short line," says Dave Schauer, noted Missabe Road photographer and book author. "He should be very proud to see his dreams come to fruition 42 years later. And his son Alexander, 13, is following in his footsteps."

The new power truck for the shovel-nose streamliner came from one of four Wisconsin Great Northern Railroad EMD SW600 locomotives. Some structural work was done on the frame of the *Injun Joe* to accommodate the larger truck.

The restoration's final stage involves moving an EMD six-cylinder 567 prime mover into the engine room, along with a generator and air compressor. The cab will also receive a control stand from former American Can SW600 No. 1280, which was painted in a Chicago & North Western Railway scheme for the Chicago & North Western Historical Society mini-meet held in Trego during 2019. — Steve Smedley

NEWS BRIEFS

Connecticut to buy six dual-mode locomotives from Siemens



The **CONNECTICUT DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION** ordered six dual-mode locomotives from **SIEMENS MOBILITY** for use on **METRO-NORTH RAILROAD** lines, joining an earlier Metro-North order from 2020 for 27 of the diesel/third-rail electric units. In all, contracts include options for up to 171 of the Charger variants for Metro-North, Connecticut, the Long Island Rail Road, and the state of New York. The units, to be delivered through 2027, will feature 4,200 hp and a top speed of 110 mph in diesel mode, with an 80-mph top speed while running on third-rail power. The first units of the original order are expected to be delivered in 2025. Siemens

PROGRESS RAIL filed a federal antitrust lawsuit against **WABTEC** in September, arguing that the rival locomotive manufacturer engaged in anticompetitive behavior and should have to divest itself of its acquisition of the former **GE TRANSPORTATION**. Progress says Wabtec — the sole supplier of key locomotive parts before acquiring the locomotive building business — is using "monopoly power" to exclude competition. Wabtec called the complaint an "unsupported attack" on the merger, which it said has benefited the entire rail industry, and plans to aggressively defend itself in court.

The **SURFACE TRANSPORTATION BOARD** approved **NORFOLK SOUTHERN's** proposed \$1.62 billion acquisition of the **CINCINNATI SOUTHERN RAILWAY**, owned by the city of Cincinnati but leased by the NS or its predecessors since 1881. But final approval was still needed by Cincinnati voters in a Nov. 7 election, and the ballot issue was being contested. While current Mayor Aftab Pureval and five of his predecessors support the deal, an opposition group contended the city should retain the railroad and increase NS' lease payments.

Pin your high-speed hopes on Brightline West



Bill Stephens

bybillstephens@gmail.com

Analysis: Trains.com

Even with Amtrak help, the Texas Central faces odds as big as the Lone Star state



Until Texas Central became a zombie company, its plan to link Dallas and Houston with a fleet of Japanese bullet trains was the country's best shot at finally getting true high-speed passenger rail.

Texas Central's concept — operate proven 205-mph Shinkansen trains on a dedicated right-of-way with no grade crossings — would have been the first world-class passenger operation in North America.

You had to cheer when Texas Central overcame the NIMBYs and nearly every roadblock put in its way. But when funding collapsed during the pandemic, so too did dreams that Texas Central would be the star of the high-speed show.

Now Amtrak has shown up to revive Texas Central's plans. On the one hand, it's encouraging someone is willing to pick up the pieces. On the other, "Amtrak" and "world class" don't go together.

I love Amtrak. But the perennially beleaguered railroad has two specialties: Operating a skeleton network on a shoestring budget and producing pretty maps of potential new passenger routes. What it has never done in its 52 years is build a railroad from scratch or develop a true high-speed rail line.

Thanks to the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, Amtrak finally has a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Amtrak has proposals to re-equip Northeast Corridor, regional, and long distance trains; launch new service as part of its ambitious ConnectUS plan; and begin much-needed major tunnel projects on the Northeast Corridor. You have to wonder where Texas Central would rank on the

priority list — and, if Amtrak has too much on its plate.

Which brings us to Brightline. The privately run passenger railroad has had a singular focus on linking Miami and Orlando via a combination of the Florida East Coast Railway and a brand new 35-mile stretch of railroad between Cocoa and the Orlando International Airport. The new trackage carried its first revenue passengers in September. Next up: Expansion to Tampa.

Brightline, which tops out at 125 mph between Cocoa and Orlando, never was intended to be true high-speed rail. But as a passenger operation sharing most of its route with freight traffic, it's impressive. And it's impossible to overstate the significance of what Brightline has accomplished by building a new passenger railroad.

Which brings us to Brightline West, the \$10 billion plan to connect the Los Angeles Basin and Las Vegas by putting a railroad down the median of traffic-clogged Interstate 15. The 218-mile electric railroad, with top speeds of 186 mph, would be world class.

Plans call for the trains to whisk passengers between Vegas and Rancho Cucamonga, Calif., in 2 hours and 10 minutes, which is twice as fast as driving. At Rancho Cucamonga passengers would be able to connect to existing Metrolink service.

Like Texas Central, Brightline West aims to build a dedicated right of way in a market that has the right population density, travel patterns, and length of haul for high-speed rail.

Unlike Texas Central and Amtrak, Brightline has credibility that comes from successfully building a new railroad. Plus, Brightline West seems to have political support in California and Nevada, and has smartly chosen a median-strip route that should limit local opposition.

Assuming Brightline West can secure funding, you can bet that before the end of the decade you'll be able to sit in a coach seat and see the Mojave Desert blur by at 186 mph. That's exciting, as anyone who has ridden a high-speed train in Europe can attest.

There's talk of linking Brightline West with the California high-speed rail project via a new High Desert Corridor between Victor Valley and Palmdale. The state-run project is way behind schedule and massively over budget. The latest plan calls for it to be operational between Merced and Bakersfield between 2030 and 2033. It's fair to ask: Will the privately run Brightline West carry its millionth passenger before the troubled California high-speed rail project even turns a wheel?

Brightline West hopes to break ground this year. In the process, they may well be creating the blueprint for how to bring high-speed rail to the United States.

Step aside, Texas Central. Brightline West is the project to watch. **I**



Brightline West envisions an electric railroad with 186-mph service between the Los Angeles Basin and Las Vegas. Brightline

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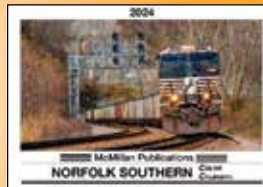
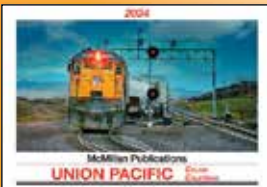
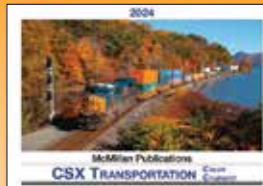
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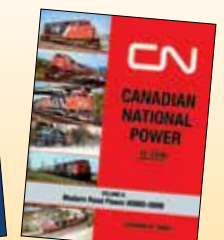
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Beyond Operation

The history and role of military railroads, and the return of passenger trains to Virginia's Fort Eustis

By Kevin Gilliam



Sgt. Santa



Powered by a U.S. Army GP10, Operation Sgt. Santa hosted 4,000 military personnel and their families over a December weekend in 2021 at Virginia's Joint Base Langley-Eustis. Kevin Gilliam

ABOVE: Sgt. Santa himself, his red suit complete with Staff Sergeant rank insignia and national flag patch, checks in with the younger guests aboard the special. U.S. Army, Staff Sgt. George Prince





Members of the Military Railroad Society pose with an observation car at Fort Eustis, Va., the home of the U.S. Army's railroad training program. Kevin Gilliam

Santa Claus and his elves were walking down the aisles of a passenger train operating on the rails at the military base in Fort Eustis, Va. It was a sight few people could have imagined just a few years earlier.

In total, 4,000 military personnel and their families rode the trains over that December weekend in 2021. The event, dubbed "Operation Sgt. Santa," was a proof of concept to show the Norfolk and Virginia Beach area could support a passenger operation on Joint Base Langley-Eustis. It was the culmination of months of planning to return passenger rail to Fort Eustis for the first time since 1972.

Largely invisible to the outside world, military railroads flourish at bases throughout the United States. Military trains loaded at Fort Eustis perform an array of missions. In addition to being a staging ground, the Fort Eustis railroad is the home of the U.S. Army's railroad training program where one can learn to be a brakeman, conductor, or engineer for work on military railroads at various U.S. bases.

This is a side of railroading that goes mostly unnoticed, but it's big business. On the Army side alone, Staff Sgt. Brett Goertemoeller is responsible for 32 military railroads and 350 staff, comprised of engineers,

conductors, and brakemen.

Railroad operations at the 32 bases vary widely. Some consist of a few miles of track; others have hundreds of miles. The military uses the railroad for the same advantages it offers other shippers: When you have to move lots of materials, railroads move more, faster, and with fewer people than trucks. The major differences compared to a regular railroad is that military railroads are more self-contained, and the train crews wear uniforms.

How it began

The history of military railroads dates to the mid-1860s and the Civil War.

The railroads were falling apart under the strain of the conflict, and were seen as targets to cut the enemy's supply lines. The famous Great Locomotive Chase in Georgia is the best known of these sabotage attempts. The chase involved a group of Union soldiers and volunteers. They infiltrated Confederate territory with the intent of stealing a train north of Atlanta, leaving a trail of destruction behind them, cutting the Atlanta-to-Chattanooga supply lines, and crippling the Confederacy. The plan might have worked. In reality, weather forced the group led by James J. Andrews to postpone its raid by one day,

with no way to pass the word along. Meanwhile, Union Maj. Gen. Ormsby Mitchel moved on Chattanooga as planned.

On the day of the raid, with Union forces rapidly approaching, the Confederate Army needed to move supplies, including ammunition, safely away from Chattanooga. With no way of knowing what was transpiring on the railroad line south towards Atlanta, the Confederates dispatched a parade of trains directly in the path of the raiders.

Between trains fleeing Chattanooga, and one heroic conductor on the Western & Atlantic Railroad, William Fuller — who pursued the raiders and the stolen train on foot, by handcar, and with two locomotives — the Andrews Raid failed. Most of the raiders were caught. Some were executed, while others were sentenced to prison terms. Eventually, the raiders were given the Congressional Medal of Honor for their failed attempt.

In the big picture, the war led the U.S. government to institute the Railway Act. This put the railroads under government control, with trained Army personnel working with the railroads to help coordinate efforts and smooth operations. The military's involvement had a twofold purpose. It helped protect the railroad infrastructure from sabotage, and also handled dispatching so that high-priority trains were able to move across the system without delay. The Civil War was the U.S. Army's entrance into the railroad arena.

After the war, the government returned control to the railroads, but the biggest lesson learned during the period of military control was the need for easy interchange between the railroads.

There were multiple gauges of railroads with no standardization. This led to the "great gauge change" in 1886, where 11,500 miles of railroad were changed to a standard gauge of 4 feet, 9 inches over the course of about 48 hours. (Gradually, this would be adjusted to today's standard gauge of 4 feet, 8½ inches.) With the use of standard gauge, supplies could be moved from one railroad to another without having to transfer bulk shipments en route. Without gauge standardization, it would have been far more difficult to meet the challenges that the early 1900s would bring.



World Wars I and II

World War I brought a second takeover of U.S. railroads by the government in December 1917, as the sudden traffic surge overwhelmed railroads' capabilities. The United States Railroad Administration was created to oversee the nationalized system, which would remain under USRA control until 1920.



Sgt. Santa visits with passengers aboard a December 2022 run. Riders included members of the armed forces and their families. U.S. Army, Staff Sgt. George Prince

The military noticed each railroad seemed to have its own standards for building steam locomotives. The power capabilities of what should be similar locomotives varied greatly, which caused havoc in the proper allocation of motive power. The USRA addressed this through standardized designs for a dozen classes of steam locomotives, ranging from 0-6-0 switchers to 2-8-8-2s. These 'USRA Standards' were considered well-built and all-around good engines by railway workers.

To help the war effort, the U.S. government also sent equipment and soldiers overseas to run foreign railroads. The Army then built the largest-ever 2-foot gauge railroad on the Western Front, funneling needed supplies to the advancing troops. With the advent of trench warfare, the railroads served a vital role behind the scenes.

After the war, much of that infrastructure was shipped back to America, and 2-foot gauge railroads were constructed on military bases in the U.S. and crewed by Army soldiers. With these active-duty railroads on the home front, some soldiers were retained for base railroad operations, and the Army set up its own railroad personnel training program to better prepare for the future.

In the meantime, storm clouds darkened over Europe as the armistice pacts began to fail. Soon enough, World War II was on the horizon. The military answered the call, but this time, there would be no government control of American railroads. In Louisiana, Camp Claiborne and Camp Polk — connected by a 48-mile railroad — became the training centers for all of the railway battalions going to the Pacific or European theater.

Many railroads sponsored their own battalions, where workers would all enlist in the same unit. The Pennsylvania Railroad set up the 724th battalion in 1943, consisting of men who worked for the Pennsy. They went as a group to Europe to serve their country.

Railroads were a dangerous arena to serve in during wartime, and casualties were high for the railway battalions. The railroads were viewed as easy targets. Sabotage was frequent, and railyards were often strafed and bombed in efforts to cripple infrastructure and equipment.

When the war was over, the 724th battalion was not disbanded. Instead, the unit was reassigned to Fort Eustis on the tidewater Virginia peninsula to operate the

base's military railroad.

The Korean War (1950-53) was the last time the Army shipped railroaders and equipment overseas to a combat theater. In Korea, the Military Railway Service battalions helped move medical aid, munitions, and refugees escaping for a better life.

Post-Korea operations

After the war, the railway training function at Camp Claiborne was shut down, and operations moved to Fort Eustis.

The height of operations came in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In addition to military missions, this period saw many special trains for civilians, including some for Boy Scouts, schoolkids, and even rail enthusiasts. As part of the 1966 National Railway Historical Society annual convention in Richmond, Va., the Army fired up three steam engines for a tripleheader and performed photo runbys on the Fort Eustis loop. During the holidays, the base operated annual "Operation Sgt. Santa" Christmas trains.

