

A “Little Jewel” of a railroad

The Soo Line left its mark in Midwest railroading • By Steve Glischinski



A classic A-B-A F7 trio, led by WC-owned 2230B, is at Greenwald, Minn., on the “Brooten Line” on October 1, 1978, bound for Superior, Wis.

Steve Glischinski

Seemingly hidden away in the north-central U.S., the Soo Line and its affiliated Wisconsin Central Railway did not receive the attention lavished on bigger neighbors Chicago & North Western and Milwaukee Road. Soo did not host a streamliner, went freight-only in 1968, and was bought by Canadian Pacific, which long had controlled it, in 1990. Soo public relations man Wallace W. Abbey chronicled the railroad in his 1984 book, *The Little Jewel*, a title meant to evoke its ability to generate profits for CP but apropos in many other ways.

Yet Soo left a big mark in railroading. In 1960, it merged the Minneapolis, St. Paul & Sault Ste. Marie, the WC, and the Duluth, South Shore & Atlantic, another CP-controlled regional [“The Upper Peninsula’s Railroad,” Winter 2015 CLASSIC TRAINS], into what it called the “New Soo.” Like the Monon, it adopted its pop-

ular monicker as its official name: Soo Line Railroad (“Soo” being the pronunciation of “Sault”). Before and after the merger, Soo proved you could make a profit in territory where others struggled. It did so through conservative management of its limited resources and an emphasis on customer service.

Soo’s history dates to the September, 29, 1883, incorporation of the Minneapolis, St. Paul & Atlantic. It was the brainchild of Minneapolis milling interests anxious to find a way to ship their products east without going through the expensive and congested Chicago terminal. The millers’ answer was a direct 500-mile line from Minneapolis to a CP connection at Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario.

Construction began in April 1884 at Cameron, Wis., and “the Sault” (two like-named cities in Michigan and Canada) was reached in December ’87. Orig-

nally the road reached Minneapolis by trackage rights on the Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis & Omaha from Turtle Lake, Wis. This was remedied when a subsidiary, Minneapolis & St. Croix, was built from Turtle Lake into Minneapolis, and the route opened in January 1888. Simultaneously the Minneapolis interests incorporated the Minneapolis & Pacific to build west to bring wheat from the Dakotas to the Twin Cities’ mills.

Like many rail ventures of the era, all three encountered financial problems, but CP propped them up, mandating they be consolidated. Thus began Soo’s long relationship with Canada’s first transcontinental railway, as on June 11, 1888, the MStP&A, M&StC, and M&P were joined to form the Minneapolis, St. Paul & Sault Ste. Marie Railway. The nickname “Soo Line” quickly emerged.

