





# “BOOMING” IN MODERN TIMES

Adventures of a locomotive engineer on the Rock Island and Burlington Northern in the mid-1970s

By Steve Lasher

**L**ike many of you, when I was young I read everything I could get my hands on about trains. In western Kentucky in the 1960s, though, there wasn't much available. One publication on the newsstands was *Railroad* magazine, whose standard fare back then was muddy photographs, girls, and that now extinct item, railroad fiction. Notable as the frequent heroes of these tales were the “boomers.” Footloose followers of the grain rushes, or just going wherever the wind blew, theirs seemed to be a glamorous existence as they worked for different railroads around the country. When I hired on with the Rock Island in 1973 I thought those days were gone, but I would learn that, after a fashion, “booming” still happened! While it didn't entail hiring out with different companies so much, moving from place to place could and did occur.



Once transferred into engine service, author Lasher qualified on the East Iowa main between Silvis, Ill., and Des Moines, but his first assignment was based at Eldon, Iowa, on the Missouri Division, to help handle Milwaukee Road detours. In Davenport (above), a westbound keeps to the East Iowa main at Missouri Division Junction; the tracks on either side of the dwarf signal lead to Eldon. Lasher's first pay trip as an engineer was on a set of GP40s like the trio at left at Nahant Yard, adjacent to Davenport, in September 1975.

Above, R. B. Olson, David Oroszi collection; left, Steve Lasher

## Eldon: a sleepy beginning

It didn't take long for it to happen to me on the Rock Island. After 10 months as a clerk, I transferred to engine service on the East Iowa Division seniority district (Silvis, Ill., to Des Moines, Iowa) and was promoted to engineer on December 20, 1974. By April 1975, owing to the failed Union Pacific merger and a general recession, two classmates and I were furloughed from our “you'll never have to worry about being laid off” jobs. For one thing, UP had shifted all the Chicago traffic it could from the Rock Island to the Chicago & North Western, and traffic on the Rock's East Iowa main plummeted from 7 or 8 trains a day to 3 to 4 on a good day.

So it was that, when Homer Day, Road Foreman of Engines for the East Iowa and the Missouri Division between Silvis

and Eldon, Iowa, on the Kansas City line, asked if I would be interested in some temporary work at Eldon, I quickly said yes. I was tired of signing the weekly unemployment cards for Railroad Retirement, and this sounded good to me.

Initially, Homer said he needed us because he had a lot of vacations to cover early that summer, but as it turned out, he made a lucky call. The Milwaukee Road lost its bridge over the Skunk River at Rubio, Iowa, and would be detouring all trains on the Rock Island for several weeks. About that time we newcomers had made a few qualifying trips and so were instructed to report “ASAP” to Eldon to mark up on the extra board and be available for pilot duty.

Now, pilots (usually an engineer and conductor) are employees assigned by the home road to detouring trains of an-



**Rock Island was in bad shape, physically and financially, after the proposed Union Pacific merger fell apart, evidenced by the GP40s (357, 363, and 361) on train 81 at Des Moines yard on August 15, 1972, visibly leaning to one side. Beyond the units is the main line from Chicago.**

Steven N. Eudy, David Oroszi collection

other road to assist the visiting train's crew with knowledge of the rules, local conditions, and the lay of the land. While the rules say the pilot will "inform" the guest crew about such matters, what usually happens is that the pilot engineer runs the train. Since he's familiar with the road, it's simpler that way.

My first pay trip as an engineer thus took place not on the East Iowa but on the Missouri Division as a pilot on a detouring Milwaukee Road train. We were called to go to Otero, Iowa, and relieve the hog-lawed pilots on a westbound. After sitting down in this "foreign" seat and having a short conversation with the engineer — who said, "No, the dynamic brakes don't work as the company had disabled them when the engines came east to work" — I took over the consist of four GP40s and we set sail for Eldon about 20 miles away. The unit's electronic bell took some getting used to, but the trip was otherwise uneventful.