Behind the scenes, the focus was shifting away from railroads. In the Vietnam War, the railway battalions were used only in an advisory role. Vietnam was a different

Railroads were a dangerous arena to serve in during war-time, and casualties were high



For the riders aboard the Sgt. Santa special, no train journey would be complete without a uniformed conductor punching tickets. U.S. Army, Staff Sgt. George Prince

kind of war, requiring a new response. Vietnam's existing railroads didn't line up well for use as supply lines. The conflict served as a turning point in the Army's view of railroads. To this point, the Army had continued steam operations on the Fort Eustis base, so personnel working in foreign countries would be properly trained for lines that were, in many parts of the world, still steam-powered.

The last active-duty Army railroad regiment, the 714th at Fort Eustis, stood down in 1972, and the steam engines fell silent. Eventually, the passenger equipment at Fort Eustis was scrapped, and the engines sold into preservation. A small detachment remained at the fort to staff the base railroad. Eventually, soldiers operating the trains gave way to civilian contractors.

Downgrades and abandonments of the railroad facilities followed into the 1970s and '80s, as the military turned to trucks to move equipment. By 1990, the military almost entirely curtailed railroad operations.

Then tensions in the Persian Gulf flared up, requiring a military response.

Military railroad revival

Unlike the guerrilla tactics of Vietnam where the railroads had a minimal role, the Gulf War saw a more traditional need to move large quantities of cargo

to points of embarkation. The military took a second look at the rail division to establish how and where rail might be used efficiently within the grand scheme of military operations as a Power Projection Platform.

The Army reestablished a training program for railway personnel at Fort Eustis and never looked back. These days, a reserve unit is in charge of all railroad functions for the Army — the 757th Expeditionary Railway Center.

Fast forward many years, and informal discussions within the 757th group came up on whether it was possible to bring passenger rail service back to Fort Eustis for the military families. Eventually, the non-profit Military Railroad Society was formed, and the approval came for a "proof of concept" run at Fort Eustis in December 2021. The base still had a several-mile-long loop of track, albeit one considerably shorter than in the 1960s. One challenge the group faced was the need to bring in privately owned passenger equipment to make up the special trains. Private cars were secured, with CSX Transportation helping by waiving positioning fees and moving the cars for free.

With the success of that trial run, an expanded Operation Sgt. Santa returned in 2022. This time, two weekends of trips

With the success of the trial run, an expanded Operation Sgt. Santa returned in 2022



were operated, with a total of 24 trips running the Fort Eustis Loop carrying crowds of happy riders. Following that, a sold-out Valentine's Day Dinner Train operated on the base. The Military Railroad Society also hosted rides for school kids and charity organizations. Passenger rail has returned to Fort Eustis.

Military railroaders

There are two ways to be involved with the Army as a military railroader. The first is to hire on as a Department of Defense civilian or contractor working on one of the bases with railroad operations. Once there, you can come to the training school at Fort Eustis, and take the standard railroad operations course, which will certify you as a brakeman/conductor. After some time, you can complete the engineer training course. The courses are basically identical to any other railroad training program, with the addition of a few specialized courses in handling heavy military equipment.

The second is to enlist in the 757th Expeditionary Railway Center. This is a reserve unit that drills one weekend a month and two weeks each year at Fort Eustis. The job will train you to become a combat railway operations advisor.



An informal night photo shoot was conducted the night before the Operation Sgt. Santa trains operated. U.S. Army, Staff Sgt. George Prince



After a successful first year, Operation Sgt. Santa returned with expanded operations in 2022. Two weekends of trips were operated using privately owned passenger cars, with a total of 24 trips running the Fort Eustis Loop. U.S. Army, Staff Sgt. George Prince

Following the standard basic training for every soldier, you will come to Fort Eustis for Advanced Individual Training, which is the uniformed soldier's version of the standard railway training course. This program covers the basic railroad training curriculum you would find at any railroad, with some extra instruction address-

ing matters such as working with foreign railroads, and training for the advisory role you will fulfill with the Army as a go-between for Americans and foreign national railroads.

Either way, you will be working with the military railroads and be serving your country at the same time.

Big plans

What's next for the Military Railroad Society? One of its big projects is bringing steam back to Fort Eustis in the form of No. 5002 a 0-6-0T locomotive built by H.K. Porter for the U.S. Army in 1942. The restoration of 5002 would return steam to the base for the first time since 1972.

Another project is the Military Railroad Library. At Fort Eustis, the society is putting together documents and artifacts on military rail history. So far, over 30,000 documents have been collected.

Also on site is the U.S. Army Transportation Museum, which includes more than 7,000 artifacts, ranging from vehicles to helicopters to two steam locomotives. The general public is allowed access by inquiring at the guard house at the base entrance. If you're visiting, don't be surprised if you see something moving. Joint Base Langley-Eustis is an active military base, and access to some areas is restricted.

The base railroad has a long, rich history, and still serves a vital role. And, yes, Virginia, there is an Operation Sgt. Santa. **I**



The Making of 'Magic'

A backstage pass to the Polar Express

by Nastassia Putz

Spreading holiday joy, the National Railroad Museum in Green Bay, Wis., has hosted the *Polar Express Train Ride* since 2006. Courtesy of the National Railroad Museum



All aboard!

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Wearing matching pajamas and big, bright smiles, more than 12,000 people shuffle through the door to see the

National Railroad Museum's *Polar Express* (PEX) Train Ride in Green Bay, Wis., each holiday season.

One show accommodates roughly 300 people due to the capacity of the museum's Lenfestey Center. Tickets for the event — which go on sale in July — have sold out within 24 hours previous years.

In 2023, tickets sold out within just 3½ hours. This is a record for the museum, which has hosted PEX since 2006. Unfortunately, when tickets sell out this fast, there are unhappy folks, as not all who want tickets are able to get them. Dozens of comments — both happy and angry — flooded the museum's Facebook page on selling day.

Justin Lambrecht, the museum's director of education, acknowledges not everyone may be pleased with the results of July 25. "It's par for the course. Thousands of people were still able to obtain tickets while roughly five times as many were trying to order them at the same time, on the same site," says Lambrecht. Most people that want tickets have become accustomed to penciling in the date on their calendars, setting timers, and doing whatever it takes to get tickets.

"We just saw 12,000 tickets go out the door in three and a half hours for a family-



Many *Polar Express Train Ride* hosts rely on volunteers and seasonal employees to present the holiday program. Doug Grant, a National Railroad Museum volunteer, conducts the train, spreading plenty of holiday cheer. Four photos, Courtesy of the National Railroad Museum

related movie and book," Lambrecht says. "You know, for something like that, getting into the holiday season. ... I've never heard of that at any other place. It's amazing, and there's such a demand for it." He recalls that at *Polar*'s inception in 2006, the NRM was selling 850 tickets — total!

Confident with the current sales process, Lambrecht says, "It's just patience, and it's supply and demand." For the last couple of years, the museum has used a ticketing agency called Ticket Star, which sells tickets for leading venues, sports teams, and events in Northeast Wisconsin and be-

yond. With only a limited quantity available for the 40 shows (four weekends, 10 shows each), the process is going to involve a bit of preparation by the purchaser, as well as some luck.

Pre-show jitters in a nutshell

Preparation is key for the *Polar Express* shows, too — and a 12-person committee helps. This is the second year for the *Polar Express* committee, comprised of two-thirds staff and one-third volunteers. Lambrecht says that an event that is only four weekends still takes practically the whole



Are there any *Polar Express* passengers in need of refreshment? Albeit in slightly different ways, a hot chocolate dance and the sipping of that warm, rich beverage is part of the program at each *Polar Express Train Ride* site. Annually, PEX sites make hundreds of gallons of hot chocolate.

year to produce, with people working on *Polar* from March to December. Here is a quick glance at their schedule:

- March through June: Ordering merchandise and consumables. In April, the *Polar Express* committee devises a master plan and begins meeting every other month until August.

- July: Tickets go on sale and sell out!

- September through November:

Meetings become monthly; the museum is casting parts, holding rehearsals, setting up decorations, sending out contracts, and much more.

- November/December: The PEX is live and the committee meets weekly.

"The weekends get long, but it's a lot of fun," says Lambrecht. It's definitely something he and many others are proud to be a part of each year. Volunteer Doug Grant, who is the head PEX conductor and supervises the other conductors, has been "an integral part of this chaos," as he likes to say, since 2007.

One of the main reasons he returns each year is for the families. "Every year there are certain families that hunt you down," says Grant. "All they want is a picture of their kid(s) with you," he continues, "... something they've been doing for the past 14 years." The photo becomes a part of their holiday tradition, and as a result, this conductor is proudly displayed on household mantles throughout the U.S.

Besides being the director of education, Lambrecht plays a PEX character known as the Hero Boy, and is occasionally recognized in public as a result.

"On Super Bowl Sunday back in February, I went down to one of the local pizza joints, and I was picking up a pizza before the game ... the guy behind the counter says, 'Hey, are you that guy that reads the story for the *Polar Express*?'"

The question then becomes, "That all depends. Did you like it?" says Lambrecht.

The show must go on

This popular performance is based on the classic children's book *The Polar Express* by Chris Van Allsburg (1985). Rail Events Inc., based in Colorado, holds *The Polar Express* licensing through Warner Bros. It contracts the event to dozens of tourist railroad and museum sites throughout the U.S., Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia. The contract requires a certain level of quality per show. However, each venue presents the program in a slightly different fashion based on its accommodations.

Lambrecht confirms that the NRM enhances the show from year to year by tweaking things as needed. "We do update things periodically," he says. "But of course, you don't want to get away from the main part of the story ... that stays the same."



While all *Polar Express Train Ride* events follow the same storyline, each site offers a different presentation based on available facilities. For the National Railroad Museum, the show starts in the main exhibit hall with passengers seated among the trains and holiday trees.



National Railroad Museum's PEX fun facts:

- Dancers and volunteers hand out TONS of hot chocolate and cookies. The NRM goes through 1,500 pounds of hot chocolate mix (that's 3/4 of a ton) per PEX season and about 16,800 cookies, or 1,400 dozen, which are all baked locally.
- Cast members rehearse for 30 to 40 hours prior to the season.
- There are four to six conductors, four stewards, two Hobos, four Lost Ticket Girls, two Santas, one Hero Boy, and plenty of support staff and volunteers moving about.
- The three top PEX gift shop purchases are pocket watches, robes, and conductor hats.
- The 'caribou on the track' bit was not part of the original performance. It was a "happy accident" that is now a regular part of the show. A few years ago, an engine died during a run, so Conductor Doug Grant had to improvise. Patrons were told the unscheduled stop was due to *caribou on the tracks* and to help yodel them off.
- The NRM loop is 1.5 miles long. For PEX, the train makes three laps — 4.5 miles — in approximately 35 minutes. The whole show is 90 minutes long.

The bottom line for most people buying tickets is that they know what to expect, and for them the experience never gets old. They know the story and its premise of taking children on a magical journey to the “North Pole” via a train ride where they get to meet Santa Claus.

But, what ticket holders may not realize — and is quite astonishing about this reenactment — is it’s highly orchestrated to create a “magical” event that you become an important part of.

The “behind the scenes” is really “out in

the open,” according to Benjamin Wideman, former director of marketing and communications for the museum.

It’s also performed by mostly volunteers. Each show has roughly 15 staff members and approximately 80 volunteers filling a variety of roles. Once all these people are in place, the show begins — *like magic*. Doors swing open, children pour in, adults shuffle by, and the cups of hot cocoa begin to overflow.

Get ready ... because here comes Santa!



‘Twas the night ... of the PEX performance

As you enter the museum with your golden ticket in hand, you’ll soon be aboard a real train set up to resemble the one in the 2004 *Polar*

Express motion picture starring Tom Hanks.

Picture-taking, storytelling, and clever acting fill this 90-minute experience. For the first half hour, guests are welcome to explore the museum’s main exhibit center, walk through the gift shop, and take pictures with cast members before settling into their seats.

Once seated, the show begins with a whimsical rendition of the Hot Chocolate Dance performed by the dance troupe from Green Bay’s NEW Fusion Dance and Performing Arts. Dressed in festive robes or chef’s garb, the dancers sit quietly off to one side, in plain sight of guests, yet blend seamlessly into the holiday decor. Some are holding props — a silver tray with a “mug of hot chocolate” attached — while waiting anxiously to be cued by the music and lights to begin their routine and engage with the audience. The theatrical lighting and audio are controlled by museum volunteers and staff surrounded by computers like those in any theater setting.

And while all these moving parts and controls are in the same room as the 300 passengers for each ride, they are hardly noticed for the magical show going on in front of the crowd. Meanwhile, volunteers in the nearby kitchen — just behind the seating area — are preparing carts filled with cups of hot chocolate and cookies, one for each guest. The treats roll out as the Hot Chocolate Dance concludes.

After the dance, images from the original Van Allsburg book begin to play on an oversized movie screen above the audience. There is a Pullman sleeping car behind the screen that’s lit up and made to look like it’s moving during the beginning of the story. The conductor alights from the train — as in the story — and calls, “All Aboard!” A snow machine, attached to the lighting rig above, creates a delightful indoor snowstorm, which complements the book’s wintery setting. During the entire performance, parents are happily struggling to get their excited children to sit quietly and listen to the story. There is, however, no restraining their holiday spirit.

Meanwhile, the Hero Boy — the main PEX character — is reading the story in dramatic form, while the book’s images play out on the screen above him.

Envision the train car as a stage

As the reading ends, patrons are invited outside to board one of the full-size vintage passenger cars that make up the museum’s *Polar Express* train. Which car a passenger boards is determined by which of the four



Put it on your Christmas list

ON THE TWELFTH DAY OF CHRISTMAS, my true love gave to me ... three *Polar Express* tickets, please? Justin Lambrecht and Doug Grant from NRM suggest the following 12 tips for increasing your chances of getting tickets to this popular holiday event.

No. 1: Have patience!

No. 2: Put the ticket on-sale date for your railroad on your calendar and set a timer.

For the NRM, tickets go on sale promptly at 10 a.m. on July 27, 2024.

No. 3: Research the venue ahead of time to see seating charts.

No. 4: Go for Sunday night tickets — they are easier to get.

