

# Burlington's NIGHT CRAWLER

Glimpses back in time, and of some of the lesser-known scenic sights of Wyoming

By Stan Rhine • Photos by the author

**O**ff the speedy paths of its *Zephyr* headliners, the Burlington Route, as late as the decade preceding Amtrak, operated a plethora of local passenger trains. Once the lifeblood of hundreds of communities in the pre-highway age, many of these little trains held on because of mail contracts. One such pair was Nos. 29 and 30, which linked Denver and Billings, Mont.; south of Wendover, Wyo., they ran on Chicago, Burlington & Quincy subsidiary Colorado & Southern.

Too slow to be *Zephyrs*, and lacking streamlined equipment to boot, these trains (and their many counterparts) did not rate official names. To railroaders and railfans alike, though, trains 29

and 30 were “the Night Crawler,” and they lived up to that tag. Although the trains did kick up their heels on fast track, they took 19½ hours to cover the 668 miles between Denver and Billings, an average of 34.2 mph. A single shiny E unit generally drew the Night Crawler, which in my time had a few mail storage and express cars, a Railway Post Office-baggage car, and a heavy-weight coach; sleepers had come off in 1964 [see “Second Section”].

Let’s board No. 29 for a ride north in the mid-1960s.

As the sun slips behind the Front Range of the Colorado Rockies, washing the clouds with gold, down at the Post Office Terminal Annex next to Denver Union Station, mail is being loaded onto the Night Crawler. At 8:30

the conductor waves the highball and No. 29 undulates through the maze of depot tracks, bound for the foothills farming communities of Broomfield, Longmont, Berthoud, Loveland, and Fort Collins, Colo. As the train scamper along, clerks in the RPO apartment sort mail into the myriad pigeonholes and sacks hung from racks. Boulder, the second stop 28 miles and 44 minutes out, is not a farming town but a university city, and the lead car is set out at the modern depot. Stripped of mail for the area during the night and reloaded with mail for Denver and points south, the car will be whisked away by southbound counterpart No. 30 around sunrise.

Wyoming’s 6,062-foot-high state capital, Cheyenne, is reached a little after



Nearing dusk on July 30, 1967, “Night Crawler” No. 30 rolls past Boysen Reservoir just north of Bonneville, Wyo., against the backdrop of the Bridger Mountains. The train is in the sunset of its career, its last run occurring seven months after the author rode No. 29 in February (right).

midnight. Passengers not jolted awake by the stop, the setting out of another mail car, and the recoupling of the engine are sprawled across their seats in a tranquil tussle with Morpheus. Founded with the arrival of the Union Pacific in November 1867, Cheyenne quickly moved out of its tents, becoming a staid, respectable (for Wyoming)—if perpetually blustery—place. The quiet of the city at this early hour belies the slack-reined times that invariably attend the city’s annual July rodeo blowout, Frontier Days. Despite its veneer of 1960s urbanization, Cheyenne, it was said, could be pretty wild even

without Frontier Days. By the time of 29’s arrival, though, most folks were sawing logs.

Its station work completed, the Night Crawler eases out of town at 12:49 a.m. This part of the trip, along the edge of the Laramie Mountains through Horse Creek, Chugwater, Wheatland, Wendo-ver (where, northbound, C&S turns the train over to parent CB&Q), and Douglas, is in the dead of night—in both directions. In its final years, No. 29 was scheduled to meet counterpart 30 at Chugwater at 2:23 a.m., an event likely missed by the handful of sleeping pas-sengers in the coach.

Route		ISSUED BY (157)	
THE COLORADO AND SOUTHERN RAILWAY COMPANY			
Date of Expiration	FORM	38197	
7-30-67	FP-7		
PASSENGER COUPON			
NOT GOOD FOR PASSAGE			
FROM	First Class	RT	OW
TO	VIA RAILROAD	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
TO			Credit (10%)
TO			
DESTINATION		FAMILY TICKET	
BILLINGS MOUNT			
GOOD FROM ORIGINATING POINT ONLY ON MONDAY, TUESDAY, WEDNESDAY OR THURSDAY.			
GOOD FOR	ADULTS	CHILDREN 12 TO 21, INCL.	CHILDREN 5 TO 11, INCL.
	2		2
SELLING AGENT STAMP HERE		Regular Adult Fare \$ 17.40	
Billings Mt. 7-30-67		Other Adult Fare \$ 8.90	
		Child(ren) 12 to 21, incl. \$	
		Child(ren) 5 to 11, incl. \$	
		Total \$	
		Tax \$	
		Total including Tax \$ 26.30	
Non-Transferable Said Subject to Tariff Regulations.		Mark Mathis GENERAL PASSENGER AGENT	
BAGGAGE <input type="checkbox"/>			



Led by CB&Q E8 9947B, C&S No. 30 rolls into Boulder, Colo., elevation 5,244 feet, in the early morning of August 20, 1965. The train will pick up a mail storage car here and arrive in Denver about 7:30.



