

Rock Island

in Kansas City, 1962-1964:

Still living in the past

The “Route of the Rockets” had no money, but this made for some great diesel-spotting

By Frank Tatnall • Photos by the author



Rock Island No. 18, the *Twin Star Rocket*, arrives at Kansas City Union Station from Houston on the morning of April 21, 1963, behind E8A 652 and an E7B. Behind it are the consists of RI train 39 and likely Union Pacific's *City of St. Louis*. No. 652 would gain fame in 1976 as Rock Island's "Bicentennial" unit with a railfan-club-inspired special scheme, and the unit survives as property of the Manly Junction Railroad Museum, under development in northern Iowa.

In early 1962, as a sales representative for the Pennsylvania Railroad, I was transferred to Kansas City. The city—actually two separate municipalities with the same name on each side of the Missouri-Kansas state line—was served by 12 Class 1 line-haul carriers, and I knew it to be the nation's second-busiest rail freight gateway. Moreover, Kansas City had a reputation for offering train-watchers a cornucopia of diesel power, and after my arrival and some



Train No. 15, the *Kansas City Rocket*, has arrived at Union Station behind passenger F7 675, E8 655, and an E7B on July 14, 1962, after an overnight run from Minneapolis via Des Moines. Although the train still carried two sleeping cars, it terminated at Kansas City.



KCS's *Southern Belle* for New Orleans, due out at 9:25, and RI's *Twin Star Rocket* for Minneapolis, at 9:30, are ready to go on July 4, 1963. All nine K.C. passenger railroads—also Santa Fe, Burlington, Katy, MoPac, Frisco, UP, and Wabash—provided morning daylight action.

exploration, I was not disappointed.

Four mighty railroads—Santa Fe, Union Pacific, Missouri Pacific, and Burlington Route—handled the majority of business passing through the terminal area, but the other eight contributed to the traffic melting pot: Kansas City Southern, Frisco, Milwaukee Road, Wabash, Missouri-Kansas-Texas ("the Katy"), Chicago Great Western, Gulf, Mobile & Ohio . . . and the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific. Today, nearly 50 years later, when I look back, it's easy to remember that the Rock Island appeared to be the most down-at-the-heels of any of the big roads. "The Rock"—as many knew it, well before 1974 when it adopted that moniker in a re-imaging campaign—was already showing the symptoms of the fate it would suffer 18 years later when it became the largest rail carrier in the U.S. to be liquidated.

In 1962 the "first generation" of diesel power was winding down, and many of the big western roads were busy buying fleets of new locomotives, such as GP30's and SD24's from EMD, RSD15's ("Alligators") from Alco, and U25B's from General Electric. But this wasn't yet quite true for the Rock, which continued to squeeze the miles out of a variegated fleet of aging E units (models E3, 6, 7, and 8), F's (models FT, F2, F7, and FP7), Alcos (RS3's and re-engined FA's), GP7's, Budd Rail Diesel Cars, and several oddities including No. 621, an Alco DL109 re-engined by EMD and dubbed "Christine."



Train 39, heavy with “head-end” mail-and-express business, is two miles out of Union Station on February 9, 1963, as it arrives at the Kansas City (Kans.) station, behind an E7A-B duo. The depot, which sat between the two main tracks used by RI and UP through trains,

was beside the bridge carrying 7th Street Trafficway over the RI and UP (at left) yards. Visible crossing above the yard tracks between the train and the Kansas City (Mo.) skyline is the KCT “high line,” whose eastern end was pictured in “True Color” in Fall 2011 CLASSIC TRAINS.