The 0.6 percent ruling grade eastbound for the division started just east of the Eldon depot. While that may not sound like much compared with the storied hills elsewhere, it can be mighty mean when you're trying to hold back a

heavy train descending the grade. When we came around the last curve on the hill and the depot came in sight, we saw the operator standing out front, waving a red flag (the Milwaukee units had no Rock Island radio). After he saw I had the train under control and I'd acknowledged his stop sign (thank God for good independent brakes on those GP40s), he furled the flag and gave us a come-ahead wave. As I crept past, he shouted up for us to "put 'er in 4 track in the yard," to which I replied, "Which one's 4 track?" Our student trips hadn't included the all-but-abandoned Eldon yard, so I didn't know which one it was . . . a fact the Milwaukee crew instantly noted.

The quick-thinking "op" said, "Just take it real easy and I'll drive around and line it up and pick you up at the west end." Looking across at the now incredulous Milwaukee crew, I said, "I've never been in the yard before." I'm sure they were thinking, *We've been in the hands of an idiot this whole time*, but they were polite enough not to say anything.

It was quite a feat for the operator to get around and line us up. All we had to do was continue going straight ahead on the main line, cross the Des Moines Riv-

er, go a short distance to the absolute signal that governed the yard entrance switch, and we were there. But he had to drive through town, cross the river, come back down on the west side, hop out, and line the switches. It was a good thing he did, too, because if we had simply lined ourselves up for what appeared to be 4 track, we'd have found ourselves on a track that just disappeared part way in and had been torn up beyond. We'd have been lucky not to go on the ground, giving those poor tired sister roads, the Rock and the Milwaukee, another mess to pick up. Thus ended my first pay trip.

