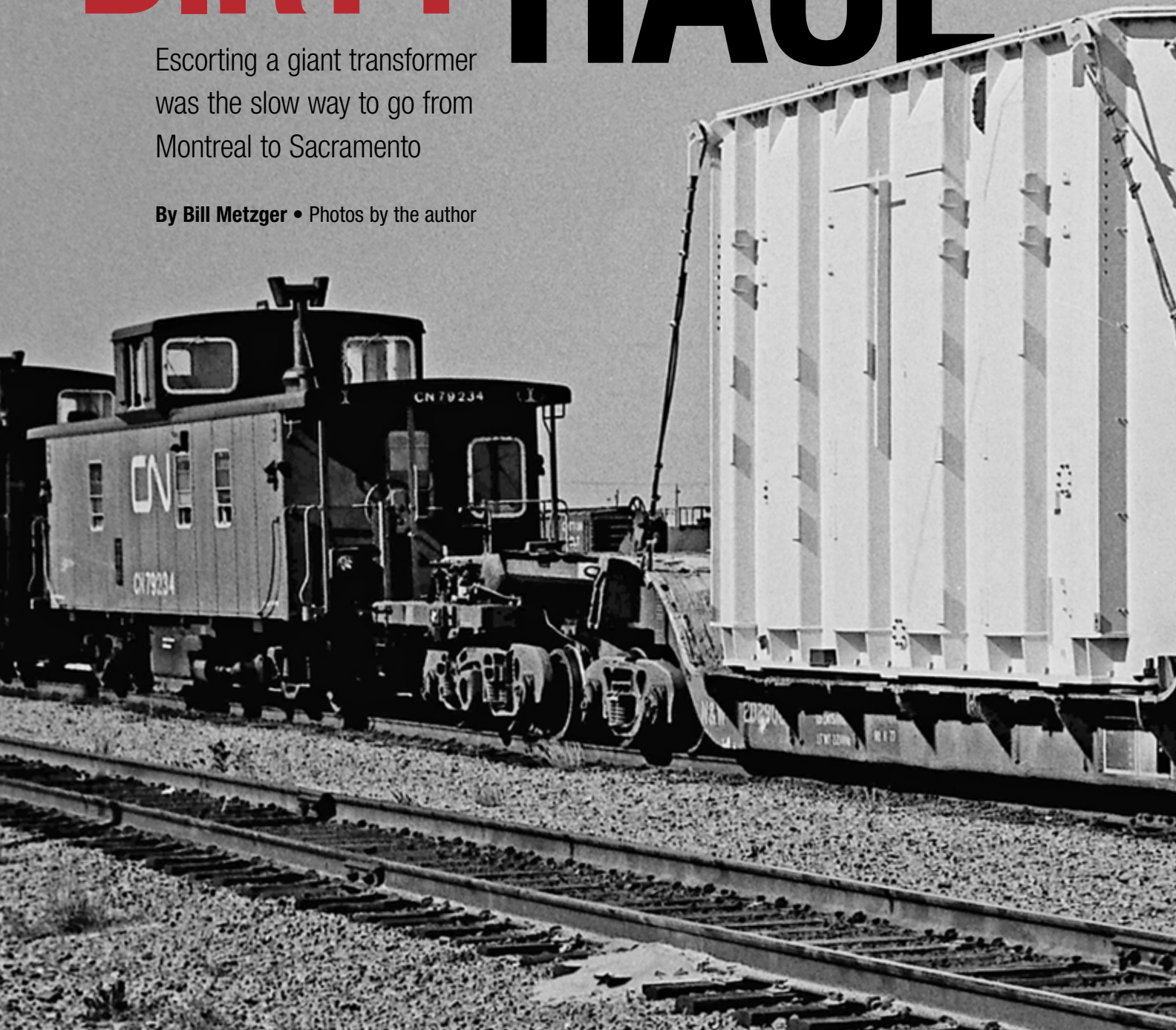


SPECIAL TRAINS

HIGH, WIDE, & A LONG, DIRTY HAUL

Escorting a giant transformer was the slow way to go from Montreal to Sacramento

By **Bill Metzger** • Photos by the author



Back in the 1970s, I worked as a “Freight Expeditor,” a term I seldom uttered. We were commonly called “riders,” and that was fine with me. The vocation dated to the days when men rode along with shipments of bananas or livestock, an era still remembered in the 1970s by older railroaders. We escorted all sorts of large, heavy, delicate, and/or expensive loads to keep them intact and moving. In June 1978 I had been on the job for almost three years. This cross-country international odyssey was my 39th trip.

