

RAILROADING BY LAND AND SEA

Southern Railway of British Columbia

bring all appropriate personal protec- Much like the people who operate the railway systems operating in Vancoutive equipment, including a hardhat. As railway, SRY is incredibly distinctive. ver, Victoria, and New Westminster walked in, looked at me and my hardhat, railway is owned by Washington Com- Electric Railway. The railroad grew, and said, "That'll really help when a box- panies (which also owns Montana Rail eventually reaching Chilliwack in 1910. car falls on your head!"

TREMEMBER IT WELL. It was my first day no boxcars have fallen on my head. At Mainland and scenic Fraser Valley. Peras a trainman on Southern Railway of first, it was a steep learning curve, but haps the railway's most impressive British Columbia in June 2006 and I I've progressed to become an experienced attribute, though, is its adaptability, was nervous. I had just landed a dream conductor and locomotive engineer. It particularly given the company was esjob fresh out of high school and while I has been a whirlwind of a career, but my tablished well over 100 years ago as a had been a railfan for my entire life, I favorite part has been working with a passenger-focused railway. quickly learned that meant nothing in small group of unique individuals, many the world of railroading. I was told to of whom I consider my closest friends.

More than a decade later, thankfully, of track, stretching through the Lower Pacific-built Vancouver & Lulu Island

MATTHEW ROBSON/PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

Interurban Origins

In 1897, several interurban and street I sat in the crew room, a grizzly engineer Based in New Westminster, B.C., the were combined into British Columbia Link) and operates on nearly 125 miles The railroad also leased the Canadian

land and Fraser Valley produced plenty of freight traffic too.

The railway flourished until the 1940s, when automobiles and highways proved more attractive to passengers. The final

Railway, a north-south route through blow came in 1958 when the last re- distinct yellow and red paint scheme Vancouver, connecting the island city of maining interurban route between Mar- with the company's logo. Richmond. While its primary focus was pole and Steveston closed; however, the The 1980s were the most turbulent





moving people, the growing Lower Main- freight business remained. Three years time in the railway's history. First, CP reafter the last interurban ran, the freight sumed operations on the 22-mile Vancouoperation was absorbed by the crown ver & Lulu Island Railway after nearly corporation British Columbia Hydro an 80-year lease with the railway. Then, and Power Authority (BC Hydro). The in 1988, BC Hydro sold the railway. Itel railroad's locomotives operated with a Rail Group, a U.S.-owned division of Itel Corp, purchased it and renamed it Southern Railway of British Columbia. The company kept the red, white, and blue livery BC Hydro had introduced shortly before the sale (which had replaced the yellow and red scheme). But the

> **OPPOSITE: SW900s 903 and 900 lead Southern** Railway's barge job across the Queensborough Bridge over the Fraser River on July 3, 2013. The SW900s are a staple for the railway and truly dependable. Twelve locomotives were bought brand-new for the railway throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s, and only one has been retired since.

> LEFT: GP9 135 is the yard power in Trapp on June 29, 2013, with GP9s 119 and 112 awaiting their next assignment.

> BELOW: SRY 135 and slug 001 prepare for the night shift in Trapp Yard on the cold, snowy night of December 9, 2013. Slug 001 is a homemade unit the railway custom-built in 2005 from an ex-CN SW900.

new owners were not well received and the employees went on a strike within a year after the company tried to change its pension program. Six years later, Itel sold the railroad to Washington Companies, which soon painted all the equipment (mostly SW900s, MP15s, and SD38s) into blue and black like its other railroad, Montana Rail Link. Nearly all of SRY's present motive power is original to the railroad, except for some GP9s from MRL and Canadian Pacific.

RIGHT: The inherent challenges of loading a rail barge are evident at the Annacis Rail Marine Terminal on August 23, 2014. The weight of loaded rail cars can turn the ramp into something more often seen at a skate park, depending on the tides. Weight must be distributed evenly across the barge to avoid capsizing. It can be a nerve-wracking experience, but the employees at the railway are true professionals, as their tremendous safety record proves.





