

BNSF IN THE NORTHEAST WASHINGTON BACKWOODS

Chase the Chewelah

BRUCE E. KELLY/PHOTOS AS NOTED

A FORMER GREAT NORTHERN BRANCH and river valleys of northeastern Wash- James J. Hill aimed to build a main line ▲ A forests of the Pacific Northwest lured in rail lines from all directions. Lakes with Puget Sound. Hill realized he is a long way from the former Santa Fe Much of that trackage has long since would eventually compete against Canamain line across the Mojave Desert. And vanished, but this rugged landscape still dian Pacific for east-west traffic, so he yet, here we are on a Saturday morning hosts enough commerce and enough rail- probed northward into Canada wherever near Springdale, Wash., watching an way to give four-axled locomotives that possible to gain business. And why not? A-B-B-B-A set of EMD GP60s crawl its were once the pride of their fleet a place CP was invading Hill's turf by piecing way up a 1 percent grade with lumber, to spend their golden years. It's hardly a together properties that would form Soo sand, and empty ore cars on the drawbar. retirement home; these Geeps still flex Line in the American Midwest. Three decades ago, these units would their muscles. And they're not forgotten, have been flying through Cadiz, Calif., having developed a cult following among at close to 70 mph with the hottest of railfans who seek one of the most unique Santa Fe's intermodal trains. Now they and well-matched motive power shows mosey down a goat trail northwest of on BNSF or anywhere else. Spokane, Wash., connecting BNSF Railway with customers located near the Canadian border, on a train known as the Chewelah Turn.

that twists its way through pine ington and southern British Columbia along the northern tier linking the Great

All Eyes on the Northwest

Before BNSF there was Burlington Northern, and before 1970 there was ward Canada. Spokane Falls & Northern Natural resources amid the mountains Great Northern, whose visionary leader Railroad spiked down some 102 miles of

When GN reached Spokane in 1892, Northern Pacific and Oregon Railway & Navigation Company had both been well established there (OR&N would later become part of Union Pacific). Local entrepreneur Daniel Chase Corbin was already three years ahead of Hill in terms of building a line from Spokane north toSF&N to GN.

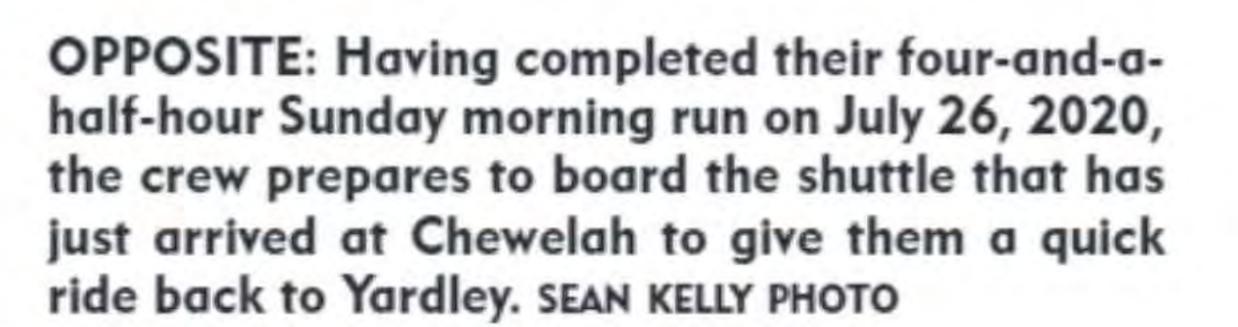
with four miles of much straighter track, making Dean, Wash., (just north of Colbert) the new junction between the former SF&N and the GN main line.

