

57

With the Rock Island unraveling around him, an engineer takes the throttle of the road's hottest train

By Steve Lasher



By the late 1970s, the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific Railroad was in its death throes. The forces that had buffeted Midwestern railroads for decades hit the Rock Island hard. As the woeful condition of the physical plant and equipment caused service to deteriorate, the Rock Island's very existence came into question. Fortunately for the morale of those of us who worked for the Rock, there was 57.

Fifty-seven was one of the few tangible entities that verified the Rock's relevance in the railroad world. It carried primarily California-bound auto parts from Chicago to Council Bluffs, Iowa, where we handed it off to the Union Pacific. This lucrative traffic was vital to the Rock Island, so 57 was given top priority.

In the May 2004 issue of TRAINS

magazine, Ed Brunner wrote about 57, mainly from the operator/dispatcher's point of view. I was on the "East Iowa" (formally, Subdivision No. 4 of the Iowa Division) seniority district's engineer's extra board in 1978-79 and got to operate 57 many times. Starting with a description of the territory, this is what it was like to sit in the hot seat on the hottest train on the railroad.

The East Iowa, from Kelly Yard in Silvis, Ill., to Short Line Yard in Des Moines, was a microcosm of the Rock Island in its final years. The first 48 miles to West Liberty was double track, signaled for operation with the current of traffic. The next 15 miles to the west end of Iowa City was CTC, controlled from West Liberty. From Iowa City to Newton was timetable-and-train-order territory, while Newton to Short Line was CTC,

GE U-boats and an EMD GP40 swing through Spring Valley, Ill., 70 miles east of Silvis, with 57, hottest train on the Rock Island, in 1973.

Thomas J. Post, Dave Oroszi collection





At Blue Island station in Chicago suburban territory, the engineer (top) and a rear-end crewman (above) on 57 snag train orders from a set of delivery forks in June 1978. Beyond the caboose can be seen the end of Illinois Central Gulf's electrified Blue Island Branch.

Two photos, Steve Smedley

controlled by the dispatcher in Des Moines. There were only two controlled sidings (*i.e.*, with switches controlled by the dispatcher) in this stretch: Newton and Colfax. The latter was relatively unencumbered by road crossings, gradients, and the like, but it was shorter of the two; Newton, although slightly longer, straddled two fairly busy crossings.

Other sidings were accessed by hand-throw switches. Between Iowa City and Newton only Brooklyn, at 7,800 feet and without crossings, was uncomplicated. The others—Oxford, Marengo, and Grinnell—were all problematic. Oxford was short and on a hill; Marengo, while longer, had a main road crossing that lopped 1,000 feet or so off its usable

length; and then there was Grinnell.

On paper, Grinnell was a generous 7,900 feet, but the reality was far different. Several busy street crossings on its west end rendered that end unusable; a Chicago & North Western line crossed at grade in the middle of it; and the westernmost 1,000 feet or so was some of the nastiest, down-in-the-mud, barbed-wire railroad anywhere. Grinnell was not a place to make heavy locomotives pull hard if you could help it. The west switch was on a heavy eastward grade that crested at the C&NW crossing. The icing on the cake for eastbounds was that the east switch was on a sharp downhill, so having to control the train while leaving slow enough so the rear-end man could

line the east switch back for the main was a recipe for trouble. All this meant that Grinnell siding was seldom used.

There were few open stations between Silvis and Des Moines. Only West Liberty was staffed continuously. Newton was open on first and second trick, and Marengo and Iowa City were open only on first trick, even though few trains transited the subdivision on first trick. This meant that any changes to train orders generally had to be made with someone's head (usually the engineer's, but sometimes the conductor's) poked into a lineside phone box as he talked directly with the dispatcher.

