

Green Bay & Western: more than Alcos

Boats, bridge traffic, and paper all factored in the several lives of this Badger State pike • **By Steve Glischinski**



With Ann Arbor's *Viking* in port, GB&W C424 313 works the Kewaunee car ferry slip on May 8, 1977. Yellow was GB&W's standard caboose color.

Steve Glischinski

Green Bay, Wis., is best known as the home of the legendary National Football League franchise Green Bay Packers, but for 97 years this city of 120,000 or so was also home to the Green Bay & Western Railroad, the self-proclaimed "Green Bay Route." When it dieselized with Alco locomotives and stuck with them into the 1990s, GB&W became as legendary among diesel enthusiasts as the Packers are with their fans. But GB&W was more than just Alcos. Running 250 miles more or less straight across Wisconsin from the Lake Michigan port of Kewaunee through Green Bay to Winona, Minn., the railroad lived many lives during its existence: local carrier, bridge line, and finally regional railroad relying mainly on paper products for its livelihood.

GB&W's origins trace to 1866, when the Green Bay & Lake Pepin was chartered in Wisconsin. The first spike was driven in Green Bay on November 2, 1871. The company name was changed to Green Bay & Minnesota in October 1873, and two months later rails reached Marshland, Wis., 208 miles west of Green Bay, where the road connected with Chicago & North Western, using it

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into Winona until 1891, when the 2-mile Bridge Railway Co. built a swing span across the Mississippi River at the opposite (south) end of the city. The bridge firm was owned one-third each by the Winona & Southwestern (later Chicago Great Western); Green Bay, Winona & St. Paul (GB&M's new name after an 1881 reorganization); and the Chicago, Burlington & Northern (later CB&Q), with which GBW&StP connected at the marshy point of East Winona. (The soon-renamed Winona Bridge Railway Co. would gain notoriety in the 1980s in a Burlington Northern labor issue.)

In Winona, GB&W eventually would interchange with not only CGW and C&NW, but also with Milwaukee Road. The name Green Bay & Western emerged from an 1896 reorganization of the GBW&StP.

East of Green Bay

In 1891, a short line, the Kewaunee, Green Bay & Western, built 33 miles from Green Bay to Kewaunee to gain access to Lake Michigan steamship lines. Eventually railroad carferries were developed and began transporting railroad cars across the lake. In the modern era, the ferries linked GB&W to two connec-

tions in lower Michigan: Ann Arbor Railroad at Elberta, the port across the local harbor from Frankfort; and Pere Marquette, later Chesapeake & Ohio, at Ludington. Green Bay & Western gained control of KGB&W in 1897, but kept it as a separate subsidiary until fully absorbing it on June 1, 1969. Diesels assigned to KGB&W wore Green Bay Route livery, but most carried "KGB&W" initials.

Another line controlled by the Green Bay Route was the Ahnapee & Western, in the Door County "thumb" of Wisconsin. A&W was built from the KGB&W connection at Casco Junction to Ahnapee (later Algoma) in 1892, and to Sturgeon Bay in 1894. Green Bay Route took control in 1906. Traffic on the 34-mile line waned during the Great Depression, so GB&W sold it in 1947 to local Sturgeon Bay interests, and a new Ahnapee & Western began operations.

A&W's swing bridge at Sturgeon Bay was condemned in 1968, and the line was abandoned north of Algoma. In 1970 the remaining 14 miles were sold to California's McCloud River Railroad, a division of Champion International Corp. In 1972, A&W contracted with the Green Bay Route to provide service, which continued until the line was embargoed in 1986. Ironically, the A&W became an ITEL property after the compa-

ny bought the McCloud River in 1977 (Itel would acquire GB&W in 1978), and the inactive line was sold with GB&W in 1993. A&W's right of way now is a recreational path, the Ahnapee State Trail.

GB&W itself had a few short branches. A 6-mile line extended from Plover north into Stevens Point, and most of it still exists under Canadian National. At Scandinavia were two branches: a 9.8-mile line south to Waupaca, pulled up in 1947; and a 5-mile branch north to Iola, abandoned in 1956. GB&W reached La Crosse via trackage rights over C&NW from Marshland to Onalaska, where GB&W owned a 6-mile line into the city. That line was lifted in 1922. The 2-mile spur from Wisconsin Rapids to a Consolidated Papers mill in Biron still exists.

Passenger traffic on the Green Bay Route ceased in 1949 when only 213 riders were carried; by then the road was operating only mixed trains. GB&W owned elegant heavyweight open-platform business cars for official use until the last one was sold in 1971. GB&W's last business car was dome-lounge-observation *Trempealeau River*, an ex-Union Pacific/Auto-Train Corp. car named after the waterway on GB&W's west end. It later served on the Algoma Central's *Agawa Canyon Train* out of Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario.

