

Railfan Rambles

March 2021



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Next Meeting:
No Meeting This Month



Volume 56, No. 3 *RFI Officers*

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About RFI

Railfans of Indianapolis was founded in 1937 as the Indianapolis Railfans Club and is one of the country's oldest rail enthusiasts organizations. Membership is open to all having an interest in railfanning and railroad photography. Members receive 12 issues of *Railfan Rambles* per year either as a color PDF file sent by email or as a black and white printed copy sent via the U.S. Postal Service.

Dues are \$12 annually and should be sent to Larry Nilles, 783 Northampton Row, Danville IN 46122.

Meetings are held monthly at 7 p.m. at St. Andrew Methodist Church, 2560 Villa Avenue. Exit Interstate 65 at East Raymond Street and go east. Turn right (south) onto South State Avenue [or take South Keystone Avenue] to Walker Avenue. The church is at the southwest corner of Walker and Villa avenues between State and Keystone.

Send contributions for *Railfan Rambles* via email to editor Craig Sanders.

www.railfansofIndianapolis.com

The Prez sez...

Greetings Railfans. I hope this issue of *Railfan Rambles* finds you all well.

It soon will be spring. Spring signifies new beginnings, which is something I think we all would welcome.

I'm looking forward to the return of warmer weather, leaves on the trees, flowers reappearing, and green grass.

Does it also mean the beginning of the end of the COVID-19 pandemic? Let's hope so.

With the continuing rollout of vaccines to battle the disease, I'm hopeful that life can start to return to what we once knew.

We had previously decided not to have a March meeting as we wait and watch what the COVID-19 pandemic is doing.

The signs are good that we will again be having in-person meetings sooner rather than later, but exactly when that will happen has yet to be determined.

Your RFI officers are currently discussing a course of action, and when we make a decision we will get the word out to you. In the meantime, continue to be safe and keep those around you safe.

Kim Heusel



Photograph by Craig Sanders

Although the Nickel Plate Road was acquired in 1964 by Norfolk & Western, there remain numerous reminders of it, including the NKP heritage locomotive of Norfolk Southern. No. 8100 is shown leading Train 143 at Milford Junction on Nov. 17, 2020. The train originated in Elkhart and is bound for Chattanooga, Tennessee.

On the Cover: It's winter in Indiana and the photographers are getting out to catch trains in the snow. In the top image, Indiana Rail Road southbound SAHW is at Bluff Road on Feb. 16.

Photograph by Don Toon. In the left bottom image, Louisville & Indiana train Z550 is southbound near Franklin on Feb. 1. That same day CSX train Q688 met the L&I train at North Elvin in Franklin. It is shown at right departing northward behind the Franklin Public Library. **Photographs by Jeff Gast**

Busy Day in Muncie

By Bob Jetmore

Norfolk Southern in Muncie was very busy on Jan. 19. Every time I checked the ATCS, NS had trains approaching or departing Muncie.

I drove over to have a look and found out I missed the NS Nickel Plate Road heritage locomotive.

I was surprised by the 123 that came with the Pennsylvania Railroad heritage unit. Boy, was it dirty.

I stayed around for three trains, NS 123 with the 8102, 9755, 7623 and DPU 4226 at 11:30 a.m.; CSX Q131 with Nos. 5275 and 4572 at 11:57 a.m.; and an eastbound NS grain train with Nos. 4032 and 3671 at 12:15 p.m.

Clouds were moving in so I never waited on three more trains that were coming including the L82, the 177 and another one whose symbol I didn't catch. ■



Photographs by Bob Jetmore

The Pennsylvania Railroad heritage unit needs to visit a wash rack or motor through a good cleansing rain. It is on the point of Train 123.



CSX ES44DC No. 5275 leads train Q131 at a grade crossing in Muncie.



An eastbound NS grain train rounds a curve with a load of covered hopper cars.

Working a Forgotten Piece of the Railroad

This story originally appeared in the Sept. 5, 1980, edition of the Journal Gazette in Mattoon, Illinois, where I was a reporter at the time.

By Craig Sanders

Most nights Bill Cooper finds himself sitting at his desk with nothing to do.

To pass the time he listens on the phone as the dispatcher in Muncie gives orders to trains traveling tracks in distant states, makes out a few reports, and sometimes amuses himself by watching patrons stagger out of a tavern across the tracks.

But mostly he waits, waits for a train to come so he can line the signals for it, waits for the morning to come when he'll call the train crews to work, waits for the section men to call and ask for that day's train lineup, and waits for his 60th birthday when he can retire with full railroad pension benefits.