No. 5: Depending on venue, an alternative to online ticket sales or telephone orders is going to the box office (if applicable). *In person sometimes works better than online.*

No. 6: The more people that are trying to order tickets at once, the slower the system will operate. Don’t have people ordering tickets for you at the same time.

No. 7: Watch out for fake tickets if searching through a third-party vendor.

Your host site has no control over such tickets.

No. 8: Prior to the day of your event, review the FAQs for your venue.

No. 9: Let the railroad know about any special needs prior to show.

No. 10: Day of show: Don’t be late! The *Polar Express* starts on time.

No. 11: Consider getting your pictures taken with the cast and crew.

“As the largest pajama party in town ...,” Grant says to find him for a photo.

No. 12: Parking can be challenging. Drive safely, arrive on time, and be patient.



The PEX is an immersive experience, placing you “on stage” with the characters. Conductors engage with you on this magical journey. Two photos, Courtesy of the National Railroad Museum

ticket levels they purchased. Each train car is named according to the story and has its own conductor to help seat passengers.

The train is pulled by a Canadian National EMD SW1500 diesel locomotive donated to the museum by the railroad in 2019. No. 1563 was built for Kentucky & Indiana Terminal in 1971, and later was part of Wisconsin Central's fleet.

The PEX consist looks like this:

- *Josephine*, named by the museum to honor the wife of a founding member, is a 1920s Reading commuter coach. Its PEX name is *Glacier Gulch*.
- Next, by its PEX name, is the *Northern Lights*. The car is one of the first bilevel gallery commuter coaches built in 1956 for the Chicago & North Western's Chicago-area service.
- *Dothan*, a 36-seat dining car, running as the *Arctic Circle* during the Polar Express season, was built in 1923 for the Atlantic Coast Line.
- Carrying the holiday markers is *Silver*

Spirit, a Chicago, Burlington & Quincy observation-lounge built in 1939. Its PEX name is *Spirit of the Season*. Half of the car is a 24-seat dinette, and the other half is round-end observation lounge with stuffed armchair seating.

With tummies full of sugary goodies, hands juggling hats and mittens, excited families board their specific car. The conductor for each car bellows “All Aboard,” while wide-eyed children make their way onto the train that will transport them to the “North Pole.” This is where the magic really happens!

Squeezing through tight train corridors and going in and out of heavy metal doors to move from one car to the next, museum staff and volunteers swiftly move around to create the perfect storybook experience for patrons during the train ride. Depending on the train car, Grant says that you may have two separate stages/shows going on at once since there

are two sides. If shorthanded, a conductor may need to bounce back and forth. If it's an entirely open car, then it's one stage/show.

It's intimidating to watch, but also amazing. The rhythmic flow they must conduct, not only with their scripted lines, but the way they dance around each other makes one realize there is a magical show

both on stage and behind the scenes.

Children and parents fidget in their seats while the story unfolds before their eyes.

As one car is being greeted by the conductor and steward punching tickets, so is the next car

and the next one after that. Then, when Santa makes a surprise entrance from the kitchen area of the train handing out his first bell of the night, all becomes calm. Along with Santa's appearances in the train, guests can see many things going on outside like the lights that make up the Northern Lights or aurora borealis show on the car's ceiling.

“EVERY YEAR THERE ARE CERTAIN FAMILIES THAT HUNT YOU DOWN ... ALL THEY WANT IS A PICTURE OF THEIR KID(S) WITH YOU ... SOMETHING THEY'VE BEEN DOING FOR THE PAST 14 YEARS.” — DOUG GRANT



The *Ultimate Polar Express* train ride is hosted in a private 1950s-era train car. It's great for families. Two photos, Xanterra Travel collection

A grand operation

THE DESTINATION YOU CHOOSE

will shape your experience. The Grand Canyon Railway & Hotel has offered the *Polar Express* event annually since 2001. They have entertained millions of guests on a 90-minute, 40-mile round trip that departs the depot in Williams, Ariz.

According to VIP Sales & Community Relations Manager Sam Langner, this venue has seen growth every year, with last year bringing 100,000 passengers.

"Millions of guests have enjoyed this experience since its inception," says Langner. "... It has become something of a generational experience."

Like other venues, this popular event sells out months in advance. Ticket prices range from \$39 to \$97 depending on the experience and date of departure.

GCR&H's *Polar Express* consist is made up of:

- 13 1920s-era Harriman-style Pullman cars, each with a seating capacity of 90.
- Two ADA Budd cars, each with a seating capacity of 60.
- All are painted in a deep blue

and gold or *Polar Express* color scheme to match the book.

- The consist is pulled by a 1970s diesel electric F40 locomotive.
- The 13 Pullman cars previously served on the San Jose to San Francisco commuter run.
- The two Budd cars started out on the Boston & Maine Railroad and were called "Highliners."
- The F40 locomotives were acquired in 2003 from Amtrak.

GCR&H OFFERS TWO DIFFERENT

PEX experiences. The traditional *Polar Express* experience caters to 1,200 people each run. It takes place aboard the train and on the property in Williams where guests experience the following:

- The Chef and Conductor sing songs with guests.
 - Hot chocolate and cookies are dispersed to all.
 - Santa boards at the "North Pole" to meet the families.
 - There is a light show and photos with Mrs. Claus at the depot.
 - Holiday-themed goodies can be purchased at the gift shop.
- The *Ultimate Polar Express* package is a bit different. It is a pri-

vate, customizable version of the traditional *Polar Express*, and is designed for families or company groups. It takes place aboard a 1950s-era train car where guests are catered to by the Chef and Conductor.

Guests may add custom food, drinks, photographers, and alcoholic beverages to their journey.

Extra Fun facts:

- Each *Polar Express* car contains two Chefs.
- There are two Conductors that

roam the consist, along with two supervisors, and the locomotive team (engineer and fireman). Approximately 40 staff members are aboard the train.

■ The "North Pole" is situated approximately 20 miles north of Williams. It's powered by onsite generators.

■ Hundreds of gallons of hot chocolate are used up each holiday season.

■ GCR&H is the country's largest PEX operation. For more information, visit thetrain.com. —NP



Kiddos aboard the *Polar Express* get to meet Santa, and receive a keepsake to bring home afterwards!



Depending on where you ride the *Polar Express*, the “North Pole” may be a few thousand feet down the tracks or several miles up the line. The common denominator is holiday spirit and priceless memories created for children of all ages — the *Polar Express* is magical. Courtesy of the National Railroad Museum

This part of the ride creates a magical awe moment of “now you see it, now you don’t” for already enamored children. Outside references are made to polar bears, wolves, and ‘caribou on the track’. Patrons are also encouraged to participate in helping a girl find her lost ticket — a popular and suspenseful scene from the movie.

It takes a whole village...

“About 80% of our cast and crew are volunteers. ... And it takes a good 75 to 80 people a night to put this whole thing together,” Lambrecht says. These folks are

pushed to the max each year. Even though they are thrilled to be a part of the holiday magic year after year, they have their own families and obligations. The museum respects this.

Without its volunteers and staff, there would be no show to enjoy. That is one big reason the event has not been extended to additional days during the holiday season, explains Lambrecht. The NRM is currently at capacity.

But who can predict what the future holds for PEX as it continues to grow? It’s a nostalgic experience for the whole family. For some people it’s a special festivity and requirement similar to hanging ornaments

on a tree together, wearing ugly sweaters to parties, or watching a stream of classic holiday films on Christmas Eve — it becomes a treasured holiday ritual.

NRM CEO

Jacqueline Frank fondly acknowledges this pastime and says, “So many of the people who visit yearly see this as a time to be with family and experience the joy and magic found in the season. ... Many of

“ABOUT 80% OF OUR CAST AND CREW ARE VOLUNTEERS. ... AND IT TAKES A GOOD 75 TO 80 PEOPLE A NIGHT TO PUT THIS WHOLE THING TOGETHER,”

— JUSTIN LAMBRECHT

them also have their favorite conductors or engineers and over time have formed bonds with those individuals ...”

“Coming back year after year can be like coming home for the holidays.” **I**

ENHANCING AMTRAK'S VALUE to rural America

The only public transportation
for many small towns plays an
important role

Story and photos by
Bob Johnston

The *California Zephyr* rolls into
Osceola, Iowa, on Aug. 7, 2020. Most
long-distance trains were temporarily
cut back to three times per week
in October that year to save costs.



AMTRAK





CHRIS KOOS HAS QUITE A VIEW.

From his third-floor office in the Multimodal Transportation Center in Normal, Ill., the five-term mayor can evaluate patronage on the Bloomington-Normal “Uptown Station” platform when he hears the rumble of Amtrak passenger trains traveling to or from Chicago, St. Louis, Kansas City, Mo., and San Antonio, Texas. In the hallway, a floor-to-ceiling window looks down on a spacious waiting room for Amtrak, intercity bus, and local transit passengers. “At train time, I like to see how many people are getting ready to ride,” he says.

Few public officials in so-called “flyover country” have this kind of a ringside seat on how Amtrak and freight rail affects their communities, but Koos has also become a pivotal chess piece in a drama playing out in the Nation’s Capital. He is the only current Amtrak board of directors nominee from outside the Northeast Corridor at a time when lawmakers from rural states are

hearing mounting complaints from their constituents about Amtrak service.

Limited capacity triggering sellouts and high fares, equipment failures and freight train interference causing multi-hour delays and cancellations, and reduced onboard dining and walk-around options have afflicted national network operations in 2023. It shouldn’t be happening at a time when travel demand is robust. Amtrak management was unprepared to capitalize on the post-pandemic surge, having sidelined rolling stock and insufficiently expanded its frontline workforce. The resulting burden has fallen especially hard on people living in communities away from major metropolitan areas without access to airports or other forms of public transportation.

Amtrak is in a unique position to serve rural markets, but there are challenges in the way it functions outside the Northeast Corridor that need to be addressed if the company is to achieve its full potential. During

the past year, *Trains* sought observations and suggestions from civic leaders who value Amtrak’s contribution to their communities. Here’s a look at how some of the national network’s shortcomings developed and thoughts on how they can be rectified.

RELIABILITY AND FREQUENCY

“To me, the issue that is always a sticking point is OTP — on-time performance,” says Koos. The Bloomington-Normal Uptown Station, a \$50 million combination City Hall and multi-modal transportation facility, serves a population of more than 150,000, as well as three colleges. Koos championed it more than a decade ago by applying for federal transportation funding and locally matched dollars. With grant funding available from the 2021 Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, he is leading efforts to build an underpass to the station’s eastern platform; money for that feature ran out during initial construction.



The San Antonio-bound *Texas Eagle* calls at Normal, Ill., on May 17, 2023, with one sleeper, three coaches, and a diner-lounge car. The train's limited capacity is often sold out to long-distance travelers. One of the coaches from Chicago will be cut off at St. Louis.

Located on Amtrak's Illinois-supported corridor 124 miles from Chicago and 160 miles from St. Louis, the college town and home to numerous Midwest-based industries has seen a recent uptick in new residents who commute to the larger cities.

"Amtrak has a real opportunity to accommodate remote workers who find you can live in smaller communities for a lot less money," Koos says. "They want to know they can get to an office in a timely fashion, whether it's two or three times per week or per month. But we've had a problem with long freight trains affecting Amtrak and our town as whole; there are times when every crossing is blocked by a standing freight."

He is also aware of late trains caused by Amtrak's equipment maintenance issues in Chicago. "Like many companies, they had layoffs during COVID — the people they are bringing back need proper training."

Koos says frequency is also important. "If you give me the full wish list, an afternoon train into Chicago and a later train [than 7:10 p.m.] coming out would be good," he says. There is a 6-hour gap daily between the *Texas Eagle's* scheduled 11:06 a.m. departure and *Lincoln Service* train No. 318 at 5:35 p.m. Punctuality is often an issue for those trains, which start their journeys in San Antonio, Texas, (with connecting cars from Los Angeles three days a week) and Kansas City, Mo., respectively.

Communities served only by once-daily long-distance trains have had a much more serious problem in 2023, however. The *Southwest Chief*, *Empire Builder*, and *California Zephyr*, in particular, showed little sign of being able to maintain schedules renegotiated with host railroads to achieve the Federal Railroad Administration-mandated "Customer On Time Performance" metric. It's bad enough that these trains, which cumulatively serve 104 intermediate stops on routes ranging from 2,205 to 2,438 miles, have on-time figures of no more than 20%. Primarily responsible are freight train interference and mechanically unfit cars and locomotives, causing mid-route breakdowns or late departures from point of origin.

Since all three trains make either same-day or tight overnight equipment turns on the West Coast, delays become additive. In the past year, cumulative tardiness became so severe that dozens



Normal, Ill., Mayor Chris Koos can keep an eye on UP and Amtrak operations from his city hall office in Uptown Station.

of round-trip cancellations occurred, depriving all those intermediate stations of reliable transportation.

NATIONAL OR NOTHING ... AGAIN

Of course, Amtrak's Northeast Corridor has competing infrastructure investment needs because the company is responsible for maintaining a vital but aging physical plant. For decades, management found ways to keep system needs in balance despite presidential administrations that periodically sought to withdraw funding. Throughout Amtrak's history, if Congress perceived too much of a Northeast Corridor tilt from management or the Executive Branch, lawmakers such as U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-Texas) would threaten, as she did in the 1990s, "National or nothing!"

Recent Congressional concerns began to surface following the forced departure of Amtrak president Joseph Boardman at the end of 2016. During a tenure that began in



Joseph Boardman, left, confers with Las Vegas, N.M., Mayor Alfonso Ortiz Jr. during a July 12, 2014, inspection train stop. The Amtrak CEO engaged with local officials soliciting matching funds for federal grants to upgrade tracks principally only used by the *Southwest Chief*.



Following an engine failure the previous evening in Minnesota, the westbound *Empire Builder* charges into Rugby, N.D., 8 hours late on Dec. 10, 2022. Multi-hour delays make it impossible for rural communities without other public transportation options to rely on Amtrak for daily mobility needs.