It's 6:30 on a July '66 morning in Casper, largest city between Denver and Billings. Passengers are off No. 29 for breakfast as Q E8 9938B is fueled and mail is exchanged; at right, a freight waits to follow.



# Route of the Night Crawler

## Breakfast in Casper

Around sunrise, No. 29 arrives at the 5,123-foot-high North Platte River city of Casper, in 1960 with 35,000 people the largest in the state. Last night's supper in Denver, 339 miles south, has been pretty well tamped down by the gentle motions of the coach during the last 10 hours. For the coach-only accommodation, Casper was the first of two meal stops. At 6:20 a.m., as passengers step onto the platform to greet the new day, the locomotive is uncoupled and moved away to be refueled. This allows the Casper switcher to pull off another mail car or two. With servicing underway, the handful of passengers follow the crew across the street to breakfast.

The restaurant is a convivial meeting place for oilmen, ranchers, farmers, railroaders, and others up at sunrise. It is a high-ceilinged, black-and-white-tile-floored, echoey place where the clash and clatter of heavy, bulletproof china being washed and stacked often make conversation difficult if not impossible. For passengers, the partaking of endless cups of strong coffee and plate-sized pancakes, a railroad meal in a tradition reaching back past Fred Harvey, leaves just enough time to finish eating and drift back across the street to the train.

Departure is at 7 a.m., 40 minutes after arrival, with a fresh crew on board. Now with fewer cars and few steps to make, this leg is relatively fast, at more than 40 mph. About midway between Hell's Half Acre and Butch Cassidy's Hole-in-the-Wall, the train calls at Arminto (not far from Deadman's Butte) and parched Lysite on its way to Bonneville.

Casper is at the apex of a big bend in the North Platte River, which flows



north out of Colorado. A hundred years before, three pioneer trails—the Oregon, California, and Mormon—followed the North Platte across the treeless plains of what became Nebraska, into the future Wyoming, down to the Sweetwater River, and west over the Continental Divide. The Union Pacific, building west from Omaha, diverged from these well-established trails to take a more challenging but direct route west of Cheyenne—Sherman Hill.

Burlington's tracks never ventured west of the Continental Divide. About 60 miles southwest of Bonneville, however, lies South Pass, the famous rediscovery of explorer Jedediah Smith, where the three pioneer trails crested the spine of the continent to reach the Pacific watershed. The first wagon train crossed South Pass in 1843, only 19 years after Smith's first crossing. Nineteen years later, in 1862, President Lincoln signed the Pacific Railroad charter, and by that time, the trickle of migrants had become a torrent. By 1881 (another 19 years later), the West was webbed with rails, and migrants were flooding in by train. In the span of one human lifetime, then, the West had been transformed from terra incognita to a land we would all recognize.

Despite South Pass's importance as a part of the 19th century overland trails, steel rails did not grace the crossing

until the mid-20th century when U.S. Steel opened an iron-ore mine near South Pass City, using a fleet of second-hand F7's to haul ore down to a UP connection. The closest other tracks were those of Chicago & North Western, which stopped its westward march at Lander, 40 miles to the north. The UP made its Continental Divide crossing 60 miles to the southeast, near Wamsutter, just west of Rawlins.

### Wind River Canyon

Turning north again at Bonneville, No. 29 rolls along the sunny shores of Boysen Reservoir, framed by the Owl Creek Mountains to the west and the Bridgers to the east. At Boysen Dam, the train dives through a tunnel, crosses a long steel trestle, and pops through a couple of short, black basaltic tunnels into the narrows of Wind River Canyon, the scenic highlight of the journey. The coach's Dutch door offers a spectacular view of the ever-widening canyon, as the E unit hums along the slight downgrade. Signs along U.S. 20 on the canyon's east side explain the geology, tipped on edge and carved into relief by the rushing river, exposing a sequence leading to the basement rocks of the earth. (Once out of the canyon, the waterway's name changes from Wind River to Big Horn River, having been named by two separate explorers who

**Train 29 rolls down Wind River Canyon, the scenic highlight among several vistas on the route, heading for Thermopolis in July 1966. Across the river at right is U.S. highway 20.**

weren't aware it was a single river.)

