

75 years **F**



# North Western's **EXECUTIVE F7s**



Bob Baker

As railroading changed, these revived 1950s haulers became roving C&NW ambassadors for a decade

**By Chris Burger** • Photos by the author



Led by two Executive F7s and power car 490, officers special ZZRWS (for President Robert W. Schmiede) rolls east at DeKalb, Ill., in late 1988. F7 425, westbound at West Chicago in 1977 (inset), joined the fleet in 1984 as second No. 400 after first 400 suffered structural damage.

One of my all-time favorite pieces of railroad reading is a ditty entitled “Hobo Rip Van Winkle,” penned by H. L. Kelso and published in the July 1954 *Railroad* magazine. Rip was Washington Irving’s fictional character who fell asleep with the help of some “moonshine” in New York’s Catskill Mountains prior to the Revolutionary War, awakening some 20 years later.

The ditty goes like this:

*Along a stretch of mountain rail,  
Some twenty years ago  
There trudged a ragged bindlestiff  
By some he’s called a ‘bo.  
’Twas evening and the golden sun  
Was droppin’ in the west;  
The hobo scanned the countryside  
to find a place to rest.*

*He spied a nook high on a cliff  
A spot to order made  
Where he could see the signal lights  
Hear malleys on the grade.  
He made his bed then paused a while  
To watch a headlight’s gleam;  
A redball freight came blatin’ up  
A-belchin’ smoke and steam.*

*Then as he ate a meager meal  
The Western Mail came by;  
Two ten-wheel mills were on the nose  
Great rockets reached the sky.  
The vagabond then knelt in prayer  
His soul devoid of fears  
And he drifted off to dreamland  
To sleep for twenty years.  
In twenty years some changes came,  
As sure as you were born;  
Our hobo was awakened by*

*A raucous diesel horn.  
He heard the sound of motors’ moan,  
’Twas quite beyond belief;  
His eyes bugged out for here she came,  
The silver Super Chief*

*And all that day the diesels passed,  
He sickened at the sight.  
His ears grew tired of growling gears  
Throughout the day and night.  
“Oh Lord! Oh Lord” the hobo cried  
“For this sad thing I weep.”  
And forthwith he laid down again  
And went right back to sleep.*

Now, maybe it’s a stretch to connect all that with Chicago & North Western’s “Executive F7” fleet, but consider this: It was conceived in the 1970s to handle the road’s business-car, inspection, and other





**C&NW had long used “English Stagecoach Yellow,” as on the units in the left photo, showing No. 867 (EMD’s first production SD40) passing business train ZZEAB at Necedah, Wis., in late 1981. After a shift to “Sunburst Yellow” on waycars, a fall 1981 discussion on visibility may have led to diesels also getting the brighter color; two Fs and a waycar in the new hue contrast with ex-CGW SD40 927 at Adams, Wis., in June ’83.**

special trains after Amtrak’s creation ended the intercity trains C&NW had often used for business-car moves (Amtrak chose no North Western routes). This was some 20 years after Kelso’s piece was published, and also 20-plus years after C&NW acquired its first F unit.

The Executive Fleet originally consisted of three F7As, with a fourth added in the early 1980s. Then, as the business-car fleet expanded, two F7Bs were added in 1985 [see roster, page 91]. So, had a latter-day Rip fallen asleep along C&NW in the F-unit era, he could have awakened 20 years later to see the same power on the point of passenger cars carrying the road’s executives, shippers, investors, employees, retirees, and friends, and occasionally even doubleheaded with steam power or handling a vintage circus train. How’s that for rationalization?

### C&NW’s F-unit history

Building on its 8 FT units of 1945, and its 39 F3s of 1947, North Western acquired its first F7s in March ’49. The railroad’s numbering scheme had the road-number suffix “A” or “C” on cab units and “B” on booster units. Hence, the FTs were 4051A-B through 4054A-B, and the first four F3As, which were mated with them, were 4051C–4054C. The other F3s came as 11 A-B-A trios (4055–4063 and 4065–4066 as A-B-C) plus F3As 4064A and C with no F3B.