The “first” WC

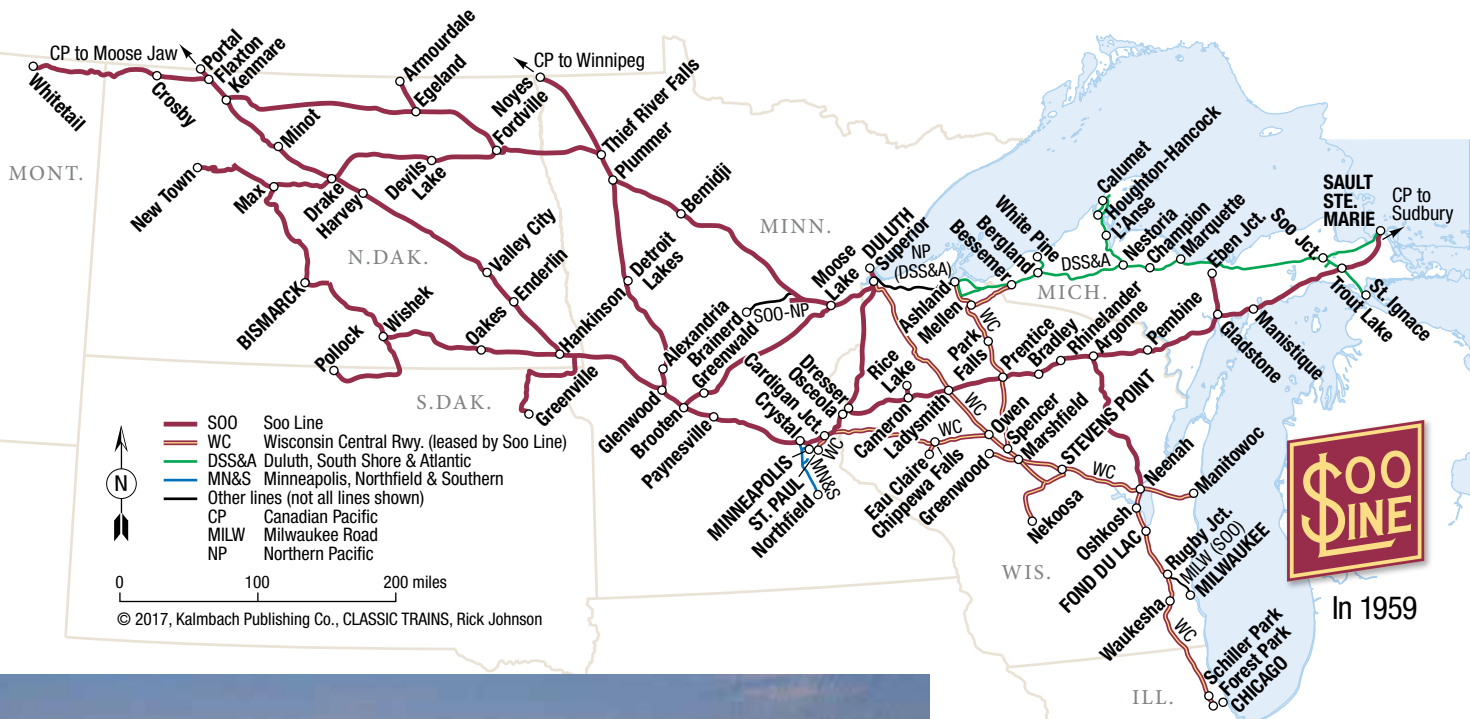
Wisconsin Central Railway was incorporated February 4, 1871. Ground was broken June 15 at West Menasha (now Neenah) for a line to Stevens Point. It would reach Ashland, on Lake Superior, in 1877, and WC was granted nearly 1 million acres of land for finishing the line. WC reached St. Paul in 1884, Chicago in 1886, and Superior in 1908.

WC seemed to be an “also ran,” though, as its routes were longer than its competitors’. In 1889 the transcontinental Northern Pacific contracted with WC to handle its trains from St. Paul to Chicago, and in 1890 NP leased the WC. NP subsidiary Chicago & Northern Pacific



The fireman on Pacific 2717 leans out for orders for train 5 at Paynesville, Minn., in March '54.

James Kreuzberger photo, Steve Glischinski collection



Mixed 58, with GP9 401, slows to work at Dafter, Mich., last town before “the Soo,” in early '61. J. David Ingles

built Grand Central Station in Chicago that year, and for a time operated Chicago suburban trains. NP entered receivership in 1893, however, and defaulted on its WC lease payments, ending its control. Baltimore & Ohio would buy Grand Central in 1910 and be its majority user.

Soo Line recognized the value of WC's routes and in 1908 acquired a majority interest, then leased the property on April 1, 1909. Under the agreement, WC remained a separate entity and Soo did not participate in its profits or losses, nor did it pay rent. However, the roads gained traffic from each other, and WC gave Soo access to Chicago. Although the combined system was known by the Soo Line name, WC continued a separate existence with its own officers and stockholders until the 1960 amalgamation. For trackside observers, ownership of locomotives was easy to spot, as WC's had four-digit numbers but Soo's just three digits. Steam-engine tenders wore the “dollar sign” Soo emblem, and diesels' flanks had SOO LINE spelled out,

with tiny W.C. initials. This practice also lasted until 1960. WC would remain a Soo ward for 52 years, though the lease ended in 1932 with WC's bankruptcy.