A family business

In 1934 Homer McGee became president of the Green Bay Route. A former executive vice president of the Missouri-Kansas-Texas (Katy), he transformed the property. McGee pumped money into track and infrastructure to allow higher train speeds and heavier locomotives. He ordered modern steam power—six Alco 2-8-2s, Nos. 401–406, that came in 1937 and 1939. Until then, 2-8-0s had been



The system's five Alco FA's ushered in the attractive red-and-gray livery. On June 18, 1954, 506 (formerly first 503) plus one of the three with KGB&W initials posed at Wisconsin Rapids.

Stan Mailer photo; J. David Ingles collection

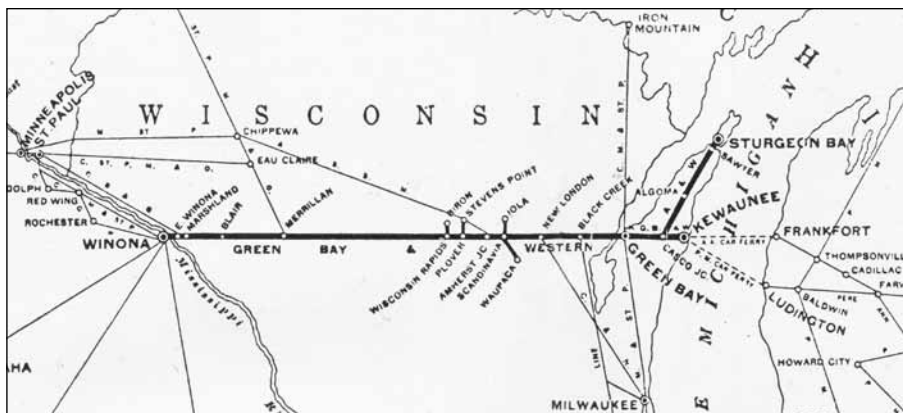
the biggest power. With better track and equipment, GB&W concentrated on the rapid movement of bridge traffic. It advertised carferry connections as a way to bypass congested Chicago. By the 1960s, more than 40 percent of GB&W traffic was overhead, the primary commodities being forest and agricultural products heading east and automobiles and auto parts moving west. One of its largest customers was Ford Motor Co. GB&W began moving parts and vehicles for Ford via the Ann Arbor and the lake beginning in the 1920s.

In 1962 Homer McGee's son, H. Welton McGee, was named GB&W president and served until 1978. Like his father, he had worked for the Katy, then the GB&W. He had been named vice president-operations in 1958.

The younger McGee faced a difficult task: by the late 1960s and '70s the carferry were becoming expensive to operate, and both Ann Arbor and C&O tried

to abandon them, only to be rebuffed by regulators. The Ford business vanished as auto production and distribution methods changed and "just in time" parts deliveries came into vogue. GB&W turned inward, expanding on-line business, landing accounts such as Ashley Furniture in Arcadia and sand from Badger Mining near Taylor.

The railroad's main facility was Norwood Yard on Green Bay's otherwise residential south side. South of the main



This map from a 1943 timetable exaggerates GB&W's crossing of Wisconsin into a straight line.



Six handsome 2-8-2s were GB&W's largest steam power. No. 403 leaves Norwood Yard and nears the MILW crossing in April 1947.

C. B. Kniskern



Sparkling in the late-afternoon sun at Norwood roundhouse on Labor Day weekend 1964 are GB&W's first two high-horsepower units, both 2400 h.p.: C424 311 and RS27 310, Alco's first.

Jerry A. Pinkepank photo; J. David Ingles collection



RS2 303 hits the Soo Line diamond in Stevens Point after a trip up the branch from Plover on May 9, 1977. This unit would wind up in Michigan, being sold to the (new) Ann Arbor in 1979.

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Ready to be chased east, train 2 rolls through Marshland on January 19, 1993. Note the serifs on RS27 316's initials; C420 323 trails C424 311.

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tracks were the roundhouse and shops, while to the north stood a large grain elevator that bore the GREEN BAY ROUTE rectangle; the elevator was built in 1918 and owned by the railroad until 1971. Headquarters was a large two-story brick station east of the yard on the Fox River's west bank. It was destroyed by fire in 1977, upon which GB&W moved to offices in a west-side industrial park.

For decades, GB&W's workhorse trains were Nos. 1 and 2. The westbound typically left Green Bay in early evening, and by the 1970s it was often followed by carloads of Alco-loving railfan photographers. No. 2 would leave Winona around sunrise and usually arrive in Wisconsin Rapids at midday. Numbers 2 and 1 also were used on the daytime "boat train" from Green Bay to Keweenaw and return; when business supported a night boat run, they were 4 and 3.

