

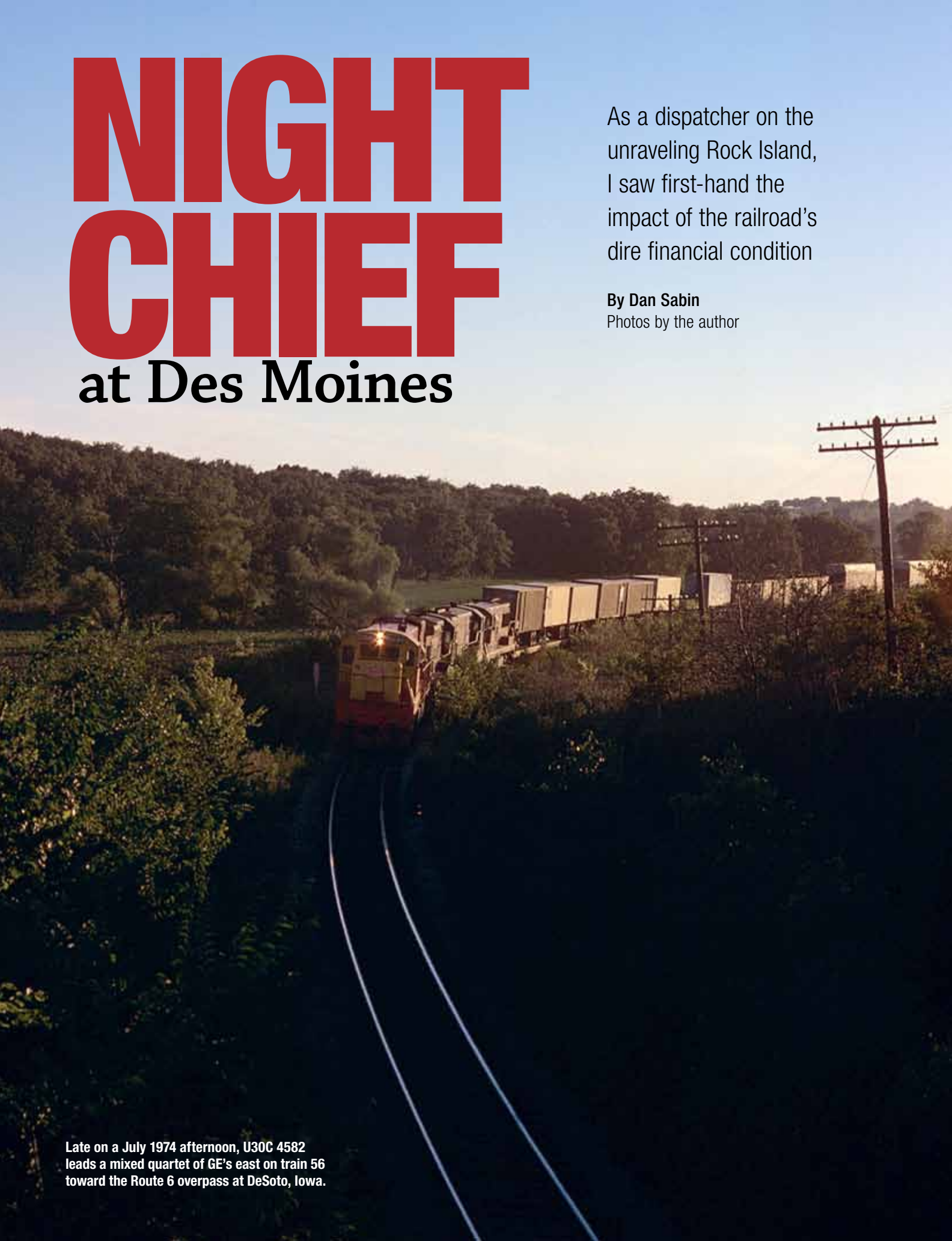
NIGHT CHIEF

at Des Moines

As a dispatcher on the unraveling Rock Island, I saw first-hand the impact of the railroad's dire financial condition

By Dan Sabin

Photos by the author



Late on a July 1974 afternoon, U30C 4582 leads a mixed quartet of GE's east on train 56 toward the Route 6 overpass at DeSoto, Iowa.