Duluth, South Shore & Atlantic was incorporated in 1887 and consolidated several iron-ore roads in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Spanning from the Twin Ports of Duluth-Superior to Sault Ste. Marie, “The South Shore” had branches tapping the copper-rich Keweenaw Peninsula beyond Houghton-Hancock and to St. Ignace on the Straits of Mackinac. From there, carferries connected with Mackinaw City on the Lower Peninsula. DSS&A came under CP control in 1890.

Standard motive power

Soo was among the first to embrace the 2-8-2 Mikado type, eventually having 48 including secondhanders from the Monon and the Rock Island. They were workhorses across Soo's system, whose breadth from Sault Ste. Marie reached over 1,175 miles after Soo finished a 136-mile branch from Flaxton,

N.Dak., to Whitetail, Mont., in 1913. Sixty-two Soo and WC Pacifics held down most passenger-train assignments.

The first true large Soo engines were the class N-20 4-8-2 Mountain types, whose ranks grew to 21 including 3 built at Soo's Shoreham Shops in Minneapolis in 1929-30 with boilers from Alco. Soo did dabble in “Super Power” steam, in 1938 when it bought four Lima 4-8-4s, which primarily ran between Chicago and Minneapolis. The four Northerns could replace seven 4-8-2s, and they put in 15,000 miles a month.

Soo dieselized its through freights with EMD F3 and F7, and Alco FA, cab units. The first F3s came in 1947, wearing a maroon-and-gold similar to University of Minnesota's (and CP's) colors. Interestingly, the front-end striping on Soo's units was similar to that of long-ago WC parent Northern Pacific. Soo's passenger units numbered 25, including 2 A-B-B trios of ex-EMD demonstrator FP7-F7Bs, 6 new FP7s, and later, 13 GP9s. All “covered wagons” and most road-switchers wore the maroon and gold, but Soo's diesel switchers and some early road-switchers were solid black with yellow visibility stripes on the ends.

Virtually all first-generation Soo diesels were four-motor B-Bs, exceptions being four each Alco RSC2s and RSC3s (A1A-A1A, later converted to B-B) and a lone SD9. Soo had a GE 44-tonner, seven Baldwins, and five Fairbanks-Morse H12-44 switchers to dent the EMD-and-

Alco roster. DSS&A had dieselized during 1945–52, and in the merger Soo inherited its 16 Baldwins (including four center-cab transfer units) and eight RS1s. Everyday Soo steam ended February 15, 1955, when 2-8-0 468 tied up at Neenah.

The last steam locomotive Soo ran was 4-6-2 2719, on a June 21, 1959, Minneapolis–Ladysmith (Wis.) excursion. Preserved in Eau Claire, Wis., the Pacific would return to steam occasionally beginning in 1998, and hauled excursions in Wisconsin and Minnesota until 2013. She is at the Lake Superior Railroad Museum in Duluth. Preserved in Superior, Wis., 2-8-2 1003 also was activated, beginning in 1996; privately owned, she is in the Wisconsin Automotive Museum in Hartford. A third Soo engine, 0-6-0 353, steams annually each Labor Day weekend at the Western Minnesota Steam Thresher’s Reunion in Rollag. Soo was generous in donating steam locomotives to towns and museums, and at least 19 survive, in four states, including three 2-8-2s and seven 4-6-2s, but the list has no 4-8-2s, 4-8-4s, or DSS&A engines.

