

It's a fine pickle you've gotten us into!

ADVENTURES
OF A ROCK ISLAND
YARD CLERK

BY STEVE LASHER



Rock Island U28B No. 279 leads an EMD unit with an eastbound freight at Peru-La Salle, Ill., in March 1973. The train is operating east from the classification yard at Silvis.

Randy B. Olson, David P. Oroszi collection





Pacific Fruit Express 57-foot mechanical reefer No. 455118 is exemplary of hundreds of such cars in use in the early 1970s to move West Coast produce to Midwest and Eastern markets. PFE was a joint venture of Southern Pacific and Union Pacific. *Classic Trains* collection

Although the accompanying headline might seem like just a clever title, if you ever worked the second shift in the yard office at Rock Island's Kelly Yard in Silvis, Ill., you'd be wise to the inside joke. Because it wasn't really a joke — it was closer to the truth.

It's also my way of describing one of railroading's many unsung jobs, one the average enthusiast probably knows little about. It wasn't a glamorous assignment, but it was absolutely necessary to keep the wheels rolling.

I held the job of second shift "Precise Inventory and Car Location" or PICL (pickle) clerk.

I had hired out in the fall of 1973 as a clerk and floated around a bit before bidding on and winning (much to the dismay of officialdom) that second shift "PICL" job. At least it was inside, out of the weather, and climate controlled (OK, except for all the hot air coming from some of the terminal trainmasters). At last, I could wear decent clothes to work. It would be the last clerk's job I would hold before transferring to engine service in 1974.

The paperwork involved in getting cars and locomotives from point A to point B was as important as pulling the throttle. At Silvis, the PICL clerk was in the thick of it. It's worth noting that second shift was probably the busiest at Silvis. Kelly Yard's primary purpose in life was sorting and blocking cars to go east.

It was the Rock's favorable fast connections to eastern carriers that kept it afloat for many of its last years. The fact that its crumbling main lines were infested with 10-mph slow orders wasn't so important when you could save a day or more at Chicago.

As it happened, many of the hot trains to Chicago connections were built and departed on the afternoon shift at Silvis. It was usually a crazy time at "Silly Ville" on second shift, and it lasted into most of third trick as well.

What exactly did the PICL clerk do? First, let me describe my work area. There were two large rooms in the northeast corner of the yard office. My area was in one of the big rooms on the upper floor, with large windows that allowed me to watch the crest of the hump one way and the expanse of the classification bowl in the other. A corner office with a view.

I had three large boxes of pigeonholes, very much like letter cases in the post office, except that these had been subdivided into two compartments: one for the waybills on the bottom and another for the IBM punch cards that accompanied them on top. There was a pigeonhole for every track in the yard.

The adjacent room held but one item: a huge IBM card-punch printer. When I say that I mean massive — they may have had to have built the yard office around it. When it was printing a list, the whole floor shook to its rhythmic clattering.

To help clarify all this, let's trace a single car through the yard, then I'll describe a typical shift for you.

Inside Kelly Yard

The Illinois division is

composed of 728.8 miles of main line, plus six branches — Toulon, Keota, Clinton, Montezuma, Postville, and Iowa Falls — of 341.3 miles, for a grand total of 1070.1 miles of railroad under the jurisdiction of the superintendent.

It is busy track, with fast freights and numerous passenger and commuter trains speeding goods and people to their many destinations.

Every Chicago-originated or Chicago-bound freight train, except those to and from Peoria, must go through or past Kelly Yard at Silvis. Most eastbound trains are yarded and classified there, blocked for their Chicago connections.

A good portion of the west-bound trains, having already been blocked at Chicago, never see the inside of Kelly, but are "mainlined," with cars added and taken off right on the main track, thus avoiding time-consuming yarding. Crews are also changed there, speeding the trains through the Quad Cities with



Let's follow that typical car. Any car will do, but, for interest's sake, let's call it Pacific Fruit Express 455118, a 57-foot mechanical reefer loaded with lettuce and destined, at least for the moment (perishables could be diverted multiple times), for a consignor at Hunter's Point Produce Terminal in New York.