Following the Railroad

The heart of SRY operations is Trapp Yard, on the border of New Westminster has changed. Here is where SRY's Anand Burnaby. The railroad's offices are nacis Spur begins, branching south and at the east end of the yard (in New West- over the North Arm of the Fraser River. minster), and the locomotive shop is at the west end (in Burnaby). The majority the swing bridge is one of the most picyard can be viewed from the Queensbor- Because of the sporadic rail traffic, the toracks from the terminal before switchfor a few miles to the west of the yard to once or twice a week. service several customers.

dustrial area, the two interchange yards cent of the railway's traffic originates.

are now surrounded by apartment buildings — a sign of just how much the area Arm of the Fraser River and is part of Known as the Queensborough Bridge,

Not even a mile from the Queensbor-SRY interchanges with BNSF at Trapp ough Bridge, the Annacis Spur cross-Yard, usually meeting BNSF crews and es another swing bridge. This bridge, CP and Canadian National are about a and road bridge over the Annacis Chan-

> LEFT: A crew begins to unload a barge at the Annacis Rail Marine Terminal, viewed from the pedestrian walkway on the Alex Fraser Bridge on February 12, 2018.

> **BELOW:** The tugboat Seaspan Protector prepares to dock barge 930 at the ARMT on July 10, 2014. Seaspan, which is also part of the Washington Companies, has a very close relationship with the railway as the sole provider of rail-marine service to the barge slip.

