ON THE TEXAS-OKLAHOMA BORDER

Red River Railroading

STEVE SCHMOLLINGER/PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

When I first thought about shooting the short stretch of BNSF Railway between Thackerville, Okla., and Valley View, Texas, a distance of about 24 railroad miles, the first thing I asked myself was, "Why?" It's not very scenic, doesn't have any memorable landmarks, and not that many trains, either. So why shoot it? It then occurred to me this might be the perfect location to challenge my creativity, to force me to think outside the box and scour the line for items of operating interest I might not otherwise pursue. Perhaps you live near such a place, where you might not be inclined to shoot because it doesn't have much to offer. But, as the old saying goes, things aren't always as they first appear to be.

So, let's take a closer look at BNSF at the Oklahoma-Texas border. The line through Valley View, Gainesville, and Thackerville was originally constructed by the Gulf, Colorado & Santa Fe Railway (GC&SF), a corporation chartered in Texas on May 28, 1873. Later, through a negotiated agreement with the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe, it connected to a subsidiary of the then-Santa Fe at Purcell, in Indian Territory, just south of present-day Norman, Okla. The date was April 27, 1887. Consistent with the agreement, the AT&SF then purchased the GC&SF, and it became part of the Santa Fe system.

Despite its lackluster appearance at first blush, this place where the Fort Worth Subdivision from the south and Red Rock Subdivision from the north come together does, in fact, have a few noteworthy aspects. A beautiful Santa Fe depot in Gainesville is one attraction,

OPPOSITE: A loaded BNSF rock train holds the mainline as it meets an empty counterpart at the north end of Gainesville, Texas, on January 25, 2014, behind C44-9W No. 5442. Both trains are on the Red Rock Subdivision, which begins in Oklahoma City and ends in Gainesville where the Fort Worth Sub begins. ABOVE: With the intense, autumn earth tones of oak leaves as a backdrop, a southbound Z train rounds a curve south of Thackerville, Okla., on November 30, 2013. In a couple miles, the hot train, led by ES44DC No. 7456, will cross the Red River into Texas.

TOP: With a heavy unit train of corn syrup and ethanol from the ADM plant in Columbus, Neb., the "Hondo" train makes good time through Gainesville behind ES44DC No. 7871 on January 25, 2014. The train has a single DPU on the rear. BNSF originates one of these trains roughly once a week. ABOVE: At 7:10 p.m. on June 3, 2013, Amtrak Train 822 departs the beautiful Santa Fe depot in Gainesville bound for Oklahoma City. ABOVE RIGHT: As autos and 18-wheelers stream north and south on busy I-35, a northbound BNSF manifest behind C44-9W No. 4825 hustles north toward the Red River Valley at Valley View on May 3, 2008. The dispatcher tends to make lots of meets at this small Texas town.

with its red brick construction and classic Santa Fe emblems at either end. Then there are the three short grades, one on either side of the Red River for about two miles, and the other between Gainesville and Valley View. These climbs won't slow down Z trains by much, but heavy trains like ethanol and grain headed south and manifests and long locals going north find them a bit of a challenge. The reason for the grades is because this area is set in the shallow Red River Valley, whose namesake runs between Thackerville and Gainesville and constitutes the Oklahoma-Texas border.

Another operating facet that adds some interest to the area is Union Pacific trackage rights over the line. As a condition of the Burlington Northern Santa Fe merger in 1995, Southern Pacific was granted trackage rights between Wichita, Kan., and Fort Worth, Texas, but was limited to four trains every 24 hours. UP now has these rights, and uses them to relieve congestion on other lines such as the ex-Rock Island line to the west (Duncan Sub) and the ex-Missouri-Kansas-Texas line to the east (Choctaw Sub), both of which also run into Fort Worth. Most of the trains UP runs on the line tend to be northbound coal empties headed back to the Powder River Basin, but it also runs manifests.

