



Rock Island

THE IOWA INTERSTATE'S BUSY EAST END

It's a Mighty Fine Line

BY CHRIS LASTOVICH/PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

"THE ROCK ISLAND LINE is a mighty fine line" says the old blues folks song. Though the Rock Island officially left us on March 31, 1980, regional railroad Iowa Interstate has successfully operated a significant portion since 1984. Over the last decade, this dynamic regional has seen growth in both its traffic volume and fan base. With the 2012 NRHS Convention being held this summer in Cedar Rapids, fans from all around the country will be flocking to central Iowa where they will no doubt catch a glimpse of one of the most successful and aesthetically pleasing railroads in the Midwest.

The Iowa Interstate formed in 1984 when it took over a segment of former Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific main line from Blue Island, Ill., outside of Chicago, westward to Council Bluffs, Iowa. In addition to this main line trackage, it also operates a branch line from Bureau to Peoria, Ill., and a small branch out of Rock Island to Milan, Ill., among a few other short stub branches in western Iowa. In 2004, the Iowa Interstate entered an agreement to run trains into Cedar Rapids over the Cedar Rapids & Iowa City (CIC or "Crandic") line from a set of wyes near Homestead to Fairfax. On the east end, IAIS reaches Chicagoland on trackage rights over CSX from Utica to Joliet and on Metra trackage from Joliet to

the former Rock Island Burr Oak Yard in Blue Island, Ill.

At the start-up of operations in 1984, Iowa Interstate's traffic base consisted primarily of seasonal grain shipments and intermodal traffic between Chicago and the Union Pacific in Council Bluffs, but into the 21st century this began to change. Grain and intermodal traffic are still fairly prominent; however, corn products from shippers like ADM and Cargill have slowly become the big money maker (a trait IAIS shares with the entire rail industry). For example, ADM corn based products, in both liquid and solid varieties, have become one of the main commodities moving in and out of Cedar Rapids. Massive ethanol plants (more corn) have begun popping up all along IAIS. The ethanol boom has allowed IAIS to upgrade its entire main line and replace a beaten down roster of first and second generation EMD's with modern, fuel efficient, state of the art GE ES44AC's.

Operations

The Iowa Interstate is divided into subdivisions. The 221 miles from Burr Oak Yard to Iowa City is known as Subdivision 1; included in this are both the Metra and CSX sections. IAIS's 44-mile line down central Illinois to Peoria is Subdivision 2. This short but quaint rail line is some of the earliest railroad-

ing ever built in Illinois; uniquely, Sub 2's mileposts start at 114.2 in Bureau stemming off of the main line, and run down to m.p. 157.5 to an interchange point with the Tazewell & Peoria at its Limit Yard. Subdivision 3 starts in Iowa City, and runs 85 miles to Newton, Iowa, and Subdivision 4 runs the remainder of the 151.5 miles from Newton to Council Bluffs, Iowa.

The most recent addition to the railroad is operation over the Crandic into Cedar Rapids, which is reached via the Yocum Connection, a new wye just west of Homestead. This connection allows trains to reach the CIC at Fairfax without making any reverse moves on- or off of the main line. This short 17.5 mile line toward Cedar Rapids is Subdivision 3B.

The IAIS has recently begun construction on the new South Amana staging yard approximately one mile west of the Yocum Connection. This will alleviate congestion at what has been the railroad's primary, albeit small, yard in Iowa City. Accompanying the new yard will be a new shop complex including a massive overhead crane and all necessities required to maintain the new fleet of modern GE six-axle diesels.

Train frequency on the eastern half of the railroad has been on the rise in recent years as ethanol plants open

OPPOSITE: Painted in tribute to the old Rock Island, Iowa Interstate's "heritage unit" 513 leads a PECR (Peoria-Cedar Rapids) loaded coal train around the southwest leg of the wye at Bureau connecting Sub 2 with Sub 1, on March 13, 2011.