About 10 miles northeast of Union Station, E8A No. 652 is on the point of train No. 18, the *Twin Star Rocket*, on July 14, 1963, as it pounds across the Wabash and Burlington diamonds at tiny Birmingham, Mo. The Rock Island track here is shared with the Milwaukee Road. The “Twin Star” still was a top-notch train,

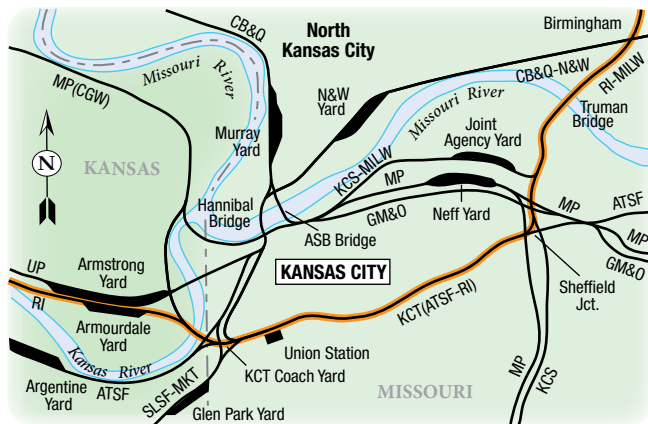
carrying coaches, a diner, Rock Island sleepers, and a parlor-lounge between Minneapolis and Houston, plus through coaches and a Minneapolis–Los Angeles Pullman sleeper via the extra-fare *Golden State*, which called at K.C. during darkness. Rock Island and Southern Pacific traded off the *Golden State* at Tucumcari, N.Mex.



RI's sole surviving E3A, 1939-built No. 625 as one of two, idles with an F7B (from one of three passenger A-B sets) at Union Station July 21, 1962, after arriving on train 15. At right, RI's highest-numbered FP7, No. 411, awaits departure with train 39. Beyond the RI trains is what is likely Santa Fe's overnight *Kansas City Chief* from Chicago.



Parked at Armourdale Yard engine terminal in Kansas City, Kans., on April 7, 1963, is E6 No. 630, one of Rock Island's five (627–631) and one of two built in late 1941. She would gain fame as the last E6 in service in the U.S.—Chicago commuter work, lasting into the 1980s. Like E8 652, the 630 survives in the nascent Manly, Iowa, museum.



From Chicago or Des Moines, Rock Island entered the K.C. area at Birmingham, Mo., crossed the Truman Bridge to Sheffield Junction, then used Kansas City Terminal's main line to RI's Armourdale Yard.

CLASSIC TRAINS: Bill Metzger and Rick Johnson

Also on the roster were five BL2's, the two unique AB6 passenger units (flat-faced E6B's with cabs, built for the *Rocky Mountain Rocket*), and a number of ancient motor cars (a.k.a. "doodlebugs"). Not all of the oddities, beloved by railfans but not necessarily by management or crews, worked out of Kansas City while I was there, but most of the types showed up at one time or another. And in fairness, I should point out that in 1963 Rock Island did begin to invest in new motive power, first with a dozen U25B's and eventually amassing 315 new road units from EMD as well as GE, plus 37 yard units from EMD and Alco. The Rock also shuttled several of its older passenger diesels off to Chicago for commuter service, re-equipping some with head-end-power (including the two AB6's and three F7A's) to pull new bilevel coaches, and acquired some secondhand E units from the Union Pacific.

Rock Island's freight operations were based out of Armourdale Yard in Kansas City, Kans., where the offices of the superintendent of the Missouri-Kansas Division ("Mo-Kan") and the system superintendent of terminals were located. A modern two-story office building, a couple of blocks off Kansas



Nameless train 39 from Chicago nears Union Station on July 3, 1962, having come through Birmingham, across the Truman Bridge over the Missouri River, and onto Kansas City Terminal's main line at Sheffield interlocking in the city's east end. The multi-track KCT main was used by all Santa Fe trains as well as Rock Island through freights, plus passenger trains of MP and KCS and Wabash's westbound varnish.



