

Hijinks on the *Punkin*

A night to remember on
Santa Fe's Pekin Branch

IN THE LATE 1960's, Santa Fe's 57-mile Pekin District, the road's only true branch east of Kansas City, was still heavily utilized by shippers, even though it was served by only one train each way, daily except Sunday. These trains still ran on a Second Class schedule, which, this being in the days when the maximum hours of service was still 16 hours, meant the crew had to be forever aware of the time, lest they fall 12 hours behind schedule and need train orders to complete their run as an authorized extra.

One crew was based in Pekin, and the other came out of Streator. They each ran 63 miles to the opposite end of the run, laid over, and came back the next day.

The only time this arrangement changed was in the fall, when the Libby plant at Morton was harvesting and canning the next year's supply of pumpkin for grocery-store shelves. Libby needed to be switched off and on all day, which meant that the train leaving Pekin would never be able to make Streator "under the law," and vice versa. So, the two jobs would be changed to turn back at Morton to their respective home terminals. Even so, the crews would still come up against the 16-hour law daily during what was known in crew jargon as the "Punkin Run."

Late on one chilly October night, the crew out of Streator had turned at Morton and was heading back. They had gone on duty at 9 a.m., and the long hours of that day, plus many more preceding it, had begun to take their toll. Staying awake, let alone alert, during the long slow climb up Crandall Hill, two miles east of Morton, was difficult, and many a short and refreshing nap was taken on this stretch as the

Billboard-lettered Santa Fe GP20 1171 switches in what little there is of the weed-choked yard by the Pekin (Ill.) depot on May 27, 1965, before heading out for Morton and Streator.



Run

By Robert Nicholson



J. DAVID INGLES

The Pekin District: making the most out of not much

AS SANTA FE'S ONLY BRANCH LINE east of Kansas City, the Pekin District has achieved more than its share of mention in our now-61-year-old sister magazine *TRAINS*. Perhaps Jon Page of Cedar Falls, Iowa, said it best in 1963, calling Editor David P. Morgan to task on his caption-writing for three photos of the branch in "Photo Section."

In a letter published in the June 1963 "Railway Post Office," Page wrote: "For an 'unremarked' [page 54, June 1960 *TRAINS*], then 'seldom-remarked' line [page 39, December 1962], Santa Fe's 57.7-mile Pekin-Ancona (Ill.) branch [page 39, April 1963] has had its share of *TRAINS* fame."

The first photo, by J. P. Lamb Jr. of a diesel on a wooden trestle, was captioned, "Northbound tonnage on Santa Fe's unremarked Streator-Pekin (Ill.) branch is hoisted up the grade out of Morton behind a 1600 h.p. Alco of the C-C type." (Forgive the editors on the diesel—at the time, I'm not sure even Alco knew what an "RSD5" was.)

A year and a half later, a Bruce R. Meyer photo was captioned, "Santa Fe's only branch in Illinois, its seldom-remarked 57.7-mile Ancona-Pekin line, feels the tread of the local on May 29, 1959. Alco road-switcher 2157 provides the power in a scene east of Morton, Ill., and steel caboose

1880 brings up the rear." Knowing that Bruce Meyer and Parker Lamb hung out together in their University of Illinois days, I suspect the photos were made on the same day.

The third time, Wayne Bridges of nearby Delavan, Ill., got into the act, with a photo captioned, "Parishoners at the white frame church on the gravel road should have no trouble identifying the owner of GP20 1165 as she works No. 48, the daily-except-Sunday local freight, over the Santa Fe's 57.7-mile Pekin-Ancona (Ill.) branch in central Illinois." There is no clue to the church's exact location, but the caption-writer's "Illinois redundancy" was no doubt due to *TRAINS*' practice in that era of "filling the last line."

The thing is, the Pekin District was originally "the show." Built by Francis Hinkley as the Chicago & St. Louis, it stretched from 23rd Street in Chicago 153 miles to Pekin, on the Illinois River. When Santa Fe President William Barstow Strong sought to extend his railroad east from K.C. to Chicago, he bought the C&StL in late 1886 and pushed

The Pekin-bound "Chico Chief" pauses to enter the TP&W. Combine 2622 and waycar 1864R on No. 47 clear the IC diamond at Minonk on July 25, 1956. Rotary 199361 plows through Benson on January 22, 1979.



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M. L. POWELL; J. DAVID INGLES COLLECTION

train inched its way to the crest.

This night was no different, except that a couple of breaks in the work had put the estimated time of arrival at Streator well ahead of the 16-hour limit for a change. However, the revving of the diesel engine in the Run 8 throttle notch, combined with the rocking of the locomotive creeping up the hill with all the tonnage it could handle, and the roaring cab heaters trying to blast the October chill out of the cab, soon brought an overwhelming sense of tranquility that could not be denied when combined with physical exhaustion. Although the engineer temporarily "signed off," he continued to work the manual sanders intermittently with his right hand and kept the dead-man pedal depressed with his left foot. His years of experience gave him more aptitude

for running an engine in his sleep than many of his critics would have for baiting a mouse trap while wide awake, and the train continued its long, slow ascent up the hill.