The F7s, continuing the number series from 4067 upward, came mostly in A-B-A trios, but C&NW later shifted to pairs of F7As, with suffixes A and C. The F7 fleet would eventually total 106 units (84 cabs, 22 boosters). The last F7 cabs came in April ’50, but C&NW’s last 4 F7s were B units delivered in July 1952. They had no corresponding new F7As but



**F7 problems on-line were rare, but a pre-arranged “failure” at Oconto, Wis., on a 1982 inspection trip resulted in 4-6-0 1385 taking over for the Fs for the benefit of VP Ed Burkhardt.**

were given numbers amidst earlier A-A pairs, 4091B–4094B. Included in the 106 total were 6 pairs of F7As for subsidiary Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis & Omaha (“the Omaha Road”) in late ’49 and early ’50, numbered 6500A&C–6505A&C.

The F units were purchased for systemwide through freight service, a role they filled until displaced by GP and SD units in the 1960s and ’70s. The Fs’ last days in freight service were mostly on former Chicago Great Western and Minneapolis & St. Louis lines, where they worked through the late 1970s. Some of them, though, had changed uniforms and become passenger engines.

The system’s passenger service underwent a metamorphosis in the 1950s. Union Pacific in 1955 moved its streamliners from C&NW’s Chicago–Omaha

line to the parallel Milwaukee Road. Under new Chairman Ben W. Heineman, North Western dieselized its Chicago suburban passenger trains in 1956 without buying a single new diesel. This was accomplished by shifting steam-generator-equipped road-switchers — EMD GP7s and SD7s, plus Alco and FM units — bought for secondary trains, to suburban service.

C&NW also reached agreements leading to a restructuring and upgrading of its suburban and few remaining intercity services. The road already had a few bilevel gallery-style suburban coaches, but planned on a wholesale commuter-fleet replacement. The ICC in 1958 approved the road’s plan to pay for the improvements by closing 23 in-city suburban stations, overhauling the fare



In December '83, internal damage in business cars on freight PREMA (above, near Mapleton, Wis.) resulted in a deadheading procedure change.

structure, and raising rates. In return for closing a lot of rural stations, many in Wisconsin, C&NW bought bilevels for two intercity trains from Chicago through Milwaukee and Green Bay, the *Flambeau 400* to Ashland, Wis., and the *Peninsula 400* to Ishpeming, Mich.

To haul the new cars, which were electrically heated, cooled, and lit, C&NW rebuilt 20 F7s and 11 E8s, fitting them with small Cummins engines to generate electricity. (The early bilevel cars would be converted from steam heat.) After the Wisconsin trains' discontinuance in 1971, the F7s and E8s would continue to haul bilevels on C&NW's three suburban lines.

Meantime, C&NW's 1968 absorption of Chicago Great Western added about 65 F3s and F7s to its fleet, and in 1971–72, to meet growing freight traffic demands, North Western purchased 38 F units with varying pedigrees from Illinois dealer Precision National. These included models F3, F7, and FP7 from the fleets of Bessemer & Lake Erie, Florida East Coast, and Katy.

### Executive Fleet origins

With no intercity passenger trains after Amtrak's May 1, 1971 startup, C&NW during 1971–72 rebuilt its 20

passenger F7s at the old CGW shop in Oelwein, Iowa. (As part of the same program, 36 E units were rebuilt, and C&NW simplified both number series from four digits to three, the F7s going from 4000s to 400s and the E units from 5000s to 500s.)

An interesting 1970s practice, though not unique to C&NW, was the use of suburban-service F7s on weekend freights from Proviso Yard outside Chicago to regional terminals such as Clinton, Iowa; Belvidere, Ill.; and Janesville and Milwaukee, Wis., when other power was unavailable. The gamble was that they'd get back in time to work the Monday morning commuter trains, and they almost always did so.

The next change for the F-unit fleet came after the Regional Transportation Authority's 1976 Purchase of Service agreement with C&NW, which led to RTA getting 46 of its units, including all the Es and half the F7s. This left North Western with 10 F7s: 414–415, 417–419, and 421–425.