The car is routed via Penn Central, on the old New York Central side. Let's say it arrives in a train from Kansas City (via Southern Pacific at Tucumcari, N.Mex.) late in the afternoon. The inside perishable protective service clerk at Six-Ring shanty on the west end of the receiving yard will process the list and waybills and send them to the yard office via the pneumatic tube system. This inbound train has hot traffic on it and the carmen are busy inspecting it and bleeding off the air on the

cars while the perishable protective clerks complete their inspections to ready the train for classification over the hump.

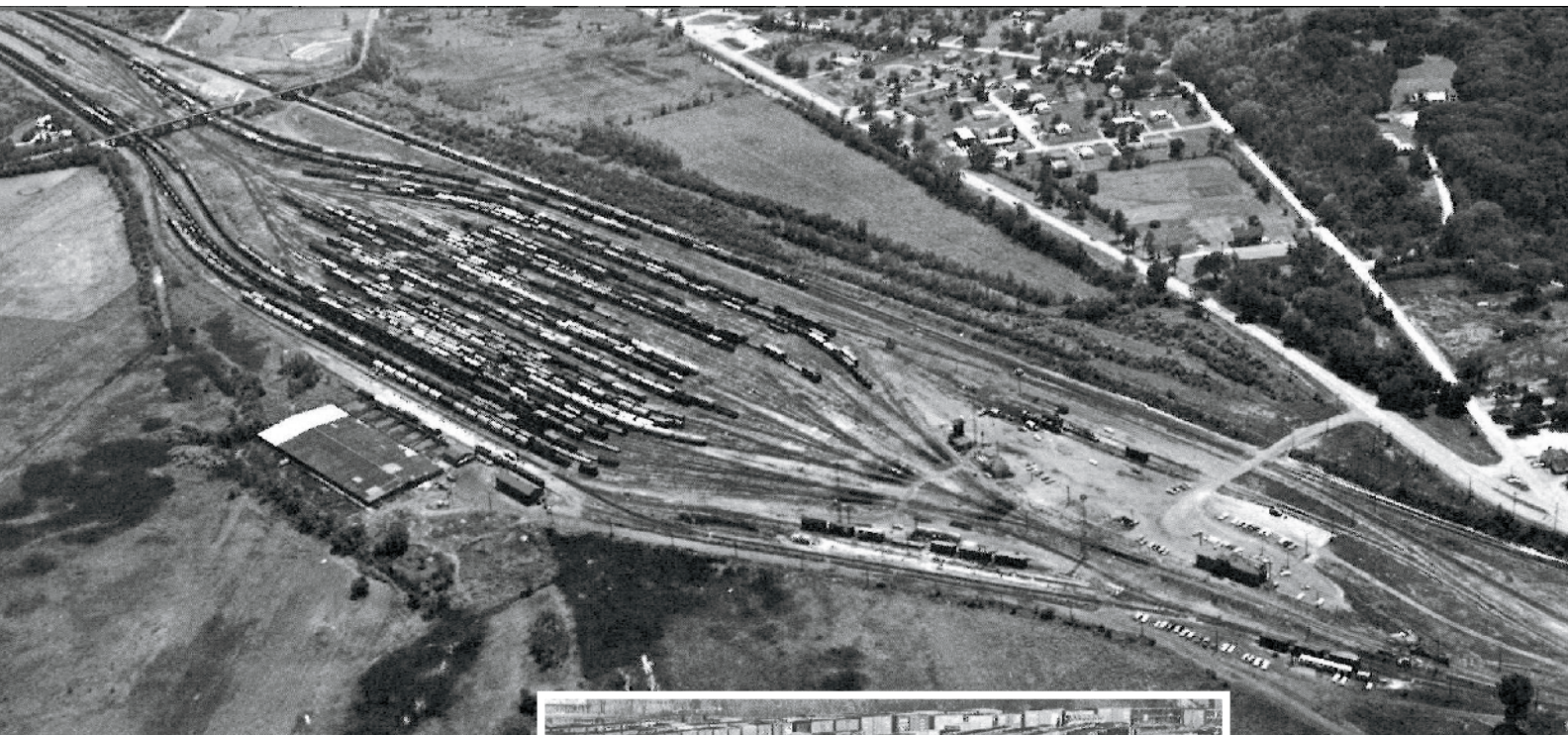
Next will come the three clerks who will shepherd our car's paperwork and journey through the yard. First will be the inbound bill clerk. He receives the waybills and inbound list along with the west walk checker's (mud hop's) handwritten list of the actual train as it arrived. It's not uncommon for there to be discrepancies between the inbound list as received from the last originating terminal and what actually shows up, but today, we'll assume the train accurately reflects the inbound list.

