C&NW's "hot corner"

When the Chicago & North Western's Proviso freight yard was placed in service in 1929 it was billed as the largest in the nation, if not the world. That probably was no longer the case in 1974 when I moved to the Chicago Division to take over the transportation operation, but it was still a big and busy place. Located about 15 miles west of Chicago, mostly within Proviso Township, the bulk of the yard (apart from its receiving yard, a.k.a. Yard 9), lay parallel to the railroad's east-west main line. Trains from the east on the Geneva Subdivision entered the yard at JN interlocking in Melrose Park; those from the west entered at HM in Elmhurst. Wisconsin Division trains arrived and departed Proviso at North Avenue, located at the north end of Yard 9.

In addition to the classification and related yards, Proviso was headquarters for the Chicago Division, which consisted not only of Proviso itself (although that was the most important — and time-consuming), but also yards at 40th Street, Wood Street (including the new Global One intermodal terminal), North Avenue, and Weber, collectively known as the "Inner Zone." It also included Elk Grove yard the extensive suburban-train operation.

The Chicago Division was the C&NW's smallest in terms of mileage, but it more than made up for that in activity, intensity, and impact upon the rest of the railroad. The supervisory staff reflected this, as did the road's new (1972) "Division Manager" structure. Under this arrangement, assistant division managers in charge of freight transportation (which was me), suburban, mechanical, engineering, and administration all reported to the division manager, who would previously have been titled Super-

The Chicago Division was small in mileage but immense in its impact on the railroad

BY CHRIS BURGER ▪ Photos by the author

intendent. My staff consisted of a day and a night superintendent, a traveling engineer, and five trainmasters along with a general yardmaster and four yardmasters on each shift at Proviso, plus another superintendent and three trainmasters in the Inner Zone with a yardmaster on each shift at Wood Street and 40th Street. Ideally, everyone worked five days a week, but when things got backed up and congested it was often "all hands on deck" 24/7.

Motive power shortages and derailments were the principal reasons for us getting behind the eight ball, so to speak. This was before the prosperity brought by deregulation, and Proviso wasn't exempt from deferred maintenance and deteriorated track conditions. In fact, it may have been *more* susceptible because it was so difficult to schedule or perform maintenance without disrupting operations. Derailments, especially in the classification bowl, were common. Finally we decided that long-term gain was worth the short-term pain, and we turned the place over to the Engineering Department during first trick one Monday a month. It was amazing to see what all could be accomplished: retarders replaced, tracks rehabbed and cleaned, switches replaced, and a lot more. It made a big difference and was good for morale too. I only remember once when we had to call it off because of operational requirements.

Derailments in Proviso that didn't require the wrecking outfit were handled by the trackmen, unlike other locations where carmen did the rerailing while trackmen waited. We did have a couple of big mainline derailments, too, at Shermer and at Skokie. Both were track-related and required the wrecking outfit.

Motive power was controlled on a system basis, and there

In early 1975, new SD38-2 6651 has arrived at the North Western's giant Proviso Yard outside Chicago with a transfer from Wood Street Yard. SD40-2s to power outbound trains look on at left.

An SD40-2 and SD45 bring an eastward, Proviso-bound freight past the Elmhurst suburban-train station in mid-1974.

wasn't a lot we could do about shortages except keep the yard as fluid as possible. We didn't get much sympathy from the power desk if the power for outbound trains was sitting at the yard board waiting to get in.

Proviso was built with manually controlled retarders to slow cars coming off the hump; unlike other yards, it was never converted to computer control. Nevertheless, we regularly humped 800 cars per shift, and 1,000 wasn't unheard of. There were two "hump leads" from Yard 9 (the receiving yard) to the top of the hump, and normal practice was to use one at a time and spread the cars across the 69 classification tracks. Cars bound for the north and east were assigned tracks on the north side starting with Track 1; those to the west went to the south side. If we needed to clear receiving tracks in a hurry, we'd look for trains to hump "side by side." The trouble with this was that it limited the ability to use all class tracks for both trains, so while it made room in Yard 9 quickly, some of the cars had to be rehumped later. It was impressive to watch, however.

Proviso was a "fast" hump, putting pressure and stress on the retarder operators. One, now retired, still has nightmares about it all.

Proviso was a "fast" hump, with the grade off the crest accelerating cars quickly, boosting capacity and putting pressure and stress on the retarder operators in the three control towers. I correspond with one, now retired, who tells me he still has nightmares about it all.