One more operation thrown into the mix is Amtrak's *Heartland Flyer* (Trains 821/822), which runs daily in both directions between Fort Worth and Oklahoma City. BNSF handles this train with kid gloves, with the dispatcher stuffing freights into sidings well before train time. The passenger train makes a stop in Gainesville, scheduled for 11:05 a.m. southbound and 6:31 p.m. northbound. For some time, Amtrak ran the *Flyer* with P42DCs on either end of the train's three Superliner cars, but recently as a way to cut costs substituted a "cabbage" car — an F40 converted into a combination control car/baggage car — at one end. The reason for the train's push-pull arrangement is there's no place to turn it in Oklahoma City.

For a number of years, two of the more interesting moves over the line were Norfolk Southern RoadRailers 267/240, which ran on BNSF with symbols QKCKSAG/QSAGKCK. They ran between Fort Wayne, Ind., and Saginaw, Texas, and reverse, with the NS-BNSF handoff at Argentine Yard near Kansas City, Kan. In September 2015, Norfolk Southern announced it was largely phasing out its Triple Crown RoadRailer service, and these trains disappeared. The auto parts carried by 267/240 are now either transported in conventional containers or over-the-road vehicles. Hot "Z" trains on the line include the ZWSPALT/ZALTWSP (Priority UPS-LTL Intermodal, Willow Springs, Ill., to Alliance Terminal, Fort Worth) and reverse. These trains usually see three or four big GEs for power, while most other trains sport two or three. Grain, ethanol, and rock trains, which run loaded heading south, usually sport a distributed power unit (DPU) on the rear, as do some heavier manifests. I've never seen a northbound train with a DPU.

All three towns in the area have sidings, and each sees frequent use. Although the siding at Gainesville doesn't appear as such in the timetable, since it's part of the yard lead, it gives trains roughly 20,000 feet of passing space. Local trackside detectors sit at milepost 421.1, just north of Gladney Lake Road on the Oklahoma side of the river, and milepost 414.5 on the Texas side. As you can see, in this area as you head south, milepost numbers decrease. The line uses Centralized Traffic Control, with a good number of signals lit up well before the train shows. As you cross the tracks in the heart of Thackerville on Route 153, you can see the southbound signal. If it's green, something's coming from the north; if red, something from the south. The same rule of thumb holds for mainline signals in Gainesville and Valley View.

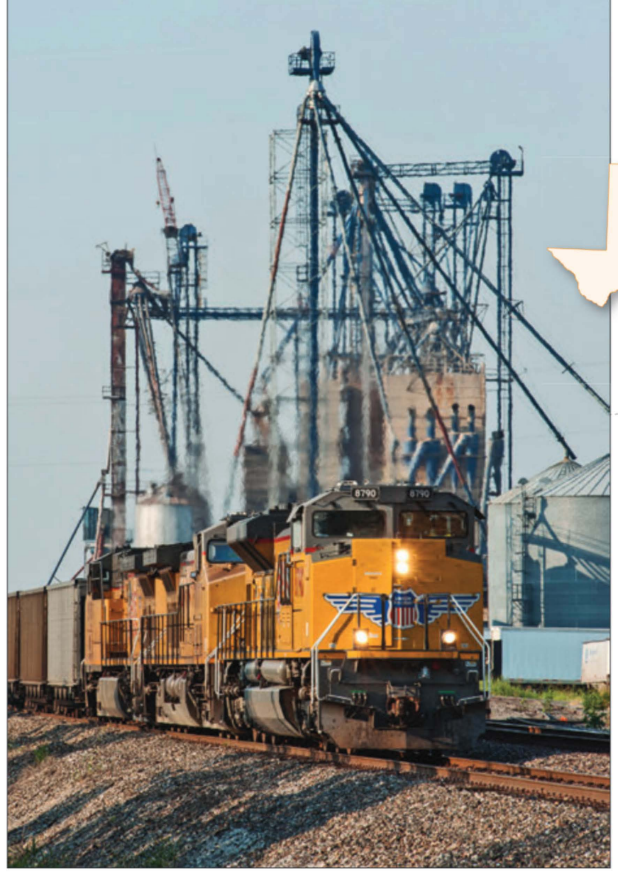
Interstate 35 runs north and south through the area, and access to towns is easy. U.S. Route 77 runs virtually from the Red River north into the heart of Oklahoma, and passes through the center of Thackerville. The mainline is on the east side of the right-of-way, with the 8,000-foot siding on the west. The quickest way to the railroad in Gainesville is on California Street, which has an exit off the freeway. Head east on California and you'll see the Santa Fe depot as you cross the tracks. The south end of the siding is just north of the station and occupies the east side of the right of way. As for Valley View, the railroad is immediately east of I-35. Take Exit 487 from either direction and head east on Obuch Street (Farm-to-Market [FM] Road 922) to cross the tracks, including the 8,200-foot siding on the east.