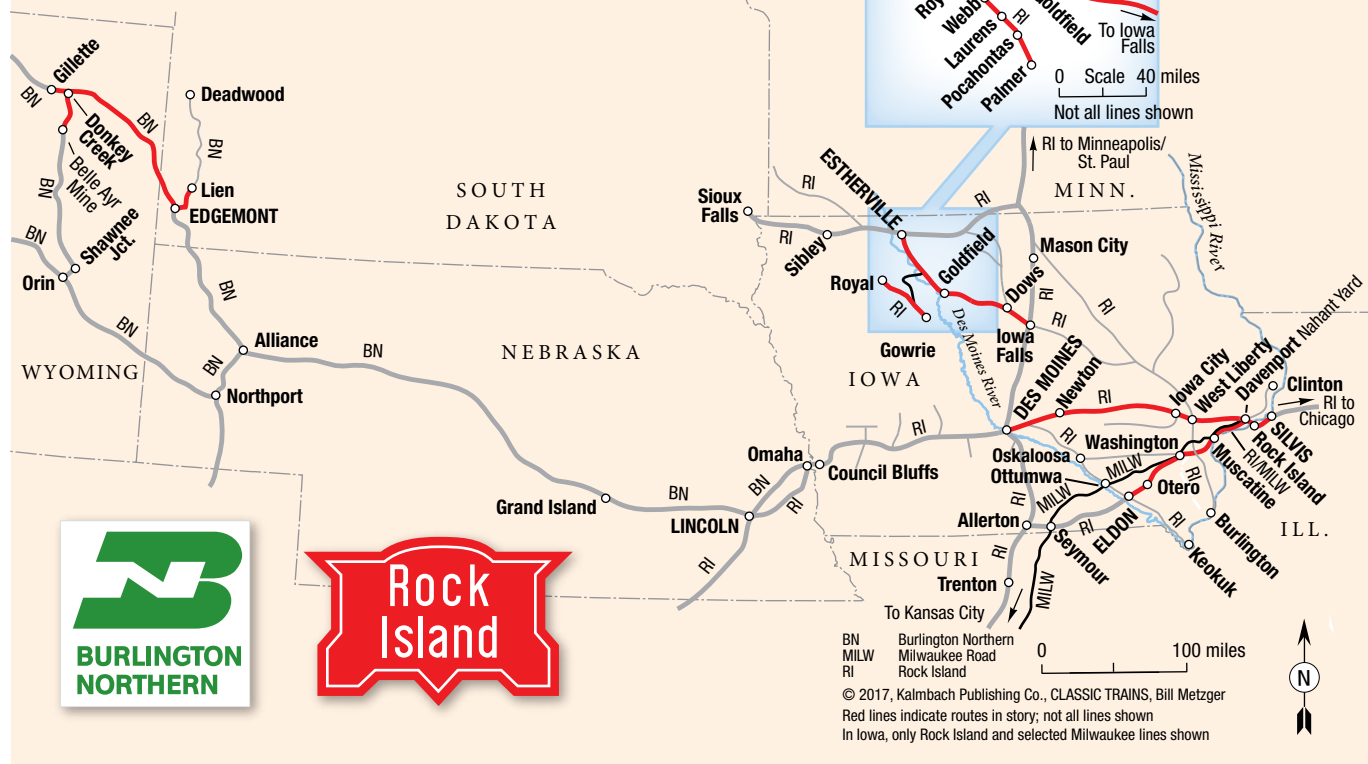
### Miserable in Muscatine

The Eldon extra board also covered the yard jobs at Muscatine, Iowa, where there was not much of a yard but rather a collection of odd tracks and some big customers providing the Rock Island a lot of business. The city was always one of the top revenue producers for the Rock. In the '70s, HON Industries, Monsanto, Grain Processing Corp., and some other big shippers kept things hopping.

However, if there was ever a remote suburb of Hell for a railroader to work in, Muscatine qualified. It was full of blind curves, bad track, and tricky spots where a switchman had to know where to stand to be seen passing signals, and if on the train, you had to know where to look for him. The town was also memorable for another aggravation, mayflies,

**Had we simply lined ourselves into what appeared to be "4 track" in the yard, we'd have found ourselves on a track that just disappeared part way in and had been torn up beyond.**

# AUTHOR'S "BOOMING" SITES IN THE MID-1970s



which were everywhere and in everything when in season. It didn't take me long to get my fill of Muscatine.

The Missouri Division was also where I learned how to "fan" the brake valve on a 26L-equipped unit to control the train through a 10-mph slow order at the bottom of a sag. There were a lot of these on the line from Nahant (Davenport's yard) to Eldon, since it crossed the drainage pattern of southeastern Iowa streams, which flowed to the Mississippi River at right angles to the railroad. The entire line was interesting in that you could see how John Dow Farrington, the Rock's post-Depression rebuild, thought that this is where the money would be.

The line boasted many 6,000-foot passing sidings and CTC signaling. A lot of Farrington's work in realigning and relocating the track involved big fills at the bottom of these valleys, and unfortunately these fills tended to be unstable at their lowest points, in my time necessitating a lot of slow orders. Since the Rock's diesels didn't have dynamic brakes, you had to do something different to stay close to 10 mph, as the en-

gines' brakes alone wouldn't hold most trains. By setting and releasing the brakes about three times in quick succession — you released the train brakes and waited just long enough to feel the train start to pick up speed, then moved the automatic brake handle just far enough to get a whisper of exhaust from the brake valve — you wound up with enough undercharged released brakes to be able to pull the train through the sag at close to 10 mph. It wasn't a recommended practice, but it worked, and knowledge of it was a valuable tool.

Quiet little Eldon, population about 1,000 in 1975, was the home terminal for crews working east to Silvis, but was the away-from-home terminal for crews working up from Trenton, Mo., the first crew-change point out of Kansas City. A one-story concrete-block building across from the Eldon depot served as a crew dormitory. We on the extra board were allowed to stay there, as there was no other lodging in town. Thus it became a refuge for me when I tired of chucking rocks into the Des Moines River off the Rock Island's bridge. I couldn't afford

the almost round-the-clock poker, blackjack, euchre, or cribbage games in the day room, and in those days TV reception there was pretty poor. One notable thing, though, was that the beds all were made up with Pullman bedding, including those wonderful wool blankets with the art deco "Pullman" logo on them. I sure wish I had a couple of them now.