2008, Boardman engaged local officials to help Amtrak offset infrastructure and operating costs on its state-supported and long-distance routes. Most notably, following barnstorming special-train forays across Kansas, Colorado, and New Mexico, he succeeded in getting communities to partner with Amtrak and BNSF Railway in seeking federal grants to help pay to replace deteriorating track used by the Chicago-Los Angeles *Southwest Chief*.

The campaign to maintain passenger-capable infrastructure in freight territory or where the *Chief* was the only train on the line was enthusiastically embraced by rural civic leaders. They saw Amtrak service — even if only once per day in each direction — as a marketable attribute that differentiated their cities from others nearby.

But in a seemingly unrelated retirement

policy overhaul, the Amtrak board in 2015 jettisoned a pension system that had retained skilled workers and operating management with institutional knowledge. Its replacement was an annual bonus structure that deified, compartmentalized, and incentivized cost savings as both an individual employee and overarching corporate goal. If managers identified ways their department could cut expenses below the company's fiscal-year projections, those who instigated the cuts and executives atop the management chain would all benefit monetarily.

National network costs are particularly ripe for cutting, because expenses for long-distance and state-supported trains include systemwide equipment and corporate overhead calculated through the company's proprietary Amtrak Performance Tracking system. Northeast Corridor trains are treated differently because most infrastructure expenses in Amtrak-owned territory are capitalized [see "Amtrak's Money Mystery," January 2019].

Two of Boardman's replacements, ex-Norfolk Southern CEO Wick Moorman

and former Delta Airlines CEO Richard Anderson, immediately began cost cutting that eliminated regional marketing staffs and curtailed national and route-specific advertising away from the Northeast Corridor. Other cuts reduced dining car personnel and onboard meal preparation, restricted private car charter operations, eliminated small town station agents, and dropped timetables and other materials that helped passengers plan trips.

However, management struck a raw nerve with a scheme to switch the *Southwest Chief's* Dodge City, Kan.-Albuquerque, N.M., section to buses rather than spend money to install positive train control. Led by U.S. senators from Kansas, Colorado, and New Mexico — three Democrats, three Republicans — that Boardman had cultivated, and howls from local officials, lawmakers made the following year's Amtrak funding contingent on keeping the *Chief* route intact.

To ward off a repeat of such shenanigans, Congressional requirements established in Amtrak's most recent reauthorization specify that residency of eight board members be



COMMUNITIES SERVED DIRECTLY BY AMTRAK LONG-DISTANCE TRAINS

	MAJOR METROS	SUBURBAN STOPS**	MIDSIZE CITIES	SMALL TOWNS	TOTAL
<i>Empire Builder</i>	4	4	10	29	47
<i>California Zephyr</i>	7	4	7	17	35
<i>Southwest Chief</i>	4	3	10	16	33
<i>Sunset Limited</i>	4	2	4	10	20
<i>Coast Starlight</i>	6	8	10	7	31
<i>Texas Eagle</i>	7	2	6	14	29
<i>City of New Orleans</i>	3	1	5	11	20
<i>Crescent</i>	8	5	11	10	34
<i>Lake Shore Limited</i>	5	5	11	6	27
<i>Capitol Limited</i>	4	1	3	8	16
<i>Cardinal</i>	7	4	6	15	32
<i>Silver Star</i>	8	8	8	11	35
<i>Silver Meteor</i>	6	7	8	13	34
<i>Palmetto</i>	4	2	7	8	21

**Includes second stops within a metro (e.g. Tacoma, Newark, Alexandria, Va.)

COMMUNITIES SERVED DIRECTLY BY AMTRAK STATE-SUPPORTED TRAINS

	MAJOR METROS	SUBURBAN STOPS**	MIDSIZE CITIES	SMALL TOWNS	TOTAL
<i>Amtrak Cascades</i>	3	5	5	5	18
<i>Capitol Corridor</i>	3	8	2	1	14
<i>San Joaquins</i>	2	2	5	8	17
<i>Pacific Surfliner</i>	2	6	5	10	23
<i>Heartland Flyer</i>	2	1	1	3	7
<i>Missouri-Lincoln Service</i>	3	6	4	7	20
<i>Illini-Saluki</i>	1	1	3	6	11
<i>Illinois Zephyr-Carl Sandburg</i>	1	2	3	4	10
<i>Hiawatha</i>	1	2	1	1	5
<i>Wolverine-Blue Water</i>	2	4	8	6	20
<i>Pere Marquette</i>	1	0	3	1	5
<i>Empire Service-Maple Leaf</i>	3	6	7	6	22
<i>Pennsylvanian-Keystone</i>	3	5	5	10	23
<i>Adirondack-Ethan Allen</i>	3	4	5	10	22
<i>Vermont</i>	4	7	8	12	31
<i>Downeaster</i>	1	3	1	7	12
<i>Va.: Roanoke-Norfolk-Newport News*</i>	1	4	9	3	17
<i>Carolinian-Piedmonts</i>	6	4	6	8	24

*Trains on 4 Washington, D.C.-Virginia routes travel to various Northeast Corridor destinations (those stations not included)

split equally between Northeast, state-supported, and long-distance routes. Koos checks two of those boxes, but he has yet to serve on the board despite three nominations since 2020 because other current nominees all hail from Northeastern states. Senators such as John Tester (D-Mont.), and Jerry Moran (R-Kan.), who were involved in the *Chief* affair, are blocking the entire slate of board nominations — including Koos — until President Biden provides the geographical balance Congress demanded. In the meantime, a board whose terms expired years ago, led by New Jersey's Anthony Coscia, continues to serve.

Asked about the status of board confirmation, U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) tells *Trains*, "Chris Koos is poised to be nominated to the board. The problem is politicians, the fact that people want to bring packages. He's cleared and ready to go." Regarding the geographic issue, Durbin demurred. "My stand is Chris Koos: whatever package with him in it, we'll do it as quickly as possible. There are some Northeastern elements in this;



Federal Americans with Disability Act funds are paying for accessibility and lighting improvements to Rugby, N.D.'s platform on Dec. 9, 2022. The national contractor had not completed the job by September 2023. Meanwhile, the station door has needed a new lock for two years.



1

1 This is an Amtrak station. Passengers line up in the hot sun on June 10, 2021, to board the *Sunset Limited* at Deming, N.M.

2 Elko, Nev.'s passenger station, as seen from a *California Zephyr* sleeper. Waiting during cold winter months is a challenge for passengers, especially if the train is behind schedule.

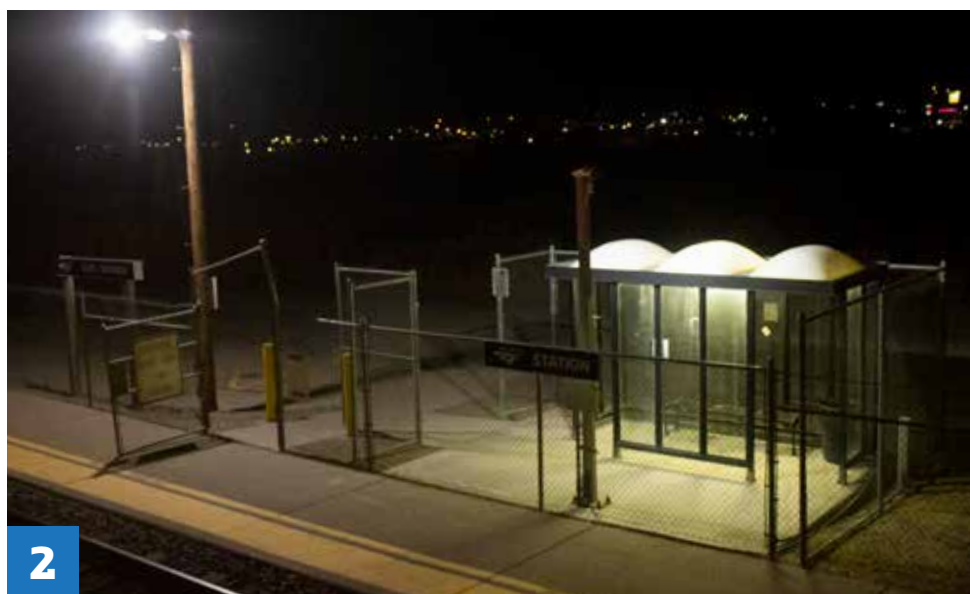
3 Erie, Pa., Union Station hosts community events but now only opens for the *Lake Shore Limited*. Amtrak does not use the main station entrance, but rather has passengers enter what was the baggage area to the right.

4 Patsy Bregdon, station attendant in Wells, Maine, assists a *Downeaster* passenger purchasing a ticket from the kiosk.

5 Illegible material posted on the Amtrak's stop designator at Palatka, Fla., on Feb. 7, 2023, lacks schedules or any information indicating where trains go.



3



2

I don't want to be too specific. We have to live with them."

CORPORATE DISDAIN

Lackadaisical managerial oversight coupled with retrenchment, a byproduct of corporate disinvestment, is being challenged at the local level. When Amtrak decided to shutter more than a dozen ticket offices at rural stations as part of its cost cutting, many communities strenuously objected. Richard and Christina Anderson were among concerned local citizens from Marshall, Texas, who went to federal and state lawmakers, pushing for legislation that eventually forced the company to restore the positions. They saw the value of having a local representative, even if management didn't. Inexplicably, some of these agents don't check baggage or sell tickets. Other duties, such as local outreach during times the trains aren't running, should be explored.

When *Trains* visited Crawfordsville, Ind., in July, Mayor Todd Barton said the shelter Amtrak built with Americans with Disability Act federal funding in 2022 had been locked for two weeks.

"I've emailed Amtrak about the locked station and picking up the trash, but nobody responds," he says. "We still don't know if a caretaker has been hired. We could never find out who the previous caretaker was, then this lady called and said it had been her father, who had just passed away. She called us because she didn't know how to contact Amtrak."

A community garden maintained by Dr. Helen Hudson's high school students when the *Hoosier State* was still running was dug up in the renovation. "The plot had become so overrun with tall grass that I had the city mow it," Barton says, "even though it's Amtrak's property and responsibility."

Crawfordsville and other communities along the Chicago-Indianapolis route —

now served only by the triweekly *Cardinal* — contributed 50% of Indiana's Amtrak operating grant for the *Hoosier State*, which maintained daily service by running on the days the *Cardinal* did not. But Barton says the *Hoosier* died (in 2019) when the state shifted the money to subsidize international flights between Indianapolis and Paris.

"The pandemic happened, the flights went away, so here we are," Barton blithely says. A Republican in an area where his party dominates, Barton says, "With 1,000 new jobs coming, we really need daily train service again and more mobility, but the state is trying to slant economic development money away from politically safe areas." He hopes a daily *Cardinal* will fill the void Indiana is unwilling to address. Barton had a business meeting scheduled in Chicago the next day. "There is no train in the morning, so I'll have to drive," he says.



In Rugby, N.D., Dale Niewoehner has been a proponent of Amtrak service from the time the *Empire Builder* became an efficient and less costly way to handle remains for his funeral home. That service — indeed, all package express — was discontinued in October 2020 as part of service reductions. The former mayor still keeps an eye on the station a few blocks from his home and business, but has been appalled by what he perceives to be waste Amtrak has incurred in building an accessible platform.

“It’s great that the long platform will be heated, but the contractors just busted up the concrete they poured months ago,” he remarked in August 2023. Platform construction and light pole installation was underway when *Trains* visited Rugby in December 2022. At the time, Niewoehner had been complaining for a year to Amtrak’s regional manager in the Twin Cities that the station’s platform door and locks needed to be repaired or replaced.

“They said two years ago that the door had to be specially made, but it isn’t eligible to be paid for with [Americans with Disability Act] money that is funding the platform,” Niewoehner says. “In other words, Amtrak has no plans to fix it; it would be a miracle if they got everything done before winter arrives, but they can [mess] around with the platform all day. Meanwhile, the air conditioner is not running and it is hot in the station. Let some local people take on a project — we will do it!”

SOME SOLUTIONS

Whether or not Congress succeeds in getting a geographically balanced board of directors that is in a position to alter current management priorities, there are national-network deficiencies that can be addressed to improve service to rural communities. Here are some suggested fixes.

- **Increase and maintain capacity.**

Restoring all possible sidelined coaches, sleeping cars, and equipment like Superliner Sightseer Lounges and Viewliner II dining cars — the rolling stock that offers onboard freedom and social opportunities unique to train travel — must happen as soon as possible.

Amtrak once maintained enough standby equipment to substitute for rolling stock needing maintenance; several derailments thinned the Superliner fleet, but management’s failure to prioritize the return of rolling stock it sidelined during the COVID-19 pandemic is largely responsible for mechanical breakdowns leading to major delays. A concerted effort will counteract higher pricing and sellouts that choke off regional mobility, and have demonstrably worsened long-distance bottom lines by supplying less revenue against fixed route costs.

The biggest myth Amtrak management used to justify cutting most long-distance trains back to three days per week in October 2020 was uttered by then-CEO William Flynn, who said national patronage plummets after Sept. 30. Yes, there are patronage “valleys,” but by its nature, demand varies by season and even day of week, but it doesn’t fall off a cliff. Historically, seasonal lulls have been utilized to step up equipment maintenance, but current management took that a step further with seasonal furloughs of onboard-service employees. Once sufficient capacity is restored, pricing can be adjusted to fit demand and newly hired workers will know the previous layoff mentality has changed.

- **Hands-on route management.**

One of former CEO Richard Anderson’s most destructive decisions was to cancel an initiative started 20 years earlier by the *Texas Eagle* Marketing and Performance Organization. Its members voluntarily managed the *Eagle*’s coach and sleeping car inventory. Little Rock dentist Bill Pollard and now-retired Amtrak man-

“ANYONE WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR A SERIES OF ASSETS AND DOESN’T MAINTAIN THEM PROPERLY, DOESN’T DEAL WITH ISSUES AS THEY ARISE, IS BASICALLY JUST KICKING THE CAN DOWN THE ROAD.”

— ANTHONY COSCIA, CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD, AMTRAK



Veteran Osceola, Iowa, caretaker Pat Green chats with *California Zephyr* Conductor Michael Fetsch as passengers leave the eastbound *Zephyr* on Aug. 7, 2020. Even if the train is hours late — as is often the case — Green is down at the station to assist passengers.