When the Executive Fleet was officially established in 1979, it consisted of three F7As: 415 (originally 4084C), 419 (4087A), and 421 (4075A). Soon, a fourth — 422 (4076A) — was added. They most likely were chosen on the basis of their

appearance, reliability, and anticipated cost to prepare. They retained their suburban-service paint scheme and lettering, but in 1980 they were renumbered to 400–403 in a nod to C&NW's passenger-train history, and the "Streamliner" nose logo, silver trucks, striping, and other details were applied to create a much better look for "Executive" passenger locomotives.

Another F7A, the former 425 (originally 4100A), joined the fleet in 1984 as second No. 400 to replace the first No. 400 (formerly 415), which had structural damage. Then, as C&NW's business-car fleet expanded, in 1985 two F7Bs were added: 317 and 316 (ex-CGW 1950 F7Bs 113D and 114B), becoming 410 and 411. A third ex-CGW unit, F3B 304 (built in '49 as 102D), also joined the fleet in '85, being converted to power generator car No. 490 *Oak Creek* for use when the F units had to be separated from the train.

### Tales of the road

A regular use of the F7s was on C&NW's twice-yearly inspection trips, in spring and fall, over the main lines by the president, vice president-operations, and vice president-transportation. Each had his own business car — 400 for the president, 401 for the VPO, and 402 for





**A fall 1988 “recognition special” for C&NW employees and their families to Union, Ill., poses next to Illinois Railway Museum’s C&NW 1518, the first GP7, built as EMD demonstrator 100.**



**Four F7s, plus power car 490 riding along, sail through West Chicago, Ill., on March 12, 1987, with a Chicago–Fremont, Nebr., test run for C&NW’s newly expanded passenger-car fleet.**

the VP-transportation — and designated inspection circuit. The three officers changed circuits from year to year but always covered the same territory in fall as each had in spring. The chief engineer or an assistant from Chicago headquarters was always on board, as were the respective Division Managers and their Assistant Division Managers–Engineering. Most of my such trips and experiences were as Wisconsin Division Manager (1977–1985) and later, Northern Division Manager.

These trips were great opportunities for the top officers to see the property and people, and for us division officers to show what we were doing, discuss problems and ideas, and the like. The trips’

main purpose was to determine engineering priorities and check progress, but each trip had its own tone and secondary focus, depending on who was in charge and sometimes, how the trip progressed. It was on one such trip in 1981 that VP-Operations Jim Zito and I pitched the idea for a steam program to Jim Wolfe, C&NW’s president.

After Wolfe gained that office upon the death of Larry Provo, a big change in the inspection trains’ operation took place. Provo’s focus had been on what today we’d call “velocity.” He wanted to be sure we weren’t unnecessarily conservative on track speed, this being prior to FRA-imposed track standards and speeds. On one trip in the 1970s on the



Lake Shore Division in Wisconsin, we were in a long 30-mph slow order when an impatient Provo asked that if the track was good for 30, why not for 10 percent over that?

This led to a limit of 33 mph and other “odd” speed restrictions for a time, with no adverse consequences that I recall. I can only imagine, though, the reaction of engineers upon reading their first such order. It also led to inspection trains getting an order authorizing higher than timetable or train-order speeds as specified by the officer in charge.

Provo also didn’t want to be delayed by other trains. Wolfe, however, did not want — repeat, did not want — a freight train delayed for his or any other inspection train. Like many presidential decrees, this one sometimes led to overre-





**“Not just another meeting,” the May 1989 Wisconsin “outreach” special, including the ex-Milwaukee dome lounge, skirts Devil’s Lake, Wis.**

action and situations where normal good dispatching might have handled things differently, but in general the policy was correct and well-received.