All three clerk jobs are pressure-packed because of time, but in slightly different



ways. The inbound clerk has to finish his work before any classification can begin. He has to take the waybills and list, and, one at a time, make an IBM punch card for each car. Sometimes he can get a leg up on things by punching cards from the inbound list sent from Armourdale Yard (Kansas City), Short Line (Des Moines), or Cedar Rapids, but he'll have to correct any problems that show up on the train as it actually arrives in Silvis. For instance, bad-order cars may have been set out en-route.

There's a machine on a small desk in our room with a typewriter-like keyboard that, instead of a piece of paper, spits out an IBM punch card. Every car will have a card made for it as it actually stands in the



a minimum amount of dwell spent in the terminal area.

Kelly Yard has a gravity retarder hump with 50 bowl tracks, plus five long make-up departure tracks and a 20-track receiving yard where the trains are put prior to being run over the crest.

Approximately 26 through freights are scheduled daily between Silvis and Chicago. Along with the many locals and transfers, this equals a train in and out of the yard every 30 minutes, all day long.



These views of Kelly Yard at Silvis, Ill., come from a Rock Island-issued brochure highlighting freight service investments throughout its system in the 1970s.

Classic Trains collection



The brightly painted depot at Bureau, Ill., matches the third unit on this eastbound freight led by U25B No. 230 in July 1976. The first cars behind the power are likely 57-foot PFE mechanical reefers like the car that the story follows. Randy B. Olson, David P. Oroszi collection

inbound train. You can imagine the time this will take for a train of 100 cars or so. It's tons of fun when an impatient terminal trainmaster is looking over your shoulder, waiting.

When the inbound clerk is finished, he'll load the cards into the big printer in the next room and print multiple copies of the inbound train list. The printer produces six copies at a time. The humpmaster will mark the still-carbon-papered lists with the tracks the cars are to be sent to. Then the lists are separated and distributed. One copy goes to the terminal trainmaster's office, one is retained by the humpmaster. Another copy will go to the hump job foreman, who sits at track level at the crest of the hump and lines the switches for the proper bowl track. One copy each goes to the two retarder tower operators and, last but not least, one goes to the PICL clerk.

In the meantime, the inbound clerk will have delivered a pack of punch cards and waybills to me, the PICL clerk. There is a pigeonhole for each arrival track but, since the humpmaster has already called down on the intercom to tell me they will be humping this train next, I'll leave the pack sitting on my desk until the list comes down. Meanwhile, one of three Rock Island SW1500s — Nos. 940, 941, or 942, serving the only terminal they would ever see on the Rock — will have gone down a clear track and coupled onto the waiting inbound train. Its engineer will be

waiting for the hump repeater signals to change so he can begin shoving the cut to the crest of the hump.

Next, I verify that the first car over the hump matches the list and begin sorting. I put each car and waybill in its pigeonhole according to how the list was marked.

I always thought Kelly Yard at Silvis was remarkably well laid out for its intended purpose. It was built in 1949 during John Dow Farrington's administration and, unfortunately, probably had little in the way of maintenance since. One major improvement it did receive was to remove every other receiving yard track, leaving an access road between what remained, making it easier for the car department to quickly work inbound trains.