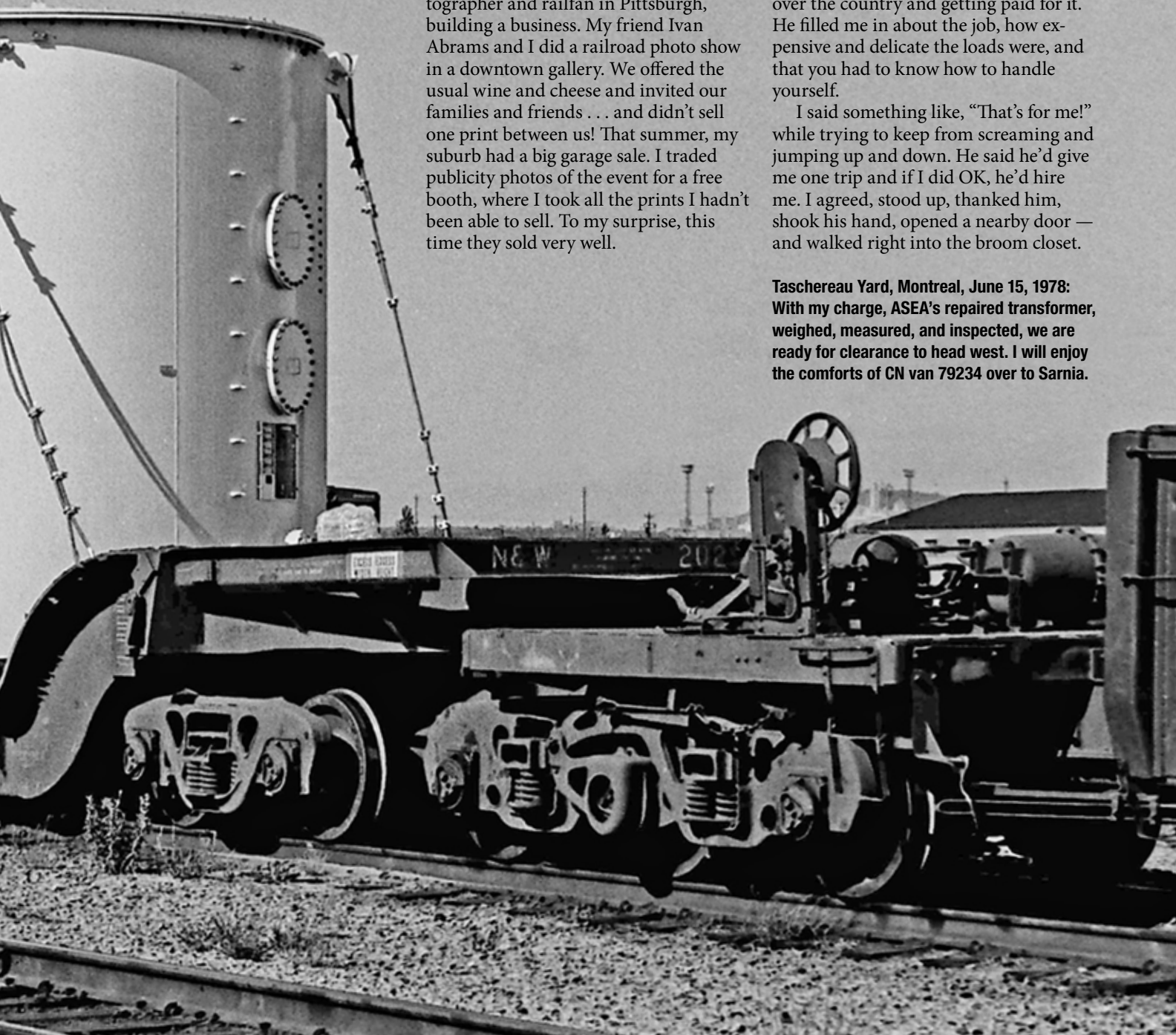
Before we board this special, allow me to fill you in on how I got these gigs. In 1975 I was a 29-year-old freelance photographer and railfan in Pittsburgh, building a business. My friend Ivan Abrams and I did a railroad photo show in a downtown gallery. We offered the usual wine and cheese and invited our families and friends . . . and didn't sell one print between us! That summer, my suburb had a big garage sale. I traded publicity photos of the event for a free booth, where I took all the prints I hadn't been able to sell. To my surprise, this time they sold very well.

