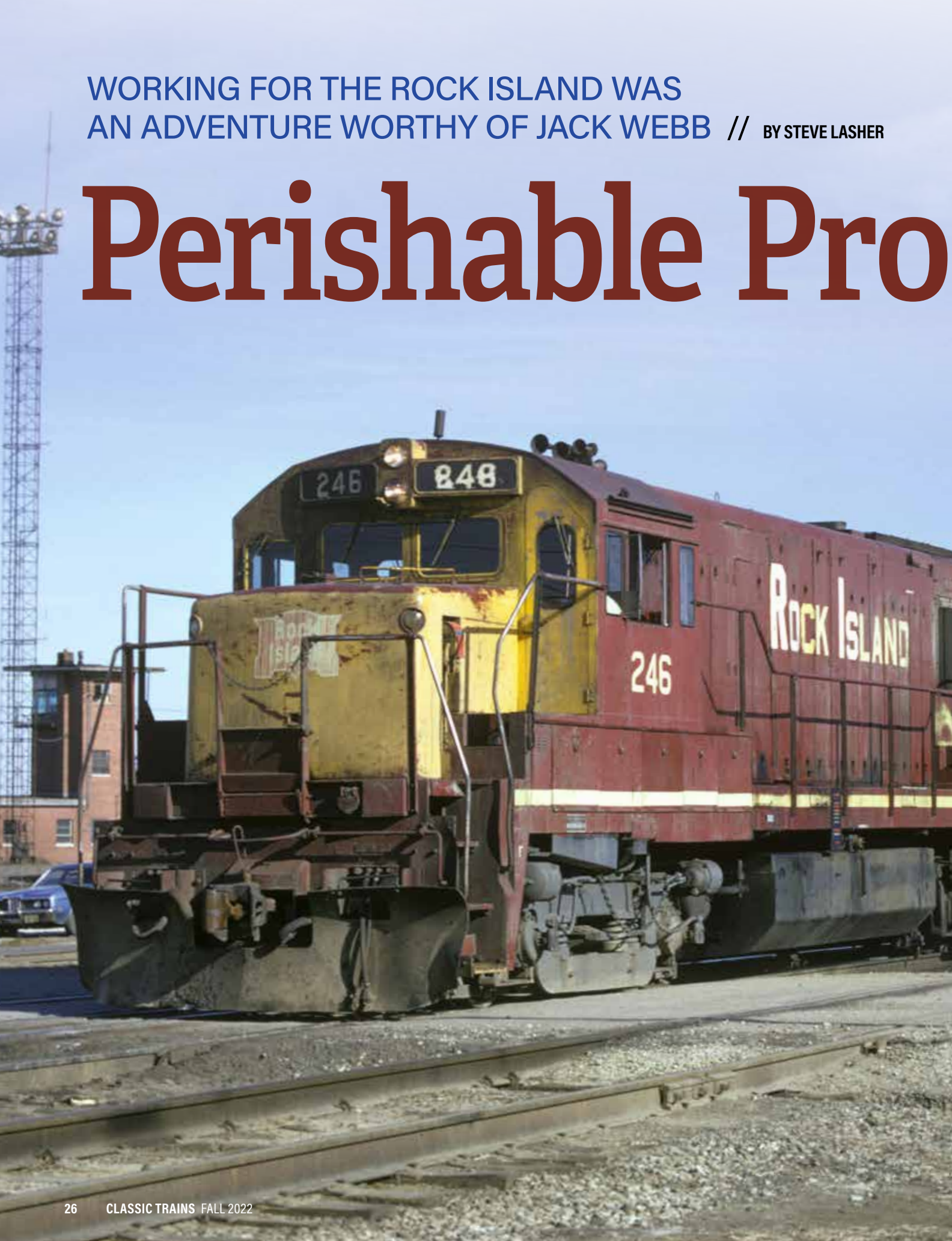
WORKING FOR THE ROCK ISLAND WAS AN ADVENTURE WORTHY OF JACK WEBB // BY STEVE LASHER

Perishable Pro



tective Service

One thing you learn quickly as a new railroad employee is that if you can hold a regular job, it's because nobody else wants it. In 1973 Rock Island stopped icing cars at Silvis. This coincided with Pacific Fruit Express's exit from the iced reefer business and represented the beginning of the end for shipping perishables by rail.