In each gap was a paved road that permitted mobile icing equipment to service trains on either remaining track. These changes were definitely a case of less is more, allowing a material improvement in workflow. In general, the yard — like most on the Rock Island — wasn't poorly designed; it just suffered from an anemia born of inadequate upkeep. However, like the pet dog of a poor master, it served faithfully to the end.

The physical tracks in the bowl matched my letter case. Each track held cars according to their specific destinations. Track 20 could be cars for Chicago and delivery to Grand Trunk Western, while another track could be for "C&O ones" (C&O ones were destined for the



old Pere Marquette to Michigan), while C&O twos were destined for the old Chesapeake & Ohio to Cincinnati. In this case, there were PC ones (old NYC) and PC twos (old Pennsylvania Railroad). Thus were the cars sorted by delivery destination while the waybills and punch cards wound up in my appropriate pigeonholes.

What made it really efficient, though, was that the first five eastbound departure tracks on the north side of the bowl had their own lead off the hump, and cars could be sent directly into them. Eastbound departure tracks were on the north side of the yard, and five westbound tracks on the south side.

About two-thirds of the way out, the departure tracks were bisected by double-slip switches from dedicated leads out of the east end of the bowl. An eastbound train could be quickly built by humping cars directly into a track on the west end, and classified cuts added by the “trimmer” engine working the east end of bowl.

There was a lot of versatility available with this arrangement. Once the slips were “closed” and the cuts coupled up, the new train would be turned over to the car department and this process would be aided by the terminal air available at the east end of each eastbound departure track. Thus, it wasn’t uncommon for the east-end yardmaster to tell a trimmer crew to “close the slips and spot the head end for air.”

The humpmaster could call down any changes but today, for simplicity, let’s say the train is humped exactly as marked. A 100-car train could be classified in 30 or 40 minutes if there were no problems. Officialdom considered it really good day if 3,000 cars went over the hill. At the end of the process each car would be in its appropriate track and its matching punch card and waybill would be in the appropriate pigeonhole.

For today, our car, PFE 455118, is going to be on the head end of what will become train “44aXX” with XX represent-

ing the date. The 44 is a hot train to be delivered to the Indiana Harbor Belt via a connection track directly from the Rock Island’s main line at Blue Island, on Chicago’s south side.

The outbound train will be built on one of the long departure tracks, say 8/20 (the five long eastbound departure tracks had dual numbers, all adding up to 28 for some reason). Due to the agreed-upon blocking for expeditious handling by IHB, it will go into a bowl track, let’s say track 26. Later it will be pulled along with one or more other bowl tracks by an east-end trimmer engine and dragged through the slips to become the head-end of “44a01.” For now, though, since it’s going to be in track 26, that’s where its card and waybill will wind up in my pigeonholes.

Now the third member of the team, the outbound bill clerk, comes into action. The humpmaster comes on the intercom and tells Smitty, the outbound clerk, “Smitty, we’re gonna pull 25, 26, and 34 and double them to 8/20 and that’ll be 44’s



This westbound Rock Island freight near Utica, Ill., is likely to terminate at Silvis on this September 1972 day. Motive power is an F7 and Geep. Randy B. Olson, David P. Oroszi collection



Train 57 works at Rock Island's Blue Island, Ill., yard southwest of Chicago in May 1973. This entrance to the Windy City made connections to the east easier and gave the Rock an advantage compared with competitors who entered from the west. Ken Crist, J. David Ingles collection

train. We're bidding it for 8:45 p.m." The "bid" time is the proposed time they think the train can be run.

That time will be conveyed to the roundhouse foreman so he can come up with power. Assuming he can dredge up something capable of tractive effort, and all else is well, the bid time will be changed to a "call" time. To make that happen, the dispatcher's office in Des Moines will be notified and, if it's OK with them, the call time will be confirmed and the crew clerks for trainmen and enginemen notified so they can call the crew.