After 12 weeks or so, with the detours gone, my first adventure in booming ended. It was back to signing weekly unemployment cards, painting models, and doing whatever else to keep body and soul together until better times returned.

## Estherville: life in the slow lane

"Hello. . . . Oh, hi Homer. . . . Where? . . . Estherville? . . . OK, who do I talk to when I get there?"

This was roughly how my end of the conversation went when Homer Day called me in September. The Eldon gig had ended soon after the Fourth of July. I wasn't married at the time, so I could make it on unemployment, but life wasn't plush. In Iowa, record corn crops and Russian grain sales meant corn on





In January '80, train 340 works the Co-Op siding at Dows, Iowa. "I spent a lot of time on the 1341," Lasher recalls. "The GP18s were good engines, but had one flaw. With the throttle in notch 2 . . . everything in the cab would join in an aggravating cacophony of sympathetic vibration."

Paul D. Schneider

the ground — mountains of it — that couldn't be moved fast enough. Hence there was a shortage of train crews, and I was glad to go.

Estherville, today with a population declining toward 6,000, was a metropolis compared with Eldon. A county seat, Estherville is in Iowa's northwest corner, an area known locally as the Iowa Great Lakes, the largest being Spirit Lake. As far as the railroad was concerned, it may as well have been on another planet. (In the first of three features in *TRAINS*, former Rock Island dispatcher Edward J. Brunner in the July 1980 issue introduced readers to the railroaders' term for all the Rock's northwest Iowa branches, roughly between Iowa Falls and Estherville: "Bow and Arrow Country.")

The Rock did have a small yard and tiny engine terminal in Estherville, on the bank of the Des Moines River (yes, same one as at Eldon). The track gauge was indeed 4 feet 8½ inches, more or less

(mostly more), and that was its only claim to anything I'd known. Estherville crews didn't go on "runs," they went on "voyages," up to three days at a time, and mostly at 10 mph. This could be brutal in the winter. It should tell you something that the natives were more enthusiastic about winter sports than summer activities, and almost every vehicle in Estherville had a block heater cord dangling from its grille.

### Voyage on a sea of corn

A prime example of a three-day voyage was to service the remains of the old "Gowrie line" to the south. Day 1: Estherville to Emmetsburg on the "trunk" toward Iowa Falls, then west on the Milwaukee Road by trackage rights to a junction just east of Spencer, then south on another Milwaukee line to Webb to re-enter home rails, the remnant of a Rock branch that used to go on southeast to, yes, Gowrie, and eventually Des

Moines. With some luck, you'd tie up at Palmer, by that time the end of track. Total miles: about 85.

Day 2: Backtracking from Palmer, you'd go north through Pocahontas, Ware, Laurens, and Webb, and on to end of track at Royal. Beyond Webb but well before reaching Royal you crossed the Little Sioux River on an old, weathered-to-a-light-gray, high and shaky timber trestle that made you hope your life insurance was paid up. We'd go back south and leave the train at Webb, then ride in a carry-all back to a motel in Laurens.

Day 3: This one wasn't too bad if all went well. You retraced your route from Webb up the Milwaukee to near Spencer and east to home rails at Emmetsburg, then returned north to Estherville to tie up — usually a short day, only 8 to 10 hours, to cover about 55 miles.

