

Santa Fe All the Way.....to Oz

by Steve Patterson; Photography by the author except as noted



Santa Fe train 15, the Texas Chief, is moments away from departing Chicago's Dearborn Station on a sunny afternoon in the 1960s. Were one heading from the Windy City to, say, little Pratt, Kan., you would begin your journey aboard this sublime streamliner—and wind up arriving in Pratt the next morning on this tranquil little conveyance, shown at Pratt on a pleasant spring day in 1966. Jim Heuer

In the mid-1960s, before UPS and FedEx, the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe still operated 11 pairs of scheduled mixed trains with LCL (Less than Carload

Lot) service in Kansas—some of them daily, others out one day, back the next, some at night, but none on Sunday. It also ran other mixed trains in other states. Fortunately, I took the time to ride one of them, from Wichita out to Pratt and back, 79 miles each way, on a Saturday in May 1966, when Santa Fe's mixed trains occupied more than a whole page in the Official Guide of the Railways.



The Pratt mixed, train 67, arrives at Wichita station from North Yard, ready for the day's journey to the Land of Oz. Steve Patterson



Classic but unremarked, this mixed train ostensibly served as a connection to AT&SF's Texas Chief Steve Patterson

Behind Electro-Motive GP7 No. 2716, westbound train 67 came into Wichita station around 8am from North Wichita Yard (three miles away; the Guide showed a 6:10am departure) with two freight cars and coach-combine No. 2638. Inside were refurbished “walk-over” seats and large double-paned windows; a potbelly stove stood in the corner. The conductor’s quarters were complete with a glass-top desk and pigeon holes stuffed full of pads of papers and forms. Two calendars (appropriately an AT&SF and a St. Louis-San Francisco—Frisco) hung on the partition. The narrow overhead hat racks were chocked with cups, supplies, and extra coats and hats. In the baggage section was another stove, a coal bin, a conductor’s chair, a gallery of new air hoses, tools, spare coupler parts, lanterns, flags, fuses, and marker lamps.



“Conductor, do these seats recline?” Even in 1966, the interior of Santa Fe combine 2638 on the Pratt mixed was itself a trip into the past. Author Patterson assures everyone that these seats did not recline. Steve Patterson

After six boxes of express and two passengers were loaded, the train departed. Outside the city, two stops were to pick up empties from lumber yards. The speed never got above 30 m.p.h.



Loading LCL at Wichita depot—there was more freight than passengers.
Steve Patterson

At Goddard the passenger crowd swelled by nine when a grandpa got on with eight kids. He appeared to enjoy the ride more than his brood which was perhaps their first train ride. Instead of looking out the large windows, they acted as normal kids would, preferring to hang around the water spigot. But, in only 12 miles, they all stepped off at Cheney.



On its way out of town, train 67 stops to pick up a 40-foot Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific boxcar from a carload customer on the west side of Wichita. The train is still within yard limits. In the laid-back operations of mixed-train service in 1966, passengers are allowed off the combine during extended stops to stretch their legs—or record a now-forgotten but once-common method of local rail travel in North America. Steve Patterson

Being the Land of Oz, the spring wheat was turning the landscape green after recent rains, and grain elevators dotted the horizon under a cloudless sky as the train skipped over occasional small streams on wooden trestles.



Santa Fe GP7 2716 works the yard in front of the Kingman depot. Though not serving any AT&SF mainline routes, the stylish depot building here appears to be in great shape—and still in use as a train-order station. Two Santa Fe routes crossed at Kingman, and both still offered mixed-train service when this scene was recorded in the spring of 1966. Steve Patterson

At Kingman, the biggest little town between Wichita and Pratt, the train stopped to switch. Three empty cars from Wichita were set out to be loaded and then picked up on the return trip. Kingman's tony red brick station and its brick platform looked ready to welcome a Santa Fe mainline passenger train—had there been one on this route.



Photographed from the comfort of his open window, photographer Patterson records the unloading caps and gowns just in time for the high school graduating class at Kingman.