A man stopped by and began looking at the prints. “Looks like you've been around,” he said. I told him I was a railfan and really enjoyed it. He introduced himself and said he managed a company that sent guys all over the country accompanying high and wide loads on the railroad.

“That sounds like fun,” I said, “are you hiring?” Yes, he was, and he gave me his card. That's how I met Don Ramsey, who would be my boss for the next five years. That was a Saturday; Monday I called him and set up an appointment for Wednesday for an interview in his downtown office. Meantime I went insane at the thought of riding trains all over the country and getting paid for it. He filled me in about the job, how expensive and delicate the loads were, and that you had to know how to handle yourself.

I said something like, “That's for me!” while trying to keep from screaming and jumping up and down. He said he'd give me one trip and if I did OK, he'd hire me. I agreed, stood up, thanked him, shook his hand, opened a nearby door — and walked right into the broom closet.

Taschereau Yard, Montreal, June 15, 1978:
With my charge, ASEA's repaired transformer, weighed, measured, and inspected, we are ready for clearance to head west. I will enjoy the comforts of CN van 79234 over to Sarnia.





The GE 45-tonner at ASEA's Varennes plant hostiles empty N&W drop-center flatcar 202908, which CN has spotted for loading. Before the transformer can be put aboard, though, major deck-cleaning is necessary. After it's loaded, the GE will flap its siderods to come retrieve it.



We've cleared Taschereau Yard and are out on the CN main, halted beside the Canadian Pacific main line at 55th Avenue in Lachine, just in time to watch CP's afternoon Montreal "TownTrain" commuter parade. This inbound behind FP7 4070 is likely train 250 from Vaudreuil.

As I backed out, sheepish and red-faced, he laughed and said, "Don't worry, you still have the job." Two weeks later I was on an Erie Lackawanna SD45 on my way to Salt Lake City.

How we worked

Don's company was Charles Donley & Associates, a freight traffic consulting firm that today is long out of the expediting business. Don was a great guy who died way too young at age 52. I worked for him during 1975–1981. In all, I did 95 trips handling loads ranging from transformers to generators to boilers to

cranes. I even went to find a car that the brand-new Conrail had lost.

The freight-expediting side of the Donley firm prospered because the nation's railroad system, especially in the Northeast, was in bad shape. We rode on the train with the load, in either the locomotive or caboose, and were there to ensure that nothing untoward happened. Employee morale was practically nonexistent, so our job was to convince the railroad men that moving our load was in their best interest and, no, we weren't company spies.

We worked on an on-call basis. Most

Donley riders were retired railroaders and worked only a few trips a year. I was the first non-rail employee Don hired, and I worked pretty much full time. We were paid by the day, door-to-door, with overtime on weekends if you'd worked the previous Monday. We also got paid extra per day for every car exceeding three in our shipment.

We started every trip with \$600 in expense money. In 1978, that was a fair amount of cash and could last a week and a half. Of course, you could get a nice motel room for \$18 a night or fly from Pittsburgh to Chicago for \$50. A national network of ATMs was years in the future.

Payday was when you got home and sent in your trip report with your expense account. I hand-delivered mine so Don and I could shoot the breeze and I could get my paycheck, plus my expense check for the next trip, right away. The expense check brought my account back up to \$600.

When your cash got low on the road, Don would send a money order. Problem was, when I started, money orders had to be sent to a specific place, a pain when you were constantly moving. You'd get into town after the drugstore that had the Western Union franchise closed and leave before it opened the next morning.

Western Union then introduced the Commercial Money Order, a godsend for us as you could receive one no matter where you were. This was before credit cards were widespread, negating a need for them. Don encouraged us to carry traveler's checks, a pain in the butt, though I never had to make a claim.

We weren't subject to hours-of-service laws. The understanding was that once you accepted a trip, you stayed with the load until delivery. If it kept moving, so did you. I worked through many crew districts nonstop and learned to eat and sleep whenever and wherever I could. I carried food but generally had no problem radioing ahead to a crew-change point to have them bring me dinner.