The 110-mile "main line" from Iowa Falls to Estherville was mostly 90-lb. rail, re-tied and resurfaced with the help of loans from the state of Iowa. The Rock Island had regained a lot of the grain business by offering unit-train pricing on lots of 54 cars (the most the larger elevators at the time could practically load). If a shipper couldn't load 54 he could bud-

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dy up with another elevator and load 27 and get the same rate. The day before the speed limit was to be raised from 10 mph to 25, though, a grain train put 10 or 12 loads on the ground at Goldfield, about 50 miles south of Emmetsburg, and that was the end of any talk of raising the speed limit. Maximum was 10 mph almost everywhere, and sometimes it took nerve to do that.

That “speed” had many drawbacks. Consider the tall elevator at West Bend, which could be seen for miles. We often stopped to eat at West Bend, and going south, as you rounded a curve the elevator came into view ahead on a 10-mile tangent. Trouble was, at 10 mph it took an hour to get there. It was amazing how much hungrier you could get watching that elevator for an hour.

### Abiding by one’s own rules

In such lonely territory, rules observance was casual at best. Take pheasant-hunting. I was fireman on a crew whose engineer carried a Marlin 22/410 over-and-under breakdown gun in his grip, and he and the two brakemen would ride the front platform of the lead Geep and shoot at pheasants from the train while I ran. Once when we had slowed to a fast walk, sure enough, one of the brakemen hit one. He jumped off, got the bird, and reboarded the rear of the lead unit. Walking forward with his trophy in hand, he opened the rear cab door, came in, and, intent on resuming the hunt, left the bird in the cab with me. But it wasn’t dead. Needless to say, I was not happy being left alone with a large, half dead, flopping and flapping pheasant.

That casual rules observance gave me one of the closest calls I ever had. At the Milwaukee-Rock Island diamond in Emmetsburg, the crossing was not interlocked, likely owing to the infrequent traffic on both lines. “STOP” boards were deemed sufficient. On this trip, we were southbound and had stopped north of Emmetsburg to leave our train in the country to go into town “light engine” for beans. When finished, we returned north to recouple to our train.

Now, we should have sent someone ahead to flag the Milwaukee crossing since we didn’t have a clear view of it, but the engineer just kept going. I was working as fireman and still on the second unit after restarting it. As we hit the diamond, I was startled by a loud “BAMP, BAMP, BAMP!” from a single-chime air horn and looked to my right to see a headlight, looking as big as a full moon,

aimed directly at me! It was on an orange-and-black F unit shuddering to a stop. Apparently the eastbound Milwaukee train had just started from his halt at the stop board when the engineer saw us and “plugged it.” I’m sure quite a bit of unprintable verbiage was directed our way. I looked ahead at our lead unit to see my engineer was oblivious to it all, this being his normal state when not hunting pheasant. After that, the Emmetsburg Milwaukee Road crossing got a lot more respect from me.

To give credit where due, the Estherville trainmen were crackerjacks at re-railing cars. If only a wheel or two was off, they could scrounge timber, tie plates, etc., and more often than not, get the errant vehicle of common-carrier transportation back on top of the rail where it belonged. To some extent this was simple self-preservation, since any help would have to come from Estherville or Iowa Falls (both hours away), prolonging an already arduous voyage.

A last thought about Estherville. The railroad put me up at the Gardston Hotel, undoubtedly what had passed for elegance in the small town in the distant

past but by 1975 a dowager. You could just hear the old girl sneering *à la* Gloria Swanson in *Sunset Boulevard*, “I am big. It’s the pictures that got small.” This was before cable TV, so all that was available were two stations and the reception was not great. One of them was in Mankato, Minn., and as I remember, was good for *Friday Night Polka Hour*, *Saturday Afternoon Polka Hour*, *Saturday Night Polka Jamboree*, and *Sunday Afternoon Polka Fest*, which was followed later by, what else, *Sunday Night Polka Hour*. Fortunately the Gardston had a nice bar staffed by a pleasant woman bartender who helped considerably to get one over the “Polka shakes.”