Despite these shortcomings, the East Iowa was in better condition than most of the Rock Island. To a large extent, the Rock had been done in by the increasing weight limits adopted by the rest of the industry, coupled with earnings insufficient to maintain or upgrade the property. It was a circa-1900 physical plant, and it simply couldn't cope. One had to but watch a grain train rock and roll at 10 mph down the line in northwestern Iowa from Estherville to Iowa Falls to appreciate the effect that 100-ton cars had on 85- and 90-pound rails—and this was after a multi-million dollar rehabilitation program paid for by the state of Iowa!

It was a railroad where you sped from slow order to slow order and hoped you wouldn't have to wait too long for the relief crew to show up after you'd hog-lawed. It wasn't always a given that both the engine and the caboose would have working radios, so—unless you had one of the few trainmen who'd acquired a walkie-talkie on his own—every move would have to be done with hand signals.

The seats on the locomotives were worn out and uncomfortable for 12 minutes, let alone 12 hours. Speedometers? Maybe. A good stopwatch was more reliable. Fortunately, the East Iowa had telephone poles spaced at 40 to the mile, making it easy to gauge a quarter mile.

Fifty-seven was the only ray of sunshine in this otherwise dismal world. All stops were pulled to expedite 57—you could count on no supervisors being out with a radar gun if you were on it. In fact, as long as you got to the other end of the railroad with the cars all greasy-side down, no questions were asked. Supposedly, the North Western was after 57's auto parts traffic, and too many late arrivals at Council Bluffs might result in the loss of this business, so any time that you could save might just save your job. Not every engineer subscribed to this



The Rock Island handed 57 off to Union Pacific at Council Bluffs, Iowa, where three RI U-boats and a GP40 idle on September 21, 1973. The biggest fish in the relatively small pond that was the Rock, the train was just one of a fleet of hot ones that blazed across the UP to California.

R. M. Leach, Dave Oroszi collection

thinking, but if you liked to run, no one would stand in your way. Running 57 certainly wasn't for the timid.

Starting out at Silvis

We can start the trip after having gotten home the day before. A good night's sleep has been a luxury lately, so I'm feeling pretty good when I call the Silvis crew clerk to see how we stand. "Lasher, you're first out and there's a hole on the second turn. First turn's going on 59 about 11, so unless something comes up, looks like you'll stand for 57 this afternoon." Since this is the late '70s, I do have a pager but, just to be sure, I'll stick pretty close to home so as not to miss the clerk's phone call.

About 3 o'clock the phone rings. It's Rick Voyce, the second-trick roundhouse crew clerk newly on duty. "Lasher, looks like you're going on the 'magic carpet' this afternoon: 57 for 4:30."

"Okay, Rick, I'll be there. You know who the train crew is?"

"I knew you'd ask. Conductor Smith, brakemen Miller and Grimm."

"Thanks, Rick," I say, hanging up. This is a good crew. The icing on the cake is that Bill Miller has his own walkie-talkie *and* his own car in Des Moines, meaning we won't be at the mercy of Yellow Cab getting back and forth to the hotel, and we'll have wider possibilities for eating once there.

After packing my grip (a large salesman's catalog case) and warming my Thermos with hot water (it's lined with stainless steel—glass ones don't last long out on the road), I head out to McDonald's. Besides my order that I'll eat now, I order two Big Macs to go and have my Thermos filled with hot coffee. Big Macs are practical since I don't mind eating them cold and you never know what may come between you and the next meal.

A trip around town on the John Deere Expressway and I'm at the Silvis roundhouse (actually, a couple of rooms in a corner of the backshop) signing the crew register. After checking the general order book and perusing the bulletin boards, I'm ready to launch into a short conversation with Rick. He beats me to the punch.

"Don't ask," he says.

"Well, I haven't . . . yet, Chrome Dome," I answer, referring to Rick's shaved head. "Just what is it that I'm not asking?"

"That's Mister Chrome Dome to you. Power's going through—change at the hump road crossing." Sometimes 57 changes engines at Silvis, but not today.