Doyle "Shake" Beeson relieves Cooper at 8 a.m. Beeson has slightly more work to do than Cooper because the only trains that glide past CO Tower anymore are locals which work mainly during the daylight hours.

Even then "Shake" said there are some days when no trains go by. "It just doesn't seem like we're railroad-ing anymore," Beeson said.

For decades, CO Tower has guarded the crossing of the Nickel Plate (now Norfolk & Western) and New York Central (now Conrail) railroads between Fifth and Sixth Streets in Charleston. The tower is owned by Conrail, but operated by N&W employees

To say CO Tower and the two men who still man it have seen better days in their railroad careers would be to state the obvious

Bit by bit, the railroads have retreated from Charleston. The railroad industry has spent millions in recent years to modernize signal and switching facilities, but hardly a dime of that has been spent on CO Tower.

The equipment and the methods



Photographs by Craig Sanders

A westbound Conrail manifest freight passes CO Tower in April 1977. In the Penn Central and Conrail eras most through freights on the former New York Central (Big Four) main to St. Louis through Charleston were westbounds.

used today at CO Tower are the same ones used by railroads 50 years ago.

Last year, Conrail removed its passing track. Earlier this year, it stopped running its Indianapolis to St. Louis through-freights past CO Tower altogether in favor of the main line through Effingham.

The N&W routes its eastward traffic from St. Louis via its line through Decatur.

In August, CO Tower was downgraded to part-time and the third man eliminated.

Cooper said he was reassigned from second trick (4 p.m. to midnight) to third trick (midnight to 8 a.m.). The tower is no longer manned on second trick on Saturday or Sunday.

Beeson said since the cutbacks in personnel were made, he has twice been called from his Neoga home on Saturday to line the signals for a Conrail local.

The N&W doesn't operate westbound trains out of Charleston on weekends.

Cooper said the only thing that has saved CO Tower from being closed and an automatic signal plant being

installed is the fact Conrail and the N&W have never been able to agree on the matter.

Cooper said probably at one time or another both railroads have sought to close CO Tower and go automatic, but they've never felt that way at the same time.

If the two railroads keep reducing service, Cooper said the problem of what to do with CO Tower will resolve itself.

"If they keep going like they're going, they won't have to worry about putting in an automatic plant," he said.

Shake Beeson as a young man in Brownstown wanted to work in the oilfields just as his father did.

He recalls his original plan was to make enough money to move to Oklahoma where he had once lived when his father's work took him there.

"I was out of work when I heard the railroad (Nickel Plate) needed telegraph operators. I didn't know they had such things," Beeson said

"It was the first time I ever got paid for sitting down," he explained. "I've never regretted it. It's a good living."

Beeson said he can remember

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working at CO Tower during the early 1950s when 25 to 30 trains would pass by during a single eight-hour shift.

CO Tower barely handles that many trains now during an entire month.

Besides copying train orders, calling crews to work and giving signals to passing trains, the CO Tower operator also operates the crossing gates on Sixth Street.

There used to be switches to throw. At one time, CO Tower operators had 46 signal and switch levers.

Today 20 levers remain, only six of which are still used.

Posted on the wall behind the row of levers is a chart listing which lever would throw which switch or line which signal.

Most of the switches and signals shown on the chart simply don't exist anymore.

Ironically, Beeson said he's never met most of the operators and dispatchers he works with.

"I've worked with one dispatcher 20, 25 years. He hired on about the same time I did. I know his voice, but I don't know what he looks like. I've never met him," Beeson said.

Another point of history Beeson took pride in recalling was the top drawer reputation the Nickel Plate Railroad had.

"When I went to work, this was the fastest single-track division run by train orders in the U.S.," he said.

Today the Madison and Charleston Districts of the Muncie Division are still run by train orders, but they're



CO Tower controlled this dwarf signal on the siding of the former New York Central mainline between Cleveland and St. Louis.

hardly the fastest in the country. The maximum authorized speed is 40 miles per hour.

Beeson said he doesn't consider himself a loner even though he's seen many tower men get so used to the loner aspect of the job that it didn't bother them to be by themselves off the job. During the day Beeson said it seems like the phone rings a lot.

Section men sometimes stop by. If a stranger is standing outside looking the tower over, Beeson said he sometimes invites them up for a look around inside.

When none of the above takes place, he fills the time by reading. "I read a lot," Beeson said.

As a boy, Beeson moved a lot as his father went from field to field. He continued to move frequently as he went from job to job with the Nickel Plate.

During his 31 years, Beeson has worked Lerna Tower (when there used to be one) and A&S Tower near Madison.