An F2 and three GP7's move a freight train east through Armourdale Yard on March 2, 1963. Visible to the left is UP's Armstrong Yard, with the Kansas City Terminal "high line" from the two-deck Kansas River bridge passing above it. The skyline of downtown Kansas City,

Mo., is beyond. The leading Geep still boasts its original 1950 livery; the F2 may look like an F3 at a distance, but Rock Island had no F3's. After 11 F2A's (Nos. 38-49) of 1946, its next EMD freight cabs were 42 100-series F7's (including 14 F7B's), in 1949 and '51.



FT's 90 and 90B lead two GP7's on an eastbound freight at Birmingham, Mo., on August 11, 1963. RI bought 12 A-B FT sets in 1944, Nos. 88-99 (and 88B-99B), and then 12 more in 1945. The dozen included eight cabs and four boosters and were numbered

70-77 (A's) and 70B-73B (B's). As the years passed, shop forces replaced side panels with just about anything, portholes included or not, so for No. 90 to retain its original four was unusual. Some FT's wound up with one, two, or three portholes, or none, as with 90B.



On the Rock Island, you might call this diesel consist a matched set—at least all are EMD’s! Ready to head west from Armourdale Yard on April 20, 1963, is a quartet of an FT (without portholes), an F7A, a BL2, and a GP7. RI had 5 BL2’s, 112 GP7’s, 21 GP9’s (including

two rebuilds, one each from an F2A and an F7B), 2 GP18M’s (rebuilt from F7’s), and 21 GP18’s. With all the rebuilds, you might surmise (correctly) RI had lost many units in wrecks. And remember, these are just EMD’s—RI had Alco road power of several models, too!

Avenue, was near the old roundhouse and engine terminal area toward the east end of the yard, which was parallel to UP’s adjacent Armstrong Yard to the north and about a mile north of Santa Fe’s giant Argentine facilities.

In 1962, Rock Island ran three passenger trains through Kansas City Union Station: the extra-fare *Golden State*, Nos. 3 and 4, between Chicago and Los Angeles; unnamed maids-of-all-work Nos. 39 and 40 (the onetime *Californian*) on the same route; and Nos. 17 and 18, the Minneapolis–Houston *Twin Star Rocket*. All changed crews at Union Station, and all were nocturnal except westbound No. 39 and northbound No. 18,

which departed around 9 or 9:30 a.m. Rock Island also ran overnight trains 15 and 16, the *Kansas City Rocket*, a half day opposite the *Twin Star* between K.C. and Minneapolis.

During my stay in Kansas City of a little over two years, I photographed hundreds of locomotives on all 12 trunk-line railroads, plus the switching carrier Kansas City Terminal and several nearby short lines, but the Rock Island truly was my favorite. This photo salon depicts a selection of power that could—and often did—show up in the Kansas City area on the railroad that for mostly financial reasons was not quite finished living in the past.

RI’s gathering of goats

NW2 767, with a transfer caboose in the “Bottoms” west of downtown K.C. on June 12, 1962, is plain-Jane for a Rock Island yard goat. One of 10 from EMD in 1948–49, it would be joined by 3 from the defunct New York, Ontario & Western, then 13 from Pittsburgh & Lake Erie. Other RI EMD goats included 29 SW’s and 8 NW1’s, all with Winton engines (RI would re-engine the NW1’s with Alco 244’s!); 18 SW1’s (plus 5 later from Illinois Central); 30 SW8’s (2 from Wichita Falls & Southern); 5 SW9’s; and 16 SW900’s. RI had 5 little Whitcomb center-cabs, 17 Whitcomb 70-tonners off Canadian National, and 26 Davenport in three sizes. From Alco, RI bought one 900 h.p. “high hood” switcher, 3 S1’s, and 14 S2’s (plus 2 from Toledo Terminal); from Baldwin, 5 VO1000’s, 5 S8’s, and 2 S12’s; and from Lima-Hamilton, two 800 h.p. switchers.