Heavyweight varnish

While passenger service was not a big part of Soo’s business, the road strived to maintain quality service, and with partner CP, offered Canadian connections. In 1889 MStP&SSM inaugurated the Minneapolis–Sault Ste. Marie *Atlantic Limited*, among the first trains with vestibule sleeping cars; its last remnant came off in 1960. Soo and CP in 1904



Pine tree-like nose stripes and switcher black are displayed at Schiller Park, Ill., in fall 1960.

J. David Ingles



Modern mainstays: Two GP38-2s and a GP30 handle train 909 at Bradley, Wis., July 16, 1979.

Steve Glischinski

began the overnight Twin Cities–Winnipeg *Manitoba Express*, which in 1928 was renamed *Winnipeg* and lasted 39 years. It was the last “pure” Soo passenger train when it quit in March 1967.

“Pure”? Soo offered “mixed train” service, as seats in cabooses, on a select list of freights until September 1986, ending an era dating to early times in which almost all trains on branches in sparsely populated North Dakota carried passengers. Soo also ran Milwaukee Road’s *Copper Country Limited*, with Milwaukee equipment, on the train’s northerly 77 miles between Champion and Calumet, Mich., a service begun in 1907 and inherited from DSS&A. The train was discontinued March 8, 1968.

Soo and CP in 1923 inaugurated the summertime Chicago–Vancouver (B.C.) *Mountaineer*. In the off months, the train was the St. Paul–Moose Jaw, Sask., *Soo-Dominion*, its cars going on CP’s *Dominion* to Vancouver. Beginning in 1933, the *Mountaineer* rode C&NW east of St. Paul, and *Soo-Dominion* cars went to Chicago on C&NW’s *Viking*. After being off during World War II, it resumed in 1947, but service east of St. Paul ended in 1950. The *Soo-Dominion* quit in December 1963, the through service to western Canada going via Winnipeg. The *Mountaineer* then was part of the *Winnipeg*, until 1965. Soo was the last road to finish a Twin Cities–Twin Ports line, in 1912, and by the 1920s ran the *Duluth-Superior Limited*, trains 62 and 63. The route was in a pool with NP and Great Northern, but Soo withdrew first, in 1961.

Any lightweight cars on Soo trains (apart from the road’s two 1948 ACF baggage cars and one business car) were owned by Pullman, CP, or other roads as Soo stuck with heavyweights. Soo did rebuild some heavyweights for its Chica-

go–Duluth train, which gained the name *Laker* on June 3, 1951. It had through cars to St. Paul from Owen, Wis., and from Spencer, Wis., to Ashland. The *Laker*’s last run was January 16, 1965.

The “New Soo”

Upon the December 31, 1960, merger that created Soo Line Railroad Co., former DSS&A President Leonard H. Murray took the helm. Known for being frugal, Murray held the presidency until 1978. A master of using the minimal resources at his disposal, he continually improved Soo’s revenues while controlling costs and increasing traffic.

Soo invested heavily in its physical plant, installing welded rail on grain branches as well as main lines, expanding CTC signaling coverage, and purchasing new equipment. Soo also adopted a colorful new image designed by Abbey: a white (actually light gray) with red ends and black lettering on the diesels, and various colors on freight cars. GP9 550 was the guinea pig for the new livery, but in 1962 two new Alco RS27s in the bright colors arrived. They were followed in ’63 by 22 EMD GP30s, which rode on trucks from Soo’s 22 traded-in Alco FAs. Later came 10 GP35s, 4 GP40s, and in 1968, 10 GE U30Cs. The Alcos and GEs were “orphans,” though, and Soo then stuck with EMD, buying its first six-motor units, SD40s, in May 1969 and eventually having 78 SD40s and -2s.

EMD’s 2,000 h.p. GP38-2 was perfect for Soo’s secondary lines and locals, and the model began replacing the F units in 1977. In a one-time occurrence, the first 10 of the road’s eventual 53 GP38-2s had the big “SOO” on the flanks in red, not black. The old three-digit/four-digit numbering scheme became history after those first 10. With the U30s next at



A wheat shock and “Colormark” label spiced up lettering on several types of freight cars.