Several years before the Rock had removed every other track in the receiving yard and, since this left room for a road between each track for the carmen to drive down and bleed off the brakes on an inbound train quickly, it markedly sped up yard operations.

Rock Island U28B 246 leads a freight with a block of perishable traffic at the head end through Silvis, Ill., in April 1974. The three reefers ahead of the bulkhead flat appear to be ice-cooled 40-footers. Note the Union Pacific GP7B third in the consist.

Benard Almquist, David P. Oroszi collection

Thus began my sojourn in the world

About that time, they removed an additional track between what had been No. 1 track and No. 3 and paved a broad road between No. 1 receiving and what then became No. 2 receiving. This gave mobile icing equipment easy access to inbound reefers needing service but, with the cessation of iced reefer tariffs (and hence, the end of the business), radical change came to the way perishable business was handled. I shouldn't imply it had disappeared entirely; it's just that it now moved in mechanically refrigerated cars and, to a lesser extent, refrigerated trailers.

This reformation led to the abolition of some jobs and the bulletining of several new "Perishable Protective Service Inspector" (PPSI) jobs for clerks. Since nobody wanted one of the afternoon jobs — 3 to 11 p.m. — I became the successful bidder. Thus began my sojourn in the world of "piffees, spiffees, and youpiffees" (referring, of course, to PFE, SPFE, and UPFE reporting marks, the latter two referring to Southern Pacific and Union Pacific). The other outside inspector's job was bid-in by Ned Loetz. He had enough seniority to easily hold other jobs but the hours and days off suited his needs at the time. The inside inspector's position was taken by Gary Sager, who had also had considerable seniority but took the inside inspector's job for the same reasons as

Pacific Fruit Express acquired 1,000 R-40-20 reefers in 1945. The 40-foot steel cars had 4/4 Dreadnaught ends and featured improved (fiberglass) insulation and floor racks. Later paint schemes had both Southern Pacific and Union Pacific heralds. Union Pacific

Sliding plug doors began to replace swinging doors around 1950. PFE's 2,000 R-40-26 cars were built in 1951 and 1952. Ice reefers were also used in ventilator service, which saw the roof hatches opened to enable air to flow through the cars. J. David Ingles collection

of "piffees, spiffees, and youpiffees"

Ned. So it was, then, that "Nedly" and "Sagey Baby" became the principal players in this comedy.

SIX-RING SHANTY

Six-Ring Shanty was as advertised: about 20 feet square and covered on the outside with that fake brick embossed tarpaper once so popular. Inside it was pure railroad.

All it contained was a desk by the front corner windows for the inside inspector, a desk for the switch tender stationed there, a second desk for the outside inspectors, a small bathroom, a few lockers, and, for heat, an oil-burning "cabin" oil stove identical to the ones in cabooses. It was all on a plain concrete floor that once had been painted.

The walls had also been painted some unidentifiable color in the distant past but now had a uniform, thick coating of yellowed nicotine. It sat at the west end of the receiving yard where the inbound trains arrived and rear-end crews got off. The inbound waybills and list were given to the inside PPSI and the crew waited for a ride to the hump yard office.

The inside inspector went through the waybills and lists to identify cars needing the services of the PPSI department. Waybills for shipments moving under perishable tariffs could be quite complicated. Shippers specified what temperatures should be maintained, if ventilation or heater service was necessary, and parameters for this and a host of other conditions. (For additional detail, I recommend the comprehensive 1992 book "Pacific Fruit Express," by Robert J. Church, Bruce H. Jones, and Anthony W. Thompson.)

When he was done, Gary gave us a copy with perishable cars marked and what needed to be done to them. The lists and waybills then went to the yard office via pneumatic tube.

THE SILVIS SHUFFLE

Now seems to be a good time to say a few words about Kelly Yard. Its primary purpose was to classify eastbound traffic for connections in Chicago. Very few westbound trains were classified there. Number 93 (the "Piss Cutter") from Peoria and No. 61 to Cedar Rapids that usually originated at Silvis were about it, although local business from the Quad Cities could go in any direction and thus would add to the westbound flow.

