

Serendipity on **HOMESTAKE**

Expecting only Amtrak, we also found a big BN freight

By **Doug Harrop** • Photos by the author



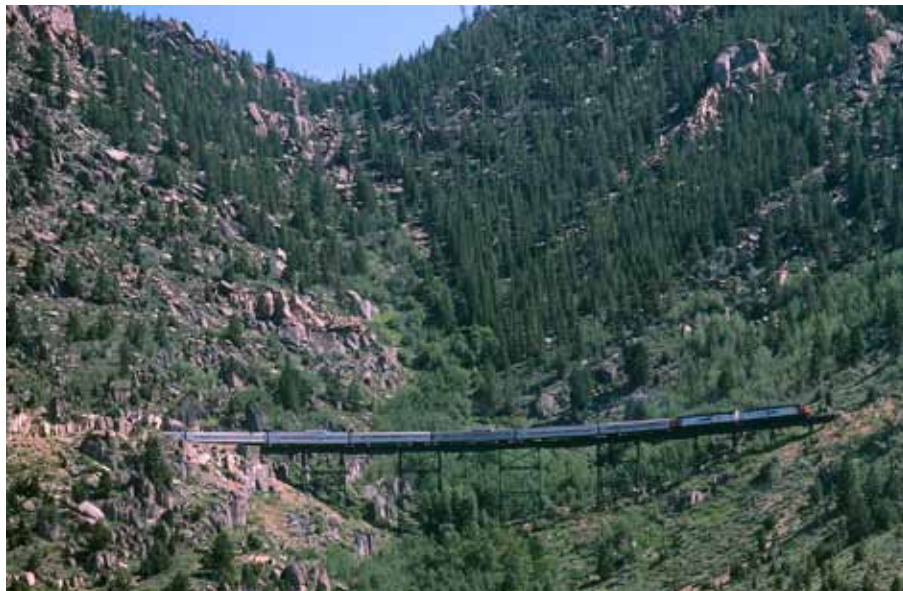
PASS



Trains on Homestake Pass were not often photographed in the 1970s, but the proximity of Interstate 90 made access easy, and this shot of Amtrak No. 9, the *North Coast Hiawatha*, crossing 601-foot-long trestle No. 63, on a 12-degree curve, concluded a surprisingly successful visit on August 4, 1975. Talk about Montana's "big sky!"



Milwaukee trains through Butte, Mont., were few by 1975, but we did chase this DFW—Dead Freight West—across Pipestone Pass. Led by SD40-2 No. 25, it is at Donald, atop the pass, running along a slide-detector fence at 15 mph. Poles and wires remain from the line's electrification, recently de-energized.



Spotting Amtrak No. 10, the eastbound “North Coast Hi,” climbing out of Butte, we easily caught up with him on Homestake Pass, capturing the train crossing trestle 63.