I ate many a lukewarm hamburger. When I was able to eat in a restaurant during a job, I ordered anything unusual, *i.e.*, other than the three kinds of steak (one chicken-fried), two kinds of chicken, and spaghetti that you'd usually find, especially out West.

My responsibility to Don was to call him once a day and report where I was so he could tell the customer what progress his shipment was making, but on many days I couldn't do that because I

was never near a phone. Widespread use of cellphones was also in the future.

Signing up for the long run

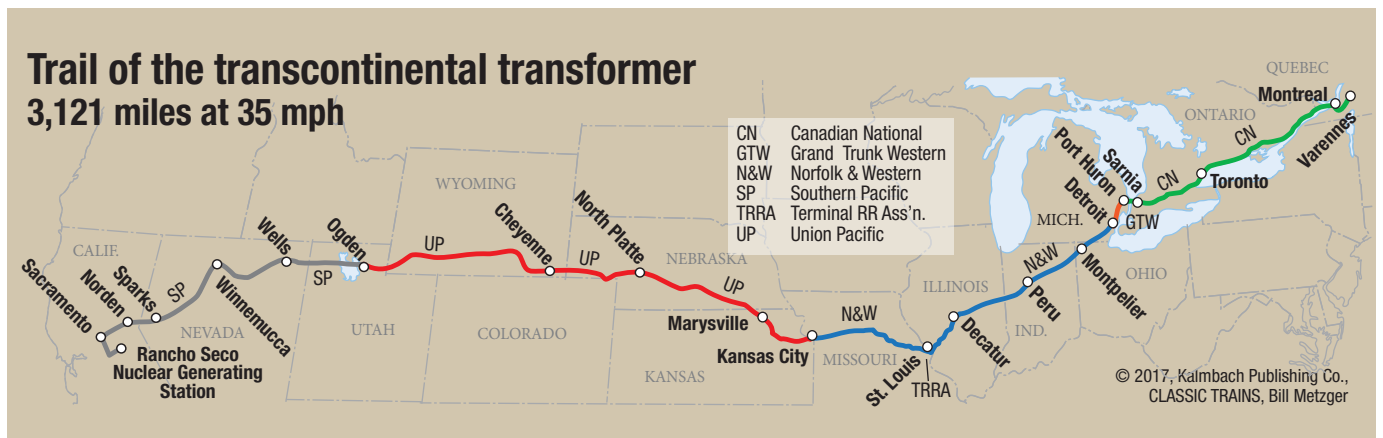
When I think back on that trip from Montreal to Sacramento, the first word that comes to mind is “dirty.” The assignment was to escort a transformer that had been repaired after an accident. The trip lasted 12 days, and I don’t think I’ve ever been that dirty for that long in my life. The railroads handled it in special trains all the way, which for me was unusual. I worked only two other jobs like that in my five years with Donley. One was a coke-quenching car that was specially built, but the trip was just a complex switching move around Pittsburgh. The third load was a giant stainless-steel casting for the Clinch River Breeder Reactor down South that never got built.

As usual, the Montreal–Sacramento odyssey began when Don Ramsey called me and described the job. The load was the main power transformer for the Rancho Seco Nuclear Generating Station near Herald, Calif., south of Sacramento. The customer was the Sacramento Municipal Utility District, a.k.a. “SMUD.” Don said a sheet of corrugated steel had blown across two of the transformer’s bushings, causing a dead short circuit and instantly shutting down the plant. ASEA, the Swedish manufacturing firm, built the transformer, but its only facility in North America capable of the rebuild was in Varennes, Que., east of Montreal.

Another rider had taken the bad-order transformer east to Varennes; I got the return job. Special-train trips, especially of that length, don’t come cheap, but until we brought its transformer back home, the power station was pumping out zero kilowatts and earning zero revenue. The Sacramento utility gladly ponied up for the special train and the cost



Toronto offered more passenger-train-watching Friday morning. West of Union Station, a four-car eastbound GO Transit train is pushed by GP40TC 505 (top), and farther west on CN’s Oakville Sub (above), a long VIA Rail train with Tempo cars, likely No. 81 for Windsor, passes us.