### Go west, young man

Railroad jobs were scarce in the mid-’70s. Most roads had been furloughing employees in the recession that followed the oil embargo. Burlington Northern was the exception because of the Powder River Basin coal explosion, and Alliance, Nebr., was the center of the action. It was the Big Rock Candy Mountain of legend and a certifiable boomer haven, drawing men from all over the country and Can-



Toddlng along for most of a day at 10 mph in flat territory on straight track had its drawbacks.

Steve Lasher





Led by 5812, GE U30Cs ease to a stop for a crew change at the Edgemont depot in August 1975 with a trainload of Powder River Basin coal.

Nick Tharalson



BN's coal boom is under way. In 1975 we look west on the loading loop lead for the expanding AMAX Bell Ayr mine south of Gillette, Wyo., at the time the south end of the "coal line."

Steve Lasher

ada too. Thus, after talking to a few friends on the Rock and seeing the end of my Estherville gig coming, I contacted BN's personnel manager at Alliance.

"Well," I was told, "we're not hiring people for our engineer training program right now, but we are hiring brakemen and it should be easy to transfer to engine service later if you want." With that, the Fourth of July 1976 found me driving across Nebraska to Alliance.

After a short interview and filling out the required forms, I was sent to the company doctor's office for a physical. A typical Old West sawbones, his only comment was, "Their standards sure aren't what they used to be." He passed me, though, and sent me back with the completed forms in hand.

I was told to report to Edgemont, S.Dak., for assignment to the extra board. Because I had some experience,

BN felt no training of any kind was needed other than giving me a copy of *The Consolidated Code of Rules*, a switch key, and a lantern. Since your seniority started with your first trip, I made for Edgemont post haste.

Seeing tumbleweed rolling down what passed for Edgemont's dusty main street let me know I had arrived in the Great American West. The clerk marked me up and told me what was available for lodging. Since it was a home terminal, I was responsible for my own lodging, but the only real choices were two large rooming houses right in town (not that you could get far out of town and find anything but sagebrush). Neither had air conditioning, so I was introduced to evaporative ("swamp") coolers, not great and with only a single large one at the end of a long hall for the whole second floor. Late that evening the callboy — yes, an honest-to-God live person — showed up to give me a call to dog-catch an eastbound that had died at Dewey, the first siding west of Edgemont. My BN career was under way.

### Coal traffic: a mixed blessing

The BN found the Powder River Basin traffic explosion to be a mixed blessing. On one hand, money from coal revenue was rolling in. On the other, money was rolling out into an apparently bottomless pit for new locomotives and new employees, plus trying to remake what had been

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a secondary, two-trains-a day, timetable-and-train-order main line into a heavy-duty route before the coal traffic beat it to pieces.

BN got most of the ballast for these improvements from a quarry at a place called Lien Pit. With only a short siding and two long tracks into the quarry, Lien was literally on a mountainside in the middle of nowhere on the branch north to Deadwood in the heart of the Black Hills. Three or four times a week, a Lien turn ran out of Edgemont with 60 ballast hopper cars to be loaded.

One morning I was called to work a Lien turn and, because the senior man (hired a few weeks earlier than me) wanted to work the head end, I wound up with the conductor on the waycar. We had three ex-Northern Pacific U25Cs, and leaving Edgemont we almost immediately hit the grade into the hills with our 60 cars, but since they were empties the U25s handled the train easily. It was quite a sight, as in several places our engines were visible from the rear climbing the mountainside in the opposite direction. A little farther on, we were doing about 25 mph, clinging to a canyon wall with a steep rock wall to our right and nothing but thin air to our left for several hundred feet down into the canyon.