On the other hand, every eastbound went over the hump. The cars were classified for eastern connections and, since most of the eastern carriers had cutoff times to make their eastward departures between midnight and 8 a.m. and to save on per diem, afternoons at Silvis could be a bit – well, let's just say chaotic.

Most of the eastbound perishable business arrived on three trains. The "02" was the biggest source, as it was the connection from Southern Pacific at Tucumcari, N.Mex., and could still, on occasion, run in two or even three sections (O2A, O2B, O2C, etc.). Number "44" was the connection from Union Pacific and could also operate in more than one section. The tail-end Charlie was 62 from Cedar Rapids, which could have a smattering of Iowa meat traffic and potatoes from the Northwest.

Usually, these arrived in the late morning or early afternoon. But if things weren't going well (which was most of the time), the later they arrived the more pressure existed to get them switched for eastbound departures. Which is why, most of the time, Ned and I were busy the first two-thirds, if not all, of the shift.

Perishable cars are routed to a special track in Silvis' receiving yard where necessary work can be done on them. Here, men take out heaters from cars.

Above: Mechanical reefers grew larger in the 1960s, as shown by Pacific Fruit Express No. 450611. The 57-foot, exterior-post car was built in 1963. J. David Ingles collection **Inset: An excerpt from a Rock Island brochure extolling the new mainline icing plant in the 1950s.** Classic Trains collection

As a result, there could be considerable pressure to get things done in a hurry on newly arrived eastbound trains. Since nothing could happen until the Perishable Protective Service released the train for humping, quite a few impatient official eyes could be on the "Outside" (i.e., Ned and I) PPSI clerks. So…

NEDLY AND I TO THE RESCUE

Our principal tools were three well-worn (read: battered) vehicles. All were painted in a shade close to reefer orange with red-and-white "Rock Island" heralds on the doors. One was a plain-Jane Chevy pick-up. Another was a small Ford tank truck for diesel fuel. Finally, we had a lift truck on its last legs.

Between the cab and the stake bed was a hydraulic lift. We used it to gain access to the roofs of old ice-type reefers to change heaters or adjust the vents (ice hatches to the un-initiated). Its platform had ramps on either side that could be let down so you could easily walk directly onto the car top.

If there was nothing pressing at the beginning of the shift, we would go over to the heater storage cars (five or so of the old General American meat reefers) where we would refuel (methyl alcohol) a supply of heaters and load them on the lift truck. The general idea was that Silvis was the point where heaters coming from the west (PFE, ART, Burlington Northern, Soo Line) were removed and replaced by heaters appropriate for their eastern connection (Grand Trunk Western, Merchants Despatch, Penn Central, Chessie System, or Erie-Lackawanna).

Ninety percent of these heaters were of the Preco type, meaning a large, round, 5-gallon fuel tank with a burner resembling a tomato juice can but larger on top. They also included an adjustable thermostat on the top of the tank along with a gauge for the fuel. Also mounted on the side of the tanks were two spring clips for anchoring the appliance to the floor.

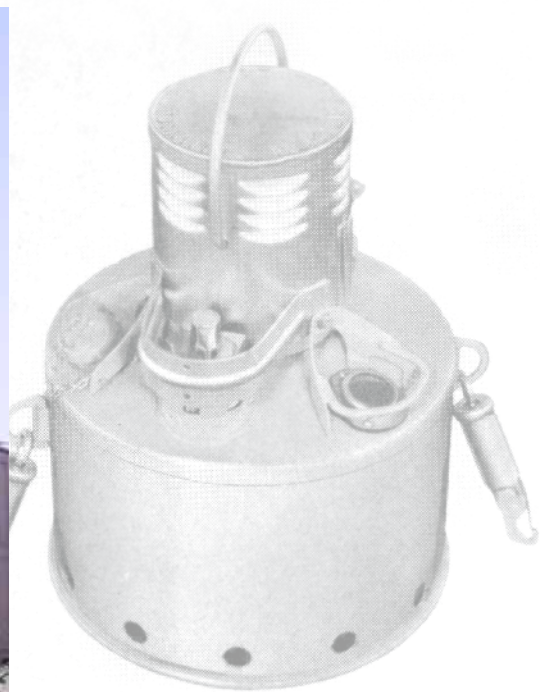
Fully fueled, they probably weighed 60 pounds or so and had a bail on top to carry them. We carried a sheet steel "paddle" that could be inserted into the side of the burner to extinguish it, and lit them with long handled "strike anywhere" matches.