cus, Wash., just north of present-day large yard and shops complex at Hill- 1906 of Spokane International Railway Kettle Falls, during 1889-90. Over the yard, its name honoring the company to connect with CP south of Cranbrook, next few years, Corbin extended SF&N president, yet coincidentally located atop B.C., forged an east-west corridor involvinto British Columbia, around the same a bluff some 200 feet above Spokane. Bet- ing Soo Line, CP, SI, and UP that comtime that CP and GN were converging on ter known for manufacturing 2-8-8-2s, peted with GN then and remains mildly that territory from the east and west. NP Hillyard almost lost its role as a sorter competitive with BNSF today. Eventualacquired SF&N in 1898. Later that year, and builder of freight trains to a larger ly, there was relative peace between GN financial restructuring forced NP to sell classification yard that GN considered and CP, the two companies exchanging developing near Dean in the late 1960s; a wealth of business across the interna-Hill now possessed the means for that project got dropped in the lead-up tional boundary decades before the North branching into southern British Colum- to the 1970 BN merger. Hillyard finally American Free Trade Agreement. bia more easily than with the line he succumbed to post-merger downsizing was building eastward from Vancouver. during the 1980s, when BN consolidated Northwest branches that became unpro-During 1899-1900, GN eliminated near- its Spokane diesel servicing to the ex-NP ductive or too costly to maintain. The ly 15 miles of SF&N's meandering track facility at Parkwater and switching dugroundwork laid earlier by D.C. Corbin north of Mead, Wash., and replaced it ties to the ex-NP yards at Yardley and in British Columbia, however, would help Erie Street.

track to the Columbia River port of Mar- Ten miles south of Dean, GN built a being in Canada. Corbin's completion in

GN and CP snipped any of their Inland keep his SF&N alive through the GN In 1932, GN operated more than 300 years, and beyond. Corbin and another miles of branch lines radiating north American tycoon, Frederick Heinze, went from Dean, nearly 100 of those miles after gold and copper near Rossland, B.C. Heinze established a successful smelter at nearby Trail, while Corbin built a daring rail line called Red Mountain Railway - with hairpin loops and audacious timber trestles — to link SF&N with Rossland. Canadian Pacific secured rail access to Trail from the north as well as control of the smelter by 1898.

> Canadian Pacific introduced processing of lead and zinc at Trail, and its delivery of those ores and processed



LEFT TOP: On the evening of July 14, 2016, the northbound Chewelah rounds the corner into Hillyard with a GP39M, four GP60Bs, and a GP30 rebuilt as a GP39M lugging 61 cars up the 1 percent grade.

LEFT: Sunflowers north of Deer Park greet GP60M-3 104 and its A-B-B-B-A consist on the northbound Chewelah of August 2, 2020.

BELOW: Three miles north of Colbert (Dean on the railroad), the southbound Chewelah of July 11, 2020, eases slowly across the Little Spokane River, its train descending one hill and about to





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TOP: Six Geeps guide the Chewelah north through Hillyard on the morning of July 29, 2018. Where Great Northern's shops and yard once stood, BNSF has arranged tracks to serve local industries and to accommodate future expansion of Spokane's North-South Freeway. BRUCE E. KELLY PHOTO

ABOVE: A Sunday morning northbound crosses U.S. Highway 2 at Dean, a few miles into the descent toward the Little Spokane River on July 5, 2020. SEAN KELLY PHOTO

concentrates made Corbin's RMR serv- the border at Waneta, B.C., being mostly obsolete. GN abandoned the RMR line in Jim Hill. 1922, but the reputation of GN's former SF&N trackage as a vital ore-hauling route would be solidified decades later.

inland from port landed primarily with less cost, in terms of purchase price and 40 GP60s and 40 Dash 8-40Bs during BN, its routing from the Vancouver area long-term expense — than the typical 1988-89. Santa Fe then went wide-nosed south to Everett, Wash., east to Yardley, freight power of the day. and north to a truck transload just above Frisco's order for 10 GP50s landed as 83 Dash 8-40BWs, during 1990-92.