Above and beyond in Osceola

PAT GREEN IS NO ORDINARY AMTRAK “CARETAKER.”

For 38 years she has hosted passengers boarding and de-training Amtrak’s *California Zephyr* in typically Midwestern Osceola, Iowa (population 5,775 in 2023), about 140 miles east of Omaha, Neb., and the train’s closest stop to Des Moines, the state’s capital and largest city.

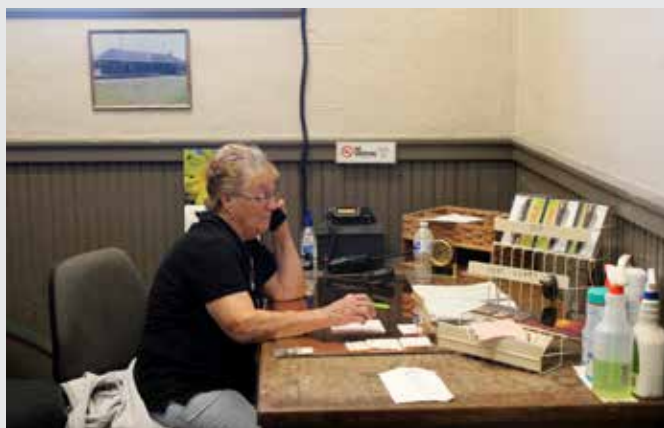
Unlike Amtrak agents at busier stations, Green doesn’t sell tickets or offer checked baggage service. Like most caretakers, the longtime resident is only paid by the company for one hour, twice each day to assist arriving and departing passengers. But she does maintain an office in the former Chicago, Burlington & Quincy depot, which the city purchased from the BNSF Railway in 2007 and has completely restored; the 1907 building is now on the National Register of Historic Places.

If the *Zephyr* is on time at 7:40 a.m. eastbound and 8:09 p.m. westbound, the caretaker job would be somewhat manageable for residents with other employment, or perhaps retirees. “I open the station every day at

6:30 a.m. no matter what,” Green tells *Trains*.

The rub — a big one — is that all through 2023, the *Zephyr* has been excruciatingly late. During three consecutive days in early August 2023, for instance, eastbound train No. 6 arrived between 12:10 p.m. and 3:12 p.m. — 7 hours, 32 minutes off the advertised. On the same days, shop forces’ inability to get westbound train No. 5 ready for an on-time departure meant that it left Chicago anywhere from 54 minutes to 2 hours, 38 minutes late. At Osceola, that translates to westbound arrivals at 9:23 p.m., 9:54 p.m., and 11:15 p.m., making for an incredibly long day.

At least Green is able to go home and return about an hour prior to when each train is expected, with the station remaining open in the interim. On an August 2020 *Trains* visit, she had a stash of printed schedules and *California Zephyr* 2010 route guides to pass out when passengers ask. “Those are all gone now — they don’t give me anything,” she says. Green helps to arrange local transportation, but notes that the local taxi service no longer runs at night.



Most caretakers show up to lock and unlock the waiting room door at train time, but Pat Green maintains an office in the city-owned Osceola, Iowa, station to keep track of utilities and make sure every aspect of the facility is clean and presentable to the traveling public.

She maintains a cordial relationship with the *Zephyr*’s operating crews and coach attendants. During the holiday season, Green will often make the crew home-baked cookies.

“Two weeks ago, I gave the conductors and engineers sweet corn. I try to be nice to them because my boys are like family and they’re always good to me,” she says. “We work together to help the passengers.” Trains only stop momentarily, of course, but it

seems there is always time to talk to Green.

Osceola City Manager Ty Wheeler values Green’s contribution to the community. He says the depot is cleaned twice per week by the city, but “unofficially, she oversees the entire operation. If she decides to retire, I don’t know how Amtrak would replace Pat.”

Fortunately for all concerned, don’t count on that happening anytime soon. — *Bob Johnston*

ager Griff Hubbard voluntarily did this nightly to adjust pricing and prevent sell-outs on certain segments from blocking higher revenue for longer trips.

The capacity reduction and *Eagle's* downgrading that followed meant those efforts would have been wasted. If long-distance capacity is increased, such active managing of inventory may reveal demand for intermediate city pairs that isn't monitored by the existing airline-style, automated "Bid Up" program. This might bring in additional passengers, rather than cheaply filling unsold inventory with the few people already traveling who are willing to spend more.

- **Restore regional marketing supervision.**

If fares and inventory coupled with sufficient capacity are to be actively managed, Amtrak needs to systematically get the word out. The most successful regional services are concerned with filling seats to earn revenue, rather than obsessed with costs. So they develop marketing outreach programs to remind customers that trains run every day.

Maine's *Downeasters*, North Carolina's *Piedmonts*, Virginia's robust system, the three California corridors, and yes, Florida's independent Brightline all utilize regular email blasts and special promotions to suggest destinations, announce pricing and schedule adjustments, and push specific events that provide reasons to travel. Amtrak does it with *Auto Train* fare sales. In the digital age, this is not that difficult, but it takes diligence and an investment by committed personnel who can work independently.

At the same time, a regionally based manager is in a position to visit and make sure stations have up-to-date signage; are properly maintained and staffed, if possible, by committed caretakers like Pat Green of Osceola, Iowa (see page 32); and regularly visit civic leaders in a position to give feedback on how constituents perceive the company is doing. That function now is handled haphazardly by Amtrak's spread-thin, regional government affairs personnel. Their efforts today are rightly focused on state legislatures, who hold the ultimate purse strings supporting Amtrak's "Connects Us" plan to expand regional corridors. Consolidation of tasks at Washington corporate headquarters and moving qualified, energetic personnel to the field might be a good source for talent and funding for this initiative.

- **Reestablish a national presence featuring usable route information.**

Amtrak management's unwillingness to accurately describe the markets it serves is simply no responsible way to run a business. Although the company has not off-shored its call centers or



The eastbound *Southwest Chief* prepares to stop at the historic Lamy, N.M., depot on Oct. 5, 2021. Once the full-service station for Santa Fe, the state capital, it is now unstaffed and no longer offers checked baggage. Spotty cell service here makes checking train status difficult.



Civic pride is evident in the well-maintained Pauls Valley, Okla., station. The center of downtown can also be seen from the southbound Oklahoma City-Fort Worth, Texas *Heartland Flyer* as it stops to pick up passengers on July 20, 2023.

moved to the off-putting, text-first communication model, disinvestment in national network information resources has reduced its visibility. Residents of many communities served by Amtrak don't know where the trains go or when they leave. As a result — except in the Northeast or where operating authorities actively promote the service — passenger rail never becomes part of the conversation.

Regional promotion must be partnered with easily accessible and printable schedules that don't require potential patrons to know what they are looking for, like the cumbersome so-called "customized" electronic versions Amtrak offers on its website and app. Getting Amtrak back into the national consciousness won't necessarily be cheap or easy, but at least travelers

need to know they have access to tools that will help them weigh options.

Amtrak board chairman Coscia, speaking last August about the federal grant application to fund a transformative \$1.1 billion Chicago Hub infrastructure project, said, "Anyone who is responsible for a series of assets and doesn't maintain them properly, doesn't deal with issues as they arise, is basically just kicking the can down the road."

The challenge for Amtrak's board and management is to apply that mantra to every aspect of its national network, from equipment, to stations, to community engagement. With depleted "on the ground" personnel, the task is not easy. But the company is in a unique position to make a significant contribution to rural mobility, if it will only rise to the occasion. **I**

Countdown to
1000
ISSUES

the AT OLD

Norfolk Southern's impressive, yet unremarked



AS WE CONTINUE OUR COUNTDOWN toward the 1,000th issue of *Trains*, we also remember longtime editor Jim Wrinn, who began the planning for the 1,000th-issue celebration before his death in 2022. In this article from issues 700-799 (specifically, September 2006), Wrinn — just 20 months into a tenure that would cover more than 17 years — surveys a twisting 13-mile mountain route in his native North Carolina and emerges with a lesson about the value of meandering, rather than taking the shortest path. Wrinn loved many places in railroading, but this one had a particular significance. Throughout his years as editor, a bit of North Carolina always remained with him. Today, the reverse is also true: one of the places his ashes have been spread is at the Loops at Old Fort. — *David Lassen, senior editor*

Loops FORT

The kudzu on the eastern edge of High Fill has a great view of an east-bound Catawba unit coal train as it winds down the loops through Dendron in June 1998.

Carolina crossing of the Blue Ridge

Story and photos by Jim Wrinn

IN THE HEART OF western North Carolina is an overlooked mountain railroad grade, as demanding as it is mysterious: Norfolk Southern's loops at Old Fort, the spiral staircase of U.S. railroads. It's well known locally — I knew about it because I grew up near the route — but few outside the region have heard of the daily battle that occurs between today's high-horsepower GEs and EMDs and the Old Fort grade.

Most railroaders and fans are familiar with two other mainline grades through this part of the Appalachians: the

former Southern Railway's route via the infamous Saluda grade, and the impressively engineered loops of the former Clinchfield Railroad on the eastern side of the Blue Ridge.

They are spectacular mountain crossings that have earned their place in history: Saluda for its in-your-face audacity, and Clinchfield for its graceful athleticism.

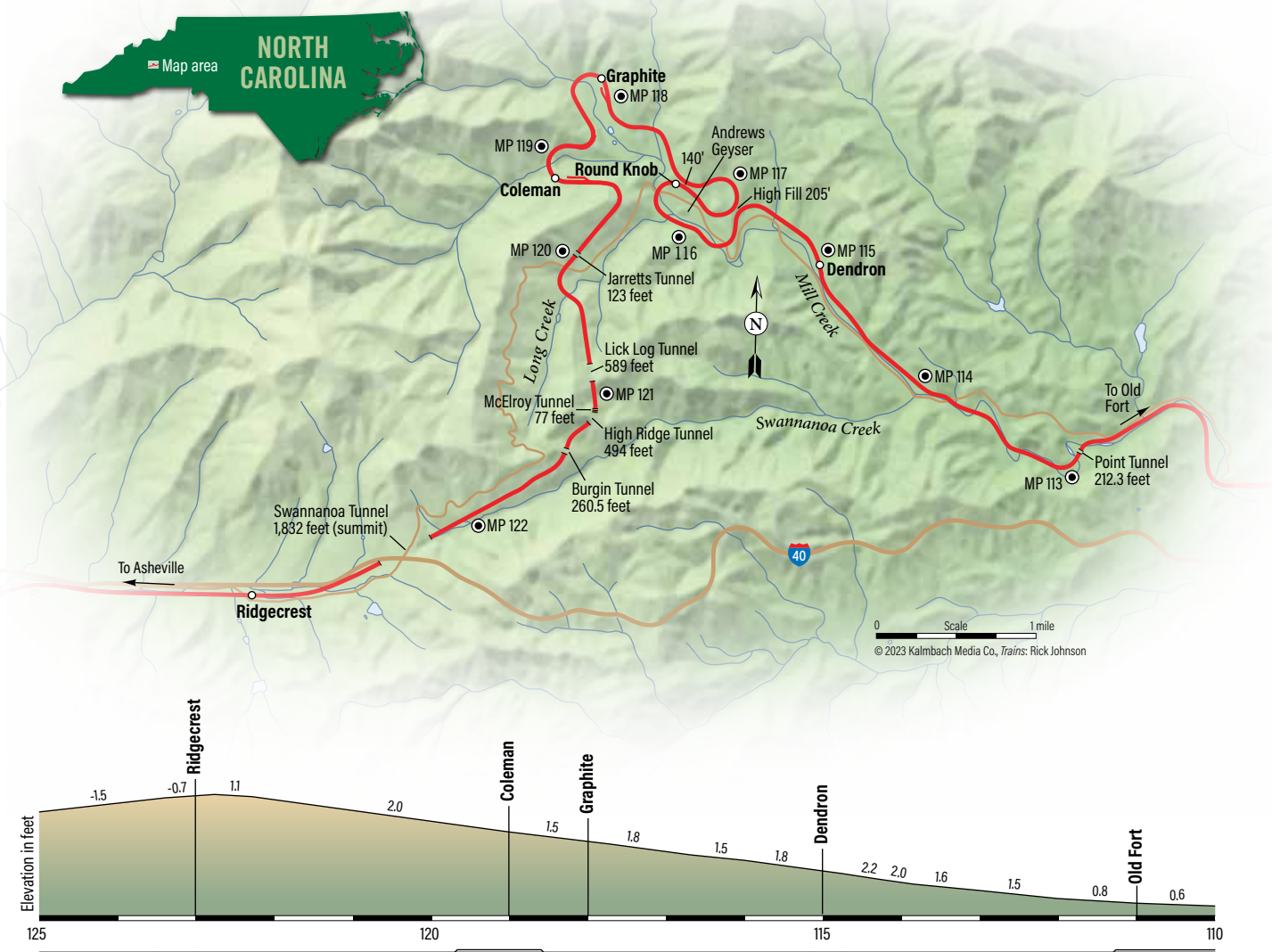
Saluda, of course, offered the greatest show of the three. The steepest mainline grade in the U.S., Saluda put 2-10-2s, SD45s, and wide-nosed GEs all on their knees.

It required trains running between Spartanburg, S.C., and Asheville, N.C., to be hefted across in three and sometimes four cuts. It claimed runaways as late as 1971. All of this meant the continued use of a safety track until Norfolk Southern closed the route in December 2001. Saluda pitted brute strength against a short, tough 3-mile grade with portions as steep as 4.7%.

The Clinchfield put on a heavy-tonnage show in a more refined way. Built roughly 30 years after Saluda, Clinchfield's route benefited from better en-

gineering, making its climb on a 1.2% grade, and using lots of track — 19 miles of it — to keep things tolerable. Now part of CSX, it has been a coal conveyor between Appalachian mines and Southeastern power plants for better than 40 years, and it looks as if that role will continue for the foreseeable future.

And then there is the mountain railroad between these two extremes, the former Southern line between Old Fort and Ridgcrest, part of Norfolk Southern's busy Piedmont Division.