Perhaps some examples would be the easiest way to give you the big picture. Let's start with "02A(date)" just arrived on "No. 1 receiving" from Kansas City and Tucumcari with, say, 82 cars, 67 of which are mechanical reefers and the remaining 15 are refrigerated trailers on flatcars.

Ned and I waited on Gary to finish with the waybills and give us a copy of the "list" (a printout of the train consist) so we can go to work. Since this will all be mechanical reefers (piffees, spiffees, and youpiffees) or trailers, we'd take the small tank truck. It's necessary in case any of cars are low on fuel.

The rule of thumb is that the reefers' gauges should show a minimum of half full and, if in doubt, fuel them. If we did have to add some, the amount was noted on the list to billed to the shipper later.

Usually, the carmen already had the train blue flagged by the time we came alongside to work from the caboose forward. We verified the car initials and number and checked a) the temperature reading on the car thermometer, b) noted that the refrigeration unit was working, c) saw that the thermostat was set to the temperature noted on the list and made



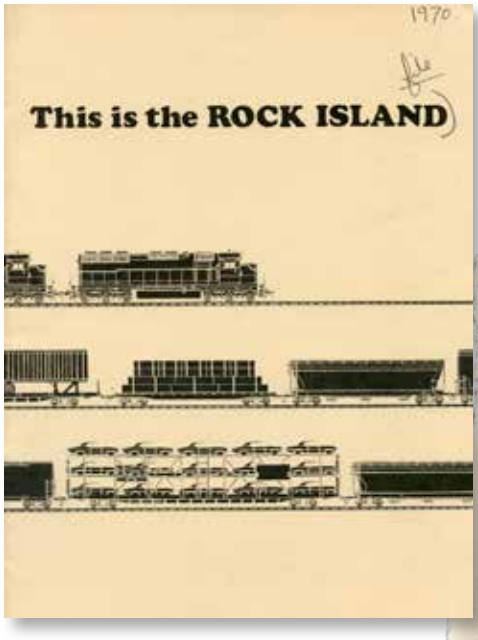
Above: Small heaters would keep loads from freezing in cold weather. Early models were charcoal-fueled and later ones ran on alcohol. Classic Trains collection **Left: A local ice contractor with a hoist truck tops off the bunkers of Santa Fe and ART reefers parked on a spur in Ohio in 1964.** J. David Ingles collection

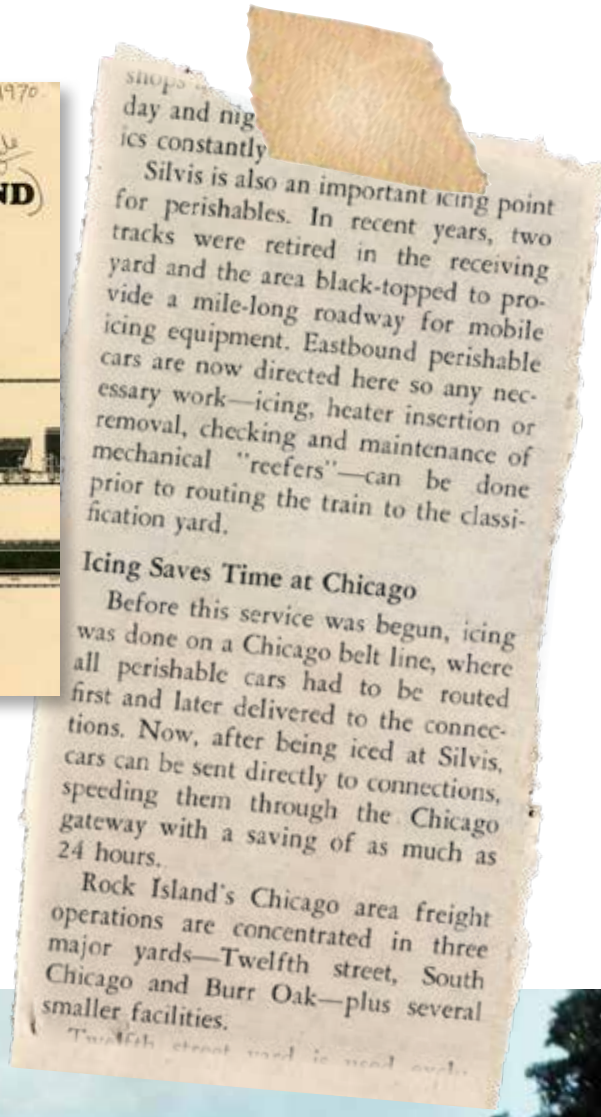
sure the thermometer was close to the specified temperature, and d) it had at least a half-tank of fuel.