ABOVE: On the morning of August 2, 2020, A-B-B-B-A GP60s drag a nearly 100-car Chewelah north up the 1 percent grade out of Spokane, approaching the former site of GN's Hillyard shops and freight yard. BRUCE E. KELLY PHOTO

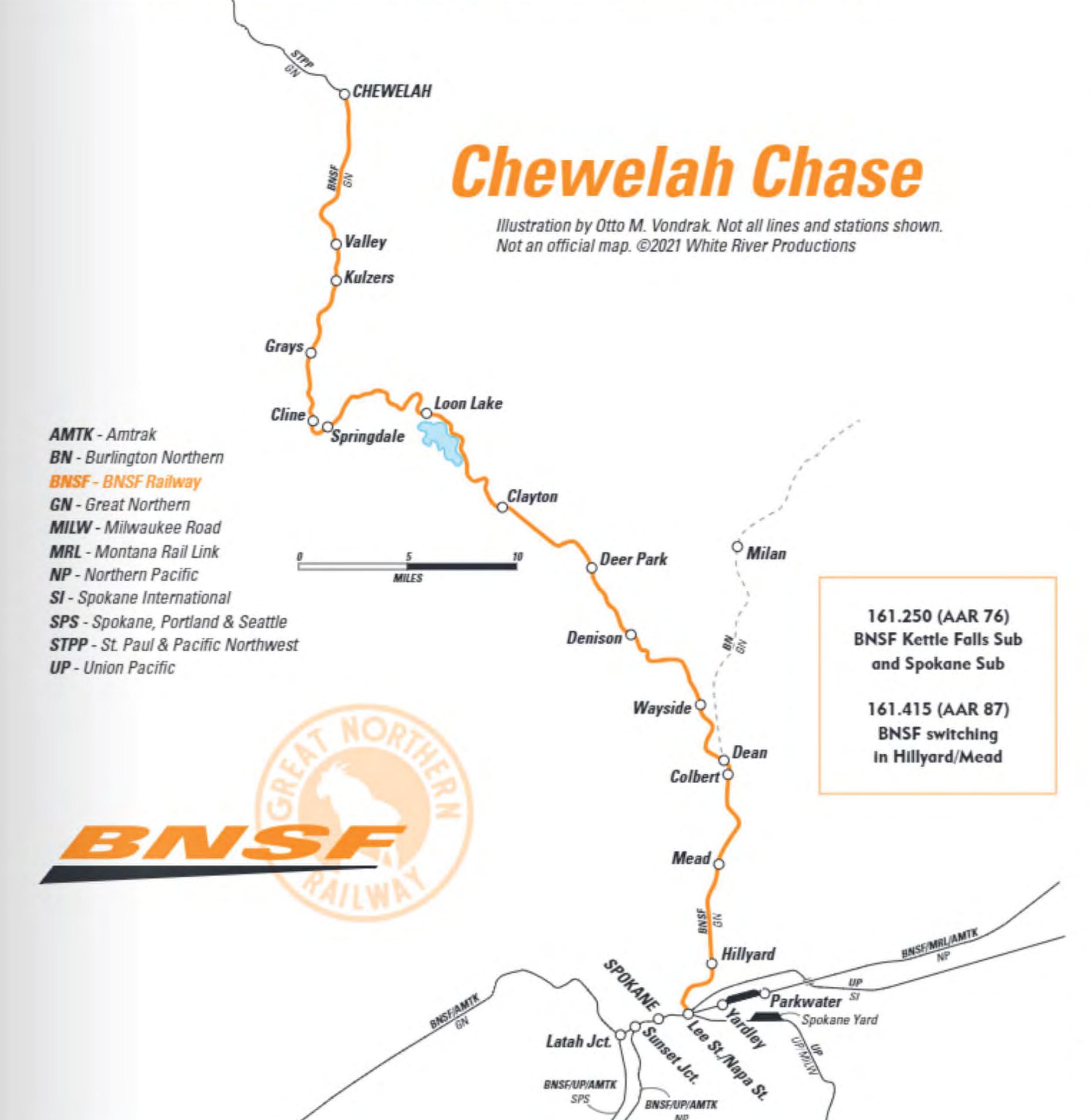
ing Rossland from the south virtually of GN heritage. Another point scored for