I get the engine numbers from Rick and start my time slip. Looks like we'll have four GE U33B's today, a common consist for 57. Not that the U33's are super reliable (nothing is on the Rock anymore), but they are *fast*. If they stay run-

ning, we'll fly with a comparatively light train like 57. This represents one of the few times the motive power was properly matched to the desired results. Of course, the big question is if they will all stay running. Davy Grimm is one of the better brakemen to have on the head end, because if the alarm bells start ringing, he doesn't mind going back to see what's wrong and he's pretty good at handling any problems.

In a few minutes the carryall vehicle pulls up; Davy and I get in, and we head over to the hump yard office.

The practice at the time was for 57's crew to be called 30 minutes before the train's estimated arrival time at Silvis. Had we been bringing power out of the shop area, we would have located the power and brought it out to the hump yard crossing and backed into the pocket to wait for the inbound power to clear on the inbound lead. After he cleared, we would pull out on the inbound lead and back down to the pot signal protecting the main line. The yardmaster would let us know (either on the radio or yard speaker) that we had permission to pass the signal and back up against our train. This would involve inspecting the power switches involved, so Davy would have to get on the ground and signal me back at each switch. After tying on, we would have to pump up the air, do a brake test and wait for the brakes to release before



A 1977 view from the cab of an eastbound on the main track at Grinnell, Iowa, shows the siding situation there. Grades, road crossings, poor track, and a diamond crossing with a C&NW line (at the depot ahead) combined to make the 7,900-foot siding nearly useless for meets.

Steve Lasher

we could go. Today, it will be much simpler. The train will stop at the hump road crossing, the inbound crew will get off, the engineer will advise me about the brakes, we'll board, and after being told that the rear end crew is on and ready, I'll release the brakes and go.

We do have a little time to kill after arriving at the hump yard office. Smitty has our clearance and orders ready, and after noting any new slow orders, I stash them in my grip after jotting the loads, empties, and tonnage on them. Today's handle will be 58 loads, 5 empties, 3,930 tons. I'm estimating our length at 3,700 feet and horsepower per ton about 3.3 if all units are working. We will do well. Don't ask me how we wound up with 5

empty cars on this train, but it seemed 57 always had a few. We'll get a better idea of the exact length when we leave. There are footage signs west of Warner's crossing (west end of the yard); using the crossing as baseline, we can get a good idea of our length—assuming the head- and rear-end radios work.

We kill time for a while until the humpmaster comes on the intercom—"57's outbound crew, he's at Colona"—letting us know he's about 4 miles out. The callboy hollers that he's ready with the carryall and we get in. It's a short ride for the head-end crew and, since the weather's nice, the callboy will let us out before he heads down the access road to swap out rear-end crews. Presently, a

headlight shows on the main line at the far east end of the yard.