Nearing sunset on an August 1973 evening, Rock Island U28B 243 and GP18 1347 ease into the yard at Manly, Iowa, hometown for the Sabins.

I am the product of a railroad family from Manly, Iowa, out of which my dad and brother Dave worked as locomotive engineers on the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific. In addition, my brother Mark became a conductor on Chicago & North Western's former Minneapolis & St. Louis route through Manly. I spent most of my first 17 years riding trains of the RI, M&StL, and Chicago Great Western, and began my working career at age 15 at Manly as a Rock Island student telegrapher [see "Of Dispatcher Rosey, a Howling Snowstorm, and an Almost-Cornfield-Meet," Spring 2006 CLASSIC TRAINS]. At age 18, I became the youngest train dispatcher in the U.S., working for the Rock Island at Des Moines, and eventually I was one of the road's first dispatchers to have worked every trick and chief dispatcher's office on the system.

By the time I turned 20, I was holding a regular job as night chief dispatcher, initially on second trick on RI's Illinois and Missouri-Kansas Divisions, then later as third-trick chief on the Des Moines Division. (This latter job included a position in Joliet, Ill., described in "Cocky Kid at MC Tower" in Fall 2008 CT.) I started working on my college degree part-time, but still worked my days off whenever I could. The assistant chief positions were interesting, but I loved the train-order jobs, especially the Nebraska-Colorado territory of the Des Moines Division between Council Bluffs, Iowa, and Colorado Springs,

Colo., formerly the route of the *Rocky Mountain Rocket*. The freights were fast and the territory somewhat harsh. It entailed 500 or so miles of single-track, automatic-block-signal-protected, train-order railroad, well-suited for me to hone my skills of dispatching.

The Des Moines Division, stretching from Minneapolis to the Colorado Front Range as it did, was an interesting territory of contrasts, especially in winter. As a blizzard would be crippling RI's Twin Cities main line and the "Bow and Arrow country" (the branch lines in remote northwestern Iowa and southwestern Minnesota), heavy rains would be falling in Nebraska or Kansas and a dust storm would be blowing through eastern Colorado. Once we even had to run a snowplow on No. 82 from Limon, Colo., to Goodland, Kans., to clear tumbleweeds from the track!

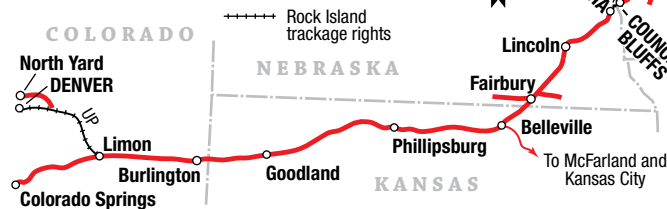
Fierce storms were common each year, and on one occasion we arranged to run a pair of diesel units with three

caboosees from Limon to Goodland to pick up stranded motorists along parallel Interstate 70. We instructed the crew to stop at every town and attempt to help anyone who appeared to be in distress. Most of the people rescued were taken to Burlington, Colo., or Goodland to wait out the storm.

A family matter

Just before Thanksgiving 1973, I was working the North End CTC desk, which handled the territory from Inver Grove, Minn., RI's Twin Cities-area terminal, south to Manly as well from Eldon, Iowa, to Kansas City. Centralized Traffic Control signaling wasn't nearly

Rock Island's Des Moines Division, 1974





J. David Ingles

The Des Moines Division spanned from Minnesota to Colorado. Four GP40's leave Denver on RI's Northwestern Terminal on December 26, 1971.



Rik Anderson; collection of Dan Sabin

On any given day, the Division hosted about 125 units. In February '69, U28B 262 and GP18 1334 waited at Des Moines' Short Line Junction.



Des Moines Division Superintendent H. E. "Jack" Phelps (left) and Assistant "Super" B. B. Brenton huddle on office steps in August 1975.

as challenging to a dispatcher as was train-order territory, but the job did include my home grounds, and I certainly knew well the Manly-Inver Grove line.

On this night, my father was engineer on No. 65 and brother Dave was running No. 95, both from Inver Grove to Manly. Coincidentally, brother Mark was conductor on C&NW No. 1 from Manly to Albert Lea, Minn. While listening in on the Albert Lea radio, I heard the rear brakeman on 95 ranting to the crews on northbounds

68 and 90 that "the Sabins and the grasshoppers were taking over the place . . . but at least we'll have clear signals with Dan at the [CTC] board in Des Moines."