Four Axles for the Future

Around the same time that "Doc" In 1989, the Red Dog Mine opened for Brown was wiring a flux capacitor into a the southern B.C. interior had been evaptives that could perform more like sports essence. orating since the 1960s. Thus, the long- cars than pickup trucks — to haul inter- A handful of railroads followed BN's term contract for shipping Red Dog ore modal and other high-priority trains at lead, including Santa Fe, which bought

straight onto the BN roster when the two railroads merged in 1980. BN bought another 53 GP50s in 1985, along with 120 cabless B30-7As, which began arriving in 1982. Packing more horsepower than their elder Geep and B-Boat cousins, BN's modern four-axle units weren't idebusiness in western Alaska, exporting DeLorean so he and Marty McFly could al for dragging heavy trains up mountain zinc and lead ore globally, much of it travel back to the future, Burlington grades, but they proved themselves worbound for Trail. Unfortunately for CP, its Northern, Santa Fe, and other railroads thy when coupled to the front of trailers most direct lines linking Vancouver with were seeking a way forward with locomo- and containers where speed was of the

with its purchase of 63 GP60Ms, as well



Those early '90s units took railfans and railroaders back to the future, dressed in the resurrected red and silver paint of Santa Fe's legendary warbonnet scheme. And in the ultimate nod to yesteryear, Santa Fe received 23 cabless GP60Bs in 1991, which often appeared in A-B-B-A consists with their GP60M counterparts, similar to matched F-unit consists of the

North of Spokane, meanwhile, BN's ex-GN branch lines to Chewelah, Kettle Falls, and Canada were being served by a series of local jobs powered by GP9s, GP35s, and GP38s, often coupled in sets of 10 or more if tonnage dictated or whenever units needed to be shuttled south to Parkwater for servicing. Hinting at things to come, BN locals out of Kettle Falls in the late 1980s were beginning to see GP38-2s or GP40s coupled around a string of cabless B30-7As. Lumber and woodchips dominated the traffic on these branches until Red Dog ore showed up.

By the time Burlington Northern and Santa Fe merged in 1996, intermodal trains of the mid-1990s were growing in

BELOW: Dynamic brake blowers howl as the Chewelah drops down the 1 percent grade from Hillyard and curves across the Spokane River approaching Yardley on July 11, 2020. BN built this bridge in 1972 and joined it with a short stretch of UP track to connect the former GN main to the former NP. BRUCE E. KELLY PHOTO



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ABOVE: An ex-Chicago, Burlington & Quincy GP30, rebuilt as a GP39M, leads the Chewelah Turn over Trent Avenue and Napa Street on its final approach to Yardley on March 16, 2017. This short segment of former Union Pacific track became part of BN's Kettle Falls branch during the consolidation of Spokane area lines in the early 1970s. BRUCE E. KELLY PHOTO

RIGHT: Just after 6:00AM on August 18, 2019, a typical Sunday at Yardley, a ready-to-go Chewelah Turn with a six-pack of Geeps and a long cut of Red Dog ore gondolas on the front slumbers at the west end of the yard. Within the hour, the train's crew will board and prepare for the trek north to Chewelah. SEAN KELLY PHOTO

both length and tonnage and being led by the latest in six-axle power. Ex-Santa Fe Dash 8-40BWs and GP60Ms joined ex-BN GP40s and GP50s on BNSF locals or manifests working north of Spokane. And as the years rolled by, GEs vanished almost completely from Kettle Falls country, while the Geeps assigned subsidiary St. Paul & Pacific Northwest there underwent mechanical upgrades. (STPP) then took charge of the 80 miles Most were repainted in variations of the between Chewelah and Columbia Gar-BNSF color scheme, which harkens back dens in 2019, and what remained of KFR to GN orange and green more than any- was just 44 miles between Kettle Falls thing else, with the Santa Fe-style circle cross emblem still adorning the GP60Bs.