Another one of those business-car discussions may have led to one of the more visible and controversial changes to the Executive Fleet. This occurred on the president’s fall 1981 inspection trip over the Wisconsin Division. We were running from Green Bay to Milwaukee on the Shoreline Subdivision, meeting a northbound freight along the way. By this time the North Western had begun repainting its “waycars” (caboose) from its traditional “English Stagecoach Yellow” to “Sunburst Yellow,” better known later as “Zito Yellow” for Senior VPO Jim Zito. The freight had a repainted waycar

on the rear, and Wolfe asked me how I liked the color. Without much time to think and feeling all eyes upon me, I replied to the effect that it sure was visible, but wasn’t it more important to see the locomotive than the caboose? I hope and like to think there was no cause and effect, but the first of the Executive F units was repainted in the brighter hue in time for the following year’s trips.

Winter weather in C&NW territory, with its operating challenges, dictated that business-car trips be kept to a minimum. One such trip was necessary in December 1983, however, and led to another procedural change. As was often done, the business equipment deadheaded from Chicago to the special’s point of origin on a freight train. Two F7s were

ahead of the usual SD power on Proviso–East Minneapolis train PREMA [page 87], with three business cars on the rear. In northern Wisconsin and then Minnesota the weather deteriorated to the point where train-handling and slack action became a problem, with damage resulting inside the business cars. Subsequent deadhead moves out of Chicago were run as special trains.

Business-car trips almost always had one or more mechanics on board to trouble-shoot any problems en route, so if there were any such, the officers on the train probably weren’t aware of them. At least I don’t remember any. I do remember, however, comments from engineers and traveling engineers about the condition of the F7s’ cabs and engine rooms.





**The 1988 edition of the annual Great Circus Train loads at Baraboo's Circus World Museum for the trip to Milwaukee and the Great Circus Parade.**

One of the men wrote what I thought was an excellent letter saying he wished the inside of the units “reflected the same pride and care that the outside did.” I agreed, thanked him, passed his note along, and made it a point to climb up there and check things out myself on subsequent trips.

Speaking of failures en route, one in 1982 was “pre-arranged.” The spring inspection trip for VP-Transportation Ed Burkhardt, behind a pair of F7s over the Wisconsin and Ore divisions, coincided with the break-in trip of Mid-Continent Railway Museum’s ex-C&NW class R-1 Ten-Wheeler No. 1385, following work by volunteer railroad employees in the Green Bay shop in preparation for the 4-6-0’s first public outing on the C&NW.

The break-in run was to be on the daily wayfreight between Green Bay and Oconto, 30 or so miles north, meeting the inspection train from the Ore Division at Oconto. Ore Division Manager Pete McIntyre and I had decided to have a little fun with Ed. The plan was to have the engineer on the F units radio the business car that they were having problems with the power and weren’t sure they could handle the train the rest of the way into Green Bay. The wayfreight with 1385 was to have arrived at Oconto, turned on the wye, and then radio back

that if those newfangled diesels couldn’t do the job, relief power was available. It all went as planned [page 86], with the F7s set out in the Oconto yard to haul the wayfreight back to Green Bay, while our inspection train left behind the 1385 with Burkhardt at the throttle. (Burkhardt would leave C&NW and, with others, form regional Wisconsin Central Ltd. in 1987, and Pete McIntyre would leave the next year to lead the start-up regional Dakota, Minnesota & Eastern.)

### **More cars, longer trips**

As things improved on the North Western through the 1980s thanks to deregulation, Railroad Revitalization and Regulatory Reform Act financing, a vigorous housekeeping focus, western coal, employee ownership, and a host of other factors, more business cars were amassed to augment the original four. Included in the acquisitions were five sleepers and one each diner, coach, presentation car, full-length dome lounge car, and inspection car with tiered “theater” seating.

These cars were refurbished to host shippers, investors, and others and show them the property. Notwithstanding the financial and physical improvements, there continued to be intense efforts to control costs with special focus on train-crew size, and this, in the eyes of many,

did not square with the investment in a passenger-car fleet. I spent a couple of years away from the Operating Department as VP-Investor Relations and VP-Corporate Communications and used the train — always powered by the F7s — on investor trips to the Coal Line in Nebraska and Wyoming. Separately, I argued that using the train for employee recognition trips could blunt some of the questions and resentment.

