

The greatest show on Earth

By Ed King

Norfolk & Western fans were cultish, in more ways than one



JOHN KRAVE

EVEN THOUGH the Norfolk & Western Railway lost its identity in the 1982 merger with the Southern Railway that formed the Norfolk Southern Corp., N&W even today still has a tremendous following. As with many roads whose “flags fell” in the modern merger movement, N&W’s fans are almost “cultish,” like those who worship Elvis, film goddess Marilyn Monroe, or movies such as *Casablanca* or *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. And if N&W fans are a cult, I’m a member.

Such adulation seems inappropriate for a railroad of only 2100-odd route-miles, most of it extending through a mountainous, but not spectacularly scenic, region. Its following, of course, is largely explained by the fact that N&W was the last major railroad to dieselize.

Let me make one thing clear—this is the “real” N&W I speak of, not the one which itself became a pioneer in the about-to-snowball merger movement by acquiring its smaller neighbor, Virginian Railway, in 1959, and five years later absorbed two lean, mean, Midwestern neighbors, Nickel Plate and Wabash.

Those of us who were drawn to N&W’s smoke and side-rod display in

mid-century were late-comers, though. By then, N&W had a base of hard-core fans who didn’t know, or care, what pulled its trains—its stockholders. They were the first N&W cult.

Expansion put the little Pocahontas coal railroad into bankruptcy in 1895. It was reorganized in 1896 in excellent financial condition under a strong management with a single aim—to make money for its stockholders.

The managers made another decision that would have a far-reaching effect on the railway—they would hire promising young men out of colleges and universities and put them to work on the ground level, pay them well, and allow them to move up through the ranks. Then, 20 or 25 years later, when the railroad needed a vice-president of transportation, coal traffic, or operations, it had a cadre of college-educated railroaders who knew what made the wheels go ‘round. The railway followed this policy until 1957, when Stuart Saunders, a lawyer, was made president. Saunders’ predecessor, Robert H. (“Race Horse”) Smith, a graduate of Princeton University, had started with N&W as an

N&W 2181, one of the first batch of 17 postwar Y6b 2-8-2’s, is eastbound at Thacker, W.Va., with 150 coal cars on a June 1958 morning.

axeman on an engineering department surveying gang, and had worked his way up through the engineering ranks and into the operating department.

Norfolk & Western did indeed make money, in a fashion that belied its physical handicaps and confounded its critics, never missing a dividend even during the Great Depression. It had the worst gradients of any of the three so-called Pocahontas roads (Virginian and C&O were the others), a fact that pundits ignored when they’d say, “N&W makes money hauling coal downhill.” N&W made up for this handicap with extremely astute operating practices. A policy of “profits through operating efficiency” never let N&W down. It might well have been the most profitable (gross income carried over to net) railroad in the world from the time it emerged from bankruptcy in 1896 until the 1982 NS merger.

In 1900, the Pennsylvania Railroad acquired stock control of N&W in an effort to stabilize a maze of export coal





WILLIAM E. WARDEN JR.

Duplicating the author's evening *Pelican* experiences is J-class 4-8-4 603 with the eastbound *Tennesseean* at Blue Ridge, Va., on the last day of 1957. Note the Southern Railway RPO car.

rates over the eastern seaports. Pennsy kept this control and profited mightily from it (PRR fans are loath to discuss how much of its self-proclaimed status of "Standard Railroad of the World" was paid for with N&W dividends) until forced to divest in 1964 because of its upcoming merger with New York Central and N&W's with NKP and Wabash.

(The two mergers were related. N&W purchased the NKP but took a long-term lease of the Wabash, and three smaller Class 1's were also involved: Akron, Canton & Youngstown; Pittsburgh & West Virginia; and Wheeling & Lake Erie, leased by NKP since 1949.)