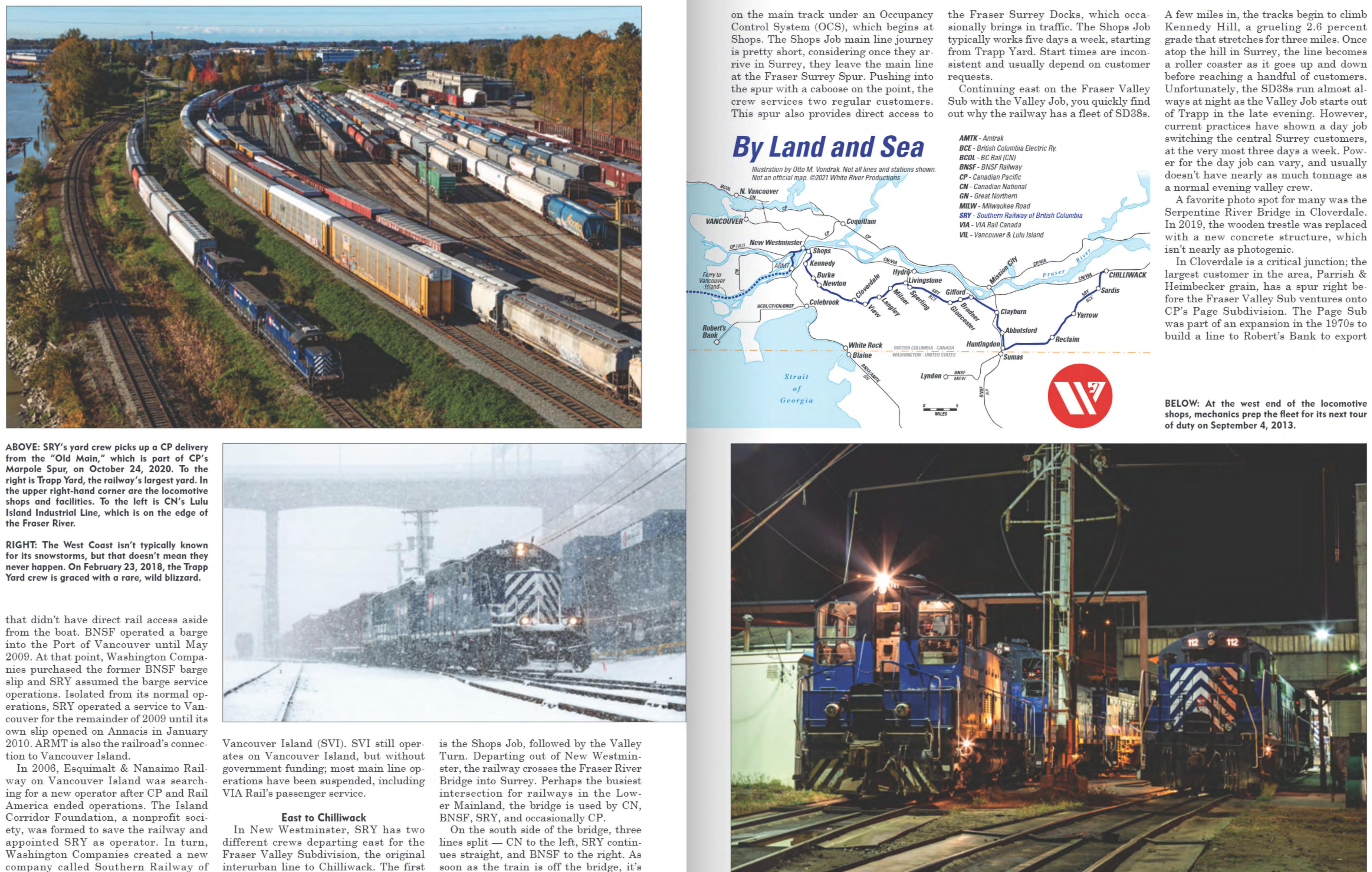


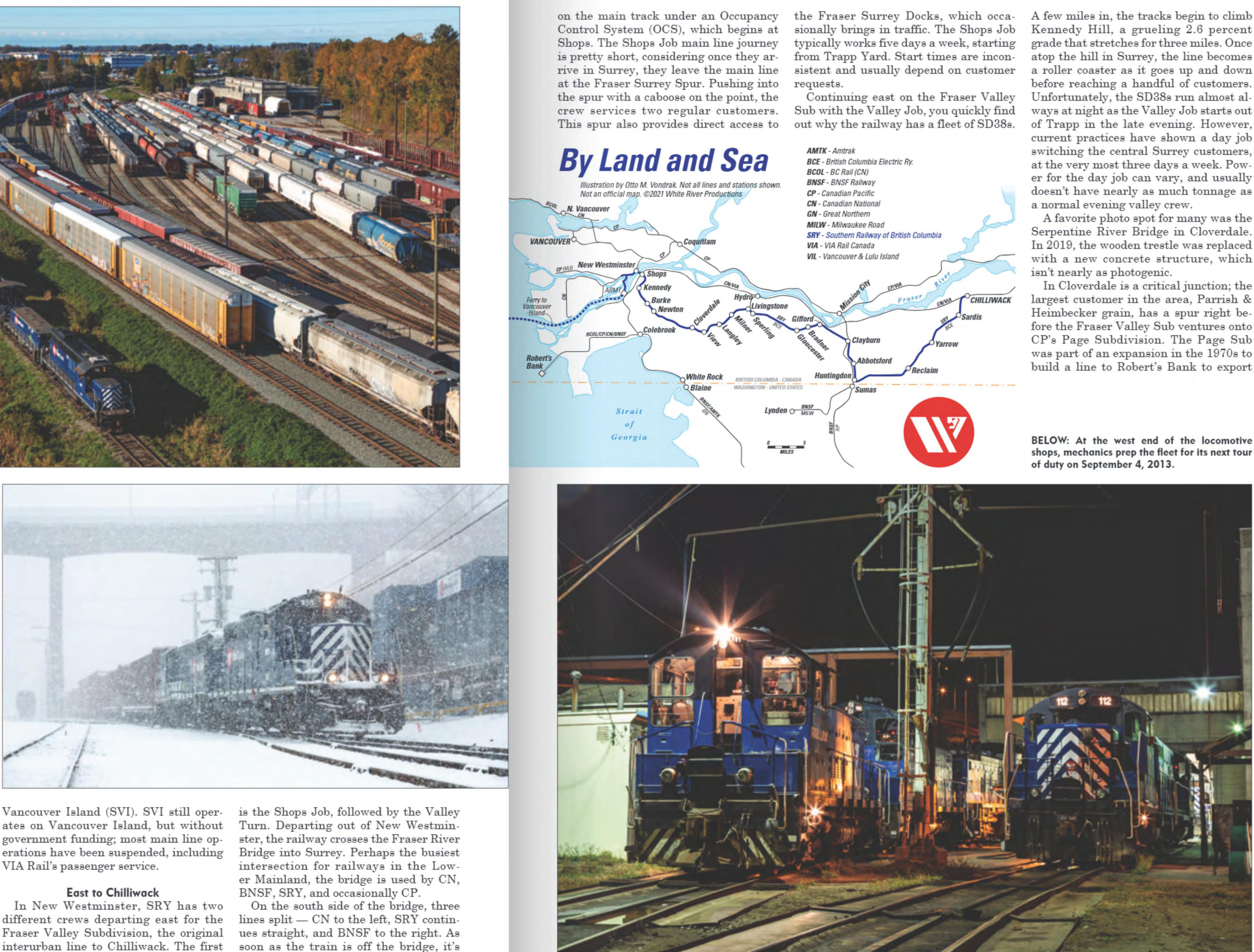
Annacis Island is located on the South Delta, B.C. The island is home to the Annacis Auto Terminal, where almost all Asian-manufactured automobiles destined for the Canadian market arrive.