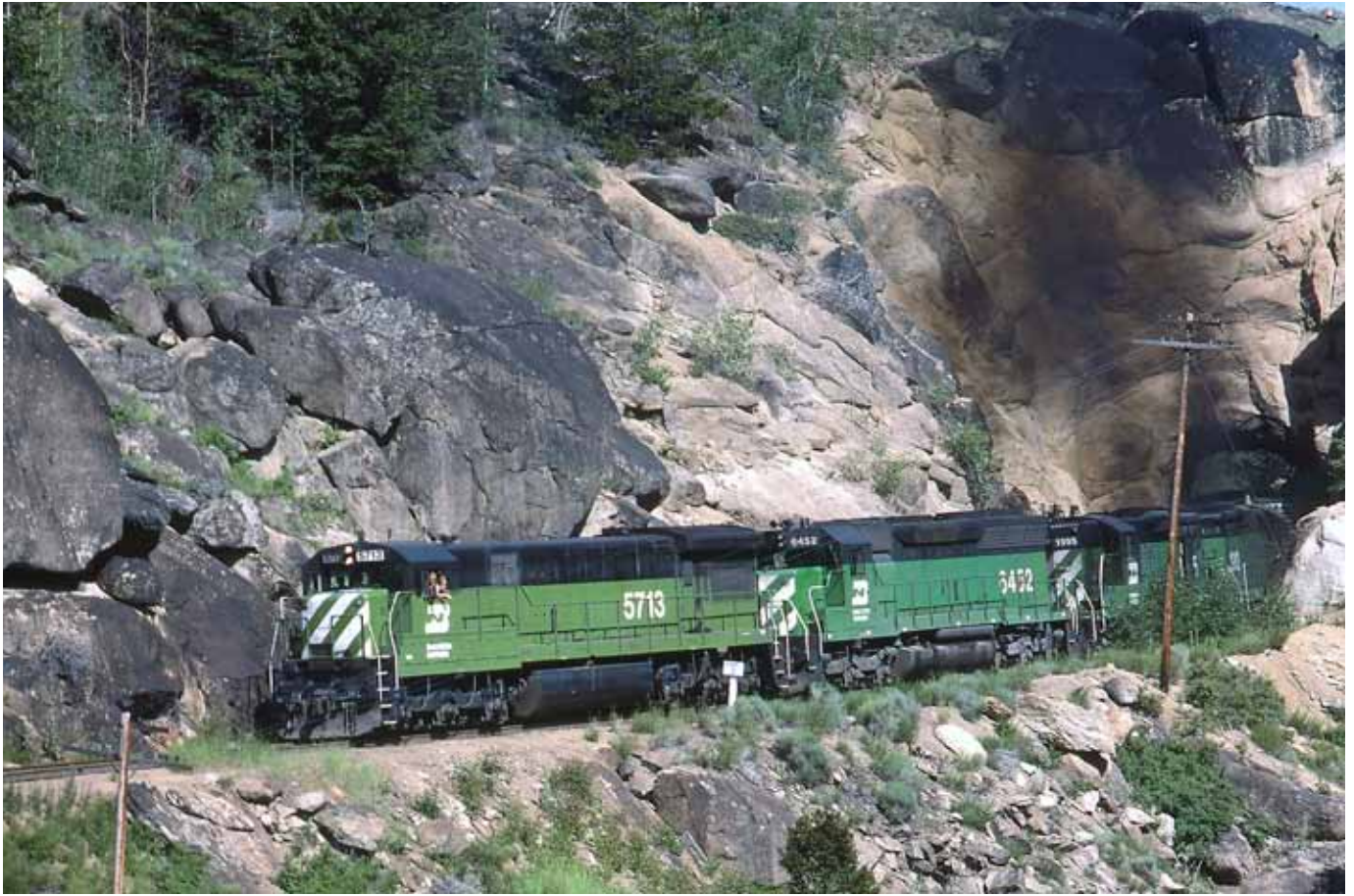
Butte, Montana, during the 1970s, was something of a magnet for railfans. Even though both Burlington Northern and Amtrak had a presence there, fans generally went to Butte to see

the Milwaukee Road. Just east of town on MILW's Pacific Extension was the fabled Pipestone Pass. Until 1974, when Milwaukee ended its electric freight operations between Avery, Idaho, and Harlowton, Mont., one could view streamlined Little Joe electric motors on the

head end of freight trains with ancient box-cab sets in mid-train helper service. The old box-cabs were employed almost daily, lifting tonnage up the long 1.6 percent eastbound and 2.0 percent westbound grades to Pipestone summit.

Even after the electrics were gone, many fans still visited Pipestone to savor the Milwaukee, but it was not to last. In March 1980, the Milwaukee's Pacific Extension, west of Terry in eastern Montana, would be shut down for good.

In August 1975, our family took a vacation trip from our California home to Canada, and I'd set aside a day en route to view the Milwaukee on Pipestone Pass. The railroad was still running trains in the West, but not many. We arrived in Butte in late afternoon on August 3, and learned there would be an eastbound train out around midnight, then a westbound over Pipestone around 9 a.m. the next day, and another east-



Surprise, surprise—a big BN freight with 70 cars, Extra 5713 West, was detouring over Homestake, with a U33C, an SD45, and two GP18's up front. The crew is amidst scenery they rarely see as they slowly climb the east side, passing through 117-foot Tunnel No. 3. The Geeps' rooftop bells show they're ex-NP.

bound at 5 p.m. That was slim pickin's, but it was still the Milwaukee, so we would take it.