While switching was being performed, a pickup drove up to the baggage car door and a large parcel was unloaded, containing the high school's caps and gowns just in time for graduation. Nearby, AT&SF's branch from Hutchinson, Kan., down to Blackwell, Okla., crossed with its own mixed service (which operated in a backward 154-mile J shape), terminating at Wellington, Kan. See the table in the sidebar and the map for a list of other AT&SF mixed trains.



While at Pratt, the GP7 spots an empty covered hopper for loading. The turntable in the foreground is a relic from the steam era, being used to turn locomotives for the trip back to Wichita. But, during this trip, the turntable was used to turn the Geep as well, allowing the engineer to operate the unit without facing backward. Steve Patterson

Near Pratt about 11am the crew broke out their lunch pails, and I was glad I brown-bagged mine. Cars were spotted at a large elevator on the outskirts of Pratt, and then a carload of lawn furniture manufactured locally was picked up. Crews turned the GP7 on a small table maintained at the end of the line, while today we know it could operate in either direction.

The first train reached Pratt on Nov. 27, 1886, on the Kingman, Pratt & Western, and the first passenger train arrived from Wichita three days later. The KP&W was jointly owned by the AT&SF (51 percent) and the SLSF (49 percent), and around the turn of the century Santa Fe bought out any interest the Frisco had in it.

Within 15 minutes train 68 left the handsome mission-style station at Pratt for the return run to Wichita. That was Pratt's second depot. As is so typical in history, the first one burned (June 9, 1911). On my trip back with the gentle pace of the train and sitting by an open window smelling rural Kansas, I realized no one out there was in a hurry or stressed. It was a relaxing escape from the news pounding us in those days about Viet Nam, practice rocket shots at the moon, and the Berlin Wall. I stepped off at 2:30pm feeling I had been on a simple and fun ride to see The Wizard.

Santa Fe's Passenger Presence in Eastern Kansas

AT&SF Kansas mixeds in the spring of 1966

Route Train Nos.