As far as Smitty is concerned, it means he'll come over to my desk and pull the cards and bills so that when he's done, the cards will be in proper order to go through the big printer and print a correct list for the new, outbound 44's train. He'll separate the list and three copies will be folded and bundled with the waybills for the outbound train.

When the conductor arrives he'll come upstairs and pick up the waybills and lists along with the clearance and train orders from the wire chief/operator down the hall (the next room down). Then he'll be ready to leave town. While this is happening, the engineer and head brakeman will have reported to the roundhouse and brought out the train's power to tie onto the head end and do an air test.

This, of course, is an example of everything going perfectly. There were a thousand ways for things to go wrong. Bad-or-

dered cars sometimes had to be kicked out. Sometimes a "no bill" meant a car arrived with no matching waybill. It usually fell to the inbound clerk to try to resolve the issue, but there was also a full-time day shift clerk whose job it was to figure these things out. It was a case of knowing who to call and where to find out the rest of the story, which could be time consuming.

There was a time-saving solution for this. I always loved Pennsylvania RR rail-roader Lloyd Arkinstall's description of the railroad's yard at Harsimus Cove, N.J., as having a "time being" track. That is, a track where the cars with question marks were put until they could be figured out. I suspect every large terminal yard has its equivalent track. Silvis always had at least one track in the bowl reserved for the "no bills" or "strangers."

That pretty well describes the process of how a car made its way through Silvis. If everything went well, as described above, a car could be in and out of town in a few hours. That was the best-case scenario. But, to continue our story, let's look at how a typical shift went.

The average shift dealt principally with cars moving from the receiving yard into the bowl and outbound trains being built. There were other duties, though. One of them was the "RIP OK's". We had something called the bum jobs, assignments that varied at the direc-



tion of the yardmasters, which were daily tasks to switch out the cars that had been repaired at the mechanical facilities or RIP (repair in place) tracks. This happened on second shift.

Once cars had been switched into a cut, the west checker walked them and brought the list to the office. I had to pull the cards and print a list for the humpmaster, who marked them up for their trip over the hump and sent the list back to me. He'd eventually tell me when they were going to classify them because it was one of those "when we get around to it" jobs. Occasionally, though, there might be a hot car or cut of cars that required priority treatment.

One disaster that could interrupt smooth functioning was for the big list printer to go down. When you came to work, you knew there was trouble if the business machine company's repair van was parked next to the yard office. You could hear it almost constantly clanking,

clattering, and thumping the floor in its room, printing its little heart out.

Another huge fly in the ointment came on days when Federal Railroad Administration inspectors were on the property. If it was locomotive inspectors, things came to a standstill; the Rock had few, if any, engines that could survive an FRA inspection. If the federal guys were car inspectors, it was almost as dire because they had no trouble finding bad-order rolling stock that had to be switched out and sent to the RIP track. You knew, though, that the lull would end and it would be a--holes and elbows once they were gone.