The CN dispatcher has held us west of the depot in Woodstock, Ont., for a westbound passenger train, so I have taken the opportunity to stretch my legs. One result: nice overhead views from a nearby pedestrian bridge of the VIA Rail train, likely No. 83 bound for Sarnia, leaving the station and passing our special, which has five gondola cars of aluminum ingots coupled between the transformer and CN GP38-2 5509.

car a mess, and a lot of steel had to be burned off its floor before we could reload it. The car was cleaned by midnight, but I had long since exited to a Holiday Inn for rest and a shower. It would be my last shower for three mid-June days.

Did I mention the speed limit on the load was 35 mph? The whole slow, dirty, weary way?

Wednesday, June 14

My contact at ASEA said the load wouldn't be ready until evening, so I went to downtown Montreal to talk to the folks at CN and get my paperwork straightened out. I then fooled around CN's Central and Canadian Pacific's Windsor stations photographing commuter trains including some with CN's ancient electrics. Knowing I'd have a long ride, I also picked up groceries. I tried to buy stuff that would keep. I always had a couple of cans of Vienna sausages, a box of Un-eeda biscuits, and a small jar of peanut butter in my grip. Those sausages were tasty when you heated them on the side-wall heater of an EMD locomotive cab and ate them with a pocket knife. Of course, smooth track was a must.

The car was secured by 9 p.m. I called the railroad, and CN's train B795 picked us up — the load and me — at 10:45.

Thursday, June 15

We arrived in CN's Taschereau Yard in Montreal at 2 a.m., where the load was weighed. It came out to 709,000 lbs. The car's light weight was 210,000 lbs., so at a net weight of 499,000 we were right at the car's capacity. CN's car department gave the load a thorough inspection, including measurements, so we didn't get out until 5:15 p.m. on train 815. I think the day-trick dispatcher just didn't want to deal with a 35-mph mover mucking up his hot Montreal-Toronto main line. Meantime, five gondola loads of aluminum ingots were added to our train.

Special-train rules, at least at that time, said that a railroad could add a certain number of extra cars and still



for me to make sure it got there in one piece and on time.

Tuesday, June 13, 1978

I flew to Montreal from Pittsburgh on Allegheny Airlines and took a taxi to Varennes, getting there in time to watch a Canadian National local switch the emp-

ty drop-center flatcar, Norfolk & Western 202908, into the plant. It was 75 feet 4 inches long with a 500,000-lb. capacity and had an odd arrangement of two six-wheel and two four-wheel trucks. The in-plant switcher was a GE 45-tonner, which was equipped with a snowplow!

The previous customer had left the



The gondolas with aluminum ingots and the transformer are the only loads for CN's barge *St. Clair* as it is pushed by the tug *Phyllis Yorke* across the St. Clair River to Port Huron, Mich., "sneaking" me back into the U.S. CN kept the carferry service as a St. Clair Tunnel bypass.

charge the customer for a special train. The folks who were shipping those ingots got themselves a pretty fancy move on the cheap, or perhaps CN pulled a fast one and charged both of us for a special.

Ingots and all, we went only a couple of miles west before the dispatcher put us in a siding, which was excellent as far as I was concerned.

In June, the sun goes down late in Montreal, so I was treated to some fine train-watching. We were sent into the hole a couple of times before we got off the island, so I got to photograph, from the front platform of our GP38-2, both CN's and CP's evening passenger rushes, including a VIA TurboTrain from Toronto. We finally got moving after dark.

Friday, June 16

We stopped in Belleville, Ont., at 3:15 a.m. for a 20-minute crew change. I was really enjoying this part of the trip since I was in one of CN's wonderful vans (caboose). They literally had all the comforts of home, and I would've happily ridden one for the rest of the trip. I met the new crew and went back to sleep in one of those comfortable bunks, made even nicer because the slack wasn't running in and out on our short train.

Toronto was next — the biggest, most exciting, most cosmopolitan city with

some of the best railfanning in all of Canada. We were there all of 15 minutes for a crew change, but I got to see some nice passenger-train action when we were in the hole both coming in and leaving. We kept the locomotive, GP38-2 5509, we'd had since Montreal and now were train 831 with a Sarnia crew.

We got into Sarnia yard at 7 p.m., and another Geep took us to the boat yard about an hour later. There, because our load was too big for CN's St. Clair River tunnel, we were put on CN's carferry *St. Clair* (actually a barge, pushed by tug *Phyllis Yorke*) for the short trip to Port Huron, Mich. I got to ride up in the tug's pilothouse!