On either side of the Red River, the railroad climbs a short 1 percent grade. Coming north, trains will trip the detector at 421.1, giving warning to folks closer to Thackerville with a scanner. Between Gainesville and Valley View, the railroad attacks a slightly longer climb with a 1 percent incline most of the way, but somewhat steeper at the end. This grade slows virtually all southbound trains, and heavy 3x1 and 2x2 grain trains crawl as they near the top. It's much the same story for the loaded ethanol, crude oil, and occasional rock trains that use the line. One of the main reasons for the high-wide detector at 421.1 is to protect the bridge over the Red River. Its six truss spans are quite narrow, and it's not unreasonable to imagine what tremendous damage a shifted load might do. Because the bridge fills the gap between two elevated rights-of-way surrounded by big, brawny trees, it's no wonder the railroad has taken such care to protect it. Making repairs would be difficult.

Between Thackerville and the river, the line passes through a landscape covered with farms interspersed with expansive stands of deciduous trees and dense brush. In some places it feels like man has hardly made an impact, so thick are the foliage and stickers. There are places where one can photograph, but this is solely because Joe Whittington Road (E2230) and Gladney Lake Road (E2240) cross the tracks. If it weren't for that, this area would be virtually impenetrable to photography. In the stretch between E2230 and Thackerville, thick brush and trees come right up to the edge of the right-of-way, so the only way through is on a high-rail vehicle. Farther south, Scott Road (E2250) passes under the railroad, but from there to the river it's much the same story with the exception that the line sits atop a narrow causeway. On the Texas side, trees continue to dominate the landscape for two miles until the railroad crosses FM 1202.

At Valley View, the railroad passes the big Martindale Feed Mill, a BNSF customer. From there, the east side I-35 Frontage Road parallels the right-of-way closely for about two miles, most of the way without anything obscuring the view of the railroad. This is a great place to pace trains, especially in the afternoon, but watch out for vehicle shadows from the nearby freeway — especially from 18-wheelers — if it's late in the day and you're photographing. Be ready to rock and roll once a train shows up, because they run fast through here, especially when headed north. This is one location I took advantage of with my oldest daughter staying with us for a while. With her at the wheel, I was able to get some decent pacing shots of a northbound stack train from the passenger seat. In an area as challenging to photographic creativity as this, you have to take advantage of any opportunity it presents.

RIGHT: A Union Pacific coal empty running on trackage rights heads north into the siding at Gainesville on October 19, 2013, with SD70ACe No. 8579 leading. BELOW: Late on a clear May 5, 2014, a southbound Z train passes a recently harvested hay field in Thackerville. ES44C4 No. 6680 leads the train. OPPOSITE TOP: A UP coal empty eases slowly northward up the long siding at Valley View on July 6, 2013, behind SD70ACe No. 8790. In the background is the busy Martindale Feed Mill, which BNSF serves. OPPOSITE BOTTOM: With a long string of double-stacks and Auto Max vehicle carriers in tow, BNSF ES44DC No. 7626 streaks northward along the frontage road just north of Valley View on April 23, 2014.



ABOVE: As the rear of a northbound UP coal empty clears the main in Gainesville, a run-through NS RoadRailer symboled QKCKSAG on BNSF (premium service, Kansas City–Saginaw, Texas) accelerates on its way toward its destination just north of Fort Worth on October 19, 2013, behind NS C40-9W 9732. The auto parts traffic carried by these since-discontinued RoadRailers now travels in conventional containers or over-the-road vehicles. RIGHT: On a sunny March 11, 2013, in Thackerville, a UP coal empty with new C45AC-CTE 8042 on the point heads into the siding so Amtrak Train 822 can run around it.