The mountain grade encompasses only 13 miles of the 141-mile Asheville district between Salisbury, N.C., and Asheville. Because Old Fort grade is situated between Saluda and the Clinchfield, I often think of it as if it were a middle child. It doesn't demand attention like the daredevil, and it's not graceful like the athlete. Old Fort is somewhere in between, doing what it does without drawing attention to itself — even though it should.

One of the expected outcomes of the 1982 merger of Southern and Norfolk & Western was to shift through freight traffic off Old Fort in favor of a routing via the more gentle N&W main through Lynchburg and Bristol, Va. But Old Fort has been a resilient mountain route, pumping unit coal trains into the Southeast and

handling lots of local and regional traffic that couldn't go elsewhere.

At times it seems there is always a train ascending or descending Old Fort grade. Four daily merchandise trains (two each way) ply this east-west route, which lies between Norfolk Southern's busy north-south lanes in the Carolinas and Tennessee. It also serves as an artery for unit coal, grain, and wood-chip trains in a growing region that constantly demands more electricity, food, and paper. Add in regular ballast trains from Inca on the former Murphy Branch, and it's not unusual in a 24-hour period to see 16 to 18 movements on the mountain.

From time to time, when Norfolk Southern's north-south mains to the east or to the west get real busy (especially the

jam-packed Atlanta-Chattanooga line), or if the Atlanta terminal gets backed up, or there's a derailment on another main line in the region, their trains often detour through the mountains via Old Fort.

As NS officials like to point out, their system is running at a high volume, but it's flexible, and running via Old Fort is one way to keep trains moving when trouble hits.

CAROLINA CROSSING

If you look at the dozen or so rail crossings of the Appalachians, from the Susquehanna River south to the Carolinas, the Old Fort crossing is among the most rugged [see chart, opposite page]. Westbound trains encounter a change in elevation of almost 1,000 feet from the start of the grade at Old Fort to the eastern conti-

mental divide at Ridgecrest, where the Southern Baptist meeting grounds and Interstate 40 are atop the 1,800-foot Swannanoa Tunnel, elevation 2,535 feet.

It's only 3 miles in a straight line between the restored 1890 wood depot (now a visitors' center) at Old Fort and the top of the mountain, but Old Fort's designers took the opposite approach to those who created Saluda. Instead of going at the mountain straight on, they found a way to roll up a valley, grab a ridge, hoist the railroad up, and then grab another ridge, and keep riding it higher and higher. The tracks coil and roll like the copperhead snakes that inhabit this land.

And there's a life lesson here — the most direct path between two points may indeed be a straight line. But

TOP OF THE GRADE: SUMMITS OF ACTIVE EASTERN MAINLINE MOUNTAIN RAILROADS

Today's railroad	Predecessor	Line segment	Summit	Elevation	Max. grade
Western New York & Pennsylvania	Erie	Hornell, N.Y.-Meadville, Pa.	Tip Top (Alfred), N.Y.	1,776 ft.	1.0%
Norfolk Southern	Pennsylvania	Harrisburg, Pa.-Buffalo, N.Y.	Keating Summit, Pa.	1,880 ft.	2.6%
Norfolk Southern	Pennsylvania	Harrisburg-Pittsburgh	Gallitzin, Pa.	2,194 ft.	1.9%
CSX	B&O	Cumberland, Md.-Pittsburgh	Sand Patch, Pa.	2,258 ft.	1.9%
CSX	B&O	Cumberland, Md.-Grafton, W.Va.	Altamont, Md.	2,628 ft.	2.2%
CSX	C&O	Clifton Forge, Va.-Charleston, W.Va.	Alleghany, Va.	2,072 ft.	1.4%
Norfolk Southern	Virginian	Roanoke, Va.-Mullens, W.Va.	Clarks Gap, W.Va.	2,526 ft.	2.1%
Norfolk Southern	Virginian	Roanoke, Va.-Mullens, W.Va.	Merrimac, Va.	1,953 ft.	1.5%
Norfolk Southern	N&W	Roanoke, Va.-Williamson, W.Va.	Bluefield, W.Va.	2,567 ft.	2.0%
Norfolk Southern	N&W	Roanoke, Va.-Bluefield, W.Va.	Christiansburg, Va.	2,052 ft.	1.3%
CSX	Clinchfield	Spartanburg, S.C.-Kingsport, Tenn.	Altapass, N.C.	2,072 ft.	1.2%
CSX	Clinchfield	Kingsport, Tenn.-Elkhorn City, Ky.	Sandy Ridge, Va.	1,836 ft.	1.8%
Norfolk Southern	Southern	Salisbury-Asheville, N.C.	Ridgecrest, N.C.	2,535 ft.	2.2%

sometimes the best route is to meander until you get to your destination.

To keep the ruling grade at no more than 2.2% (the standard set by the Baltimore & Ohio's pioneering Appalachian crossing), the rails twist and turn in several loops — actually horseshoe curves because they never completely close the gap. Because of this, the route has enough degrees of curvature to equal eight complete circles. In this area, trains — whether eastbound or westbound — travel in every direction of the compass, on curves ranging up to 14 degrees.

At one location, where the upper level is known as High Fill (because originally it was bridged, then filled in) and the lower level is known as Den-dron, the tracks are only about 200 feet apart, but they're separated in elevation by more than 100 feet.

So challenging was this mountain that in summer 1981, EMD sent a test train to run up and down to evaluate its latest

ANDREWS GEYSER MARKS THE SPOT



Westbound former Conrail units pass Andrews Geyser in March 2002. You can see the mist creates a rainbow.

SHOOTING 60 TO 80 FEET IN THE AIR,

Andrews Geyser is a man-made fountain that serves as an exclamation point to the magnificent piece of railroad engineering in the Old Fort Loops. Named for Col. A.B. Andrews, chief engineer of the Western North Carolina Railroad, it was built at the Round Knob hotel in 1881. After the hotel burned, one of Andrews' friends, George Fisher Baker of N.Y., restored the fountain at a nearby spot in 1912. Southern Railway maintained it until 1976, when it came under the town's control. Old Fort Mayor Wayne Stafford said a 6-inch diameter pipe carries water from a pond on private property near Jarretts Tunnel — halfway up the mountainside — to the geyser. There it blasts into the sky above an 8-acre park, a special place to watch the trains climb the mountains.

Stand at the geyser on a brisk fall day when the leaves have left the trees and the mist creates a rainbow; if the train is long enough, let it encircle you before it heads on its way.

It is like magic. — Jim Wrinn





P32 passes Old Fort's now-restored depot.



Rainy day for P32: The crew gathers at Asheville prior to the run to Greenlee; from left are Randy Quarterman, Boyd Wright, Mike Fields, and Tony Johnson, with Gilbert Joyce on the steps.

wheel-slip control gear for its 50-series locomotives.

This is a place where real railroading takes on a model-railroad-like feel. Above Andrews Geyser, it's not unusual at the neck of the Round Knob loop to see the head end of a 90-car train pass the end-of-train device on the last car, with 100 feet of elevation or more in between them.

Most railroaders know the area simply as "the loops," and they have a great respect for what it takes to get up — and down — the mountain.

BOTH BEAUTIFUL AND DANGEROUS

The struggle to surmount this grade takes place within the verdant mountainsides of the Pisgah National Forest.

The railroad follows the Mill Creek valley westward to launch itself against the Blue Ridge, crossing the stream 11 times and passing through seven named tunnels. For short distances, the grade is actually 2.7%; factor in the curvature, and it's the equivalent of a 3% grade.

High above it all is an awesome backdrop: the Black Mountain chain, capped by Mount Mitchell, the highest peak east of the Mississippi at an elevation of 6,684 feet.

As you can imagine, building this route was difficult, dangerous, and deadly.

Construction on the Western North Carolina Railroad began in Salisbury in 1855, bogged down during the Civil War, and resumed at a slow pace in the 1870s.

The lack of urgency was attributed to a variety of factors, not the least of which was the steep terrain.

For many years, the railroad stopped at Old Fort — so named because in the late 1700s it was the farthest point of westward expansion into Cherokee Native American territory — and passengers for

Asheville rode a stagecoach across the mountains.

In his 1967 novel, *The Road*, author John Ehle wrote a fictionalized account of the building of a railroad across the Blue Ridge. He wrote clearly about the difficult work, yet the reality must have been sheer misery. The state of North Carolina provided convict labor to push the project along, at a great cost in human life.

In his forthcoming book, *The Western North Carolina Railroad, Penetrating the Land of the Sky*, historian Matt Bumgarner notes that 3,644 convicts — nearly 50% of the state's inmate population — were put to work on the line between 1875 and 1892. Of that number, 461 died, most from disease, but many also from landslides and other accidents, not the least of which were premature explosions involving the nitroglycerine used to blast out tunnels.

Trains didn't reach Asheville until 1880 — 11 years after completion of the first trans-continental railroad.

From Asheville, builders pushed the line westward to Paint Rock, creating the route along the French Broad River to Knoxville, Tenn., and also westward to Murphy, N.C., a consolation prize for not reaching copper deposits in southeast Tennessee before another railroad did. Control of the Western North Carolina Railroad shifted with the 1894 consolidation of properties under the Richmond & Danville banner that resulted in the creation of the Southern Railway.

INTO 'THE LAND OF THE SKY'

With the line completed, others left the harsh conditions under which the grade was built to history and concentrated on the beauty of the route and the region. In the late 19th century, Asheville became a resort owing to its cool summer climate (and its historical role as a refuge for tuberculosis

patients), and George Vanderbilt of New York Central fame located his family's summer estate, Biltmore, there. Commoners followed, as well, riding Pullmans on named trains into "the land of the sky." Early 20th century author Thomas Wolfe, an Asheville native, was so moved by a journey on the line that he wrote about it in his novel *Look Homeward Angel* and other books. Engineer, photographer, and frequent *Trains* contributor Frank Clodfelter made it a personal favorite, documenting both steam and diesel operations.

Passenger trains kept the route well traveled later than most. Southern decided to stay out of Amtrak in 1971 and kept running a regular train between Asheville and Salisbury, Nos. 3 and 4, until 1975. A railroad-sponsored excursion train between Asheville and Old Fort, the *Skyland Special*, that ran through 1977, and regular NS steam excursions put many riders in touch with the route for almost three decades. But in the past 10 years, the climb across the mountain between Old Fort and Ridgecrest has faded from public view. It's become just another line on the NS route map.

Still, the charm of this railroad was, and is, in its aloof personality — hidden in the forests, in the trees, and in the valleys. It is there. You just have to seek it out to find it. Almost a year after I left North Carolina for Wisconsin, I went back to make sure I understood the mystique of this railroad that taught me admiration and respect for mountain railroading.

A RAINY DAY ON THE LOOPS

It is a rainy and warm October 2005 Friday morning in Asheville. The yard is busy, and for good reason: This is the railroading hub for Norfolk Southern in western North Carolina, as it has been for more than a century.

Trains depart in four directions — west on the former Murphy Branch 46 miles to Sylva, where short line and tourist-hauler Great Smoky Mountains Railroad operates



Westbound train No. 165 is halfway up the mountain as it pierces 123-foot-long Jarretts Tunnel on an October 1998 day.

another 54 miles of the branch to Andrews (Andrews-Murphy is rail-banked by the state of North Carolina); north to Bulls Gap, Tenn., along the French Broad River, a water-level route through the mountains to Knoxville; south to Hendersonville on the now-closed Saluda line; and east to Salisbury via Old Fort, stepping down from the mountains into the rolling Piedmont landscape.

The modern cinderblock yard office on Meadow Road is quiet, except for the banter between Road Foreman of Engines Tony Johnson and Trainmaster Mike Fields, who is lining up the day's work.

On this day, two six-axle GE C40-9Ws, Nos. 9869, in primer, and 9175 in traditional NS "horsepower" black attire, leave the fuel rack at Asheville's 1924 roundhouse (still

partly in use for running repairs and partly for warehousing) and pull up to the yard office. The two engines constitute today's P32 — a helper job on the Piedmont Division.

Joining engineer Gilbert Joyce and conductor Boyd Wright, both with 33 years of service, are brakeman trainee Randy Quarterman, Fields, and me. Our mission is to run light to Greenlee siding, 35 rail miles to the east, and pick up a block of wood-chip cars that unit wood-chip train No. 66E has set off owing to engine trouble.

It sounds easy, but this day's constant downpour, caused by a stalled tropical depression, has complicated things. Loaded wood-chip cars, Wright points out, weigh 130 to 135 tons dry, but when they're wet, they get heavy. Real heavy. So much so that a pair of big 4,000-hp GEs

— if they're lucky — can lug only 20 cars, about five fewer than normal, up the mountain. Back in F7 days, when Joyce and Wright started, it took five units to wrestle a train over the mountain. As the years went by and locomotives became more powerful, the standard became four GP30s, '35s, or '38s. For six-axes, it was three SD35s, '40s, or '45s. And now we have this pair. "The GEs can pull just as good if not better," Joyce says of his charge. "They just load a little slower."

HELPING P66 OVER THE MOUNTAIN

On this day, the one thing in our favor is that fall is late —

the trees are still green, for the most part, and there will be no leaves on the rails to make our return uphill climb even harder. All we have to worry about is wet rail and the sponge-like wood in the cars.

On a normal day, eastbound P32 would give a boost to a unit grain train bound for mills at either Statesville or Barber. Or it might push a 14,000-ton Catawba or Belmont coal train across Ridgecrest and help with braking on the descent into Old Fort, then take tonnage left by westbound merchandise trains at the base of the grade back to Asheville. But the grain is elsewhere today, and mines on CSX tracks have been more successful at winning contracts with Duke Energy to feed its Marshall Steam Station power





plant at Catawba (Terrell on CSX).

So today, we have one goal: Move the chips. We leave the yard limits, run 17 miles to Ridgecrest through mostly rolling hills, and slow as we enter Swannanoa Tunnel and begin the descent through the loops.