Another job made necessary by the hump operation, and the fact that the railroad was essentially downhill all the way to Lake Michigan, was "skateman." There were three per shift, each responsible for preventing run-outs on his assigned 33 tracks. This was done either by cutting a car or two off a cut and tying them down with hand brakes to stop cars humped into what would otherwise be a clear track, or by setting "skates" on a rail to stop oncoming cars. This was a dangerous job. I vividly remember a young skateman losing a leg and maybe more later when he either was struck by or was getting on a moving car.

With 20-plus originating and a like number of terminating trains a day, there was pressure to make room for inbound trains and get the outbounds made up and out on time with their advertised connections. My office was adjacent to the division manager's, and he had a mirror on the wall across from his desk in which he could see the hump. If he saw it wasn't moving, he'd be in my doorway or on the phone wanting to know why. I hated it, but had to admit it helped get the message and priority across — to me, but more importantly to the guys at the top of the hump who knew to expect a call if things stopped moving.

At Elmhurst, "Crandall cab" E8 505 heads west with a midday suburban train out of Chicago in mid-1974.

MORNING MEETINGS

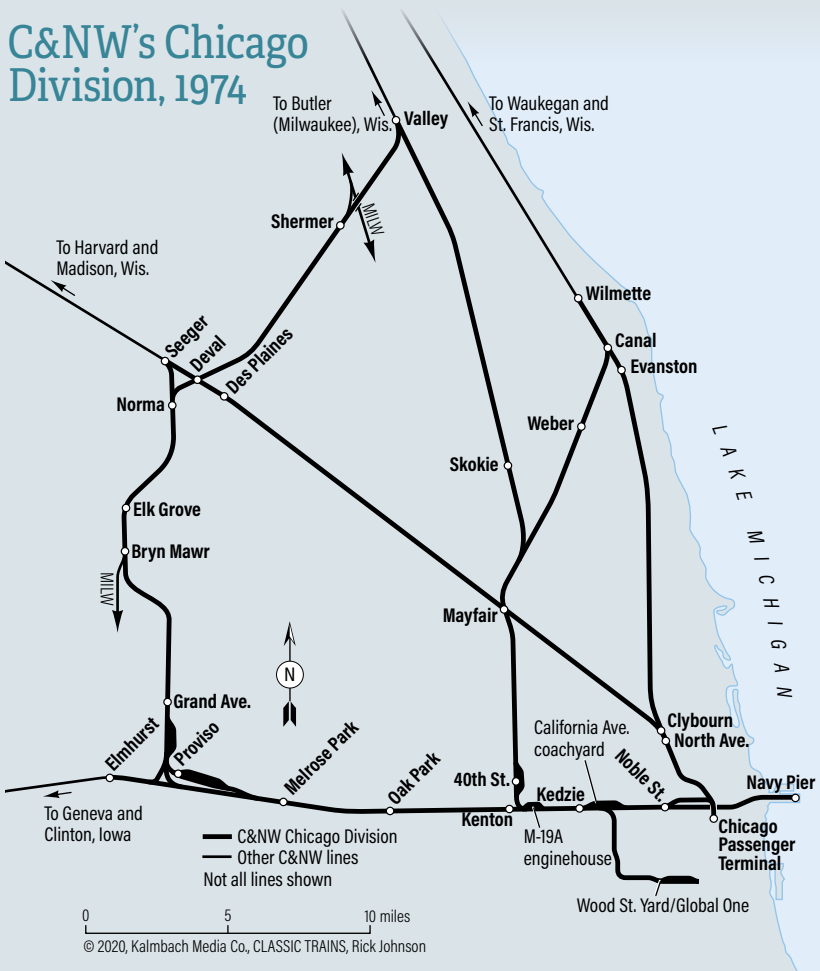
The North Western probably wasn't the first railroad to start

A "Falcon" piggyback train with C&NW and UP power passes JN, east entrance to Proviso, in April 1975. Having originated at Global One, the hotshot is bypassing Proviso on its dash west.

the work day with a morning meeting, but it received a lot of trade as well as newspaper press attention for the practice. I remember sitting in on it during my Train Accident Prevention days, at which time it was only headquarters staff participating. Sometime in the early 1970s, representatives from the divisions started to participate, too, with each of us reporting on things like yard conditions, injuries, major derailments, and the like. Each of the major yards had a set of standards which determined how it would report its condition at the meeting, "red or green." A red condition called for an explanation, which was never fun. One of the criteria at Proviso was condition red if there were more than 900 cars to be humped in Yard 9. The flagpole outside the main office displayed a flag indicating the yard condition right below Old Glory, and no one wanted to start the day seeing it red — or to have to explain it.