As is the case with much of Oklahoma and Texas, the terrain here is rolling hills with flat spots in between. In reality, those spots also curve significantly, adding vertical curvature to the railroad profile. Looking north at the Reed Road (E2210) grade crossing with binoculars or a long lens, it's obvious the right-of-way drops downgrade into Thackerville from the north and then abruptly levels out. Looking at this vertical curvature from the opposite direction shows that, just north of the siding, the rails drop into a depression before climbing up a vertical curve on the other side, and then continues up the short 1 percent grade toward Marietta. To capture the vertical curvature, I used a 600mm optic — actually a Nikon 400mm *f*2.8 mounted on a DX body with a magnification factor of 1.5. This was another creative opportunity I couldn't pass up in this rather mundane environment.

Until summer 2014, the west side of the right-of-way in Thackerville was dominated by poles and code lines. Unless you found a way to incorporate them into the photograph, they could be a challenging obstacle. The lines themselves were likely decommissioned some time ago, since the railroad now sends signal communications through the rails using a system called "Electrocode." Then out of the blue, the carrier removed them, opening a clear view of the railroad through town in the afternoon.

The trees that dot the landscape are also plentiful in Thackerville, and large oaks and sycamores grow just west of the right-of-way. With the code lines gone, this presented an opportunity to use the trees to their full advantage. Using their beautiful leaves, boughs, and branches, I

LEFT: The Santa Fe herald adorns the station at Gainesville. BELOW: Catching the low rays of the autumn sun on November 24, 2014, BNSF C44-9W 4929 North roars out of Gainesville with its image reflected in a lingering puddle from recent storms. Ahead is a series of 1 percent grades to climb out of the valley where Gainesville sits. BOTTOM: On the very humid morning of July 12, 2014, a northbound BNSF vehicle train descends the big sag at the north end of Thackerville behind AC4400CW 5644.

was able to frame passing trains in both directions in scenes that would otherwise be devoid of any framing elements. In the end, the forests that denied me access to much of the railroad on the one hand helped me create interesting scenes in town on the other. Trees in the area include sycamore — some of them giants — post oak, black oak, blackjack oak, shumard red oak, and cottonwood. Although fall colors here aren't as vivid as those in New England or the Ohio Valley, there are plentiful earth tones as well as some yellows, reds, and oranges. This is another example of how the forests here are a two-edged sword — their close proximity to the right-of-way makes for some colorful backdrops if you can gain access to the rails.

As far as capturing the feel of the railroad in this area goes, I tend to fall into a rut using my 80-200mm zoom, as it's such an easy lens to use. I almost have to kick myself to let go of it and switch to another optic, such as a 14-24mm ultra-wide zoom or even my 50mm. "Normal" lenses are sometimes shunned as too pedestrian, but I've found on many occasions in this area that it's the perfect tool for the job. My ultra-wide has also been an aid to creativity, but I've tried not to overdo it and distort things like locomotives too much. Such forbearance has been critical in this stretch of railroad since there are few places to get to an elevated position where you're not tilting the lens upward, causing inordinate convergence. Pushing the creative envelope in this bland milieu has proven to be a rigorous balancing act.

Shooting the Oklahoma-Texas border has been an interesting experience. I'm sure many drivers on I-35, including devout railfans, have driven through the area without giving it a second thought. Truth is, it doesn't attract much attention. However, it's not the area that made the experience so interesting; by cranking up my intensity, the more beautiful aspects, as well as the more enthralling operational facets of the railroad, stood out in great relief against a pastoral and almost featureless backdrop. As a result, I've come to appreciate the challenges the railroad deals with here as well as the intrinsic beauty the locale possesses. I'm sure you can apply this same approach to railroad niches in your neighborhood and come away equally rewarded.

Steve Schmollinger and his wife, Lynn, are both native Californians, but now live in the Dallas, Texas, area. They have two sons — both railfans — three daughters, and two granddaughters. Steve has been photographing railroads since 1970.