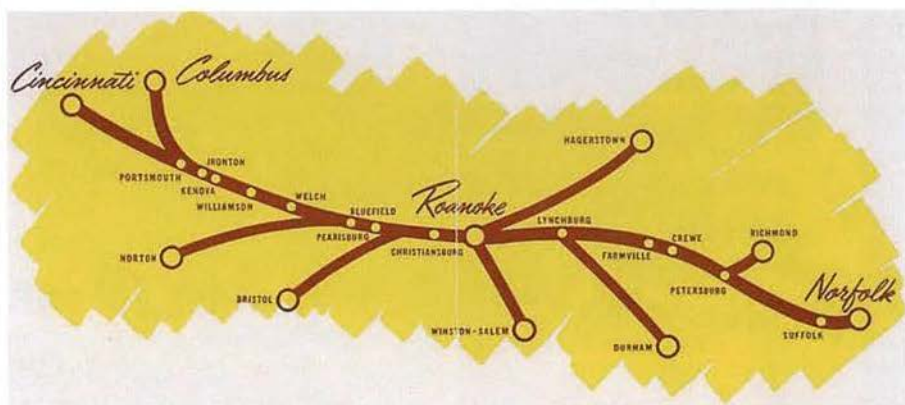
In acquiring NKP and Wabash, N&W broadened its traffic base by reducing

its traditional dependence on coal. Nickel Plate and Wabash were both time-freight-oriented and were fierce competitors in lucrative markets, including automotive traffic. To acquire them, though, N&W had to buy a 111-mile connecting link from PRR, from Columbus through NKP's hub of Bellevue, Ohio, to the Lake Erie port of Sandusky.

Further N&W merger efforts languished among rumors through the '70's. N&W+C&O was considered (and some N&W diesels renumbered to mesh), as was N&W+ATSE, but nothing else happened until the 1982 NS creation, forced by the formation of neighboring CSX.

When you're growing up in an N&W town—Bristol, Va., in my case—and being taken to the passenger station and the roundhouse before reaching school

Coalfields to the west and Tidewater to the east, Roanoke, Va., was the hub of the "real" N&W.

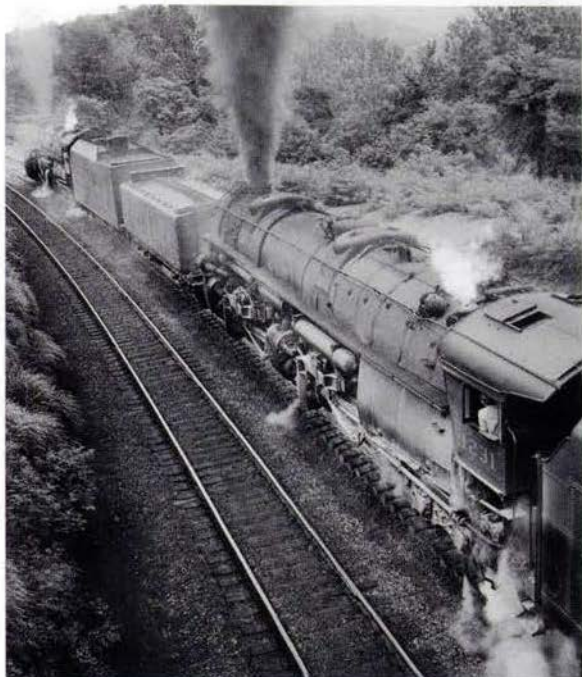


age, though, all these “rail-roading in the abstract” items mean nothing. Your sense is one of awe.

For instance, it would be decades before I had an idea of the efficiencies produced in an N&W Y6 2-8-8-2 by virtue of its 300-pound boiler pressure. I only knew, then, that when my grandfather led me past one of them in the roundhouse and the safety valve popped, it was all I could do to not, er, have an accident. But years of these experiences melded into an impression of just sheer beauty, and drew me into the N&W cult at an early age.

I would watch the east-bound *Pelican* leave town at 8 o'clock in the evening, and then get into the car with Mom and Dad to be driven, quickly, about 10 miles up the road to the top of a little knoll overlooking the railroad. (The *Pelican* was one of three Washington, D.C., trains N&W ferried for the Southern between Bristol and Lynchburg, Va., on their way from Memphis, Birmingham, or New Orleans.) We could see the lights of the train as its class J 4-8-4 topped Wyndale Hill, headlight leading the way. A short distance behind was a bright yellow line on a slant above the track (which I later learned was light from the space between the bottom of the J's grate and the ashpan). Then came the eight square lights of the mail car (two doors, six windows), a couple of express cars with lighted door windows, and the coaches, diner, and Pullmans, punctuated by the classic kerosene marker lights. All this was overlaid by the sound of a gruff exhaust making hash out of a 65-mph speed limit.