Not Your Average Branch Line

Construction of Grand Coulee Dam and the resulting reservoir on the Columkane, splitting at Kettle Falls with one the Chewelah Interchange Pass. San Poil, Wash.

was leased to KFR. Progressive Rail change. Tuesday through Saturday, the







and Grand Forks. Some railfans noticed that STPP's name is only one word away from St. Paul & Pacific, the outfit begun in 1857 that formed the nucleus of GN.

Today, BNSF's Kettle Falls Subdivision stretches roughly 62 miles from bia River forced GN to relocate track in Chewelah south to Control Point Lee the Marcus-Kettle Falls area in 1941. Af- Street, where a connection is made with ter BN took over in 1970, it eventually rea a joint UP/BNSF track alongside BNSF's moved some 30 miles of former GN main busy Spokane-Sandpoint corridor just line between Dean and Newport, Wash., west of Yardley. BNSF crews rarely run and relegated the former GN main be- into Chewelah proper; instead, they extween Dean and Spokane to branch sta- change trains with STPP (still viewed tus. All of this would leave BNSF with by some as KFR) two miles south of a simple Y-shaped branch north of Spo- Chewelah at a 7,800-foot siding called

leg continuing northeast toward Nelson, Over the past couple of years, Mon-B.C., and the other leg heading north and day through Friday, the northbound west to Grand Forks, B.C., then south to Chewelah Turn, symbol M-SPOCWH, has departed Yardley sometime between BNSF ultimately dropped the Nelson 6:00 and 7:00pm, though it's been known line north of Columbia Gardens, B.C. The to leave town hours before or after that. two branches above Kettle Falls were sold In the dark of night, once STPP arrives to OmniTRAX subsidiary Kettle Falls In- from the north, locomotives and endternational Railway (KFR) in 2004, while of-train devices are swapped between track south of Kettle Falls to Chewelah the two trains at the Chewelah Inter-



ABOVE: A sliver of sunlight catches GP60M-3 104 leading Train M-CWHSPO south in the morning shadows along Loon Lake on July 11, 2020. BRUCE E. KELLY PHOTO

LEFT: Having just crested the high point of the line at Loon Lake, a Sunday morning northbound Chewelah starts the 1 percent maximum descent toward Springdale with 109 cars, including a cut of 33 loaded Red Dog ore gondolas, on August 18, 2019. SEAN KELLY PHOTO

southbound Chewelah Turn, M-CWH-SPO, has been departing as early as 5:00 AM or any time thereafter.

Sundays provide a chance to chase the northbound from Spokane to Chewelah in daylight, usually on the move by 6:00AM. Still thought of as a Chewelah Turn, this is technically a relief job handled by a crew that spends the rest of its week working other locals out of Spokane. This same crew brings the Chewelah back south on Monday morning.

Lane Mountain Company's sand plant at Valley is the only on-line customer that's routinely serviced by the Chewelah Turn. The 3,420-foot siding on the north side of Valley also gets switched on occasion to add or subtract hopper cars stored there for Lane Mountain. Otherwise, it's a fairly straight run for the Chewelah

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RIGHT: On the morning of August 18, 2019, two GP50s (derated as GP25s) and four GP60Bs exit Tunnel 1 approaching Mead with a 109-car northbound Chewelah.

RIGHT BOTTOM: Bridge 47.5 rumbles beneath A-B-B-B-A GP60s leading the northbound Chewelah across Highway 231 and Sheep Creek, just north of Springdale on July 26, 2020. BRUCE E. KELLY PHOTOS

both directions, but one that's easy to chase because track speed is 10 to 25 mph across most of the Kettle Falls Sub, with a short 35 mph sprint between Dean and Mead.