We drove our rented motor home up the pass on Montana 2, the old Pipestone Pass highway, found a place to camp, and bedded down for the night. The midnight eastbound awakened us as it thundered up the hill. I became so anxious waiting for the night to end that I could not get back to sleep.

At 8 a.m., we intercepted the westbound, its SD40-2 team led by No. 25, at Piedmont on the east side of the pass and followed it over the top, getting some good photos. Now we had the entire day to kill waiting for the late-afternoon eastbound. What should we do?

Homestake is the answer

As we drove back into Butte from the southeast, my son Mike let out a "Whoop!" and pointed to the mountains



east of us. An Amtrak train, no doubt the *North Coast Hiawatha*, was climbing the hill on the old Northern Pacific's crossing of the Rockies east of Butte, the seldom-remarked Homestake Pass. Well, this train suggested something to do for the day—explore Homestake.

We dropped my wife Dianne off in town for some shopping and laundry chores and headed up the mountain on I-90, which would be, at least in places, on the south side and with a view of the railroad. We easily overtook the crawling

eastbound Amtrak No. 10 for a few photos. If, as No. 10 did, the westbound *North Coast Hi* still ran on the schedule of NP's *North Coast Limited*, perhaps we would find it on the mountain, too.

Homestake Pass, it should be noted, by the mid-1970s was not a major rail route. Completed by Northern Pacific in 1890, it was called the Butte Short Line. It was to be just that—a short, direct route to and from the east for shippers in Butte and nearby Anaconda. It ran from Butte 70 miles over Homestake Pass and



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Not far from the summit, the BN freight is twisting through Homestake's rugged terrain on the 2.2 percent grade. Back in the train is a mid-train helper set consisting of a GP9 and an SD45. And—right on his tail, about 100 yards behind the cabooses—is Amtrak's *North Coast Hiawatha*! The diligent passenger engineer, keeping his SDP40F's to the freight's 10 to 15 mph crawl, reduced his speed even more around the blind curve in front of our vantage point. Good dispatching usually avoids such situations in the mountains.

along the Jefferson River to Logan, a station on NP's transcontinental main line, which went via Helena. NP also ran west out of Butte, connecting with the Union Pacific at Silver Bow and joining the NP main up north at Garrison.

So when NP took full control of the Garrison line in 1896, the railway then owned two main lines over the Continental Divide. Butte citizens felt their line would become the preferred route, but that was not to be. For various reasons, the expected freight traffic volume never developed. The Butte line ultimately became Northern Pacific's favored passenger route in the area, used by the flagship *North Coast Limited*.

NP's postwar secondary streamliner, the *Mainstreeter*, went via Helena, the preferred freight route. What freight there was on the Butte Short Line decreased over the years to just a local or two and the occasional detour.

Burlington Northern was formed in March 1970 and assumed operations on the NP. When Amtrak started up on May 1, 1971, the Butte Short Line lost its passenger train briefly, as Amtrak kept only the *Empire Builder* across Montana, on its traditional former Great Northern "High Line" through the state's northern tier. Local pressures soon forced the addition of a second Chicago–Seattle train,

though, and on June 5, 1971, the *North Coast Hiawatha* was born, on a tri-weekly basis west of Minneapolis. The "combination" train name honored the former NP flagship plus the Milwaukee Road's fleet, since Amtrak used MILW between Chicago and the Twin Cities. Although it would experience some minor route variations, the *North Coast Hi* always served Butte, not the Treasure State's capital city of Helena.