The next stop is at the south edge of the Big Horn Basin in Thermopolis, the world's largest mineral hot springs. With swimming pools, therapy pools, mud baths, water slides, and other naturally heated aquatic diversions, 4,326-foot-high Thermopolis has acres of fantastic cones and bubbling, mineralized water rippling across rock wildly painted by nature's slow, persistent brush.

Most of the West, of course, is ranch country. In the rain shadow of the Sierra and the Cascades, only lofty mountains get much precipitation. The rest of the region survives on what folks back East could get in a couple of good rainstorms. One of the Night Crawler's stops, Lysite, makes do with less than 6 inches of precipitation a year, and in 1960, squeezed out only 1.28 inches. Farming was thus restricted to bottomlands that could easily be irrigated.

Outside the coach window, the sunny uplands of the Wyoming Basin trot by, revealing roads, barbed-wire fences, and occasional houses, but most of the land seems little changed from what it must have looked like hundreds of years ago. Today it still looks much that



**After its scheduled lunch stop, No. 29 prepares to leave Worland at 11:20 a.m. in July 1966. Once into Billings, Northern Pacific will service E8 9938B during its almost-22-hour layover.**

way. Maintaining a respectful distance from the high reaches of Wyoming's Middle Rockies, the route rises and dips some, starting in Denver at an elevation of 5,280 feet and ending at 3,124 feet in Billings (in 1960, Montana's largest city with 53,000 population).

### **A relaxed pace**

Despite the crew's blue serge uniforms, which lent an air of formality, the Night Crawler was a casual operation. Much of its trip was after dark. Southbound, it traversed most of Wyoming at night, while northbound, daylight came about one-third of the way through. Some passengers dozed. Others alighted briefly at the stops to watch mail and express being passed into and out of the RPO-baggage car, or stayed on board, strolling back and forth in the coach aisle. A book provided a wel-

come diversion, but the lure of the ever-changing scenic panorama constantly dragged one's eyes back up off the page and out the window.

For a better view, a passenger could step out onto the coach's back platform, empty except for swirling clouds of dust. A flimsy, waist-high accordion tailgate reminded the unwary not to step farther. The platform offered a great vantage point for spotting startled antelope bounding away from the train across the grassy steppes. And the mesmerizing backward rush of rail and crossties xylophoning out from beneath the coach, accompanied by the soothing clickety-clack of the staggered rail joints, were wonderful antidotes for whatever ailed one.

The customarily assigned six-axle coach had been "modernized" with rubber-gasketed windows and painted sil-

ver to blend with the Q's streamlined passenger stock. That attempt at uniformity, however, fell a bit short out here at the end of Burlington's tether, for the RPO and most of the mail cars between the train's silver extremities were still adorned in the dark green of the heavy-weight era.

The 80-foot coach held about 60 passengers, more than the population at some of the Night Crawler's many stops, and far more than ever rode the train when I experienced it in the 1960s. The crew and passengers might fill 10 percent of the space. The interior was neatly painted, well lit, and pleasant, in a soothingly old-fashioned way. High-backed, comfortable reclining seats were spaced to permit fully stretching out one's legs. Commodious aisles beckoned the stroller. And that rear platform offered an unparalleled view of the scenery. Steam-heated in winter and air-conditioned in summer, the roomy car contrasted pleasantly with the hard, claustrophobic, sardine-can seating of an airliner.

Despite the languid pace, though, on board there was work to be done. As the mail clerk was handing off mail to, say, the postmaster at tiny Frannie, Wyo., last stop before Montana, and receiving Frannie's outgoing mail, the brakeman had pulled a pair of coveralls over his uniform and was busy loading and setting off milk cans, truck tires, a galvanized stock tank, a snazzy fat-tired bicycle for junior from the mail-order folks at Montgomery Ward or rival Sears, Roebuck, or a well-wrapped package from Miller Stockman in Denver. The trek of the Night Crawler took it across much territory that was, and



**Snow covers Boysen Ridge just north of the Wind River Indian Reservation on December 21, 1965, as No. 29 nears Thermopolis. Heavy Christmas mail has called for a pair of SD9's as power instead of the usual single E8; the train has already set out several mail cars.**

remains today, lightly inhabited. It is moot whether these far-flung communities now are being served more expeditiously, and more devotedly, by truck than they were by train.