J. David Ingles collection

800–809, Soo renumbered the GP38-2s from 790–799 into the 4400s. During 1987–89, Soo bought what would be its last new power: 58 SD60s and 5 SD60Ms, all in the 6000s. The last 21 units came in a new “Candy Apple Red” with reflectorized white lettering, which would be applied to older units, but ultimately Canadian Pacific’s red would win out.

Unexpected expansion

In 1980 Soo remained profitable but had some catching up to do. Its track was good, but it held trains to a maximum 40 mph systemwide, hardly competitive. As other roads negotiated labor agreements with reductions in crew size, Soo didn’t move until the late ’80s. Meanwhile, Soo had become a small road in a sea of larger players as other roads were expanding or merging. To survive, Soo had to expand its traffic mix and reach new gateways to garner longer hauls and market share. Kansas City was a logical target, and upon the Rock Island’s 1980 shut-down, Soo made an aggressive move to buy RI’s Twin Cities–K.C. “Spine Line.” In June 1982, Soo acquired the 77-mile Minneapolis, Northfield & Southern to connect with the Spine Line, but the North Western was awarded the RI route.

Soo then put its resources into buying the Milwaukee Road, which in 1980 had retrenched to a 3,100-mile Midwest “Core System.” It appeared C&NW would win the bidding war, but on February 9, 1985, U.S. District Court Judge Thomas R. McMillen, who was handling MILW’s bankruptcy, awarded it to Soo despite its bid of \$570 million being below C&NW’s. McMillen said Soo’s bid was more in the public interest, in part because it would not abandon any lines.

Thus did Soo Line overnight, and un-

expectedly, go from a 4,400-mile railroad to a 7,500-mile system. It had to assume enormous debt to finance the acquisition: \$187 million in cash, and \$383 million of Milwaukee Road debt. The latter’s trackage mostly was standard and required millions to become competitive. As a result, Soo began losing money. After an attempt to trim crew costs by creating the in-house subsidiary Lake States Transportation Division, with different labor pacts, on its original Wisconsin and Michigan lines, Soo in 1987 spun off those lines, plus a few MILW secondary routes, to new regional firm Wisconsin Central Ltd.

Canadian Pacific, which long had a 56 percent stake in Soo, said it would sell its interest, but in 1990 reversed course and instead took full control. Thus while Soo still exists legally (*i.e.*, “on paper”), and most of its original lines remain in operation by CP or Canadian National (which purchased WCL in 2001), to observers it is all Canadian Pacific. Nevertheless, while perhaps not visible and despite being under Canadian ownership, the “Little Jewel” continues to shine. ■

STEVE GLISCHINSKI, of St. Paul, has had 12 bylines in CLASSIC TRAINS, starting in 2002.

Soo Line fact file



(comparative figures are from 1939 and 1988, and include Wisconsin Central Rwy.)

Name change: Minneapolis, St. Paul & Sault Ste. Marie (nickname Soo Line), upon the three-road December 31, 1960, merger, made its official name Soo Line Railroad Co.

Route-miles: 4,284; 5,807

Locomotives: 300 (six diesels); 424

Passenger cars: 260; 0

Freight cars: 14,552; 12,295

Headquarters city: Minneapolis, Minn.

Special interest group: Soo Line Historical & Technical Society, www.sooline.org.

Notable passenger trains: *Atlantic Limited*, *Laker*, *Mountaineer*, *Winnipeg*

Recommended reading: *Steam Trains of the Soo*, by Lesley V. Suprey (several editions beginning in 1962); *The Little Jewel*, by Wallace W. Abbey (1984); *Saga of the Soo: West from Shoreham*, by John A. Gjerve (1990); *Saga of the Soo: Three Generations West*, by John A. Gjerve (1995); *Soo Line in Color*, by Robert J. Wise (1997).