Annacis Yard is the second starting of crews begin and end their duties here, turesque spots on the railway. It's hard location for trains, usually with three with three yard crews starting period- to find a bad angle with several different crews a day on what is called the Rack ically throughout the day. Much of the views on the river's north and south side. Job. The afternoon crew pulls loaded auough Road bridge. At the west end of the bridge remains open for river traffic, and ing them into blocks for CP and CN. An yard, CP's Marpole Spur heads west, part crews will call the bridgetender to signal evening crew takes autos to New Westof the former Vancouver & Lulu Island a swing. South of the bridge is the lightly minster to be interchanged with the line. SRY has running rights for CP's used Queensborough Spur. It presently Class Is. Until 2020, most traffic was go-Marpole Spur in New Westminster, and has two customers and trains go down it ing to CN, but now CP gets the bulk of it. The night job spots autoracks back into the compound.

At Annacis Yard, the tracks split, with one line going to the north shore and swapping trains. Interchange yards with known as the Annacis Bridge, is a rail the other to the south shore. The north shore line serves a number of industries, mile east of Trapp Yard. Once a busy in- nel onto Annacis Island, where 70 per- including steel, pulp, lumber, and grain producers, as well as the Hansen's Auto Terminal. The north shore is served by the Box Job, which runs out of Trapp Yard in the morning, five days a week.

> On the island's south shore are several more customers served by the Barge Job, but the Annacis Rail Marine Terminal is the highlight. Opened in 2010, ARMT is a state-of-the-art slip that can accommodate both vessels and barges and serves several ports along the West Coast. Originally, BNSF had the contract to service these coastal mills in Port Mellon, Powell River, Harmac, and Crofton





In Cloverdale is a critical junction; the

traffic control between View and Living- area still put on a good show. and coal trains.

They'll interchange cars or locomotives with the Huntingdon-based crews and then return west to New Westminster.

From here on in, all crews who work in this area are based out of Huntingdon. A few customers are scattered throughout the area as the railway winds up and

RIGHT: The afternoon Rack Job picks up a set of autoracks from the Wallenius Wilhelmsen Solutions compound on August 27, 2014. The auto industry is the livelihood of the railway, making up a majority of its business.