Indeed, as the mail-heavy Christmas season approached, the train would swell beyond the ability of a lone E unit. To accommodate the extra business, the Burlington would order up a pair of steam-generator-equipped SD9's, the region's ubiquitous first-generation diesel freight power. (By 1957, CB&Q and C&S/Fort Worth & Denver had a total of 149 SD7's and 9's, three-quarters of them built with steam boilers.) The black-and-gray hood units were certainly a step down from the shiny silver E, but spoke eloquently to a railroad's flexibility in meeting demand. More mail? More passengers? Simple. Just add another car. Can the airlines do that?

### Lunchtime at Worland

Leaving Thermopolis, the Night Crawler continues along the Big Horn River, arriving at 4,061-foot-high Worland just before 11 a.m. for a 40-minute stop. Worland is one of Wyoming's hot spots. Literally. It's not the hottest—Basin, two stops north, once recorded 114 degrees—but the sun beats down on the crew and passengers as we troop from the depot across the sweltering street to one of two restaurants.

Pushing the creaky screen door



**With its last sack of railborne mail for the 1,220 residents of Basin, Wyo., loaded into the postmaster's car, No. 29 is ready to leave town on this, its last run, on September 2, 1967.**



**Hardly any among the 600 citizens of Bridger, Mont., have come down to the shelter at East Bridger to bid farewell to the last Night Crawler, though an old-timer has just disembarked.**

open, we mosey in. The door is zinged smartly shut behind us by a long coil spring. The occasional hungry fly, tempted in by the sizzle of meat, is soon immobilized on the omnipresent amber strip of flypaper hung by the cash register. Sitting at tables covered with red-and-white checked tablecloths, tinkling glasses of icewater and partly handwritten menus before us, we contemplate the limited selections. It generally came down to a choice between a hamburger and fries or a BLT sandwich and chips . . . not necessarily at the same restaurant.

Visible through a curtain-framed front window, across the street and behind the brick depot, is the deserted train. With their train reduced at Casper to the lanky diesel and the three cars, by now the crew outnumbers the passengers. Departure from Worland is at 11:20, and the train passes huge, bright-yellow piles of sulfur on its way to Manderson and Basin.

Emerging from short but scenic Sheep Canyon, the train pulls into

Greybull to top off its fuel and water tanks, departing at 12:15 p.m. From Greybull, and Lovell, 34 miles on, highways lead directly west to Cody, but up the line at Deaver—once the Night Crawlers' afternoon meeting point—there is a bus connection to Cody, near the east entrance of Yellowstone Park. Until the 1950s, when all rail passenger service to Yellowstone was discontinued, CB&Q provided the only service to the park's east entrance, via the Cody branch, which still sees BNSF Railway freights today.

Three railroads served the park from Montana points: Union Pacific at West Yellowstone; Milwaukee Road at Three Forks; and Northern Pacific at Gardiner, the park's northern gateway, via a 32-mile branch from its main line at Livingston. NP passengers disembarked at Gardiner's low, log depot, and stage coaches took them into Mammoth and throughout the park. After satiating themselves with the magnificent wildness of Yellowstone scenery, they would leave with a lifetime of memories.



**With a friendly wave from the conductor on the rear vestibule steps, No. 29 eases up the siding at Fromberg, Mont., in July 1966, having just met No. 30 holding the main line.**



**On 29's last run on September 2, 1967, a railroad employee photographs the crew at Casper. The E8, 9938B, is being serviced, and a switcher will couple on to remove a mail storage car.**

### End of the line

Along the way north, lots of friendly folks waiting in their pickups by wood-en crossbucks wave as the Night Crawler flashes by. There are also station agents, mailmen, and townspeople down to meet the train at each of the 28 scheduled stops—an average of one every 23 miles in this sparsely inhabited land. There are a few other “conditional” stops, and the crew might just take a fancy to stop elsewhere. It is, indeed, a “crawler.”