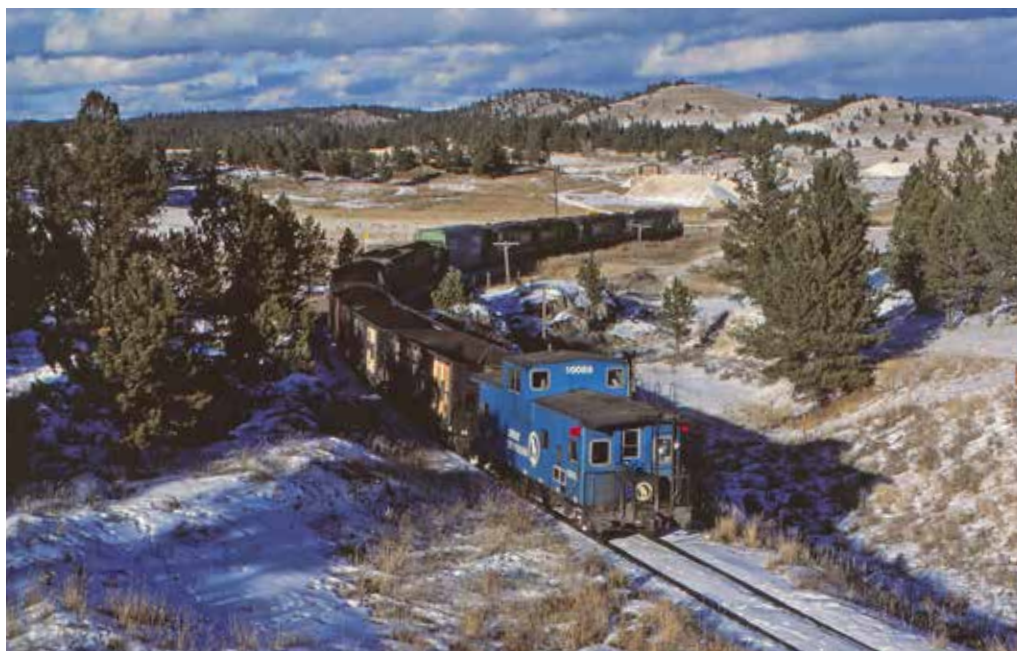
I was riding in the cupola on the right side when, going around a right-hand curve, the empty ballast cars ahead started doing a wild dance. I was in the process of hollering down to the conductor, who was talking to a section foreman, who was riding with a couple of his men to some remote spot, when the caboose went “WHAM, WHAM, KAH-WHAM, WHAM.” After radioing the head end to stop the train, we gingerly backed up to find a rail, on the inside of the curve, broken down to the web with about a two-foot chunk of the head lying out to the side. Nothing had derailed, but if the break had been on the outside rail and the rear end had derailed and gone down into the canyon . . . well, you wouldn’t be reading this story.

For me, it only took a couple of months for the “glamour” of the Great American West to wear off. I found myself parked a remote siding, sitting in a caboose in Wyoming waiting six-plus hours for a maintenance-of-way window to expire, thinking that General Custer surely picked one lonesome place to die and wondering why had we expended so much energy to steal this land from the Native Americans in the first place. I suppose the answer lay literally buried in



**The operator at Dewey, first siding out of Edgemont, holds orders up for a westbound empty. Note the condition of the unrebuilt track ahead, and piles of new ties waiting to be installed.**

Steve Lasher



**A Deadwood Branch train heads north behind four SD9s in February 1977. Just ahead is Loring Hill, the first of four 3 percent grades the crew will encounter en route to Deadwood.**

Nick Tharalson

the ground waiting to be extracted, but I’d had enough and headed back to the Quad Cities area and the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific out of Silvis. Having “seen the elephant,” I was glad to head home. Ahead lay the end of the Rock Island and a move to Texas and the Cotton Belt, a boomer haven in its own right, but a tale for another time. ■

*STEVE LASHER, who wrote about his late-1970s Rock Island experiences in “57” in Winter 2013 CLASSIC TRAINS, grew up in Cleveland, Ohio, then moved to Kentucky; he graduated from Murray (Ky.) State University in 1973. He took a Cotton Belt buyout in 1987 and moved to Louisville, where he is a Registered Nurse. He and wife Bonnie live close by in Indiana.*