Train 39 heads west from the Armstrong Yard area in far western K.C., Kans., on UP trackage rights (as far as Topeka) on March 2, 1963, led by Alco DL109 621 and an E6A. The 621 was nicknamed "Christine" after it was re-engined by EMD in 1953. RI had three other Alco passenger cabs of the same styling. Tagging along behind the SP coach for Los Angeles at the rear of the train is RI RDC3 9016, the "Herington pusher." At that Kansas junction, it will uncouple and go 73 miles south on its own to Wichita as train 27, while No. 39 heads to Tucumcari.



A sister RDC3, No. 9015, waits east of Union Station July 12, 1962, before being tied onto train 39, which will tow it the 150 miles to Herington. RI bought five Budd RDC3's during 1953–56 for long-haul service, later converting three to standard coaches. For a time, two

held down RI's 762-mile Memphis–Amarillo *Choctaw Rockette* schedule, second-longest RDC run in the U.S. to Western Pacific's 924-mile Oakland–Salt Lake City *Zephyrette*. In the background, Alco PA's are ready to take Santa Fe's *Grand Canyon* to Chicago.



Not only does train 39 have an RDC mid-train as it departs Kansas City on July 9, 1962, but on the rear end is RI's unique "baggage-observation" car, complete with a *Rocket* tail sign. This car is believed to be the only lightweight round-end observation car in

which only luggage enjoyed views of the receding tracks, because passengers were not allowed to sit in the round-end area! In back on the KCT main line is a Milwaukee Road transfer with an Alco S2. MILW and KCS shared the "Joint Agency" yard in northeastern K.C.



In a photo taken before my K.C. assignment, motor car No. 9090 leaves Union Station on June 15, 1957, hauling a heavyweight coach for Eldon, Mo., 136 miles east on RI's lightly used line to St. Louis. Even during the heavy travel days of World War II, the route offered

only a single "motor train" round trip, as RI served no big towns and could not compete against MoPac and Wabash. The 9090 was built by Standard Steel in 1928, powered by a Sterling gas-electric engine until re-equipped with a 400 h.p. Caterpillar diesel in 1954.

Rock Island's singular "Northwest" branch

Unusual baggage-car doodlebugs set this rickety line apart from most others

During my Kansas City years in the early '60s, I encountered what local railroaders called Rock Island's "Northwest" branch. If you examine an old Rock Island system map, you'll see this obscure line diverging from the St. Joseph, Mo.–Topeka route at Horton, Kans., a one-time railroad shop town 50 miles northwest of K.C.

This 108-mile line was built in 1887 by the Chicago, Kansas & Nebraska, a subsidiary that the Rock Island established for its expansion west from the Missouri River. The line served a string of rural communities including Powhattan and Sabetha, Kans., and Beatrice, Nebr., and connected with the Chicago–Omaha–Colorado main line at Jansen, Nebr., 7 miles east of the Western Division headquarters town of Fairbury.

By 1962 it was the archetypal rural branch, rundown and redundant. To describe it in today's terminology as "excepted track" would have been charitable, what with its splintered ties, wobbly rails, and extremely restricted speeds. Yet until the line was abandoned in 1967, tri-weekly mixed trains 79 and 80 continued to provide a passenger accommodation in a wooden caboose for anyone wishing to ride. The entire 115-mile trip between Horton and Fairbury took 6½ hours.

As these photos, made on two spring 1962 Saturdays, reveal, what separated this obscure branch in the early '60s from the scores of others on the Great Plains was its motive power—two doodlebug-type power-baggage units numbered 9006 and 9014 [see "The Baggage-Car Locomotives," December 1965 TRAINS]. Two of three survivors in 1960 from a fleet of 10 built in 1929 (9006 at Horton shops and 9014 by St. Louis Car), they were

avored because of their minimal impact on the poorly maintained track. These units added to the Rock's famously eclectic locomotive roster of the period.