After 90 miles or so, the train veers away from the Big Horn River, stopping at Lovell. It is then a mere 18 miles to the white-painted clapboard depot at Frannie, then a hop, skip, and a couple more stops—including a meet with

southbound No. 30 at Fromberg, Mont.—to Laurel. There, finally, the Night Crawler is turned loose.

Laurel is where CB&Q met the high-speed main line of its half-owner Northern Pacific. At last, the Night Crawler's engineer shakes the reins of his steel steed, gives it a kick with his spurs, and the short consist hightails it east out of Laurel as if being chased by armed bandits. It's a thrill to stand out on the rear platform and listen to the E unit's Run-8 roar, as, trailing a rooster tail of dust, we skim past those slow-pokes loafing along on adjacent Interstate 90. Hissing that last 15 miles into Billings on smooth, welded rail is in one way the most exciting part of the trip. Then at 4 p.m., 19½ hours after de-

parting Denver, we ease into the station tracks at NP's handsome, long, yellow-brick Billings depot.

After our rides, when my wife and I lived in Fort Collins, Colo., we would hear the chime horn of the Night Crawler's E unit approaching the city limits an hour before midnight. With the engineer using its quieter single horn, the train would rumble through the Colorado State University campus, down the middle of Mason Street, and stop at the depot. After exchanging mail, sometimes dropping a mail storage car, and once in a great while actually discharging or adding a passenger, the train would creep across College Avenue and accelerate out of town. Soon, the melodious chime of its distant horn would waft through the night air as the train hurried off across the high plains toward Wellington and Cheyenne . . . and eventually Billings.

The end for the Night Crawler came in 1967 when the Post Office cancelled its railroad mail sorting contracts. A mail train in everything but name, the Night Crawler, like dozens of similar colorful local trains that were unable to live without mail income, was discontinued. On September 1, 1967, we stepped aboard the quiet, darkened coach one last time for a sad, final trip though the heart of Wyoming and on to Billings on the last No. 29 . . . and an entire way of life vanished. ■



Above, R. S. McGonigal; right, B. G. Corbin, Hol Wagner coll.

# Rail mail legacy

Notable Burlington Route RPO survivors **By Robert S. McGonigal**

Just as mail was crucial to the survival of the Night Crawler, it holds an important place in Burlington Route history. On July 28, 1862, Burlington predecessor Hannibal & St. Joseph launched what is generally accepted as the first Railway Post Office service. The H&StJ began with converted baggage cars, which were soon replaced by purpose-built mail cars. In 1933, for its exhibit at Chicago's Century of Progress fair, CB&Q rebuilt an ex-H&StJ 40-foot baggage car into a replica of one of the 30-foot mail cars of 1862. "H&StJ No. 1" toured the Q system off and on for more than two decades. It's now displayed at the Patee House Museum in St. Joseph, Mo.

Twenty-two years later, on March 11, 1884, CB&Q launched the *Fast Mail* between Chicago and a connection

with the Union Pacific at Council Bluffs, Iowa. The train was among the hottest on Q rails for decades, and the road marked its 75th anniversary by publishing a book about it in 1959.

At least five heavyweight CB&Q-family mail cars survive, four of which are 70-foot baggage-RPO's. Colorado & Southern bag-RPO 254 was a regular on the Night Crawler before going in 1968 to the Colorado Railroad Museum, where it is displayed today. CB&Q bag-RPO 1945 is seen by hundreds of train riders each day at its display site next to the Galesburg, Ill., Amtrak station. Sisters 1923 and 1938 are operational at, respectively, the Illinois Railway Museum at Union and the Fremont & Elkhorn Valley tourist line in Fremont, Nebr. The National Railroad Museum at Green Bay, Wis.,



Museum of Science & Industry: J. B. Spector

**CB&Q baggage-RPO 1923 snags a bag (top) at the Illinois Railway Museum in September 2008. The Q's H&StJ No. 1 replica was at Red Oak, Iowa, in April '59. The *Pioneer Zephyr's* RPO interior has been beautifully restored.**

is home to 60-foot full-RPO No. 2330.

The most-visited and best-restored Burlington RPO is part of one of the most famous and influential trains in history, the *Pioneer Zephyr*. The three-car articulated streamliner retired to Chicago's Museum of Science & Industry in 1960 as an outdoor display. After a complete refurbishment, the *Zephyr* moved inside and reopened as a star exhibit in 1998. The RPO area, located in the power car, is a major part of the multi-media exhibit, toured by hundreds of thousands of people each year. ■