I may be an illegal immigrant, because when we got to Port Huron, no U.S. Customs agents greeted me and nobody bothered to tell them I'd come across. I sauntered down the dock at 9:45 p.m. and was back on American soil with a fair amount of Canadian soil stuck to my body. Railroaders, now of CN subsidiary Grand Trunk Western, told me I'd be there at least a couple of hours, so I got a crew caller to take me to a nearby Holiday Inn. By the time I showered — hooray! — and got into bed, it was probably 11 p.m. They called me about 1:30 — not much of a rest, but I was clean!

Saturday, June 17

We got out of Port Huron's Boat Yard at 3 a.m., but I'd showered and had bought some groceries. GTW added a TTX flat to our train as an idler and put 62 cars behind us at 32nd Street yard. We now were GTW train 453; I rode the lead unit.

Train 453 tied up at East Yard in Detroit at 10 a.m. Now with just an engine, the TTX flat, our load, and a transfer caboose, we left at 3:30 p.m. Our unit was GTW GP9 4448, coincidentally a close sister to the first locomotive I ever rode, GT 4449, in Island Pond, Vt., 15 or so years previously. Both were in a group of nine, built in 1956 as GTW 1768-1776 and transferred to sister CN subsidiary Central Vermont as 4442-4450 before winding up back in Michigan under the U.S. "GT" umbrella.

It took us an hour to get to West Detroit, a junction where we were picked up by N&W GP7 2411, a former Nickel Plate unit. Now we were a real special again, just the load and a transfer caboose, going a short distance to Oakwood Yard.

We finally cleared Detroit, leaving Oakwood at 10:30 p.m. Now we were Extra 638 West, our power an original N&W GP9 with dual controls. While the details of the interchange were being settled, there was enough time between



Grand Trunk Western GP9 4448 (above left), sister to the first engine I ever rode and unusual on GTW for its dynamic brakes (although it served on Central Vermont), has taken us from Port Huron to Detroit. At Peru, Ind. (above right), on June 18, our N&W crew change took 15 minutes.

transfer runs to get groceries, which I did because I knew I was going to be on one railroad all the way to St. Louis, however long that would take. I saw no point in starving to death on the way.

Sunday, June 18

N&W held us in Montpelier, Ohio, the first division point, for two hours after we arrived at 3:15 a.m., but we only stayed at the next one, Peru, Ind., for a 15-minute crew change. We now had two empty PFE mechanical reefers along to help with braking. I don't remember much about this part of the trip, the ride on the former Wabash across Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, but there's not all that much to remember anyway. Now and then the dispatcher would put us in the hole for a meet — we never held the main — and then we'd "roll along past houses, farms and fields," just like Steve Goodman said in his "City of New Orleans" song about the Illinois Central.

Decatur, Ill., a big city and a hub for N&W as it had been for predecessor Wabash, with a big yard and locomotive shops, did not bog us down — 15 minutes was all we spent, for a crew change. I was increasingly glad I had a good supply of rations, because the smell of grain roasting in the air made me hungry. We left Decatur at 7:45 p.m. on the mostly straight main toward St. Louis, and everything was just ducky until we tripped a hotbox detector at Granite City which said two of our bearings were running warm. It took two hours to grease the bearings right there — N&W wasn't messing around with this. The delay gave the dispatcher time to run some trains

around us. We bid farewell to Granite City and the adjacent steel mill at 11:30.

Monday, June 19

At 1:10 in the morning, we tied up in the Terminal Railroad Association of St. Louis' Madison (Ill.) Yard. They told me I was going to be here for a while so they could look at the bearings. "Hot damn," I thought, and hustled to a hotel as soon as I was sure the car was tied down on the "RIP" (repair-in-place) track. I wound up over in St. Louis, in a big Holiday Inn near the base of the Gateway Arch, and my room overlooked the Mississippi River! I spent 6 hours in luxury.

Bearings inspected and lubed, we left Madison Yard at 9 a.m., still with N&W GP9 638, as TRRA's Job 102, headed for nearby Merchants Bridge and N&W's Luther Yard in northern St. Louis. Then, trouble! My notes read, "12:05 p.m. car bottom hung up on grade crossing. One engine unable to free it. 2:30 p.m. Train freed by two additional engines. Inspected track on 'Levee Line,' found it unsuitable for big load, 6-inch drop in some places. TRRA engines 1509 and 1511 [SW1500s] assisted out of jam."