The key to coming down the mountain is control, right from the top, says Johnson, the road foreman. In fact, many engineers consider running down Old Fort more challenging than Saluda, since operations on the latter meant tying down the brakes and dragging down the hill, while Old Fort is much longer with more time for things to go wrong. An engineer must use skill and all the resources available to keep the train under control. Entering the tunnel at no more than 15 mph is imperative; making good use of the dynamic brakes is critical; and not making a large brake-pipe reduction too soon is a wise part of restraint. With light engines, we have little to worry about, but if Joyce were running a train with a full consist, he would have to manage his air with great care. Too

An eastbound Catawba unit coal train eases down the loops in June 1998, after navigating the rails in the foreground. The big GEs on the back of the train stay on to help with braking, then return from Old Fort with westbound tonnage.

much air and you stall, and if you stall, you can't bail off the air and rebuild it in time before a runaway.

Dispatchers who work this line learn, early on, how they can work with train crews to keep eastbounds moving safely down the mountain. The operating philosophy is opposite to that on most mountain railroads. To keep eastbounds from using too much air on the mountainside, upgrade trains stop at Coleman siding, about halfway between Old Fort and Ridgecrest, for meets. Eastbounds keep moving because recharging the brake system after a release is a luxury crews cannot often afford.

"Stopping at Coleman is a good way to piddle away air," Joyce points out.

Holding at around 10 mph,

we drop through the tunnels that mark the upper elevations of the line: Burgin, High Ridge, McElroy, Lick Log, and Jarretts. Exiting one, Wright vouches for his engineer and engineers of this area: "If you can run a train here on the mountain grades we have, you can run it anywhere."

Amen to that, especially halfway down the mountain when we meet the crippled 66E at Coleman. We slip into the siding while 66E's lead unit, C39-8 No. 8620, and the dead C40-9W, No. 9791, hold the sharply curving main with nine soaked cars in tow. Behind him, also on the main, is the local; soon its GP38-2s, Nos. 5332 and 5029, will follow 66E, dragging seven chip cars and two boxcars with them. We slip out of the east end of Coleman, wind our way through the loops, and follow Mill Creek into Old Fort.

ONCE SALUDA'S, THE CHIPS ARE HERE

These wood chips started out at a chipping operation at Conrad, S.C. They would've gone up and over Saluda in multiple cuts, but now they make a roundabout trip out of South Carolina, through Charlotte to Salisbury, where they head west to their final destination, Blue Ridge Paper's plant at Canton on the old Murphy Branch.

The paper plant needs lots of wood chips, and 66E has left P32 quite a set-off: 31 cars at Greenlee and 9 at Old Fort. From Old Fort, we head to the remote siding at Greenlee, pick up 20 of the 31 cars, and head west. The other 11 chip cars will have to wait a day. The crew is anxious to evaluate the potential for trouble on the mountain.

"We've got a good test between Greenlee and Old Fort," Wright says. "If we can make it over Ebenezer Hill with 20 cars, we can make it up Old Fort mountain." We plod across the hill, taking 20 minutes to run the 4.6 miles from Greenlee to Old Fort. We will make it to Ridgecrest, the crew assures me. Not by much, but we'll make it.

Leaving Old Fort, Joyce puts the throttle in Run 6 or 7, but

as he blasts out of Point Tunnel, the only bore near the bottom of the grade and the first one westbound trains encounter, he goes to Run 8 and stays there. We should cruise up the grade at 20 mph, but on this day, we struggle to stay between 16 and 18. There's little slipping — just a lot of water coming down from the heavens to get between the wheels and the rails.

At Dendron, where the curvature and the grades really get tough, we slither up the mountainside like a snake, encircling Andrews Geyser. We see the geyser through the trees once from cab height, once from an engine's height plus 20 feet, and finally from 80 to 100 feet above it.

Our GEs are momentarily headed eastbound until they sail around High Fill, the valley below now being the one we just traversed, and we turn west again. From here, we hug the mountainside. We'll turn eastward twice again as we exit the Mill Creek valley — once at Graphite, and again at Coleman.

"Coleman is a good place to stall," Joyce says as we dip into the coves that mark the climb. Indeed, the siding where we met the train responsible for our mission today is in such a tight curve that track crews double-spike the rails in the curve in an effort to keep them where they're supposed to be.

On this day, we avoid a stall, pierce the series of upper tunnels, and 40 minutes after leaving Old Fort, crest the grade, entering Swannanoa Tunnel at 15 mph. A Norfolk Southern train has won the battle for Old Fort Mountain once again. We return to Asheville, having moved 20 cars closer to their destination. Tomorrow, the same crew will retrieve the stragglers at Greenlee and Old Fort, and 66E will be vindicated.

STORM STORIES

It's appropriate that I took this journey in the rain. Twice, in 1916 and again in 2004, heavy rains saturated the ground on this mountain so much that washouts and land-

slides closed the railroad. Both were caused by the remnants of hurricanes that resulted in widespread flooding, destruction, and death.

The infamous floods of July 1916 wiped out the Southern for weeks. The disaster was so devastating, but the recovery so efficient, that Southern President Fairfax Harrison commissioned a book, *The Floods of 1916*.

The storms of September 2004, while not as severe as those of 1916, did heavy damage to the railroad, closing the Old Fort line, as well as the former Murphy Branch, for several days.

Track Supervisor Don Robinson, whose territory includes Old Fort grade, has a connection to both disasters. His grandfather, Luther Rohm Ludie, was section foreman at Denton when the 1916 storms plagued the mountain. He was among 500 men who labored 45 days straight, working in shifts, 24 hours a day, to reopen the railroad. "He used to tell me stories about it when I was a child," Robinson said.

In 2004, the remnants of hurricanes Frances and Ivan swept across the Carolinas, forcing streams out of their banks and causing widespread damage on Old Fort mountain. The one-two punch of the two back-to-back hurricanes caused washouts of 200 to 300 feet in the highest part of the loops. By one count, the railroad suffered 52 washouts between Ridgecrest and Old Fort.

"It took 400 air dump cars of rock," Robinson said. Today, thousands of laborers aren't needed — hi-rail trucks dumped rock where trains couldn't venture. Once trains could return, they shuttled rip-

A summer downpour drenches No. 165 on a July 1990, evening as it hits the final stretch leading into Swannanoa Tunnel.

rap and ballast from places where trucks could stockpile it at Old Fort and at Ridgecrest to the washout areas.

By the time of my visit a year later, some of the ugly gashes the water had made were starting to heal, and it will only be a few years before the floods of 2004 are a memory. Still, I have to ask, when will the waters be back again? This fall? Next fall? Not for 10 years? Or 20? Will Don Robinson have to fight this battle again?

There is, of course, no way of knowing. But this is for sure: The grade at Old Fort is as remarkable as ever. It is a daily miracle that the Norfolk Southern undertakes to move tonnage up and down the mountain.

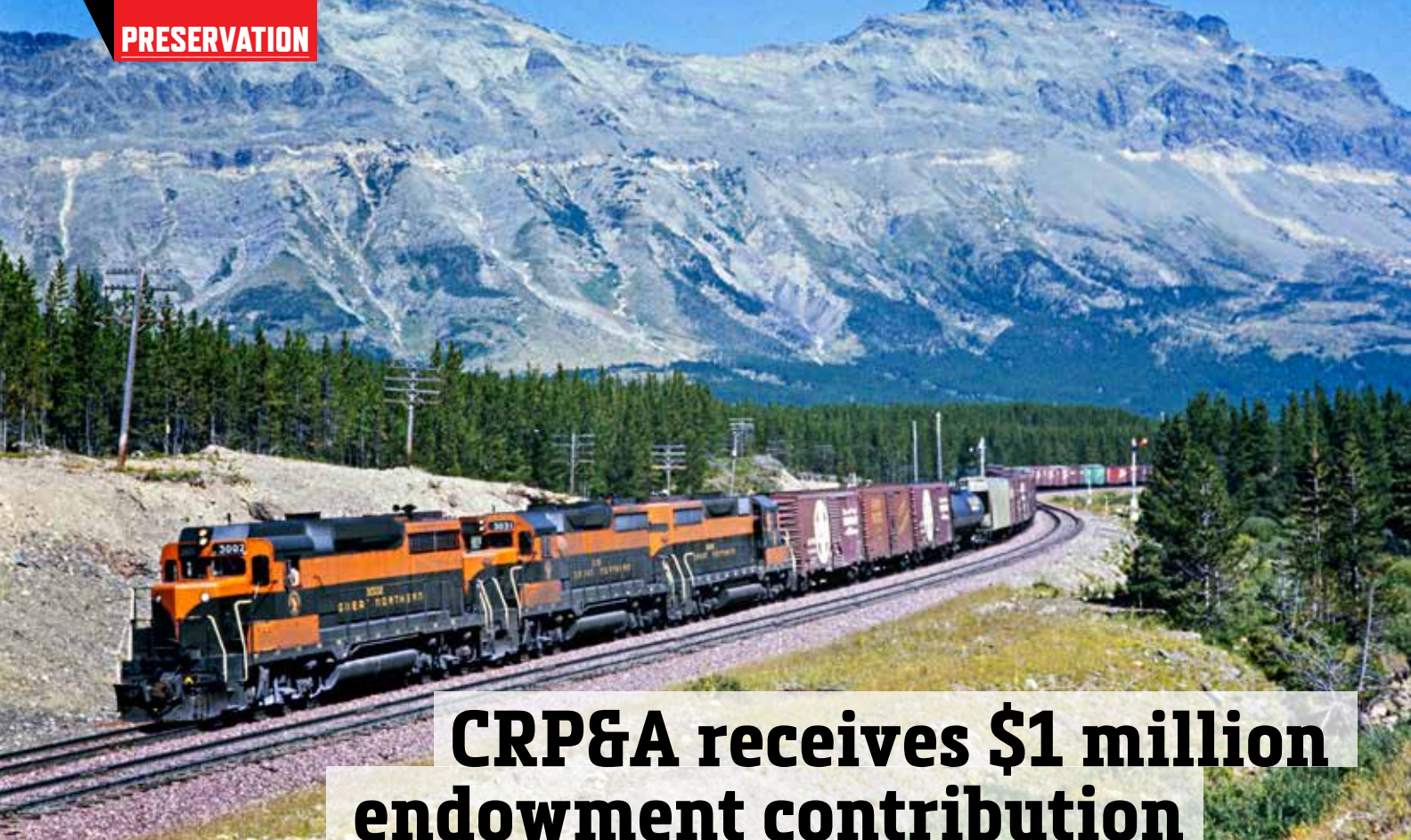
As I write these lines, I reflect on this railroad and the many mountain grades I've been fortunate to see, at Horseshoe Curve, Moss Run, Moffat, Donner, and many other locations. And then my mind wanders to T.S. Eliot and his passage:

And the end of all our exploring. Will be to arrive where we started. And know the place for the first time.

"Yes," I think to myself as I recite the lines, "I've been to that place."

It's back home in western North Carolina, between Old Fort and Ridgecrest, where the trains loop their way into the mountains ... and into your heart. **I**





CRP&A receives \$1 million endowment contribution

Donation from Hill estate will enhance Center operations annually

▲ Montana was one of Ron Hill's favorite locations to photograph trains, and the Great Northern one of his favorite subjects, as illustrated here. Beneath the dramatic peaks of Glacier National Park, a freight train heading west leaves Summit to begin its descent of Marias Pass behind a GP30 and two GP35s on the afternoon of Aug. 22, 1966. Ron Hill

THE ESTATE OF NOTED WESTERN RAIL PHOTOGRAPHER RONALD C. HILL

has made a financial contribution totaling a little more than \$1 million to the Center for Railroad Photography & Art, based in Madison, Wis. The gift is directed to the CRP&A Endowment Fund.

"We're over the moon and feeling tremendously grateful and humbled by Ron's generosity," says Scott Lothes, CRP&A president and executive director. "As one of the West's premier railroad photographers, Ron had already made a lasting impact when he donated his collection to us. Words can't fully express how grateful we are for Ron's great confidence and trust in the Center."

The Hill gift increases the CRP&A's endowment by nearly 50%, allowing the Center to support an increased portion of its annual operating budget with endowment distributions.

Hill, who called Denver home, died on Jan. 23, 2023, at age 85. He was a prolific and accomplished railroad photog-

rapher, particularly of the Intermountain West. His talents were exhibited through his many books and calendars. Most of his collection — more than 25,000 color slides and 2,000 black and white prints and negatives — was previously donated to CRP&A. More than 3,000 of these images have been digitized by the center.

Beyond photography, Hill was an accomplished author, with a dozen railroad books to his credit, many completed with a group of coauthors that included notable photographers such as Bill Botkin, Jeff Brouws, Al Chione, Victor Hand, R.H. Kindig, and Dave Stanley. His first book, *Railroading West: A Contemporary Glimpse*, was published in 1975. It sold out within two editions. Hill also had a strong interest in railroad art — with Chione, he co-authored *The Railroad Artistry of Howard Fogg* (Ced-



Ronald C. Hill

co, 1999), a study of this renowned artist.

"While trains and railroads were his primary subjects, he also photographed airplanes extensively, as well as other modes of transportation, infrastructure, and land-

scapes from the 1950s through the 2010s," says Lothes. "He frequently sought locations that conveyed the geographic features and other characteristics of Western railroads, and he liked to return to the same locations over the years to record the seasonal variety and changes through time."

Hill was a key figure in the development of the Colorado Railroad Museum in Golden, Colo. He served as museum president from 1981 to 1994, and served on the museum's board for more than 40 years.

For additional information on the Center for Railroad Photography & Art and the collections it holds, please visit railphoto-art.org.



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The allure of holiday trains

Rolling along in frosty darkness with a warm drink in hand

▲ Take a ride under wire through snow, ice, and 15,000 colored lights. The Connecticut Trolley Museum at East Windsor holds its annual Winterfest and Tunnel of Lights from the end of November to the end of December. This event is celebrating its 45th year in 2023.

Three photos, Brian Solomon

THE WINTER HOLIDAY SEASON

is a wonderful time to experience rail travel and to create memories that last a lifetime. This is the busiest season for many tourist railroads and long-distance passenger carriers including Amtrak. Some tourist railroads rely entirely on special holiday trains to get them through the lean months that follow. Some even carry more passengers in a few weeks on snow excursions, Santa trains, *Polar Express* journeys, and other seasonally themed trips than they do during the rest of the regularly scheduled year.