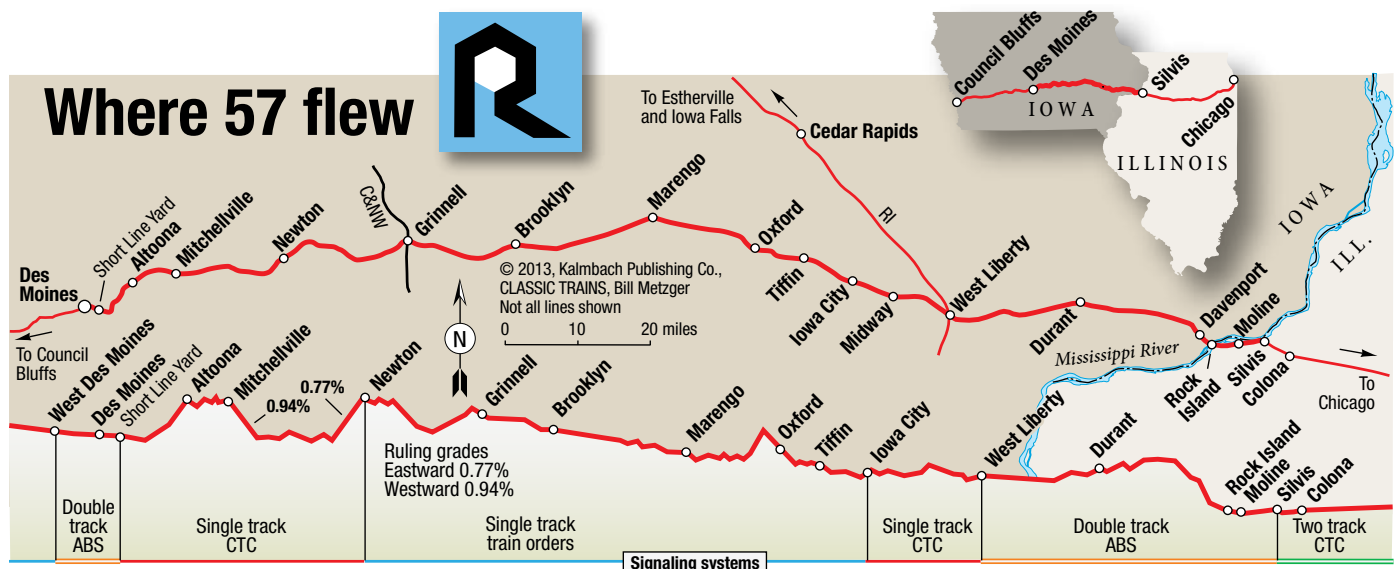
The inbound engineer stops with the lead unit's steps right in front of us, and we wait for the head-end crew to climb down. The engineer tells me she handles "sweet"—no problems with the brakes, the speedometer is pretty accurate, and the last signal was "clear."

First thing: Fix the seat

The first order of business after boarding is to work on the engineer's seat. Rock Island bought the cheapest seats it could, and the years haven't been kind to them. Their manufacturer must have been on staff for the Inquisition. Usually, the problem was that guys would try to lean back in them like lounge chairs, and they weren't made to do that. It bent the seat-back hinge out of shape and, unless you wanted to lie back for the whole trip, you needed to fix that. But first, I'd remove the seat from its pedestal and pull the pedestal tube up to the height I wanted and put the pin back in place to keep it there. After putting the seat on the pedestal, I'd take some folded paper towels and wedge them in the hinge to try to get the back to some point where it provided at least a little support. Finally, I'd move the wiper arm on my front window as far to the left as it would go to get it out of my line of vision.

About now, the rear end comes on the radio and announces, "57, the brakes are set and we're on and ready." I reply, "OK, Conductor Smith, here comes your [brake] release." Then, "57's outbound to Kelly Yard hump [humpmaster]. We're ready to go."

"Kelly hump to 57's train, OK to depart Kelly Yard."





U28B No. 259, a U30C, and another four-axle U-boat lead 57 west through Silvis, Ill., on October 28, 1978. Slow track here and through Moline, Rock Island, and Davenport limited speed to between 10 and 20 mph, but once out in the country on good track, 57 sometimes hit 70 mph.

Steve Smedley

Before he's finished speaking, I've got the throttle in the first notch and I'm easing off on the independent (engine) brakes. You almost always opened the throttle while leaving the engine brakes fully applied. That way you could ease the engines and the train into motion by controlling the start with the engine brakes for a smooth start and gentle take-up of the slack.

Presently, Smitty is on the radio, "Moving, 57. 5:15 on the pull, Kelly."

We're off. If we don't have any problems, we should roll to a stop in Des Moines about 9:45 p.m.

Coming out on the throttle to about the sixth notch, accompanied by the GE trademark belch of black smoke, briskly accelerates the train around the slightly uphill curve from the hump road crossing and under the Route 5-92 overpass. When we're up to about 10 mph, I start notching down, letting the speed settle to about 20 mph. One of the good things about 57's train is that it normally was all piggybacks and auto parts cars, no covered hoppers, and was not as subject to harmonic rock and roll as some other trains. I never would have run any other train for any length of time at that speed. In fact, harmonic rocking was the phenomenon that relegated much of Rock Island's track to 10 mph. The thinking was that if the track wasn't good for at least 25 mph, then it had to be 10 mph

with nothing in between to avoid walking covered hoppers off the track.

