

On June 23, 2016,
the engineer of
BNSF's Cowley
Local gives the
peace sign as he
rolls his
SD70MACs and
train northbound
through rugged
Sheep Canyon in
Wyoming's
Bighorn Basin.

Wild Wyoming

BNSF in the spectacular Bighorn Basin

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It's difficult to believe that less than 24 hours earlier, I set out from Wisconsin, my truck packed full of gear for an annual summer vacation in Wyoming and Montana. It was a grueling 1,100-mile drive, but now I find myself cresting the Bighorn Mountain range between Sheridan and Greybull, Wyo. As I left Sheridan, the temperature was in the 80s; at the top of the Bighorns, it's barely in the 50s.

Melting snow mingles with silvery lupine and Indian paintbrush wildflowers. The cool temperatures are elevation-induced and brief. By the time I pull into Greybull, it will be back into the upper 80s. It's not only the temperature that varies wildly here. The scenery in this stretch is some of the most diverse and beautiful that I've ever driven through. On this trip, one of my goals is to photograph some of the most overlooked and out of the way railroad lines in Wyoming — BNSF in the Bighorn Basin.

The portion of the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy that eventually reached into the Bighorn Basin began with the construction of a line from near Huntley, Mont., to Cody, Wyo., completed in late 1901. The Big Horn Railroad (a paper CB&Q company) built the line from Frannie to Kirby between 1905 and 1907. The railroad from

Kirby to Thermopolis and through Wind River Canyon finally reached Casper in 1913. Additional construction continued the next year, giving CB&Q and its subsidiaries a through route from Orin Junction, Wyo., to Billings, Mont., including trackage rights over Northern Pacific from Laurel to Billings. It also gave the railroad access to the basin's blossoming cattle ranching and sugar beet industries.

With lines on either side of the mountains, CB&Q and its subsidiaries avoided a direct crossing of the Bighorn Mountain Range, but that didn't mean the railroad dodged spectacular topography. The railroad slices through breathtaking Wind River Canyon and passes through one of the most unique and geologically rich areas on the planet. The Bighorn Basin contains layers of rock from virtually every geologic time period, from tens of thousands of years to well over 2 billion years old. It also exposes and preserves one of the most varied collections of fossilized plants and animals anywhere on our planet. In the northeast corner of the Bighorn Basin north of Greybull, the Bighorn River cut a deep gash over the course of millions of years, forming Sheep Canyon. Here, surveyors for the CB&Q took advantage of the cut made by the river to build through



Sheep Mountain. It also exposes the Sheep Mountain Anticline (a fold of stratified rock in an arch-like shape, containing the oldest rock bed at its core). This particular

Two former Burlington Northern SD70MACs lead the Cody Local, its four cars and a caboose (shoving platform) over Polecat Creek near Frannie, Wyo., on June 24, 2016.



Above: BNSF No. 9621, one of a pair of SD70MACs powering the Cody Local, pauses next to an old derail indicator sign in Frannie, Wyo., on June 24, 2016. Right: That same day, the matching pair switches the small yard and runs around their caboose (shoving platform) in Frannie before returning to their home base in Cody.



anticline and outcroppings contain rock from several geologic periods, dating back more than 300 million years.

Besides the incredible scenery and geology, what is in the Bighorn Basin that draws me away from the typical (and busier) railroading haunts, such as Montana Rail Link north of here, or the coal traffic-heavy Powder River Basin to the east? For the past several years, with the railroad's

acquisition of hundreds of GE ES44s and EMD SD70ACes, BNSF's mainline motive power has become predictable. It is the branch lines, yards, and out-of-the-way places, such as the Bighorn Basin, that hold BNSF's motive-power secrets.

Greybull and nearby Cody are home to a trio of five-day-a-week locals that have become a haven for a small number of SD70MACs, SD60Ms, and rebuilt Geeps.



On June 28, 2018, GP38-3R No. 2392 leads former BN SD40-2 No. 1659 and the Cody Local across the old U.S. Highway 14 bridge and Alkali Creek Patch, in Ralston, Wyo. The faint initials of former owner CB&Q are visible on the bridge.





Above: On a perfect first day of summer 2017, Cascade Green former Burlington Northern SD60M No. 1410 and a SD70MAC power the southbound Cowley Local through incredible Sheep Canyon, north of Greybull, Wyo.

Left: On June 22, 2016, a pair of orange-and-green SD70MACs lead the southbound Cowley Local as it tiptoes through the afternoon shadows cast by the sheer cliff walls of Sheep Canyon.

North of Greybull, the “Cowley Local” primarily serves bentonite and gypsum industries on BNSF’s Casper Subdivision main line in the Stucco (7 miles north of Greybull), Himes, Kane, and Lovell areas. It also serves a sugar-loading co-op in Lovell. For the past few years, a pair of SD70MACs or SD60Ms, or a combination of the two, has powered the local. The other local calling Greybull home works grain and bentonite industries on the Casper Subdivision in Manderson, Worland, and Lucerne. The local also serves a beverage packaging plant (aluminum), and a beverage bottling and canning plant in Worland. The south local has been assigned SD60Ms, SD40-2s and Geep rebuilds.

Cody, a town of just under 10,000 known as a gateway to the east entrance of Yellowstone National Park, is home to one of the most interesting BNSF locals. The Cody Local operates on the Cody Subdi-

vision Branch Line to Frannie and return, serving a gypsum industry in Cody, grain loading in Ralston, and fertilizer tank cars and grain loading in Powell. The Cody Local is also responsible for switching the small yard in Frannie, where the branch joins BNSF’s Casper Subdivision main line. The Cody Subdivision happens to be the only BNSF branch line in the state of Wyoming. In recent years, the Cody Local has operated with Geeps, SD40-2s, SD60Ms, and even a pair of former Burlington Northern SD70MACs. The local is also equipped with a caboose (now referred to as a shoving platform).

If you enjoy peering through a window to billions of years of geologic history and easy-paced railroading in a spectacular landscape, check out the locals of the Big-horn Basin. The wilds of Wyoming just might become a regular haunt in your quest to find BNSF’s motive-power secrets. **I**