THEN AND NOW: During the summer of 1977, an extra Rock Island manifest from Peoria is cruising east through Depue, Ill. Back then there were 20-25 trains a day through this town within a 24-hour period. PHOTO BY MARK LLANUZA Thirty-two years later, Iowa Interstate's train BUSW passes the remains of the depot in Depue, Ill. The train is headed to Utica to interchange with the CSX, and to work a cement plant interchange in LaSalle, Ill. RIGHT: Iowa Interstate 708 is in charge of a CRPE with 80 empty coal hoppers bound for the Tazewell & Peoria connection in Peoria, passing the beautifully restored Rock Island depot in Chillicothe, Ill., on Nov. 24, 2006.



across this old Rock Island main line. IAIS operates two regularly scheduled road trains a day, one each way out of their home terminals: Blue Island to Council Bluffs, and Council Bluffs to Blue Island, symbolized BICB and CBBI respectively (also nicknamed the East and West trains).

In addition to these scheduled trains, there is the Crandic Turn that makes a round trip with interchange traffic from the IAIS at Iowa City to the CIC at its Smith Doves Yard in Fairfax. This turn is symbolized ICCR and CRIC

for east and westbound movements. Once this traffic arrives in Iowa City from Cedar Rapids, another job will come on duty in Iowa City to operate a turn to Silvis Yard in Illinois, symbolized ICSI and SIIC.

Within the last year, the Iowa Interstate has changed their operations in western Illinois, rebuilding a portion of

the former Rock Island Silvis Yard, and transferring all major yard duties there, leaving Rock Island yard as a staging and interchange point with BNSF Railway and Canadian Pacific, along with an overnight local crew that works the small Milan Branch.

In addition to these scheduled main line trains, there are a handful of jobs

that take care of switching and industrial work amongst the various terminals. On the east side of operations, there are Blue Island, Bureau, Silvis, Rock Island and Iowa City Switchers, symbolized BISW, BUSW, SISW, RISW, and ICSW respectively.

All the jobs mainly take care of interchange traffic and local yard work, with the exception of the BUSW, which can actually do quite a bit of main line running. Nicknamed "The Rocket" after Rock Island's famous Peoria Rocket, BUSW has two crews, one called at 8:00 a.m. daily, and 8:00 p.m. Monday through Friday. The three main jobs for BUSW are making the run to Peoria and back with interchange grain or coal

with the Tazewell & Peoria or to work a rather large industrial park in Henry; operating east to Utica to interchange with CSX and work the Buzzi Unichem Cement interchange in LaSalle; or make the run all the way west to Silvis with cars to alleviate traffic from the east or west trains. Traffic and industry work all varies on a day to day basis. The easiest way to railfan this operation is to show up at Bureau before the crew goes on duty at 8:00 a.m., and see which direction they head.

With the amount of traffic being forwarded from Cedar Rapids eastward, there is the possibility of an extra east train operating out of Silvis for Blue Island symbolized SIBI. Of course, using

ABOVE: Big power rules on Sub 2 this day as a local BUSW crew is heading through Henry, Ill., to make a trade with the Tazewell & Peoria interchange in Peoria. Crews will swap 30 grain empties for a heavy loaded coal train, on December 11, 2009. **LEFT:** The freshly painted 513 is seen on her maiden voyage to the east with CBBI (Council Bluffs-Blue Island), working the small yard at Iowa City while westbound counterpart BICB awaits its turn on January 24, 2010.

the old adage, "what goes east must come west," extra westbound movements are symbolized BISI. In addition to these multiple day a week extras, there are a plethora of other extra and unscheduled trains that operate the east end, such as eastbound ethanol move ANBIU (Annawan, Ill., to Blue Island). There is also an ethanol plant located at Menlo, Iowa, just west of Des Moines, but these loads are usually picked up by the day's east train, and switched out at Silvis to run the remainder of the way as an SIBI. Westbound empty ethanol moves are either combined with that day's West train out of Blue Island, or are run as an extra BISI train.