As we pass Warner's, I pinch the speed down to about 12 mph for about a quarter mile of rough track. After the rear end calls "Warner's, 57," I note the foot-age marker and reply "3800 on 57, Conductor Smith." A little math gives me the estimate of 29 pole-lengths, a number that will be handy to know the rest of the trip. Then comes the following sequence, which would be replayed many times en route to Des Moines. After I'm sure the rear end is over the worst of rough track, I start notching out and shortly the speed comes up. When it hits 35 or 37 mph, I set a minimum reduction and wait. The wait allows the slack in the train to settle down and arrests the acceleration. When I think the time is right, I make a further service reduction and start slowly notching down the throttle. When the speed comes down to about 16 mph, I release the brakes and ease off on the throttle to notch 2, then notch 1, and the speed settles to 10 mph for the seriously bad track under Interstate 74 in downtown Moline. I'll let it come up to 12 or so between Moline and Rock Island.

So it will go all the way to Short Line, jack-rabbing from slow order to slow order, adhering pretty close to some and ignoring others completely. The top speed will range from 50 to 60 mph between Silvis and Iowa City, and better

than 70 from there to Short Line.

After crossing the Mississippi River on the Government Bridge at a steady 10 mph, I give the horn a few extra toots coming through the streets of Davenport to summon the "shady lady." This woman's home was at the bottom of the embankment of the first curve going up Davenport hill. It was situated such that her back door faced the tracks but otherwise couldn't be seen from across the street or by her neighbors. She liked to stand in a pristine state in the back door, giving train crews a view. The conductor and brakeman on a work train scrambled down the bank once to introduce themselves and later testified that some things are best viewed from afar.

By 6:40 we're rocking through West Liberty. Operator Ed Brunner is out on the platform leaning against the depot to watch us by as required by the rules. It took a certain amount of courage to be that close to a Rock Island train in those days. We had the motorists trained pretty well by then as most, if traffic behind them permitted, would back up away from the track a hundred feet or so as insurance against a derailment.

Noting that the order board is red (as it always is), I lean out the window and snag the head end's copy of the orders from the train-order stand. The clearance reads "C&E NO 57." In the absence of anything else, this would be all the



authority we would need, but tonight there is a wait order:

NO 57 ENG 294 HAS RIGHT OVER
EASTWARD TRAINS AND WAIT AT
IOWA CITY UNTIL 645PM
OXFORD 655PM
MARENGO 710PM
BROOKLYN 722PM
GRINNELL 740PM
FOR EXTRA 4712 EAST

These times are deliberately calculated to be (by about 30 minutes) before we get to these stations, so we will never have to actually wait, but they do give the extra a new schedule to run against.

The problem if you were on the east-bound coming against 57 was that you generally didn't get running orders until you were at Newton, so you had only one-half mile or so from the time you got the orders in your hand to the west siding switch at Newton to decide if you could go to Brooklyn. You had to judge by how your train had handled thus far and taking into account its length to decide if Grinnell was even a possibility; generally it wasn't, so Brooklyn was usually where you'd have to go. Then, you had to figure if you could make Brook-

lyn in time. If not, then stopping and having the dispatcher line you into the siding at Newton was the best option.

Tonight, when we top the hill at Midway (not a station, but a known point as it was halfway between West Liberty and Iowa City), the advance signal for the east switch at Iowa City shows "advance approach" (yellow over yellow) which tells us to "proceed prepared to advance on a diverging route at the next signal." I smell a fubar here and call West Liberty on the radio but get no answer. Sure enough, when the signal for the siding at Iowa City comes into view it's "diverging approach" (red over yellow). Because the main line has a 10-mph slow order just east of the depot, heading in won't make a huge difference time-wise, so in we go. Besides, with the route lined for the siding, changing it to the main line would require us to stop and wait for the timer to run down before West Liberty could reroute us—a certain delay.