The years have become a blur to both Beeson and Cooper. Both men have difficulty remembering dates on which they took new assignments or something happened on the railroad.

Cooper thinks the last Nickel Plate passenger train was discontinued in 1957, but he won't swear to it.

He checks a sheaf of papers on a clipboard and determines he went to work at CO Tower in December 1977.

The magic numbers to get a pension are 30 (years of service) and 60 (the age when you can start drawing it).

Both Cooper and Beeson have the years of service. Neither is old enough to retire. So they wait and hope CO Tower will remain open long enough to allow them to retire.

For Shake Beeson that means eight more years.

Cooper, unlike Beeson, has spent his entire railroad life in Charleston. His first steady position was night passenger ticket agent.

When the passenger trains were cut, he became a cashier in the paymaster's office.



For whatever reason the repainting of CO Tower was never finished and the tower appeared this way for several years.

Cooper said he remembers the day when as many as 400 men picked up paychecks at the paymaster's office in the depot. The N&W's Charleston payroll now numbers 13.

Prior to 1977, Cooper was a clerk in the yard office.

When the N&W abolished that position, he moved to CO Tower.

CO Tower is Bill Cooper's last hurrah with the railroad. Now just one year short of his 60th birthday, Cooper said even if CO Tower were closed tomorrow it would be his last assignment. Cooper explained there aren't any more railroad position in Charleston for him.

His seniority extends from Madison to St. Marys, Ohio, but Cooper said he won't leave Charleston to work another assignment just for one year.

How much longer CO Tower will exist is something which Cooper or Beeson decline to hazard a guess.

Cooper explains why. "When I went to work in the passenger station in 1951 I thought I was set for life. I never thought they'd take off the pas-



This August 2012 view looks eastward on the former Conrail right of way. CO Tower would have been on the other side of the tracks to the right. The Decatur & Eastern Illinois Railroad uses those tracks today. The former NKP passenger station and freight house are still standing out of view to the right.

senger trains. You don't try to guess what the railroad is going to do next."

Beeson was freight agent at Coffeen, and worked the extra board before taking a tower job at Ramsey.

The Ramsey tower job lasted 18 years. Three years ago the Ramsey Tower was closed and an automatic signal plant installed.

After Ramsey, Beeson worked as agent at Neoga for one year before being bumped by a man with more seniority.

He then went back to CO Tower for the second time in his career. Beeson said it seems like he's spent most of his life working towers on night shifts.

"It gets kind of lonely, especially at night. Days are not so bad," he said.

Beeson said every tower man has tales to tell about trains that almost collided or derailed.

He recalled once at Ramsey watching a train go by when he noticed the truck of one car was off the tracks.

The rulebook states tower men must be upstairs in the tower when trains are passing.

However, Beeson said he'd rather be on the ground so he can scamper to safety if a train derailed while passing the tower.

Some of the old customs of tower

men have faded away. Beeson said it used to be as many as six tower men would get on the phone lines and joke and tell stories to pass the time.

That stopped when railroad management started to monitor the phone lines. Everyone on the railroad also used to have a nickname by which they were called.

That also, Beeson sadly notes, has fallen by the wayside.

Epilogue

Conrail abandoned its line through Charleston in March 1982 and pulled up the rails a year later. The right of way between Charleston and Mattoon is now a trail.

The former Nickel Plate line was abandoned by Norfolk Southern west of Neoga and east of Metcalf in the middle 1980s.

The surviving line is used by the Decatur & Eastern Illinois Railroad, a Watco Companies subsidiary, which interchanges with Canadian National in Neoga and another D&EI line that was once part of the Baltimore & Ohio in Metcalf.

The last Nickel Plate passenger trains through Charleston were actually discontinued in March 1959. As for CO Tower, it was razed in January 1984. ■

Interchange Track

The city of Charlestown has donated a former Seaboard Air Line passenger car the Louisville Railway Company, which plans to restore it to operating condition. The observation car had been built in 1939 for use on SAL's *Silver Meteor* and has been on static display for the past 25 years.

The city donated the car because the site where it is displayed is slated to be developed, and a proposal to move it to another site in the city was deemed to be not feasible.

The South Shore commuter service substituted buses for trains between South Bend and Michigan City during the first two weekends in February due to severe winter weather.

Last month's severe winter weather had CSX parking trains because of congestion on the Belt Railway of Chicago. Cars were parked without locomotives in sidings on the Monon and Garrett subdivisions, and in the Transfer Yard in Indianapolis. The Indiana Rail Road had to hold more than 100 cars in Hiawatha Yard in Jasonville that were to be routed through Chicago over the BRC. In some instances, railroads were able to bypass the BRC by building solid trains for destinations beyond Chicago. Canadian National was reported to have built solid trains for Cincinnati and CSX built solid trains for CN.