Northbound departures from Spokane are occasionally delayed by the Mead Turn, which makes a round trip to Hillyard and sometimes Mead to switch local industries. When timed ideally, the Mead will either duck into the clear to let the northbound Chewelah pass or will head out immediately behind the Chewelah.

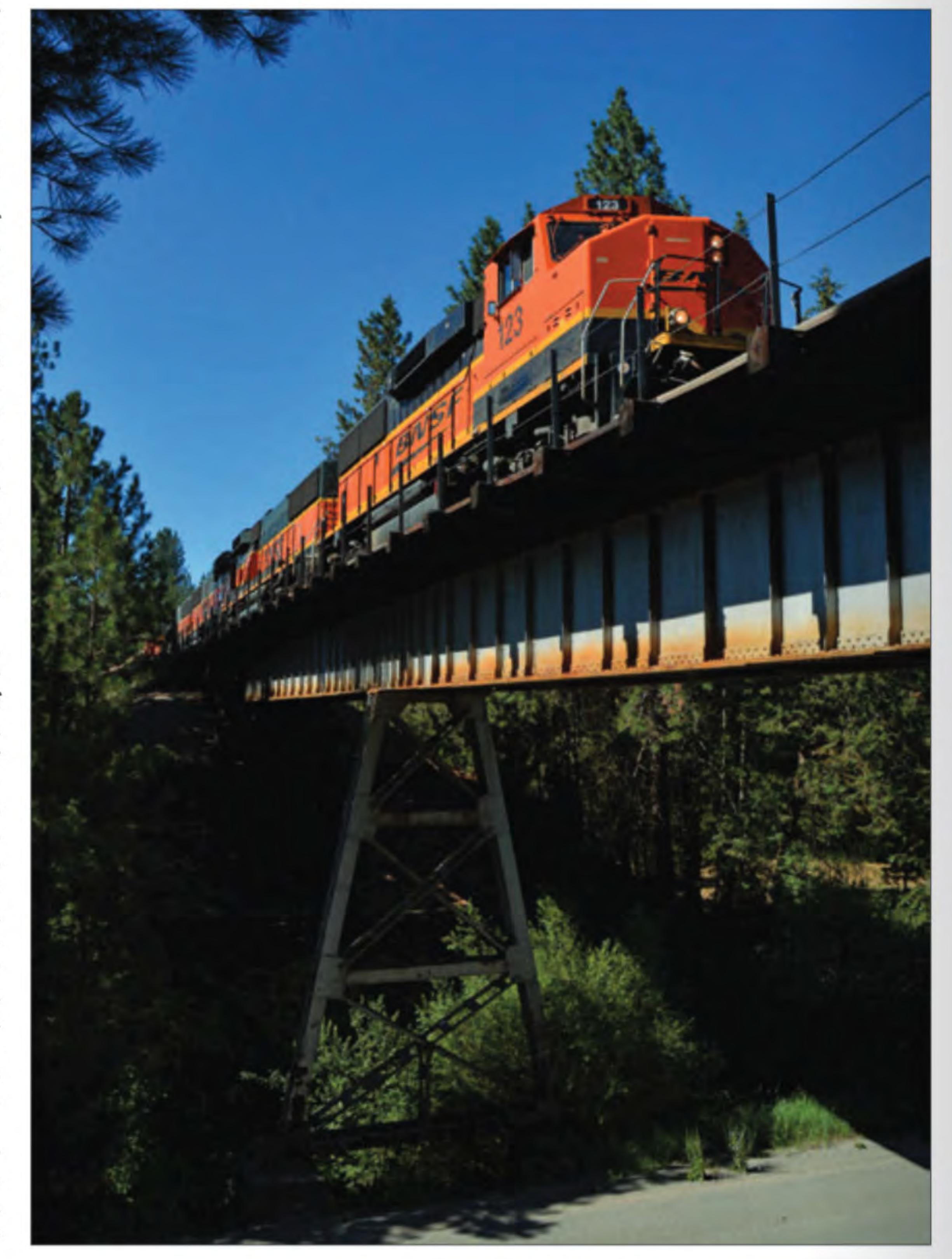
Teck Resources now owns the Red Dog mine and Trail smelter. BNSF manifest H-EVESPO, which moves Red Dog zinc loads from Everett to Yardley for handoff to the Chewelah Turn, has occasionally been shifted off its normal course via Wenatchee and routed farther south via Pasco, Wash.