Extra seasonal grain moves are also very common, and can have a varying array of symbols. One popular one is a NTCR, (Newtown, Iowa, to Cedar Rapids), as most western grain now goes to Cedar Rapids. Coal trains are also a bi-weekly occurrence on The Iowa, operated from Peoria to the ADM power plant in Cedar Rapids. Loads come from a mine in southern Illinois and are interchanged to the IAIS in Peoria from Norfolk Southern via the



Stretching their legs on Metra territory, west-bound train BICB is just out of Burr Oak Yard nearing Tinley Park and is making quite the racket with its eclectic mix of motive power on August 2, 2009.

Tazewell & Peoria terminal railroad. These moves are random and unpredictable, but will normally be forwarded up to Bureau by a BUSW local crew and operated to Cedar Rapids as a PECCR coal load. Coal empties out of Cedar Rapids usually head east combined with the day's turn to Iowa City, where it will then be separated and run to Peoria as CRPE.

Motive Power

Many major motive power changes have taken place within the last decade on the Iowa Interstate. It started in 2004 and 2005 with the addition of 22 former Penn Central GP38-2s, rebuilt by Union Pacific while under its ownership. IAIS acquired the 22 EMD's from Locomotive Leasing Partners (LLPX) to replace its badly aging fleet of first generation rebuilt four-axle Geeps. With the more modern second generation four-axes also came eight former Reserve Mining SD38-2s. These were primarily acquired for use on the recently (at the time) acquired Crandic trackage to Cedar Rapids.

Progress and growth brought a major motive power change in April 2008, this time in the form of a dozen modern GE Evolution Series (GEVO) ES44AC's. An additional two ES44AC's were delivered just over a year later. The final unit, No. 513, was painted in a special commemorative Rock Island freight livery. Around this same time, two mother slug sets were created using old GP10 hulks for slugs, and a GP38/GP38-2 for mothers, based at ei-

ther ends of system in Council Bluffs and Blue Island.

With the addition of the futuristic GE's, IAIS placed into storage almost a dozen of their EMD's in favor of the more fuel-efficient GEVO's. The Iowa can now operate much longer trains and utilize distributed power technology, using one or even two motors remotely linked to the head end, but distributed either in the train or on the rear. Distributed Power Units (DPUs) can be seen on almost any Iowa Interstate train, but are most commonly used in a 2x1 format on the ICCR and CRIC turns, and 1x1 configurations on loaded ethanol trains.

Aside from all of these changes, IAIS chairman Henry Posner III also purchased and imported two 2-10-2 QJ-type Chinese steam locomotives for use on excursions across the system. IAIS 6988 and 7081 have both made numerous appearances since their arrival in 2006 on passenger and freight trains, along with fundraising events across central Iowa. These two steamers, along with a modest passenger fleet, reside at the yard in Newton.

Railfanning Iowa Interstate

Even though the IAIS only operates roughly 475 miles of main line railroad, chasing its trains can be quite a challenge at times. Between a lack of frequent radio communication and overnight operations, you definitely need to know where to go to find moving trains. Daylight running can be primarily seen on the railroad's busiest

stretches of trackage between the Yocum Connection and Rock Island.

We will go from west to east, starting out at Newton where the east train CBBI usually goes on duty before sunrise. As detailed and useful as track warrants can be, unless you catch it being transmitted, radio communications are very infrequent at best. If you're planning on finding a train already out of its terminal, a good idea is utilizing the EOT/FRED frequency in your scanner. Other than that, chasing this train is fairly straightforward, using either I-80 or U.S. Route 6. Most of the main line trackage is rated at Class 3 speeds, making it 40 m.p.h. for freight, and 60 m.p.h. for passenger moves. There is a chunk of IAIS-maintained (leased from CSX) rail from Bureau east to Utica as well as all of Sub 2 that is all 25 m.p.h. stick rail from the Rock Island days. It's probably wise to pick and choose your locations before diving into a chase.

On an average day, CBBI will get into Iowa City early morning, do whatever work is required, maybe swap some power, and continue east to its next major terminal at Silvis. Also on the move in the early morning is the CRIC turn, usually out of Fairfax around daybreak or earlier. On average, the turn will follow CBBI into Iowa City from Yocum and wait just west of town for CBBI to do its work before proceeding into the yard.