I knew nothing, then, of profits or operating ratios or widows living well off their N&W dividends, and couldn't have cared less.



ROBERT HALE



CLASSIC TRAINS COLLECTION

A big show “unrivalled for the day” (top): War-baby A-class 2-6-6-4 1231 is helped upgrade by a Y-class in 1957. N&W's first diesels, in 1956, included four each EMD GP9's and Alco RS3's (above).

In later days, I used a Harley-Davidson 125cc motorcycle for home-to-school, good for about 45 mph, with two speeds: stop and go. An extracurricular activity one afternoon saw a laughing engineer Roy Harrell run away from me with his Y6 on time freight 88 down the hill into Glade Spring, Va. Returning home, I was just in time to have engineer Joe McNew do the same, west-bound down Wyndale Hill, on 4-8-0 382 with the Abingdon Branch train.

Nothing was better than sitting on a box in the open door of the express car on that “time-warp” Abingdon Branch mixed train and watching and listening to the Twelve-Wheeler mauling its modest tonnage up White Top Mountain, exhausts echoing up and down White Top Creek. Watching the machinery of those 4-8-0's in the curves was mesmerizing.



H. REID AND A. A. THIEME

The two rear drivers, with their rods, seemed to have a life of their own, and the Baker valve gear with the rear-hung combination lever was an exquisite view. Sometimes with heavy tonnage the mixed would rate a doubleheader, and once or twice there was a third 4-8-0 cut in ahead of that express car.

Trips in the mid-'50's to places like Walton Tower at the foot of Alleghany Mountain, and Blue Ridge Mountain east of Roanoke, just further cemented my fascination. To stand on the outside of Walton's curve and witness a Y6 pusher come past at a wide-open 15 mph behind 10,300 tons of coal and a similar beast on the head end was almost a religious experience. Anyone who felt that a Mallet working compound ought to have a soft, mushy exhaust would have gotten his eyes opened in short order. And the 2-8-8-2/2-6-6-4/2-8-8-2 assault on Blue Ridge with coal trains produced sensations words can't describe.

Those steamy 1950's drew the world's attention to my little coal road. The J-class 4-8-4's, Y-class 2-8-8-2's, and A-class 2-6-6-4's put on a show unrivaled for the day and probably as great as any, ever.

Nothing lasts forever, though. When changes not under the railway's control made diesel operation more profitable, the diesels came, and quickly. N&W's first eight road-switchers came in 1956, and steam breathed its last in 1960.

It is beyond fortunate that some N&W steam was saved. Class J 4-8-4 611 and A 1218 were restored to operation in the 1980's and gave many thousands of fans a glimpse of what N&W's

"Nothing was better . . .": M-class 4-8-0 495 skirts a tobacco field near Taylor's Valley with the Abingdon Branch mixed train in August '51.

glory days were all about. They're silent now, on display for contemplation in Roanoke; so is Y6a 2-8-8-2 2156, an example of the world's most successful group of Mallet compounds, at St. Louis' Museum of Transportation. And Twelve-Wheeler 475 hauls tourists on the Strasburg Rail Road.

You may dispute my claim that N&W's was the Greatest Show on Earth, but for me, Ringling Brothers could not trot out any tricks more fascinating, no trapeze artists more spectacular, no big-cat tamers more enthralling. Sometimes I regret not being a bit older, so I could have enjoyed it longer. Sometimes . . . ■

N&W fact file

(comparative figures are for 1929 and 1981)

Route-miles: 2240; 7803

Locomotives: 788; 1372

Freight cars: 30,222; 87,903

Passenger cars: 4767; 113 (1970)

Headquarters city: Roanoke, Va.

Notable postwar passenger trains: *Pocahontas*, *Powhatan Arrow*

Special interest group: Norfolk & Western Historical Society, Box 201, Forest, VA 24551; <http://www.inmind.com/people/shammer>

Recommended reading: *The Norfolk & Western: A History*, by E. F. Pat Striplin (N&W, 1981); *Norfolk & Western in the Appalachians*, by Ed King (Kalmbach, 1997)

Source: *The Historical Guide to North American Railroads* (Kalmbach, 1999)