Most of the rail BN installed north of Spokane in the 1980s is 115 pounds per yard, versus 110 pounds or lighter in GN days. But it isn't rail weight that limits trains to four-axle power north of Dean as much as it's been the abundance of tight curves, many as sharp as 10 degrees. One cluster of curves north of Loon Lake forms a giant horseshoe in the forest, where a drone or aircraft directly overhead is the only way to see a mile-long train wrapped back upon itself. Combine areas of severely serpentine track with a roller coaster of grades reaching 1.04 percent and a Chewelah engineer has his or her work cut out for them.

North of Dean, to avoid buff forces that cause excess rail and wheel wear in curves as well as increase the risk of derailments, crews are prohibited from using dynamic braking on descending grades, relying instead on a healthy application of air. South of Dean, on what was once the GN main line, dynamics are permitted. GP60M-3s and GP60Bs put their extended-range dynamics to good use when easing a lumber-laden Chewelah down the 1 percent from Hillyard and over the curved Spokane River bridge at a crawl. That bridge was built in 1972, after the BN merger, to better link the former GN to NP and the Yardley terminal. A short segment of UP track that once reached into downtown was also cobbled into this GN-NP connection.

The man who planted the roots for this railroad, D.C. Corbin, whose middle name was Chase, had no idea that train enthusiasts would be doing precisely that





railfans chase the Chewelah for its dis- steel, or wood, no two being alike, and tinctive motive power, the Kettle Falls Sub has engineering landmarks that are just as noteworthy. The line's only tunnel is a 1,300-foot tube of pre-cast concrete arches that was erected south of Mead in 2009. It was then covered with rock north of Mead, especially between dusk of restaurants, providing a comfortable and dirt to allow Spokane's North-South and dawn. Deer Park and Chewelah have home base for a week of photographing

more than a century later. While most on photogenic bridges made of concrete, some dating back to the steam era.

Visiting Chewelah Country

Railfans should be on the lookout for the line crosses highways and local roads Loon Lake and Valley offer one or two KFR counterpart.

local outlets with limited hours of business. For an extended stay in Chewelah country, there are a couple of small motels in Chewelah itself, as well as rental cabins on Loon Lake. Colville, 23 miles north of Chewelah, has more than a half deer, elk, and moose in the rural areas dozen lodging choices plus a wide variety Freeway to pass overhead. Elsewhere, plenty of options for food and gas, while both the Chewelah Turn and its STPP/

> Great Northern crews obeying the Chewalah route's 35 mph maximum speed limit in the 1930s could not have imagined diesel-electrics built for twice that speed would some day work there. But one glimpse of those A-B-B-B-A Geeps in their GN-inspired paint, moving freight where bigger units dare not venture, proves they've found their niche.

> LEFT: A precarious rocky knob offers a view down on a Sunday northbound Chewelah Turn passing a small marsh in the woods just south of Loon Lake on July 5, 2020. From here, the sound of the train climbing the stiff grade from Deer Park could be heard for nearly a half-hour. SEAN KELLY PHOTO

> BELOW: An 81-car M-CWHSPO climbs the 1 percent out of the horseshoe loop approaching Loon Lake on August 22, 2020. Lead unit 3126 was a BN GP50 built in 1985; it's now a GP25 derated to 2,500 hp. BRUCE E. KELLY PHOTO





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