While CBBI is doing its work in Iowa City, West train BICB should be working its way west out of Rock Island.

These guys get into Silvis anywhere from 5:00 to 7:00 a.m. and also make a set-out and a possible pick-up before heading west. Typically they try to make CBBI and BICB meet just east of Iowa City yard limits near First Avenue in town, but that doesn't always work. Otherwise, there are four sidings that can be used between Rock Island and Iowa City; from east to west they are Walcott, Twin States (east of Wilton), North Star (west of Wilton), and West Liberty.

After CBBI departs Iowa City and makes its meet with the west train, it will continue on east into Rock Island. It may work the CP interchange at Taylor Street in Davenport, Iowa, before

crossing the Government Bridge into Illinois. Once on the Illinois side, it will traverse the jointly owned single track called the BN Industrial Track from 44th Street in Rock Island, to 7th Street in East Moline. The BN industrial track is owned by BNSF with both CP and IAIS granted trackage rights.

Once on its home rails again at 7th Street, it's only a couple miles or so until it reaches Silvis Yard. Once at Silvis, the train performs an abundance of switching maneuvers, re-blocking the train for the east, and setting out ethanol or grain blocks for other jobs or extras, usually killing most of the daylight. Once work is complete, the Newton crew will forward the train just east

of Silvis to Carbon Cliff siding, where they will tie the train down, and await a Silvis crew to take the train the remainder of the way to Blue Island under the cover of darkness. The SI crew is normally called between 5:00 and 6:00 p.m., so like many other trains on IAIS, the long days of summer are ideal.

Backtracking toward Iowa City, if you wish to follow CBBI west, the same kind of terminal work is performed as the East train does before departing Iowa City. Usually heading west around lunchtime or a little later, it's pretty much a straight shot to Newton where the train will be tied down, and await a new Newton based crew that comes on duty at 5:00 p.m. to take the train west to Council Bluffs under the cover of darkness.

After both the east and west trains have cleared and the ICRI turn has made it into Iowa City, a new Silvis turn crew will come on duty to forward the Crandic traffic to Silvis. Usually on duty in early afternoon at IC, this turn is a good candidate for the long days of summer. Making it into Illinois in the mid-afternoon, if the swapping of trains takes place in a timely manner,



LEFT: Iowa Interstate 2-10-2's 6988 and 7081 double head an ICRI (Iowa City-Rock Island) photo freight passed the restored West Liberty depot in fine fashion on October 18, 2008. BELOW: Stricken by the blizzard of 2011, the IAIS was forced to use the only two units they had at their Burr Oak Yard to power a 100 car extra BISI three days after the storm, making for a rare daylight westbound, seen here near Joliet, Ill., on February 12, 2011.



a lucky railfan might be faced with a westbound SIIC turn in some juicy evening sunlight. Also, an ICSW local job may operate east toward Wilton to work the industries just outside of town after all the traffic has cleared. If fanning the Quad Cities area, be on the lookout for the SISW terminal switcher to be making a run or two to Rock Island yard and back via the BN Industrial Track. From personal experience, the westbound SISW runs mid-morning after BICB's departure.

Now moving east toward Blue Island, things are a little different. On an average day, schedules and call times can easily change. In a perfect world, CBBI from the west will operate over CSX trackage and get into the Blue Island area in the wee hours of the morning. A third trick (overnight) BISW crew will usually hop onto the train, set out the intermodal traffic, and forward what usually amounts to the entire rest of the train to the Indiana Harbor Belt via BI Junction. Due to possible severe congestion down on the Indiana Harbor Belt (IHB), this move may take until daylight hours to complete. Extra eastbounds like ethanol moves or second sections of a CBBI are usually on duty at Silvis around midnight, leaving the train to work its way east overnight and, if all goes well, getting near the Metra trackage around daybreak. This is all as needed and sometimes random, but it is entirely possible to find an eastbound IAIS move in daylight on the east end once or twice a week.