Official Guides of the 1960s published the same schedules as were shown in timetables before World War II, but in practice the mixeds ran as freight traffic demanded. In later years, trains rarely exceeded five or six cars, mostly agricultural products and farm supplies. It was hard to believe that this decrepit line actually had been a part of Rock Island's original route to Colorado, before the new "short-cut" main line was built from Omaha to Fairbury during 1891–93.

Horton, in fact, became a case study for a railroad town that blossomed and withered as the decades passed; it is the subject of the book *Prairie Railroad Town*, by I. E. Quastler (South Platte Press, 2003). Founded in 1886, Horton was the early centerpiece of RI's western expansion, first from Atchison, Kans., then from Kansas City and Topeka, and eventually from Omaha. Over the years, major RI traffic lanes from those cities bypassed Horton, and the town declined. Its economy had been railroad-based because of the huge shops, and it quickly had boomed to 3,200 population and eventually almost 4,000; now it is less than half that size. RI's locomotive shop at Silvis, Ill., and a car shop in K.C. usurped Horton in importance, and the Horton shops faded in the late '30s and finally closed in 1946.

I was just in time for these "Northwest" branch oddities, as Nos. 9006 and 9014 last ran in fall 1962. They, and the other survivor, 9013, went into storage and were retired in 1964.

—Frank Tatnall



Purpose-built "motor" 9014 hauls a short extra train on the Horton Branch near Beatrice, Nebr., on May 12, 1962. The last of seven such cars constructed with new bodies by St. Louis Car in 1929, the 9014

was first equipped with a 400 h.p. distillate engine, then dieselized in 1951 with a V-12 Caterpillar. Intended for dual service when built, the unique units found homes on light-trafficked and light-rail branches.

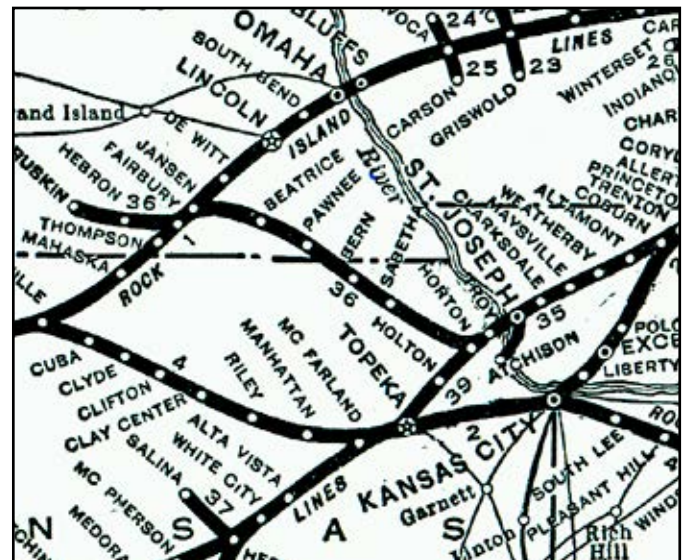


On May 12, 1962, the 9006 has a typically short train as it heads west with mixed No. 79, crossing a trestle near Mercier (above right) and a rural road near Powhattan (above). Unusual this day is that a second train is on the line (opposite page). The first of the 10 “bag-

gage-car locomotives” left the roster in 1948, and by 1960 only the 9006, 9013, and 9014 were left, based at Horton and Ruskin, Nebr. In Fall '62, 9006 and 9014 were stored at Des Moines, later Silvis, Ill. The 9013 ran Bucklin–Dodge City in western Kansas until late 1962.



Early on April 7, 1962, the 9006 is ready to leave Horton with mixed 79 on its 6½-hour run to Fairbury. After RI's Horton Shops in 1927 installed two 275 h.p. 6-cylinder distillate engines in a pair of 1911-built 40-foot mail cars, the road in 1929 took three baggage cars, put in twin 400 h.p. EMC power plants, and numbered them 9005–9007. Both the 9006 and 9014 last operated on this line in fall 1962.



Map from a 1963 Official Guide