If any were found not running, we tried to get them going. We always carried a couple cans of ether in case the recalcitrant engine needed a little help getting started. If we couldn't get it going, we'd call Gary on the radio and notify him of the car initial and number so he could tell the hump master and have the car sent to the RIP track.

Trailers were a horse of a different color. They seemed to be more troublesome than the cars and there was a bigger variety among them, even if they were the same manufacture. The fuel tanks might have filler spouts on both ends or only on one end.

It was one of these with gauges on one side only that taught me there was more than one way to build a flatcar. Ned and I had split up, so I was by myself. The trailer was by itself on a PFE flatcar. Although I wasn't happy about having to crawl under a trailer, I soon learned worse could be in store. It turns out that when I swung my leg over the center sill and expected it to land on something solid, there was




day and nig
ics constantly

Silvis is also an important icing point for perishables. In recent years, two tracks were retired in the receiving yard and the area black-topped to provide a mile-long roadway for mobile icing equipment. Eastbound perishable cars are now directed here so any necessary work—icing, heater insertion or removal, checking and maintenance of mechanical "reefers"—can be done prior to routing the train to the classification yard.

Icing Saves Time at Chicago

Before this service was begun, icing was done on a Chicago belt line, where all perishable cars had to be routed first and later delivered to the connections. Now, after being iced at Silvis, cars can be sent directly to connections, speeding them through the Chicago gateway with a saving of as much as 24 hours.

Rock Island's Chicago area freight operations are concentrated in three major yards—Twelfth street, South Chicago and Burr Oak—plus several smaller facilities.

A Rock Island freight service brochure explains the benefits of icing reefers at Silvis. The practice enabled faster interchange of traffic to Eastern connections compared with icing trains in Chicago. Classic Trains collection

A U33B-slug-U33B set in the Rock's late "bankruptcy blue" scheme has a block of reefers in tow at Bureau, Ill., in 1978. The lettering on the side of the slug dubs it "The Great American Energy Saver," a nod to the newfound energy conservation movement of the decade. Mark Llanuza

. . . nothing that entertains the old heads

nothing there! My leg went down all the way to my crotch and, in this semi-split position, it wasn't easy to get it back up. Painful it was. It turns out the center sill was hollow on these cars with only a bottom web down below. After that, I kept a close lookout for these cars!

Usually though, when we radioed Gary that we were done, within a few minutes the hump repeater signals would change to green and the former train would begin its slow journey up to the hump crest to dissolve into new parts for other consists headed for a variety of places.

HEATERS

Just because carriers no longer iced cars didn't mean that ice-bunker refrigerator cars disappeared overnight. They were still very useful for loads that needed heater or ventilator service. This would typically be lading that was fine within a wide temperature range. Potatoes were the loads most often moved this way and No. 44 (from UP at Council Bluffs) could have a lot of them.

We took the lift truck when we had heaters to work. The list told us where the car(s) was going and we'd pick appropriate heaters for the connecting roads. If there was more than one car, we would work up to three at a time by spotting the truck by the middle one and carrying the heaters across to the other two.

If we were going to work three cars and two were going to Penn Central and one to Erie-Lackawanna, we would load the appropriate heaters on the lift. Most of the time we only had to change one heater in the bunker at each end.

It was a process. We'd get the lift to match the car height and cross to the roof via the ramp. Ned, the smaller and more agile of us, would climb down into the bunker and, using his steel paddle, extinguish the heater's flame.

I would let down a rope with a steel hook and Ned, after unclipping the heater from the floor, would attach it to the bail. Then I'd pull the heater up and set it to the side. Then the process was reversed with a new one. Ned would clip it to the floor, light its burner, and ensure the thermostat was set to the proper temperature. And so it went.