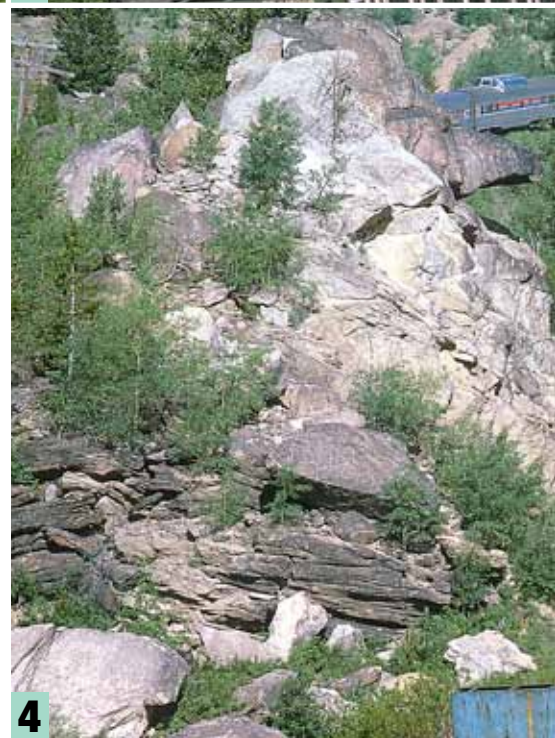
Since BN, like NP, routed most freight via the capital, few railfans through the 1970s visited the little-known Homestake Pass. With its 2.2 percent grades and glorious scenery, the only trains that fans could count on seeing there were the *North Coast Hi* and, if lucky, a shirt-tail local whose engines sometimes could outnumber the cars in the train.

The rare bird

But on this August 4, 1975, there would be some freight traffic on the Short Line, and it would be more than just a local. After viewing what remained of the railroad at the summit—not much, just a weedgrown and very much secondary main line and siding—we motored on east.

Once again it was Mike who spotted the headlight first and let out another "Whoop." Here comes Amtrak No. 9 at

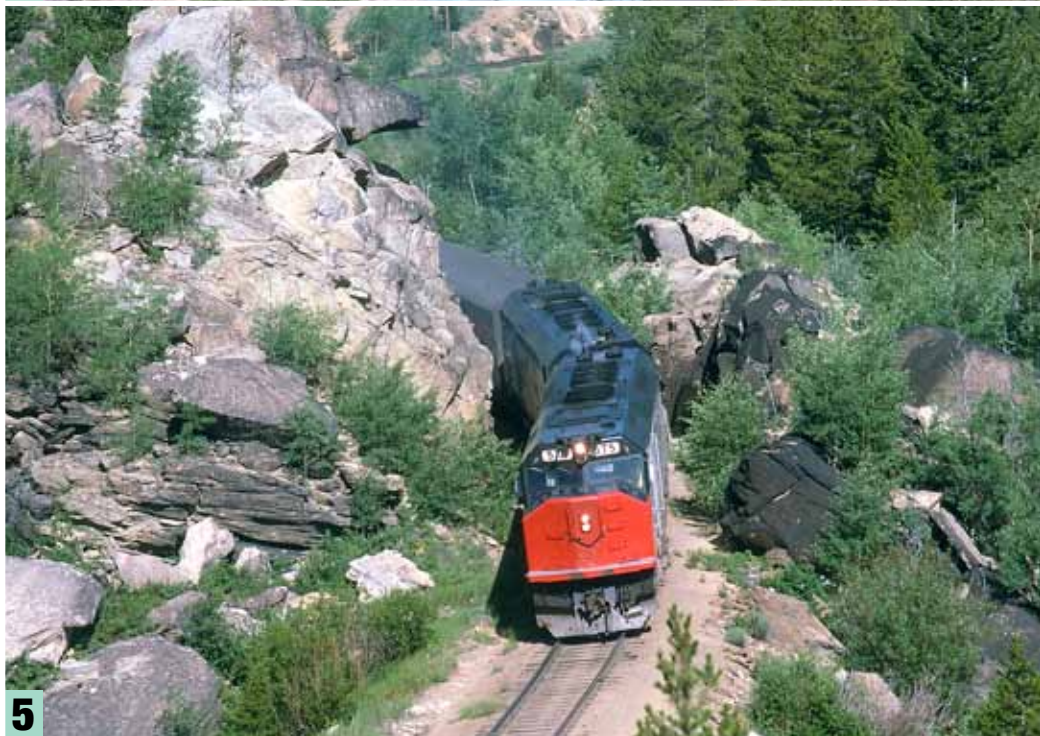
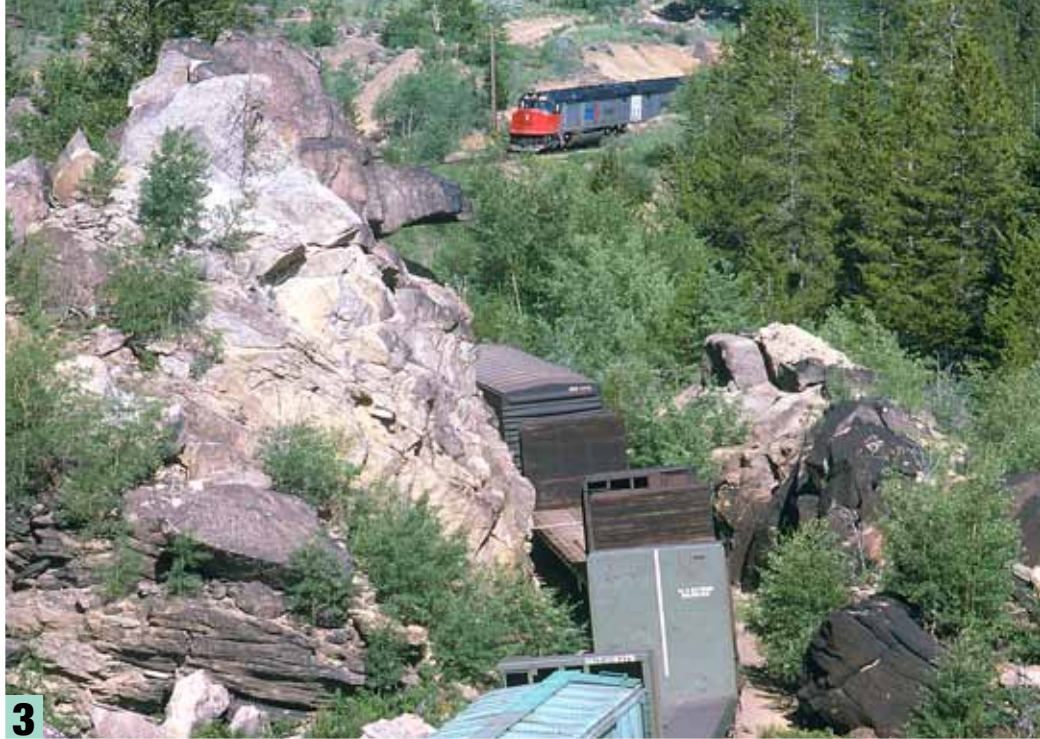
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us, we thought. But no! The engines were green, and barely moving . . . with box-cars following. It was a freight train, and a big one at that, wrapped around several curves. There are few things better in this hobby of train-watching than true serendipity, a completely unexpected occurrence—a rare locomotive, an unexpected passenger extra, or a freight train running where it is a complete surprise.