Thus did I wind up getting a nice tour of the TRRA, next backing back across Merchants Bridge into Illinois, then going south into East St. Louis and across TRRA's MacArthur Bridge. We curved south down to river level, reversed, and ran north on TRRA's Merchants Sub, going past the bases of the Gateway Arch.

We finally arrived at Luther Yard, a former Wabash facility, at 7:10 p.m. and left at 9:15 as train 21MSM, again a special and still with GP9 638. After a

20-minute crew change at Moberly, Mo., at 5 a.m. we now were train 1MMK.

Tuesday, June 20

Kansas City was relatively easy to negotiate compared with St. Louis. UP handled the interchange in about 2 hours, but not without incident. The UP dispatcher said the load was 12 feet 8 inches wide and that Southern Pacific wouldn't take it. I informed them of the error of their ways, since the transformer was barely wider than the car at the bottom. The problem was temporarily solved on the basis of an impassioned "trust me" speech on my part.

I restocked provisions at a nearby store, thanks to a van driver, and we were off on UP's old Kansas Pacific at 3:45 p.m. as train 2KCF, with SD40-2 3368 as power and two yellow UP boxcars for braking help, replacing the two PFE reefers. Our diesel was one of 682 SD40-2s on the UP roster at the time; we'd have it all the way to Sacramento.

Wednesday, June 21

We swerved northwest off the old KP at Topeka, our first stop being a 15-minute crew change at Marysville, Kans. I slept a fair bit but was awake when we rolled into North Platte, Nebr., at 7:45 a.m. Central Time. The car inspectors again measured the load, and it came out 11 feet 8 inches on its widest side, which would clear SP's tunnels. We left North Platte at 8:30 a.m. Mountain Time.

Another 15-minute crew change got us through Cheyenne, Wyo., and out at 5:50 p.m. While we were there, I climbed up on the transformer and checked the



internal pressure, something I'd done every day. It had to have positive pressure, because any air entering the vessel contained unwanted humidity that could mess things up. Nobody was taking any chances; I had orders to immediately report if the pressure was negative.

It was a beautiful day to go over Sherman Hill, and I enjoyed it thoroughly from the tall cupola of UP caboose 25621. The dispatcher sent us over the Harriman Cutoff and avoided having our slow train gum up his railroad, at least for a while. The impressive 6900-series Centennial units were the preferred power for UP's hot freights, and I got to see and photograph quite a few of them.

Thursday, June 22

We stopped for 10 minutes to change crews in Rawlins, Wyo., and departed at 1 a.m. I slept well overnight on the Overland Route, but when I awoke, my body



After an aborted try to reach N&W's Luther Yard in St. Louis via Merchants Bridge, we went to MacArthur bridge, exiting (top) to an MP yard and reversing north on the Missouri side. As we went under the approach we'd just come down, the daily Manufacturers Railway transfer to Alton & Southern's yard in Illinois, with S4M 253 and two MP15DCs (above), headed up to the bridge. The 253 was Alco S2 208 re-engined in 1976 by Morrison-Knudsen with an EMD 567C.



On Union Pacific, most of the hot freights that passed us in either direction were led by twin-engined DDA40X Centennial units, as here near Laramie, Wyo. Crews hated working our 35-mph train, as with each passing westbound, another crew in their pool was running around them.



Not as luxurious as the CN van, UP caboose 25621, my home from Kansas City to Ogden, Utah — being passed here by 6933 East — still beat the GTW transfer caboose in Michigan and N&W's from Detroit to Kansas City.

left a shadow in the dust on the bunk cushion. Yeah, I was dirty. I must have slept right through the crew change at Evanston, Wyo., since there's nothing in my notes about it.

We rolled down the canyons and into Ogden, Utah, at 2 p.m., still on Mountain Time. Of course there was the usual interchange diddling between UP and SP, but I got to take care of the never-ending food situation in the ensuing five hours. We were moving out of Ogden at 7 p.m., still as OGRVY22 with the same unit and idler cars, but an SP bay-window caboose. I was still dirty, and

clothes were becoming a problem.

I usually packed for a week, figuring I'd have a chance to do laundry at some point, and that usually worked out fine, but I was now two days over the limit on clothes. It had been three days since my last shower, and I was getting to where I couldn't stand to be next to myself. My hair hurt — I was that dirty.