BELOW: Two SW900s struggle to pull a heavy barge train over the Queensborough Bridge on October 6, 2015. The steep grade of the bridge approach proves to be quite a challenge for just two units. Crews would often stall with large tonnage trains that are typical on the Box and Barge jobs. Nowadays, these jobs are often supplied with three locomotives.

original Fraser Valley Sub was rerouted grade, Mount Lehman Hill. While the the diamond, we arrive at the agricully seven miles, SRY runs on centralized the MP15s and GP9s that work in this

stone. Scattered throughout the Page At Clayburn, the main track ends as Sub are several different customers that we cross CP's Mission Subdivision. Up milepost 42 of the Fraser Valley Sub. SRY serves while dodging intermodal until the early 2010s, this diamond was Huntingdon is the third and final startstill protected by manually operated ing location for crews. While the yard Branching off at Livingstone, the semaphore signals. Consistently show- doesn't have nearly as many tracks as railway travels only a few miles before ing a stop for SRY, crews would have to Trapp Yard, they are double the length reaching Sperling. This is typically as pull several levers before the CP signal of Trapp's longest tracks. The east end of far east as New Westminster crews go. would time out, allowing SRY to have the yard is located within a few feet of the





coal. Deltaport followed in the 1990s and down through the suburbs of Langley a clear signal to cross. The semaphores has become an essential link for both CP and Abbotsford. Around milepost 31, the have since been replaced with less-exand CN. When the line was built, the railway begins to descend its steepest citing stop signs. Not long after crossing out of Langley, and BC Hydro handed 2.7-percent grade is challenging, most ture mills in Abbotsford, one of the bigover control of the line. For approximate- trains climbing west are small, although gest customers on this end of the railroad serving the many grain producers in the Fraser Valley.

Finally, we arrive at Huntingdon Yard,





U.S. border. (At one point, the railway passes through the backyards of Ameri- built part of the valley was originally a as CN can deliver up to 100 cars in intercan residents!) The railway interchang- lake. Sumas Lake proved to be quite the change traffic. es with CP and BNSF here. Four crews obstacle for the railroad's builders. Along typically work out of Huntingdon. A day the side of Sumas Mountain, the ideal job starting in the morning switches route had already been claimed by the cle repeats itself the following day. Action is typically seen on weekdays.

East of Huntingdon toward Chilliwack, the Fraser Valley's scenery dramatically improves with views of farmlands and Sumas Mountain. The railway is roughly 10 to 15 feet off the valley floor and con- this might be the most impressive. Statinues as such as it snakes along Ved- tion name sign Sardis, roughly milepost to keep boxcars upright on the rails. der Mountain. The railroad is elevated 59 of the Fraser Valley Sub, is the last of So far, so good.

because when the interurban line was viving route.

SRY has plenty of bridges and trestles, on it.

ABOVE LEFT: The Shops Job has finished switching on the Fraser Surrey Spur and is ready to push its train out and back to New Westminster on July 2, 2013. The Shops Job typically pushes its train in and out of the spur.

LEFT: Conductor Julian Myles guides caboose A6 into a clear track in Trapp Yard, preparing to build the Valley train on top of it on September 4, 2020. The cabs were all locally built for the railway and are still a common sight.

the large industrial parks along the railway. Before reaching the main line's end at milepost 63 of the Fraser Valley Sub, the railway crosses over the Trans-Canada Highway. Initially, this was just a level crossing, but once the highway system was improved and traffic continued to grow, an overpass was built. With that, the line ends in Chilliwack at mile 63.4 where the railway connects with CN's Yale Subdivision. Some of the railway's largest trains originate from Chilliwack,

Ready to Serve

For more than a quarter-century, the yard. The Chilliwack Turn typically Great Northern. Another option was to Washington Companies' Southern Railstarts in the early afternoon. The second drain the lake. Ultimately, the railroad way of British Columbia has faithfully afternoon job will continue switching the opted to build along Vedder Mountain served the Lower Mainland and Fraser yard and every other day depart west for with tight curves that restrict trains Valley. What the future holds for the Sperling. Lastly, the night job switches to just 15 mph. A decade later, a group railroad is unknown, although it's likely all the mills in Abbotsford before the cy- of engineers drained the lake, and GN the aging fleet of SW900s, MP15s, GP9s, abandoned its line. To this day, the least and SD38s will eventually have to be redirect route to Chilliwack is the only sur- placed. What is certain is that the railroad will adapt to changing conditions, Another interesting landmark is the just as it always has, to continue to serve crossing of the Vedder River. Although the customers and communities that rely

As for me, my main goal is to continue