I've always loved the holiday season. It's a time to travel and photograph trains, and I've found that trains in the snow make for some of the most alluring images. Yet, I've always wondered what makes this time special for others.

Let's find out.

A former CSX conductor told me that he'd have preferred to be home with his family during the holidays instead of being on the railroad. When working during the holidays, his crew would turn the classification lamps on the front of the locomotive in a simple celebration of the season: one to green and the other to red. The class lights were a legacy of the train order era that ended in the 1980s. However, the lights remained on many older former Conrail locomotives.

The holidays are a time for families to be together. Dave Swirk, president and general manager of Conway Scenic Railroad said, "I love to see families traveling for a holiday event. The special trains are an opportunity for families to travel together and it's touching to see parents, grandpar-

ents, and kids all enjoying a train trip with one another."

Photographer Oren B. Helbok — who has been photographing trains in the snow since 1972 — says holiday trains give folks nostalgia, even those who don't remember the olden days.

"Traveling by train in the winter takes them back to a time they wished they had lived in," he says.

Holiday trains are far more than an American phenomena. My friend Markku Pulkkinen wrote to me about Christmas trains in his native Finland, where people believe that Santa lives in Finnish Lapland, an area famous for its reindeer. Long-distance passenger trains, run by the VR Group, tend to be booked up to the holidays and television stories show "crowds of travelers heading for holidays boarding



Massachusetts' Cape Cod Central is one of several excursion lines around the country that hosts the popular high-energy *Polar Express* seasonally themed trains. These often sell out night after night, so get your tickets early!

full trains at Helsinki main station." Every year it is reported how "Santa Claus starts his journey from Lapland in a sled pulled by a reindeer."

Markku continued, "I have one special Christmas train memory. I used to teach in a school about a hundred miles (160 km) from my home town Oulu. There was a tradition to celebrate the end of autumn term and beginning of Christmas holiday in the local church at midnight. Our pupils and the school choir had prepared a solemn program like singing spiritual songs and reading the Bible. The vicar gave a speech. There was a very nice Christmas atmosphere with candles and decoration. The following morning I traveled home, usually by train. There was a surprise on the train one year. Santa himself in his red gown with fur lining, carrying a sack, wandered up and down the train passing out candies to passengers. He repeated his round after every station stop to cheer up new passengers. I must say I was in a Christmas mood at my destination after the previous night's celebration and the Santa aboard the train. I learned later that the VR had arranged this in cooperation with a charitable organization."

Seasonally, VR runs a night train from Helsinki to Rovaniemi called the *Santa Claus Express* (although sometimes this name refers to all night trains to destinations in Finnish Lapland). Rovaniemi is located at the Arctic Circle, and among the attractions is the world famous Santa Claus Village and train. Both are popular at this time of year when daylight is scarce in the far north.

Many years ago, on my first visit to Finland I traveled this route. It was mostly in daylight and in September, rather than December. However, I found that even in late summer the Arctic offers a cosmic charm.

Whether to the Arctic or closer to home, a big part of the cosmic allure of holiday trains (long-distance or themed excursions) is the festive experience they offer when rolling along in frosty darkness. With warm drinks in hand, imagine passing landscapes where snow cover masks the intrusions of the modern world. Notice the distant twinkling lights of towns and cities, as you pass by holiday decorations that invoke strong feelings of simpler, earlier times. Feelings that will stay with you for a lifetime.

To find out more on the Connecticut Trolley Museum visit, www.ct-trolley.org or visit www.capetrain.com for more on Cape Cod Central Railroad. — *Brian Solomon*

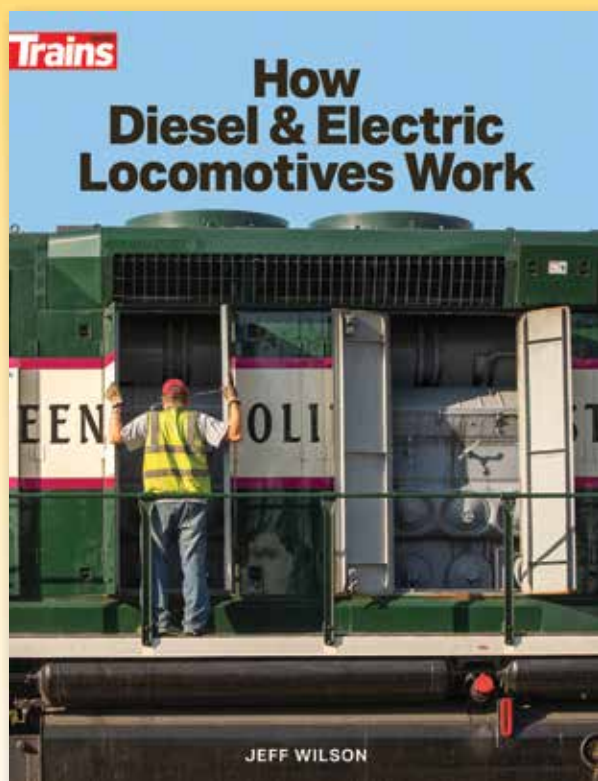


West Chester Railroad's former Penn Central GP38 No. 7706 decorated with a holiday wreath for service on its annual *Santa Express*.





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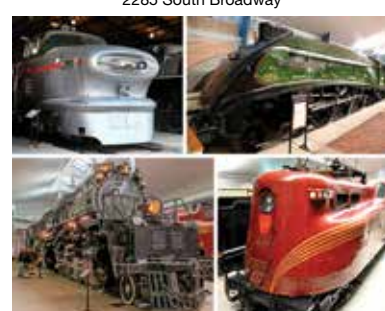
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DECEMBER 2 & 3, 2023: San Joaquin Valley Toy Train Operators, Inc. Model Train Show. Saturday 10am-5pm. Sunday 10am-3pm. Admission: \$10 (cash only), kids under 12 free w/adult. Operating layouts, vendor tables, free parking. Stanislaus County Fairgrounds, 900 N. Broadway, Turlock, CA. Information: Jack Smith 209-765-1354 or Vern Cowan 714-686-7165 www.sjvttoinc.com

JANUARY 27, 2024: The 32nd Annual Great Tri-State Rail Sale. La Crosse Center, 2nd & Pearl Streets, La Crosse, WI. 9:00am-3:00pm. \$5.00, under 12 free. Model, Toy & Antique Trains & Memorabilia, Sale & Swap Meet. 608-781-9383, www.4000foundation.com

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Pretty little boxcars all in a row

Framed by pristine snow and bands of winter clouds, this string of brightly painted Canadian Pacific boxcars rolls south as part of train No. 420. On a cold Feb. 28, 2023, the train is in the final 50 miles of a journey between Winnipeg, Manitoba, and Toronto.

Brandon Muir



Christmas is in the air

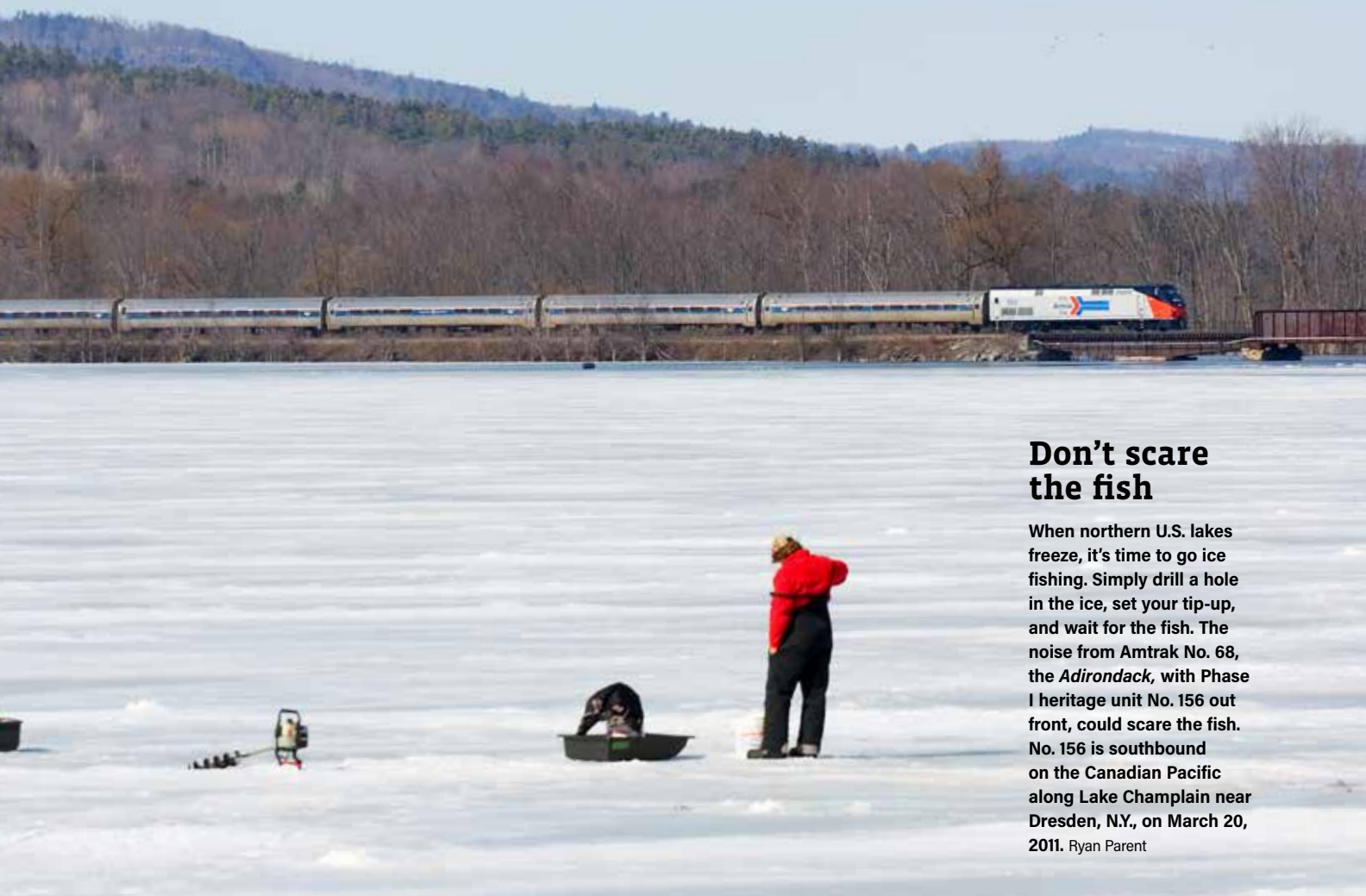
Baltimore-bound Norfolk Southern train No. 34A floats through the Christmas spirit of Havre de Grace, Md., on Dec. 9, 2011. The train, with C40-9W No. 9572 leading, is nearing the south end of Amtrak's Susquehanna River bridge on this crisp, sunny morning. Michael S. Murray



Coal for Christmas

Did you ever wonder where Santa Claus may get his coal? Here's a whole train-load! Not long before Christmas, Dec. 11, 2011, a CSX coal train rolls through the New River Gorge at Cotton Hill, W.Va. That's the headlight of AC4400CW No. 72 illuminating the lightly falling snow. Don Woods





Don't scare the fish

When northern U.S. lakes freeze, it's time to go ice fishing. Simply drill a hole in the ice, set your tip-up, and wait for the fish. The noise from Amtrak No. 68, the *Adirondack*, with Phase I heritage unit No. 156 out front, could scare the fish. No. 156 is southbound on the Canadian Pacific along Lake Champlain near Dresden, N.Y., on March 20, 2011. Ryan Parent



Teddy bear's Christmas

If your train should pass by this field outside Knippa, Texas, along the Union Pacific's Sunset Route, you're in for a big surprise. For this is where the teddy bears are gathering for Christmas. Visible from both the railroad and U.S. Highway 90, a rancher created a Christmas teddy bear from hay bales and paint. It's Dec. 2, 2020, and that's C45AH (ES44AC) No. 8210 on point. Norm Schultze



Heading west to the North Pole

The Big Guy awaits the arrival of Western Maryland Scenic Railroad's *North Pole Express*, seen here at the Frostburg, Md., depot on Dec. 15, 2013. WMSR No. 734, former Lake Superior & Ishpeming 2-8-0 Consolidation No. 34, helps create a near-perfect holiday scene rolling by the station. William Gill





As seen only by train

There are still places that can only be appreciated by train. Amtrak's train No. 8, the eastbound *Empire Builder*, crosses a small mountain bridge near Essex, Mont., on Feb. 28, 2010, passing through one of those scenes best viewed by rail. A trio of GE P42DC units leads the train through the mountains near Glacier National Park.

Travis Dewitz

Holiday juice

The Tropicana juice train heads north to New Jersey on Dec. 9, 2012, with SD70MAC No. 4823 and ES44AC No. 861 pulling through the morning fog. The CSX train, carrying juice products for the greater New York area, is crossing the Manatee River at Bradenton, Fla. Today, Tropicana cars move north in CSX manifest freight trains.

Scott A. Hartley





Oh, what a beautiful morning

On the sunny morning of Dec. 10, 2018, snow clings to every tree branch at the exit of Mud Tunnel near Callahan, Va. CSX train No. G610, led by GE C40-8W No. 7810, emerges from the tunnel and begins its descent of the Allegheny Grade. Samuel Phillips

Tough Sledding

Amtrak Siemens Charger SC44 No. 4633 powers southbound *Lincoln Service* train No. 303 through the three crossings in Atlanta, Ill., during a heavy winter storm on Feb. 2, 2022. The train is already running 3 hours late due to weather delays along the Chicago-St. Louis High Speed Rail Corridor. Steve Smedley



A winter journey

After battling heavy snow, D&RGW train No. 18, the *Rio Grande Zephyr*, has arrived at Denver Union Station from Salt Lake City, on Christmas Eve 1982. Nothing is moving. Amtrak's No. 6, the *San Francisco Zephyr* (one track left), will stay put. Those choosing to detrain will spend the night on station benches. Mel Patrick.



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