Morning meetings could get pretty intense, especially after a major derailment, and I remember one in particular, following an Iowa Division derailment caused by a broken rail. In the mid 1970s the North Western was taking delivery on a large order of new covered hopper cars, a big deal for a cash-starved railroad like ours. They were built by Pullman-Standard in Pennsylvania and moved in blocks of 20 or so to the C&NW at Wood Street. From there they moved to Proviso in the nightly transfer run, which entered the yard on a lead track from JN interlocking

C&NW's Chicago Division, 1974



Short-term pain, long-term gain: Engineering Department crews swarm over Proviso's twin humps, shut down for their work, in 1974.

Wreckers from Proviso and Butler clean up a derailment at Shermer in 1974. The track in the foreground is the connection to the Milwaukee Road main line; MILW trains used C&NW to access Bensenville Yard.

that ran right alongside the westbound departure tracks.

I happened to be out in the yard at around 3 o'clock one morning when the transfer arrived with a block of these cars on the head end and stopped right beside train 247, a hot Union Pacific run-through consisting mostly of empty refrigerator cars. It was scheduled to depart ahead of the suburban-train curfew around 6 a.m. and I thought we could make a quick move to get the new hoppers on its head end to be set out in Iowa, saving a day or so of transit time.

This called for permission from Operations Control as the Train Operation Manual didn't provide for it, so I called, got permission, made the move, and hung around until 247 left on time. When I got back to work some hours later, the first person I saw asked if I'd heard that 247 had derailed somewhere in Iowa, destroying most of those brand-new cars. At the morning meeting, President Larry Provo, known for his astute and vigorous questioning, asked what they were doing on 247. He was told that I had suggested it and that Op Control thought it was a good move and approved it. Everyone held their breath until Provo said he agreed it was a good move at the time and that we were probably better off destroying empty covered hoppers than mechanical refrigerator cars.

WORKING THE "MANAGEMENT EXTRA BOARD"

Sometime in late 1974 or early '75 the position of Assistant to the Division Manager was created on the Chicago and Iowa divisions. The job was to help out wherever the Division Manager felt it was needed, and to be in charge of the division in his absence. I called it the "management extra board" and had mixed emotions about the position, but it was a step up, with interesting possibilities.

In May 1975, freight GP30s and a GP35 (top) and suburban E units (above) populate the tracks at the M-19A locomotive facility.

Shortly after I took the job, the Assistant Division Manager, Mechanical, retired and I took over until a replacement could be found, which turned out to be several months. One of the nice things about the transportation job was that I got to work with and rely upon the mechanical and engineering people and learn something about their operation. This helped in my new job, as I knew the lay of the land and most of the people. The Mechanical Department included both motive power and car, each with its own organization and facilities. Motive power included the Proviso and M-19A diesel shops. The car department included the large Proviso repair track as well as the California Avenue passenger operation plus car inspectors at Proviso, Wood Street, Global One, and 40th Street.

I suspect that in my mechanical role I learned more than I contributed, except maybe in the safety area. I had always wondered why Car Department employees, unlike those in Engineering and Motive Power, were not required to wear hard hats. Following the third head injury within a couple of months sustained by Proviso car inspectors while coupling air hoses, I issued instructions requiring them. There was grumbling among the employees, but it was generally agreed that the move made sense. The same was not the case with the heads of the Car Department in system headquarters. I don't remember why — maybe because "an outsider" had done it — but they took the issue to Vice President, Operations, Jim Zito and came away with an agreement requiring "bump hats," a smaller and lighter version of the hard hat. Overall I think the mechanical organization benefited from my fresh set of eyes, and I picked up some knowledge and perspective that helped me in subsequent jobs.

Finally, in May 1975 a new Assistant Division Manager, Mechanical, was appointed, about the time when it was realized that the "Assistant to" positions weren't such a good idea. The Assistant Division Manager, Transportation, position on the Twin Cities Division became open and was the next stop in my railroad odyssey, and high on my list of favorite jobs. We'll cover it in the next edition. Meanwhile, stay safe!

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