A good place to check for an eastbound at daybreak is in Rockdale, Ill., just west of Joliet near the end of CSX ownership. The train will hold there for permission onto Metra, and wait for a CSX bridge tender to lower the lift bridge (Bridge 407) across the Des Plaines River and into Joliet proper.

In Blue Island, there are 3 local crews that are utilized throughout the day. The overnight job is symbolized CBIHB, comes on duty after midnight, and switches out the east train when it arrives forwarding all the Council Bluffs (CB) traffic to the IHB. The first day time job is symbolized BIIND and



TOP: Class unit of the GE's, IAIS 500 leads a string of empty ethanol tanks in BICB, seen departing Burr Oak Yard in Blue Island, photographed from the Western Avenue overpass on July 20, 2009. **MIDDLE:** Train BUSW is headed home from Peoria with loads of grain from the Tazewell & Peoria as the pair of 700's glide through the small town of Putnam, Ill., on IAIS' Sub 2 on April 17, 2010. **RIGHT:** At the Tazewell & Peoria's yard limit in Peoria, Ill., an empty CRPE coal train has just arrived. The TZPR is utilizing an old Illinois & Midland SD18/GP10 combo to pick up the empty hoppers while IAIS' GP38-2's hold in the clear on November 24, 2006.



ABOVE: Unlike the other switcher jobs on the system, the BUSW (Bureau Switcher) can do a fair amount of main line running in addition to its yard work. Here we see the crew utilizing an SD38-2/GP38-2 combo lead a healthy cut of cars across the Rock River in Colona, Ill., on October 18, 2008. **LEFT:** An SD38-2 and an ES44AC team up on this extra RIBI made up primarily of ethanol loads out of Cedar Rapids. The two units are on their hands and knees working up a steep grade on Metra's Rock Island Line near Mokena, Ill., with 120 loads of fuel on September 23, 2010.

builds all westbound trains. BIHHB is the second daytime job that does all industry work and pulls interchange from the IHB for the next day's west train. The Iowa no longer interchanges directly with the CN in Joliet, and any one of these three jobs can either deliver or pick-up unit ethanol trains from the IHB or Chicago Rail Link at Burr Oak, all on an as-needed basis.

Summer months are favorable for photographing the west train on the east end of the railroad. Operating over Metra rails, Iowa Interstate is forced to work around their "rush hour curfews" and time restraints. The first opening for a westbound IAIS move on a weekday is after what Metra considers its final rush hour train, train No. 421 departing Vermont Street in Blue Island at 6:42 p.m. If the west train does not

depart on the heels of that Metra, it will more than likely be forced to wait until the next window, at 7:24 p.m.

A Mighty Fine Line

What attracts fans to this nearly 500 mile regional carrier? Maybe it's the Interstate's rich heritage, attractive paint scheme, steam program, or just its friendly employees. I know my own reasons stem from my childhood in the late '80s and early '90s, growing up in suburban Berwyn, just two miles outside of Chicago's city limits; I lived but 100 feet from once growing and thriving regional Chicago Central & Pacific. With its rag-tag roster of second and third hand, first generation Geeps, I was thrilled as a child to watch massive manifest freights roll by my house behind mismatched rainbow consists.

Now fast forwarding a bit to the year 2001; as I began to venture out to explore the railroad world around Chicagoland, I spent one wintery Saturday at Joliet Union Station in hopes of catching what my friends and I believed to be a "rare" Iowa Interstate train. Armed with little knowledge and a cheap digital camcorder, my first eastbound IAIS train came through town, turning out to be the BICB, led by five four-axle motors, made up of various models, paint schemes, and histories; it very much reminded me of my childhood, growing up watching the CC&P from my front window. Over the last decade or so, I've watched my favorite little Iowa based regional railroad make gold out of corn products, and turn their roster of rag tag first generation EMD's into a GE-based roster made up of breaking edge technology and fuel efficiency.

The only constant in life is change, and change is what fuels a railfan's ambition to do what we do. As the Iowa Interstate grows with the times, so shall the railfans that follow this former Rock Island line. □