Chanute–Pittsburgh 77/78

Little River–Galatia 89/90

Manchester–Barnard 85/86

Neva–Concordia–Superior, Neb. 73/74

Dodge City–Boise City, Okla.* 173/174

Satanta–Pritchett, Colo.* 185/186

Wichita–Englewood 71/72

Wichita–Pratt 67/68

Attica–Belvidere 69/70

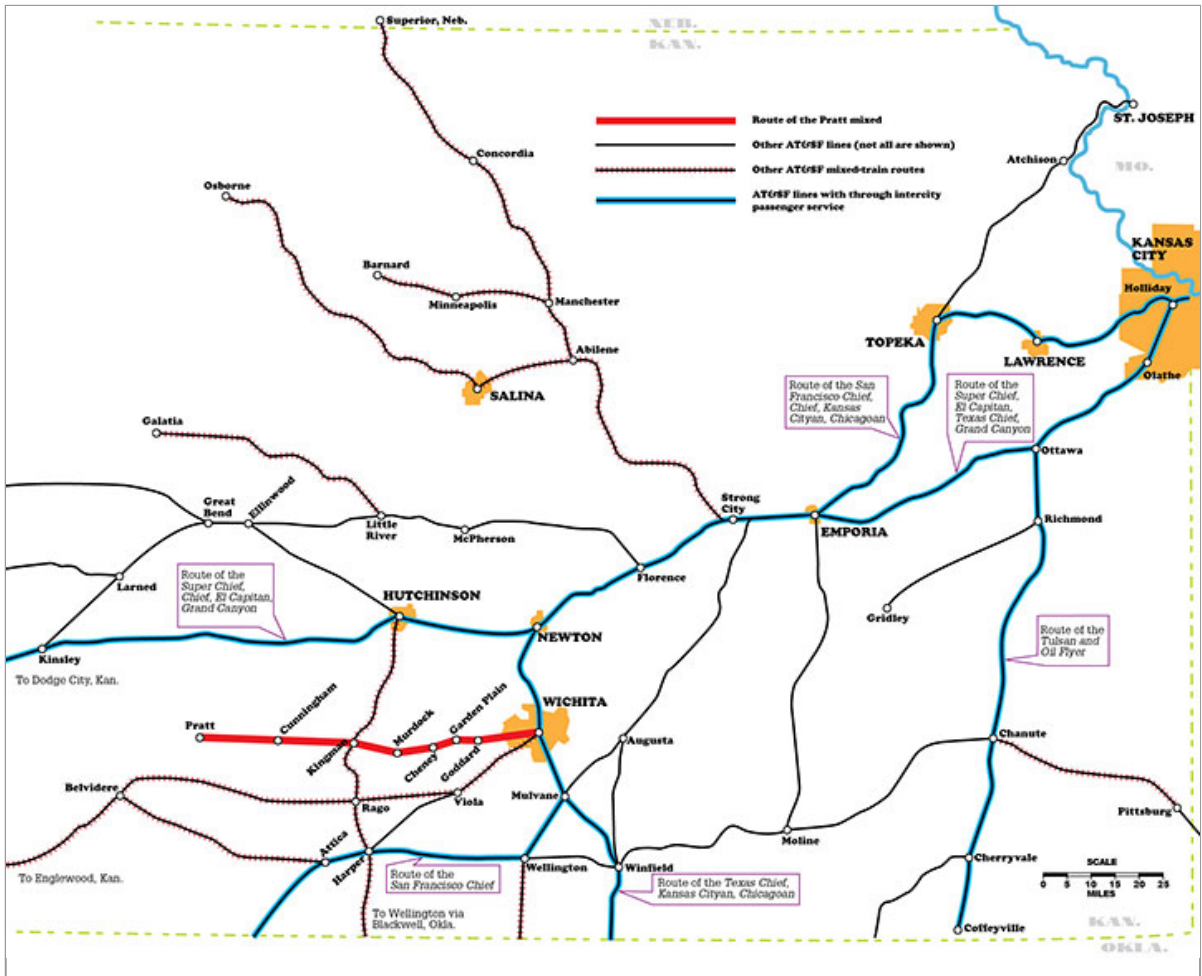
Hutchinson–Wellington

(via Blackwell, Okla.) 59/60

Abilene–Osborne 79/80

*Not shown on map

Info from records in General Manager's office, Topeka, Kan., in May 1966





AT&SF mixed train 185, running from Dodge City, Kan., to Pritchett, Colo., is near the far western Kansas border at Manter, headed for Springfield and ultimately Pritchett on April 11, 1968. Steve Patterson

For a largely rural state, Kansas—especially the eastern end—enjoyed a fairly comprehensive rail passenger network into the late 1960s, especially courtesy the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe (Union Pacific and Rock Island passenger services are not shown on this map). Some of Santa Fe’s mixed-train services could loosely be considered as connections to the railroad’s through, intercity passenger trains; Santa Fe’s through routes themselves were varied.

Mixed-train service throughout the U.S. was swiftly disappearing by the end of the 1960s, at which time no Santa Fe mixed trains were being shown in the Official Guide of the Railways; rival Union Pacific, however, had mixed-train service that survived to Amtrak. Burlington Northern (ex-Spokane, Portland & Seattle) and Georgia Railroad also offered mixed-train service until Amtrak (Georgia’s mixed trains continued beyond Amtrak). AT&SF’s Wichita–Pratt branch as well as other lines were sold to Omni-Trax on the first day of 1993 and became known as the Central Kansas Railway. The segment between Wichita and Garden Plain has since been abandoned.

Today, only one Amtrak train—Nos. 3 and 4, the Southwest Chief—serves eastern Kansas, operating via Topeka and Hutchinson. If 3 and 4 are ever rerouted via BNSF’s southern transcon mainline via Amarillo, Texas, which is being contemplated, the train’s most likely routing in eastern Kansas will be that of the old San Francisco Chief via Topeka, Newton, Wichita, and Harper.—M.S.