I turned our rig around, found a spot where the railroad was near I-90, and shot the train leaving Tunnel 3. We then drove ahead a mile, parked, climbed a



hill, and waited. The freight came grinding by, around a sharp curve in a blind cut, typical of the rugged terrain on the east side of the pass. Seventy cars long behind four units up front, with a mid-train two-unit helper, the freight was laboring to make 10 mph. We'd later learn it was detouring off the Helena main.

As the caboose came into view, so did another headlight! Amtrak 9, the westbound *North Coast Hi*, amazingly was poking along less than 100 yards behind the freight! The engineer, to his credit, reduced speed a bit and tiptoed around

the blind curve below our vantage point. He knew that if the train ahead went into emergency, the caboose could be right there waiting for him.

We then drove over the top and shot the trains as they crossed the 601-foot-long trestle No. 63, on a 12-degree curve and today one of three big bridges still standing on the pass. The typical Montana blue "Big Sky" with white, fluffy clouds and green foliage enhanced the scene. It had, altogether, been a fine day. Later, after collecting Dianne, we followed the promised eastbound Milwau-

kee freight that evening up to the Janney substation as it climbed Pipestone Pass.

I was glad to get the Milwaukee Road photos, but the Homestake surprise really made this day. As for the railroad on the pass and its trains, the *North Coast Hiawatha* would last until the October 1979 Amtrak cutbacks under President Jimmy Carter, and BN embargoed the track over the pass in 1983. Although the track is still there, no trains have run over Homestake Pass since a final Amtrak "Test Special" now 31 years ago. Our timing was most fortunate. **1**