When we get to the west end, the pot signal for the siding is red, so I pinch us down to a crawl and call "West Lib" again. This time he answers.

"West Lib."

"Say, Ed, 57's got a red signal on the siding here at Iowa City. We meeting somebody here?"

"Stand by, 57."

Presently the pot changes from red to green and I let the speed increase as we move back onto the main line.

A burst of 70, then down to 35

We first touch 70 after hitting the welded rail at Tiffin. It doesn't last long, though, as there is a 30-mph slow order at Oxford, site of a recent washout. We take it at about 35, and when the rear end clears, we're headed up Homestead hill. The U33's slowly gain speed, but we're still only doing 50 or so when we go over the top. I notice an Iowa state trooper over on the paralleling highway, and we pass him as we rocket down the far side and over the Milwaukee Road overpass. He'll have to keep his ticket book in his pocket for us.

Marengo, 7:40 p.m. This is the half-way point and time to break out the Thermos. The smart play is to pour only half a cup. Any more invites a mess on the control stand. We're around the curve and through the old truss bridge



An all-EMD consist powers 57 past the depot at West Liberty, Iowa, and enters 70-mph track in a race toward the setting sun in June 1977.

Two photos: Randy B. Olson, Dave Oroszi collection

west of town in the blink of an eye. I always thought the bridge looked a little frail and not quite big enough for a train, but we always made it.

Brooklyn, 7:55 p.m., and Extra 4712 East stands, headlight extinguished, in the siding. The head brakeman, on my side and well out in the weeds, waves a highball; the engine crew is standing by the lead unit to give us a roll-by.

Presently on the radio, “Looked good, 57’s train.”

Smitty, our conductor, asks, “Say, John, how many behind you?”

“Three, but they were going to call a 44 behind us.”

This is important information, as it gives us an idea how long we’ll be laying over in Des Moines before our next call.

Davy is on my side of the cab looking the train over as we round the curve at the east end of Grinnell. I wait as long as I can before slowing to 12 or 14 mph over the C&NW diamond. The train-handling will get trickier from here on. If you could slice a cross section of the topography you would see that Grinnell,

at an elevation of 1,014 feet, sits atop a ridge and is the highest point between Silvis (elevation 700 feet) and Des Moines (955 feet). From here we’ll cross drainages at right angles, first down into a valley at Kellogg, then climbing to Newton. We’ll drop to Colfax, then climb the westward ruling grade (0.94 percent) to Mitchellville and finally descend from Altoona down to Short Line.

We drop through Newton about 9 p.m. Sure enough, a train sits in the clear at Colfax. Since I had to slack off to about 30 mph over the east switch at Colfax, and Mitchellville hill starts soon after Colfax, we do well to hold what speed we have. Once over the top, we briefly touch 70 again for the last time before slowing at Altoona for the start of the hill down to Short Line Yard, in the east end of the Hawkeye State’s capital.

Leaving Mitchellville, I call the Short Line yardmaster and receive the reply I expect: “Down the main to the west end and change crews, 57.”

When the rear end is past the branch-line junction at Altoona, I let her ramble

for one last sprint as we hit 40 mph rounding the big, sweeping curve at the east end of Short Line Yard. A final brake application brings us to a halt at the road crossing at the west end of the yard at 9:45, and we repeat the exchange made between crews at Silvis. It feels strange to stand on solid ground again as we head to the engineman’s locker room to wait for Smitty and Bill to pick us up for the ride downtown to the hotel.

Within two years, the Rock Island will cease to exist, and I’ll be working for the Cotton Belt out of Commerce, Texas. The difference will be like moving from the frigid dark side of the moon into brilliant, hot sunlight. The North Western finally got 57’s coveted auto-parts traffic, but it was a pyrrhic victory, as the recession of the early 1980s caused auto production to plummet. The U33B’s, old before their time, were put permanently out of work. Ah, those GE’s. I will grudgingly have to give them some credit. When they were bad, they were awful; but when they were good, they were very good! Was this trip fun? You bet! ■