About those Alcos

GB&W's first diesel, 600 h.p. high-hood Alco 101, arrived in 1938. In 1941, 660 h.p. S1 103, assigned to KGB&W, arrived. Both were painted black, but that changed in 1947, when three 1500 h.p. FA1's—KGB 501-502 and GB&W 503—arrived in an attractive red scheme with a gray stripe. The switchers were repainted red and gray, and in 1949 were joined by two more, GB&W S1 102 and 1000 h.p. KGB S2 201. FA1's KGB 503 and GB&W 507 came in 1949, the same year an order was placed for four RS2's, 301-304. They arrived in February 1950, and the last steam locomotive ran in March.

The RS2's were supplemented by RS3's 305–308 during 1951–55, and a single RS11, long-hood-front 309, in 1956. The road stood pat with motive power until 1960, when it received RS27 310. (Alco built only 27 of them, first known as DL640's.) Two secondhand RS27's would follow in 1968 and a third in 1976 (316-318), after short careers on C&NW and a trade-in to Alco for C425's.

New C424's 311–314 arrived during 1963–65, and soon the switchers were phased out, yielding yard work in Green Bay and Wisconsin Rapids to the RS's. The last new locomotive, C430 315, came in 1968; GB&W donated it to Green Bay's National Railroad Museum in 1987. In the late 1960s GB&W dropped the gray stripe and went to a solid red scheme, repainting the last unit in 1973.

With the RS3's aging, in the 1970s the capable Norwood Shops rebuilt them to "RS20's" with new 251-C engines, swapping the control-stand position to short-hood-forward and chopping their noses. RS11 309 also was "reversed" and "chopped." Norwood also handled contract jobs on other roads' Alcos. In 1979 GB&W picked up its last diesels: five used Alco Centurys, rebuilt by General Electric Apparatus in Hornell, N.Y. Four were C424's of PRR (319), Reading (320), and EL (321-322) ancestry, while the fifth was an ex-Lehigh & Hudson River C420.

Competition and assimilation

By the mid-1970s, GB&W had lost most of its automobile business. Still, other traffic moved via the carferries, and on-line paper business was good. GB&W's main interchange partner was Burlington Northern at East Winona, and in 1974 the two roads applied to the Interstate Commerce Commission to merge GB&W into BN. That didn't sit well with C&NW, Milwaukee, and Soo Line, all of which wanted to keep BN out of central Wisconsin. Railcar leasing firm Brae Corp. also made a play for GB&W. When the legal wrangling ended, BN had dropped out, the Milwaukee was bankrupt, and another player, Brae competitor Itel, made a higher bid. GB&W went to Itel in October 1978.

Itel's victory was short-lived, though. With the 1980 rail deregulation, most of GB&W's remaining bridge traffic dried up. In 1985, the Winona Bridge was taken out of service, leaving GB&W's west end with only the BN connection. In 1989, new (1987) competitor Wisconsin

Central landed the contract to serve Consolidated Paper's large Wisconsin Rapids mill. In 1990, the last carferry ran, costing GB&W \$1 million in annual revenue. In December 1988, Itel had established the Fox River Valley Railroad (FRVR) when it took over two C&NW lines between Milwaukee and Green Bay, and by 1991 GB&W and FRVR were under common management.

While GB&W was marginally profitable, FRVR was not, and Itel wanted out. In a quick and quiet maneuver, Itel in 1993 sold the two roads to Wisconsin Central, which set up a subsidiary, Fox Valley & Western, for them. The last GB&W train ran on August 27, 1993.

In the years since the Green Bay Route's demise, two segments of its old main line have been pulled up: Plover–Manawa and New London–Green Bay. The Kewaunee line has been truncated to Luxemburg. Norwood Shops were leveled in 2000, but some yard tracks remain. WC's 2001 successor Canadian National still provides service from Wisconsin Rapids to East Winona, and many of the Alcos survive on other railroads.

The Packers remain one of the NFL's most successful teams, but the colorful railroad that called Green Bay home has slipped into history. ■

Green Bay Route fact file

GREEN BAY
ROUTE

(comparative figures are for 1929 and 1992)

Route-miles: 269 (KGB&W 35); 256

Locomotives: 43 (KGB&W 12); 16

Freight cars: 1197 (KGB&W 267); 1687

Passenger cars: 41 (KGB&W 9); 1

Headquarters city: Green Bay, Wis.

Special interest groups: Green Bay & Western Historical Society, Inc., P.O. Box 12713, Green Bay, WI 54307; www.gbwhs.org; GB&W Yahoo! group: <http://finance.groups.yahoo.com/group/GBW>

Recommended reading: *Green Bay & Western*, by Stan Mailer (Hundman Publishing, 1989); *Green Bay & Western Color Pictorial*, by Andrew S. Nelson (Four Ways West Publications, 2003); *Story of the Green Bay & Western*, by Ray and Ellen Specht (Railway & Locomotive Historical Society Bulletin No. 115, October 1966)

Sources: Author's materials; website www.greenbayroute.com