A private charter trip will run on March 21 between French Lick and Jasper on a former Southern Railway route. Tickets are \$40 per person and must be paid for by check. Orders must be received by March 15. The trip is being sponsored by Brian Banta. Tickets can be purchased by mailing a check made payable to Brian Banta to P.O. Box 56, Edinburgh, IN 46124. Email Brian at BantaRail@aol.com or call 812-526-6677 and leave a message. ■

Exhibit Interprets Life Along the Monon

An exhibit portraying life along the Monon Railroad is running through March 12 at the Grunwald Gallery of Art at Indiana University in Bloomington.

The exhibit is titled *Hoosier Lifelines: Environmental and Social Change Along the Monon, 1847-2020* and is described as an artistic and historical exploration of the changing environment along the remains of the Monon Railroad from the Ohio River to Lake Michigan.

One of the exhibit's goals is to reflect on one railway line in an artistic and historical study of 100 years of Indiana's changing environments.

Don Toon said after visiting the exhibit that it succeeds by appealing to all your senses.

"You enter the viewing hall and are greeted by a big screen of sound and moving images, including drone shots of the current state of the Monon, both positive and negative," Toon wrote.

"It tears at the heart strings to see how far the physical plant has fallen in the various haunts of my youth, but lifted by the wonderful photographs and artifacts represented."

In a news release, the gallery said the exhibit, which opened on Feb. 9, is more than a reflection of one rail line.

"*Hoosier Lifelines*' assembled photographs, artifacts, and historical narratives illuminate the long history of what scientists now call the Anthropocene—the age of humans—in Indiana.

"By bringing artistic and historical study to bear on the network of industry, commerce, agriculture, and energy that Hoosiers built during the line's 100+ years of service, the exhibition transports visitors to a new appreciation of a familiar place."

The exhibit curators said that at a time when the state's residents face growing risks from environmental change, public health threats and economic turmoil, the exhibit asks such questions as what becomes of the future that Hoosiers once imagined for themselves; what replaces the network of resources, communities and workers that once brought the state together; and what will sustain Indiana communities in a time of diminishing resources and accelerating environmental change?

Visitors can tour the exhibit using a



Photographs by Don Toon

Semaphore blades, lanterns and other artifacts help to illustrate the history of the Monon Railroad in an exhibit now open at Indiana University.



virtual 3-D walkthrough at the Grunwald Gallery website.

The gallery is located at 1201 East Seventh St. in Bloomington.

More information is available at <https://soaad.indiana.edu/exhibitions/grunwald-gallery/>

After finishing its run in Bloomington, the exhibit will move to New Albany's Carnegie Center for Art and History in July through October, and then to Michigan City's Lubeznik Center for the Arts during October through January 2022.

Lenders to the exhibition include the

Floyd County Historical Society, Floyd County Public Library, Monroe County History Center, Tippecanoe County Historical Association, Indiana Geological and Water Survey, Monon Railroad Historical-Technical Society, Inc., Barriger National Railroad Library, St. Louis Mercantile Library at University of Missouri-St. Louis, Indiana University Herbarium, Indiana University Paleontology Collection, the Mathers Museum and local residents. ■

E.O.T.



Photographs by Bob Jetmore

I had some shopping to do in Fort Wayne earlier this year so while there I drove past Norfolk Southern's New Haven yard and the Chicago, Ft. Wayne & Eastern. NS had two units switching and I could not see their numbers. The locomotive service area was bare. The CF&E had Marquette Rail SD40-2 No. 3413, CF&E GP38-2 Nos. 2131 and 2135, and a couple other motors whose numbers I could not see.



Photographs by Phil Brooks

I was on my way home on Feb. 20 when I saw this grain train on CSX's Frankfort Branch near Brownsburg likely going to ADM in Frankfort. I couldn't stay and count cars but watching my rear view mirror it probably was more than 50.



Photographs by Larry Zimmerman

Let's close this issue with two past winter images. An eastbound grain train with six locomotives in Chessie System and Baltimore & Ohio liveries is at Rochdale on March 3, 1985, on the B&O line that once linked Indianapolis and Springfield, Illinois. The train had pulled a knuckle on a covered hopper car. Conrail train WSAV80 is dashing through the snow back to Avon Yard and passing the grain elevator in Fortville on Jan. 26, 1977. On the point is GP38-2 No. 8176