When I returned to the Operating Department as Assistant VP-Transportation and General Manager in 1988, I had my chance, and arranged a trip from Chicago to the Illinois Railway Museum at Union, on our line to Belvidere and Rockford, for participants in C&NW’s quality program and their families. At IRM, our F7s were posed [page 88] with the museum’s ex-C&NW GP7 No. 1518, built in 1949 as the very first GP7 and recently donated to IRM. This was the first such trip for employees and their families and led to more in subsequent years.

The Coal Line trips were the longest, leaving Chicago in late morning or early afternoon and arriving in Bill, Wyo., C&NW’s division point on the Powder River Basin line, in time for breakfast and a tour of mines and the railroad the next day. The overnight return to Chicago arrived around midday. The “presen-



With two F7s “helping” Nickel Plate 2-8-4 765, a summer 1984 excursion from Chicago begins its turnaround on the wye at St. Francis, Wis.

tation car” was included in the consist and used en route to present financial and other facts and figures to the guests. Shipper trips were another staple, often to points like Nelson, Ill., the junction with our St. Louis line 104 miles west of Chicago and a point where the train could be turned on a wye, with dinner and presentations en route.

Like many railroads at the time, North Western was saddled with too many light-density branch lines. This resulted in a vigorous abandonment program, mostly in the 1970s and perhaps most active in Wisconsin and Iowa, resulting in strained relations in those states. To address this in Wisconsin and determine what might be done to generate more traffic there, a committee of C&NW Government Affairs, Marketing, and Operating department people was created in 1989, headed by AVP-Government Affairs Mike Payette.

Since I had spent 13 of my 22 years on C&NW in the Badger State as trainmaster, assistant division manager, and division manager, I was the Operations representative. As part of the effort, we ran a special F7-powered train [page 89] in May 1989 over our line through Madison for shippers, state DOT employees, and others. While it would be unrealistic to suggest this and similar trips else-

where changed things overnight, they did improve communications and understanding and gave us access to important people who might not have shown up for “just another meeting.”

Other uses of the F7s in the 1980s included Operation Lifesaver specials; piloting Amtrak and other freight roads’ trains on detours where Automatic Train Control was necessary; leading (or helping 4-6-0 1385) on the annual Baraboo-Milwaukee Great Circus Trains, as well as public trips around the system as part of the steam “goodwill” program; and teaming with the Fort Wayne group’s ex-Nickel Plate 2-8-4 No. 765 on a series of excursions out of Chicago in 1984. There were others from time to time, as well.

<b>C&amp;NW’S ELITE EIGHT</b>		
<b>Original No.</b>	<b>1979 Exec. No.</b>	<b>1980 Exec. No.</b>
<b>F7As</b>		
4084C	415	400 (1st)
4087A	419	401
4075A	421	402
4076A	422	403
4100A	425	400 (2nd)
<b>B units (added 1985)</b>		
CGW F7B 113D	C&NW 317	410
CGW F7B 114B	C&NW 316	411
CGW F3B 102D	C&NW 304	490

By 1989, the F7s were requiring more and more care. Union Pacific, over which we traveled between Omaha and the coal line in western Nebraska on the Powder River investor trips, was objecting to the units’ lack of dynamic braking, and the decision was made to discontinue their use. Their final run for C&NW was on Senior VP-Operations R.A. Jahnke’s fall inspection trip in October ’89. Although C&NW’s Executive F unit era was over, the diesels are remembered as historic, colorful, and attractive locomotives with “something for every interest” that made friends and helped boost the railroad’s image.

Five of the six are still around, too. Nos. 402 and 403 are on the Canon City & Royal Gorge Railroad in Colorado, albeit in Rio Grande colors; 401 is stored in Cheyenne on Union Pacific; and the two B units, our 410 and 411, now are Norfolk Southern 4275 and 4276, respectively, in the road’s A-B-B-A executive F-unit consist, rebuilt in 2007 at NS’s Juniata Shops in Altoona, Pa.

I was among many folks, railroaders and enthusiasts alike, who were lucky to have been around during the Fs’ time on the North Western. I’ll bet Hobo Rip Van Winkle would have been happy at the sight of them too, perhaps awakened by a glimmer of “Sunburst Yellow.” ■