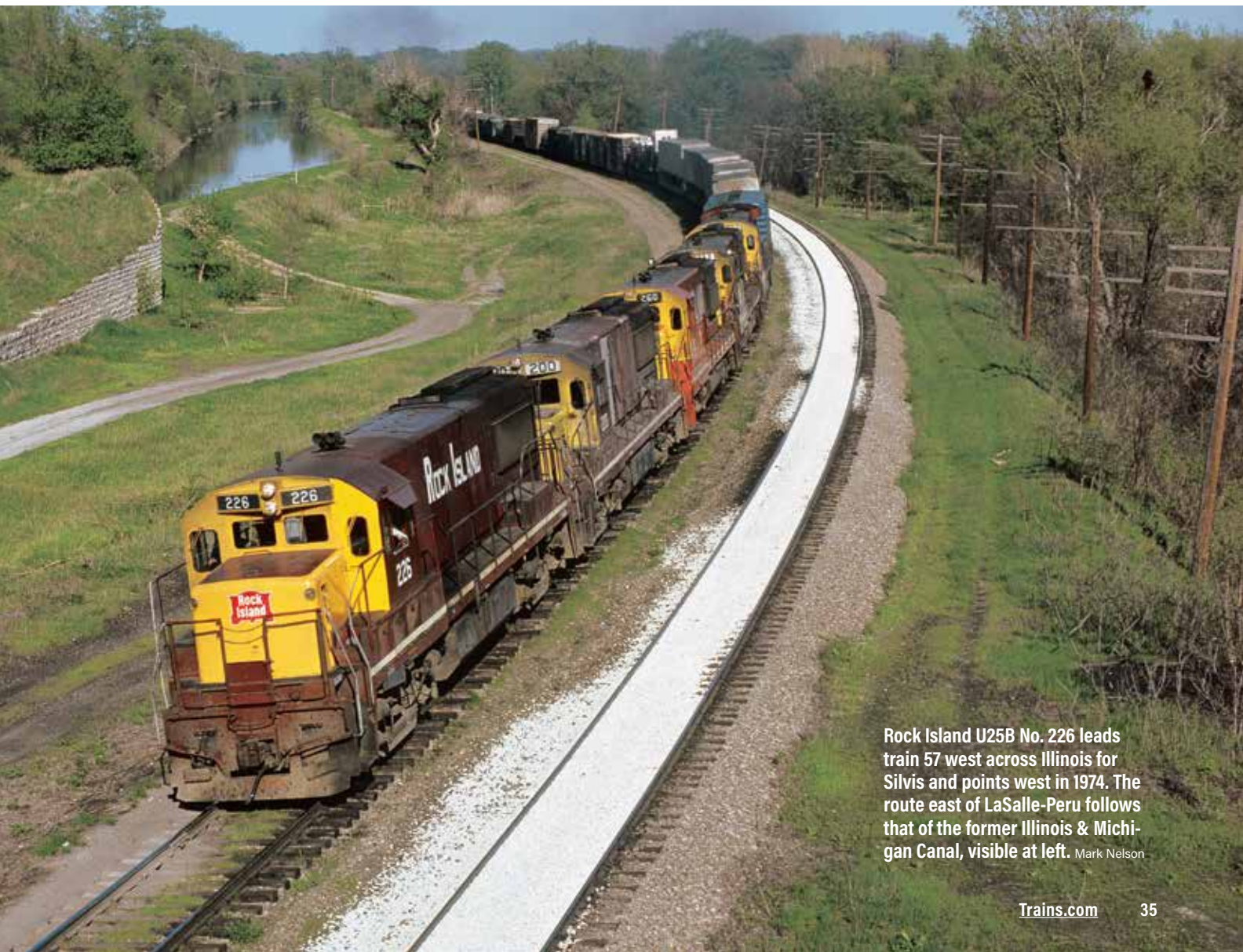
The grand finale of the evening, sort of the "Ode to Joy" for the PICL clerk, was printing the "master" PICL: a document of every car in the yard and its location. Each slot in the letter cases had a header card that identified the track and stayed permanently in its slot. You went through the letter cases and pulled every slot, in order. You wound up with a huge deck of

cards, and God help you if you dropped it. It was a good idea to make sure the printer had enough paper while printing the list — you didn't want to run out.

After what seemed to be an interminable amount of clattering, the machine would produce a huge list. I seem to remember we had a set of pins mounted on the wall where we could hang the printout and strip out all the carbons at one time. You wound up with several large copies that were distributed to involved parties.

To finish, you had to take the huge deck of cards back and replace the cards, in reverse order, back into their slots. This happened three times a day at the end of each shift.

So it went, three shifts a day. I think of my account here as a lot like the job itself: not very glamorous, but without it there wouldn't have been many trains for us to watch and photograph. Owning stock in the company that made the printer paper wouldn't have been a bad idea, either. ■



Rock Island U25B No. 226 leads train 57 west across Illinois for Silvis and points west in 1974. The route east of LaSalle-Peru follows that of the former Illinois & Michigan Canal, visible at left. Mark Nelson