Across the Great Salt Lake causeway and the salt flats, and down the Humboldt River valley, we mercifully wheeled along across Nevada without incident.

Friday, June 23

Another night sleeping in the caboose and one of sweat and desert dust. Sometime during the night, we were in a siding and I woke up. I told the conductor I was going to take a look at the load. He looked at me and said, "You might not want to do that. There's a rattlesnake laying down below the front steps." I decided the load was just fine.

At 9:30 in the morning, we halted in Sparks, Nev., where they held us for the westbound *California Zephyr*. I'd had it. I was feeling pretty beat up and really needed to get cleaner than I was. I made it clear to the local SP authorities that the train wasn't going anywhere until I got some food and clean clothes. They took one look at me and agreed, giving me a driver and a van. The first clothing store we came to sold western stuff, and I bought jeans, a shirt, and new underwear.

This was followed by a stop at a grocery store, which gave me the strength to tackle Donner Pass without having to resort to cannibalism. We departed Sparks at 11 a.m. I even bought a newspaper.

Things went fine on the climb up Donner's east slope. We stopped at a couple of tunnels to make sure the measurements were correct and we wouldn't collapse the tunnel and bring the Sierras crashing down upon us. I marveled at the scenery I'd only read about.

We went into the siding at Norden under the gloom of the snowsheds. The dispatcher's office, with a CTC machine, was in the shed. The dispatcher/operator said he couldn't let us go for a couple of hours. I told him this was the hottest thing on his railroad, and about the power plant being shut down, and I really needed a quick move. This didn't impress him, so I called Don. I'd already talked to him that morning; he'd given me the information on how to get in touch with the plant when we got close.

I told Don the dispatcher wouldn't move me for several hours. He said OK. About 20 minutes later the dispatcher got a phone call, his side of which went something like, "Uh huh, uh huh, yeah, yes sir, OK." When he hung up, he looked at me and said, "OK, you got your move." Then, "Who the hell are you, anyway?" I just smiled and said thanks.

So we got the move, but it wasn't all that quick. We weren't down the moun-



On SP's Donner Pass crossing, we are making sure our load still fits through a tunnel (right) it traversed going east. At Norden, we are out of the snowshed holding for Amtrak's eastbound *California Zephyr* to pass (above).

tain and into Roseville until 7:15 p.m., but SP was ready. We changed engines, to SP SD7 1414, a model I always admired, and were moving in 10 minutes.

We pulled into the power plant at 10 p.m. and spotted the load at 10:30, all under the gaze of large guys in combat uniforms carrying large guns. Somebody from SMUD accepted the load and hustled me off to a nearby motel. I walked into the lobby, and an elderly Asian woman opened the sliding glass window and said, "What you want?"

"I'd like a room, please," I replied.

"You look like bum. Bums don't pay."

"I'm not a bum. I work on the railroad and I had a long trip."

"You still look like bum," she said, making no sign of wanting to let me register in her fine Travelodge. Then I remembered I had a new credit card, and flashed it. She took it, saying, "OK, but you still look like bum." For the first time in a week, I re-entered the world of showers, clean sheets, and washing machines that I'd almost forgotten about.

Saturday, June 24

Next morning I called Chuck Weinstock, a friend now of several decades who at the time was living in San Jose, Calif., and he drove up and got me. We spent the afternoon having a leisurely



lunch in a real restaurant and visiting the Western Railroad Museum at Rio Vista. That's what you do when you've spent the last nine solid days riding a train — you go look at trains.

After I was back home, I figured my mileage to be 3,121 (that was for my logbook — we got paid by the day).

Epilogue

Our load-escort territory was North America, and even beyond this Montreal-Sacramento trip I got to see a big piece of it from the exalted perches of locomotive cabs and caboose cupolas. I've been in all 48 contiguous states. But after five years and well over 100,000 miles of

"rider work," it was time to call it quits and rejoin society. Once in a while, Don would call me with a job he thought I'd like, and once in a while I'd take it, especially if it was going south in the winter.

Then Don passed away, and that was it for my life as a freight expeditor. But those years I was on the road were the high adventure of my life. It was a post-graduate course in experiencing America, and I got paid to do it. ■

BILL METZGER, a contributing illustrator for us, and his wife Pam winter in Florida but call Confluence, Pa., home. This is his first CT feature after four previous bylines; he also created the map on page 79.