

Hats off to the Santa Fe



In the early 1970s, not all “warbonnets” were red

By **J. David Ingles**

Photos from the author's collection

Thanks mainly to Lionel, and then other model railroad manufacturers who produced miniature F units so decorated, Santa Fe's “warbonnet” passenger-diesel livery of a red nose with silver, or stainless steel, flanks and thin yellow and black trim striping, became arguably the most famous and popular diesel locomotive color scheme ever. Applied to more than 150 cab units beginning in the 1930s with Santa Fe's first *Super Chief* units, the colors and warbonnet style (so nicknamed in keeping with the road's fleet of “Chiefs,” illustrated by a flowing head-dress) were continued briefly on second-generation EMD and GE passenger units in the late 1960s. Then in 1990, Santa Fe boss Mike Haverty revived the image on modern high-horsepower freight units, a



After my Cleburne, Texas, shop visit on May 2, 1972, I shot this consist (above) with “blue-bonnet” F7A 343L exposed at the service area. Soon we wound up chasing the set (right), with 266C (painted in normal freight blue) leading, north from Cleburne on a Dallas-bound freight.

Three photos, J. David Ingles

practice carried over briefly into the BNSF era after the 1995 merger. Excluding cabless B units, *i.e.*, counting only locomotives with red front ends, there were roughly three times more “modern warbonnets” than there were early passenger ones.

Nevertheless, the livery was — and remains — a color scheme for the ages.

But not all warbonnets were red. For a short time in the early 1970s, Santa Fe experimented with yellow, or blue, paint on some F7s instead of red. Beginning in 1940 with its legions of FTs and going clear through the 1980s, Santa Fe's road freight diesel colors had been blue and yellow. (And yes, a dozen FT quartets wore the red warbonnet scheme for a

... or maybe not



Above: My first good warbonnet photo was in, of all places, Denver, in fall 1959, of dual-service F7 trio 337 at the C&S-ATSF Rice Yard roundhouse, now the site of Elitch Gardens amusement park.



Amtrak allegedly didn't like the yellowbonnet, as worn by F7A 315L leading the *Super Chief-El Capitan* at Joliet, Ill., on March 24, 1973. The *El Capitan* label would be dropped the following month, and Santa Fe withdrew permission for use of the *Chief* name in May 1974.

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time when pressed into passenger service after World War II, and early high-horsepower freight hood-unit diesels briefly continued the black-and-silver livery worn by switchers and road-switchers.)

Living off-line but trading color slides with friends across the land, and being a faithful reader of the locomotive news magazine *Extra 200 South*, I was vaguely aware of the existence of non-red Santa Fe warbonnets, but a trip to Texas in 1972 put me smack in their territory. At the time, F units still ruled Santa Fe's world in the heart of the Lone Star State.

Mid-afternoon on Tuesday, May 2, found me finished with a visit to Santa Fe's diesel shop at Cleburne for background on what became the "24th Annual Motive Power Survey" in August 1972 *TRAINS*. Its theme was that firms and facilities other than EMD and GE

were turning out diesels, and Cleburne was a key player. Santa Fe people there were in the early years of the program of converting F units to CF7 ("converted F7") road-switchers. Originally envisioned to encompass 100 units, the program wound up turning out 233 CF7s from late 1969 to early 1978.

After visiting Montreal Locomotive Works and returning home, I'd come to Cleburne by rail, via Chicago, New Orleans, and Houston on Amtrak's *Panama Limited*, *Sunset Limited*, and *Texas Chief*. My wife Carol accompanied me; we took the *Chief* through Cleburne to Fort Worth, rented a car, and drove back south the 30 miles to the shop town. Carol dropped me off in mid-morning and went sightseeing on her own.

(Pardon the interruption, but that detail would have no relevancy here were it

not for a humorous anecdote. When I re-joined Carol after finishing my shop tour and interviews, she asked me if I'd heard the sonic boom, caused by a military jet a couple of hours earlier. I hadn't. "Well," she said, "you won't believe this, but I was having lunch at the Sonic Boom Drive-In when I heard it!" As Midwesterners, we did not know of the Sonic chain of eateries, which originated in Oklahoma in 1953 and by 1972 had grown to 165 drive-ins spanning from Missouri to New Mexico. Today Sonic has 3,500 outlets in 43 states.)

Being done with my Santa Fe work, I shot a few diesel slides on the ready tracks by the yard, where F units in several liveries reposed. We then headed back to Fort Worth, chasing the north-bound freight pictured on the previous page, with the five F units, up the freight-only line toward Dallas. (We would fly home on Ozark the next day.)

Reliving this chase through my rediscovered slides got me curious about those "off-color" warbonnets, so you also see here examples of slides from my files of Santa Fe's "yellowbonnets" and "bluebonnets."

Santa Fe experts tell me more than two dozen cab units, plus about as many B units, were known to be given the non-red look, so among the road's hundreds of F units at the time, the "oddbonnets" represented a small percentage:

- Two cabs and a booster of the 300-class passenger F7s leased to Amtrak were given yellowbonnets, but Amtrak objected and no more passenger-assigned units were repainted. These units were the survivors, renumbered for Amtrak assignment, among Santa Fe's 16-class F3s and 37-class F7s.
- Of Santa Fe's 325-class dual-service F7s, 7 cabs and several boosters were giv-



The devil is in the details — note the subtle differences in nose striping on F7 334L and F9s 286L and 289C, in photos taken from 1972 to 1974.

Photos from left: Ed Fulcomer, Bruce Barrett, Steve Patterson



The B units behind F9A 281C, in fall 1974 at Fort Worth, Texas, show respectively, the freight yellowbonnet wide stripe at bottom, and the passenger yellowbonnet and bluebonnet versions. Santa Fe perhaps unintentionally created a model railroader's delight . . . or nightmare.

Robert P. Schmidt

en bluebonnets, but this livery was soon discontinued owing to trackside visibility issues. There were 14 yellowbonnets in this class, with seven versions of details on the nose emblems and stripes.

- Of the 200-class freight F7s, only one cab, 271C, received a yellowbonnet on a blue body, in 1972, but it was wrecked 18 months later. Several B units got wide yellow stripes at the bottom of the carbody to match.

- Seven cab units of the 281-class freight F9As were repainted with a yellowbonnet on blue carbody, and several B units were done to match. Again, there were some variations on nose emblems and stripes.

It all was a noble experiment, or in retrospect, maybe not. Some might call it a blasphemous and misguided attempt to distance the Santa Fe, in those early Amtrak years, from any reminder (*i.e.*,

red and silver) of what had been widely regarded as the best passenger-train operation in the land. Personally, I thought the bluebonnet was an attractive choice, although a big splash of yellow on a silver unit, while a bit much, did improve visibility. But it all became moot within a few years as all the oddbonnets joined the ranks of the CF7 conversions, units many observers might call unattractive no matter what colors they wore. 📌



Only the emblem and below on F7s 345 and 330 in 1973 are different. Santa Fe management preferred yellow to blue (on 329) for better visibility.

Photos from left: R. R. Wallin, Bruce Barrett, John Arbuckle