THE HEAD BRAKEMAN, though, was not on the best of terms with the engineer for reasons now lost to history. Probably the result of fatigue more than anything else, the brakie took note of the state of affairs and saw an opportunity for a little excitement that was too great to resist. Stealthily reaching to the tool rack at the front of the cab, he slowly and quietly pulled out the 24-inch pipe wrench that had been rocking back and forth in the tool rack in harmony with the swaying of the cab.

With the wrench in both hands, he quietly crept over behind the dozing en-

gineer, raised it high over his head, and, holding it parallel to the cab floor for just an instant, let it drop. When it hit the floor, indescribable pandemonium ensued, causing the engineer's adrenaline count to instantly shoot up to crisis levels. His right hand came off the sander switch, causing the engine to begin "slipping down" with the train. At the same time, his left foot came off the dead-man pedal, setting off a shrieking whistle that threatened to culminate in a full-service brake application if the pedal was not depressed again immediately.

The engineer was on his feet at once, groping around with his right hand to find the sander switch and stomping around with his foot, trying to locate the deadman pedal in the darkness before the penalty brake application commenced.

his new Chicago, Santa Fe & California as straight northeast from K.C. as possible. The new line intersected the C&StL at tiny Ancona, 6 miles south of Streator, and to this day a sharp curve in BNSF's transcontinental main line at Ancona marks where the CSF&C met the C&StL.

The Pekin District had passenger service until late 1954 or early '55, last in the form of a motor car, among the last to serve the Windy City. In its final years, the motor, which ran as trains 14 and 13, left Pekin at 7 a.m., arrived Dearborn Station at noon, departed at 1:35 p.m. (turning, passengers and all, on a turntable!), and was back in Pekin at 6:20. A combine for express graced Pekin freights 47 and 48 into the late 1950's.

The branch even hosted a fan trip, the "Chico Chief" of April 26, 1969. Railroad Club of Chicago was the sponsor; James A. "Jim" Neubauer was the organizer; and J. M. "Joe" McMillan, later author of several AT&SF books, was Santa Fe's safety official on board. The passenger list included Harold Edmonson of Chicago; Jim Boyd and Mike Schafer of Rockford, Ill.; and my father and me. Boyd would later edit *Railfan* magazine, while Neubauer, Edmonson, Schafer, and yours truly were then, or would become, employees of TRAINS' publisher. Dual-service A-B F7 duo 308L/306B pulled two coaches. There were numerous photo stops, beginning with a wait at Ancona on the branch for train 23, following us, to swing around the curve.

A decade later, the line hosted a rotary snowplow to clear the results of the blizzard of January 1979. In its first use since 1967, plow 199361 came east from Albuquerque for the task. One aspect of the branch was truly unremarked: trains utilized 5.9 miles of trackage rights on Toledo, Peoria & Western through Eureka, from Streator Junction to Pekin Junction. In the diesel age, locomotives on the branch progressed from huge Baldwin center-cabs to the Alco RSD5's to EMD GP20's to, finally, GP38's and GE U23B's.

Modern times caught up with the Pekin District in July 1983 when Santa Fe pulled the pin, letting the right of way revert to cornfields. Still, I bet these words are far from the final ones published on this "remarkable" branch.—J. David Ingles

Alas, he did not, and it did, and the sound of air-brake exhaust was added to the rest of the deafening confusion in the cab. The train came to an emphatic halt right in the middle of the hill. This brought the conductor and rear brakeman up from the waycar to find out why the train had stopped.

The conductor's patience was worn as thin as the denim on the seat of his bib overalls, and when the cause was revealed to him, a serious discussion developed.

THE CHOICEST of silver-tongued railroad oratory was traded back and forth in the cab with machine-gun diplomacy, concluding on the premise that it might be in the best interests of the head brakeman to "advertise" his job upon arrival at Streator and bid on

another job somewhere else, preferably as far away as possible. The instructions for the engineer were to pay attention to what he was doing, quit fooling around, and get the train on the move again, pronto. "And it better not be necessary to double the hill, either!"

Attempts to restart the train in one piece on the stiffest part of the hill constituted a real test of skill for the engineer, immersed as he was in thoughts of unwholesome predicaments in which he would like to see the head brakeman and the conductor caught. If you asked the engineer, conductors never did nothing but sit on their lazy hip pockets in the caboose while everybody else did the work. Engineers and conductors, you'll recall, have had an uneasy relationship ever since they duked it out back in the 1830's and established the

conductor's right to give the orders.

The engineer finally succeeded in getting the train under way, his left foot again on the deadman pedal and his right hand again working the sanders. The head brakeman, chin in hand and his ears ringing, looked straight ahead, contemplating his immediate future. The conductor and rear brakeman (who had kept his integrity intact by saying nothing during the episode) caught the caboose as it crept by.

Once more, everything was in order, except for two things: the pipe wrench was lying on the cab floor, securely positioned under the engineer's seat, and nobody was drowsy anymore, at least for that night! Arrival at Streator, in the wee hours of the next morning as an "authorized extra," was "on the law" once again. ■



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