Here, I must confess: Although I'm not terrified of heights, I'm not fond of them. I'll say this, it sure looks a lot farther to the ground standing on top of a car instead of looking up at one.

OH, THE JOKE'S ON. . . ME!

A word now to set the scene is in order. One of the local officials was a terminal trainmaster by the name of John Ahern (aka Big John). Now, Big John was several things. He was somewhat prone to mishaps, not to mention having a booming voice.

Once, when a car was on fire, he came to the hump office and grabbed a fire extinguisher. After he got back to the car and squeezed the handle the hose blew off and covered him in white fire retardant, making him look like a powdered-sugar covered gingerbread man.

But Big John's main claim to fame was that he appeared in (and appears in the screen credits) as a bumbling Marine Corps recruit in the 1957 movie "The Drill Instructor," directed by Jack Webb of TV's "Dragnet" fame. He was very convincing in the movie but I'm not sure it took much coaching, as actual recruits were used in the filming.

This fact was well known to all the locals but not so much to me. Now, you also need to realize there's nothing that entertains the old heads on the railroad as much as a good joke played on an unsuspecting "scizzorbill." I certainly fit that description and boy, was it a doozy.

Our pneumatic tube was subject (as was almost everything on the Rock) to occasional fits of misbehaving. On this evening, Big John had come down to wait on

Rock Island U28B 268 leads a GP40 and Union Pacific GE unit at Blue Island, Ill., in June 1974. A large block of reefers, including an ice-cooled car first out, rides at the head end of the train. Blue Island was the Rock's main freight facility in the Chicago area. Mark Llanuza

on the railroad as much as a good joke . . .

the waybills and paperwork off a scorching 44 so that he could take them up to the yard office without delay. A couple of hot eastbound departures were waiting on cars from this train, so he impatiently stomped around waiting for Gary to get done.

Now, during times pleasantly passed in conversation, Ned and Gary had heard and knew that I wasn't a particular fan of Jack Webb. I would mimic and mock his dry, monotone manner of speaking. "Just the facts, Ma'am" or "Well, we know one thing, don't we Ma'am…He won't do that again, will he." This was their trap that I was about to innocently stumble into.

Ned chimed in, "Say, did you see the movie that was on last night?"

"No, what was it?' I said, not realizing that I had just slipped the noose around my own neck.

"Yeah, it was 'The Drill Instructor' with Jack Webb."

"Really?" I said then launched into my routine, "Just the facts. We know one thing don't we Ma'am, he…"

Then came the explosion.

"Why, you couldn't carry Jack Webb's jock strap!" came a voice I'm sure was heard in all downtown Silvis, along with a few more minutes of dressing down.

After the ostracizing finally ended, Big John finally stomped out with the paperwork and left Six Ring. It's a good thing he did, too, because Gary and Ned were about to split trying to contain themselves. To say they were in tears would be a gross understatement.

ALL GOOD THINGS MUST END

I eventually got bumped off the PPSI job and moved on to other things. I do owe Big John one thing. He told me once (in the days before touchy feely Human Resource departments) that he didn't think I was smart enough to pass a rules exam. Of course, this was an inspiration. (John, I missed one question out of 495 on the rules test. Thanks!). I do have fond memories of Ned and Gary and, of course, the piffees, spiffees, and youpiffees. ■

STEVE LASHER, who wrote about his late-1970s adventures on Rock Island and Burlington Northern in Winter 2013 and Spring 2017 Classic Trains and about the Cotton Belt in Fall 2021, grew up in Cleveland, Ohio, then moved to Kentucky, where he graduated from Murray State University in 1973. He took a Cotton Belt buyout in 1987 and moved to Louisville, where he retired as a registered nurse. He and wife, Bonnie, live close by in Indiana.

Fresh paint on the Bureau, Ill., depot brightens this view of an eastbound in 1976. This day's train has a mix of GE and EMD power with more reefers up front. Randy B. Olson, David P. Oroszi collection

A Pacific Fruit Express mechanical reefer rides first out behind four E units at Bureau, Ill. In the 1970s, as passenger service dwindled, the Rock shifted some of its E units to freight service, especially on weekends when Chicago commuter operations were lighter. Philip A. Weibler