That bubble was soon popped, however, when I put 65 in the hole at Gordon, Minn., and held 95 at Albert Lea to let the C&NW have the main track to make the diverging junction at Curtis in Albert Lea before he tied up on his maximum service hours on the section of joint RI-C&NW operation. A lot of howling ensued, and I took some ribbing at Thanksgiving dinner, but I knew I'd made the right decision.

Diverting the president

By this time on the poor old Rock Island, derailments would occur daily,

and we kept a book of them on the division, numbering consecutively from January 1. The book for 1975, as I recall, listed well over 1,000 derailments on the Des Moines Division alone! On one occasion, RI President William J. Dixon and his family were on a business car on the rear end of No. 55, going through to Denver. No. 43 was ahead of them by a couple of hours but piled up 35 or so cars at DeSoto, just west of Des Moines. Vice President and General Manager Bill Hoeng called me and asked me to have the road foreman jump off the units of No. 55 and drop back to advise Mr. Dixon of the derailment and work out alternatives. I called United Airlines and made contingency reservations, then held a southbound train at Short Line Junction in Des

Read about Dan Sabin's last years dispatching for the Rock Island in **WORKING ON THE RAILROAD**, on sale in late November 2010, or order from www.ClassicTrainsMag.com.





One of the author's favorite off-duty photo spots was the Raccoon River bridge near Booneville, Iowa, where two GE's and a GP40 (above) led train 43 west in August 1973, and a westbound's caboose (right) cleared in '74.

Moines to take the business car to Kansas City to try to match up with No. 73 for Denver, or perhaps line it up on a Union Pacific westbound out of K.C.

Homer Day was the Illinois Division road foreman, and he dropped back to the rear end of the train at Newton, Iowa, and relayed the message to President Dixon. When Dixon got on the radio and was advised of his options, he said, "OK, do whatever you think is best." He and his family enjoyed the Friendly Skies of United Airlines that evening.

Slower track equals more units

That was an example of how, while working as night chief, I was learning first-hand of the impact of the Rock Island's deteriorating financial condition. The desk handled all the locomotives on the division in coordination with the Power Desk in Kansas City. For the so-called bow-and-arrow lines (the universal term on the railroad, owing to the vast rural areas these light-density branches covered, and the relative lack of communication available with the trains), we needed 18 or so Geeps, plus a couple dozen more units to cover local switchers and wayfreights over the mainline territories from Inver Grove to Des Moines and west to Denver and Colorado Springs.

Road units covered some assignments while laying over at the likes of



Inver Grove, Council Bluffs, Belleville and Goodland, Kans., and Denver, but as I recall, we usually had 125 or so units on the division at any given time. Each succeeding year, however, as track deteriorated, more slow orders were applied, which meant running time increased, thus requiring more units. I watched the need for power increase by about 10 percent a year, just to handle the same level of traffic.

Crews also were in short supply, taking far more time to get over the road, often tying up on the hours-of-service law, and in some cases dragging their feet. It got especially bad with the substantial amount of export grain we were attempting to move to the Gulf of Mexico. We ran 54-car unit trains, and it was unusual for any of them to get to Galveston without derailling somewhere along the way. On top of our own trains, C&NW detoured several pairs of trains every day from its worn-out Chicago Great Western routes to our main line, especially between Des Moines and Kansas City. (C&NW had absorbed CGW in 1968). This took even more of

our crews away from availability.

One night I was dispatching the West Iowa when the conductor on No. 53, the train from Iowa Falls out to Estherville in the bow-and-arrow country, called me and asked if I could change the meet with No. 54 from Goldfield to Clarion. They had ground-relay problems on two of their four Geeps and were waiting for an electrician to show up from Iowa Falls. He suggested we bring No. 54 onward so the other crew would not tie up on their 16 maximum hours. I agreed, and asked how long it would take them to get to Clarion from Goldfield. He responded by telling me that they expected to cover the 10 miles in about two hours! When I expressed my surprise, he said that they'd had a new brakeman with them the previous trip and he was so frightened of the track conditions he had jumped off the engine twice in his first trip!

Such was life on the Rock Island as it began what turned out to be its last few years of existence, and before I moved on to other RI locales. ■