



FOLLOWING THE KCS PITTSBURG SUB

RETRO BELLES

BY CARL GRAVES/PHOTOS AS NOTED

"KCS CONSOLE ONE KANSAS CITY... That's a good track bulletin... Upon the arrival of the BNSF 5658 North, KCS 4054 has permission to leave Airline Junction and enter CTC at KCS Junction." The dispatcher's words on my scanner excited me; I knew a southbound Kansas City Southern freight was heading my way with a beautiful "Retro Belle" diesel on the point! I estimated that within an

hour or two, this train would roll past my location south of Kansas City at Grandview, Mo., milepost 23.5 on the Pittsburg Subdivision.

After years of painting its diesel fleet in subdued shades of gray and white, in 2007 Kansas City Southern debuted a bright, new paint scheme reminiscent of the colors once used on the railroad's famous *Southern Belle* passenger

train. This nod to the past was warmly welcomed by trackside observers who follow the 120-mile long route between Kansas City, Mo., and Pittsburg, Kan.

The rewards come from encountering one to five Retro Belle-led freights and grain trains per day in usable light running through big city, small town, and rural settings, with the ability to chase some of them and get multiple shots.

OPPOSITE: Retro Belles rule the KCS Pittsburg Sub! Train QKCNL rolls under the Highway 58 overpass on October 21, 2014, just south of Grandview, Mo. In the distance you can see the signals at the north switch of the IFG siding, as well as intermodal cars that this train will pick up behind its rear DP unit. **CARL GRAVES** **ABOVE:** Kansas City's skyline dominates the background with SD70ACes 4031 and 4114 heading geographically northeast at milepost 2 just west of KCS's Knoche Yard. In tow is the daily cut of Schneider double stacks that will head south on the next freight out of Knoche. The pair were shined up for a photo shoot for *National Geographic* photographers on July 26, 2008, which also happened to be CTC Board's annual "Day in North America" photography event that year. **KEVIN EUDALY**



ABOVE: Northbound grain empty GHVCDR crosses the 875 foot-long 63rd Street steel viaduct in Kansas City's Swope Park on April 4, 2015. A unit in the older KCS gray paint leads two Retro Belles. RIGHT: Southbound QKCNL is about to cross Main Street at the north end of the siding in Grandview on October 26, 2014. It will pick up intermodal and auto cars at the nearby IFG CenterPoint yard. CARL GRAVES



There are also challenges. Foreign power, especially BNSF and Union Pacific, will pull the other five to six trains you will normally see. Some once-viable vantage points are no longer accessible due to fences, foliage, and increased security. In addition, the line's north-south orientation means that for much of the year, northbounders will be backlit. I have found, however, that the positives outweigh the negatives, which is why I am as enthusiastic about this KCS line as I was when I first saw it in the 1970s.

Mainline and Yards

The Pittsburg Sub begins at Knoche Yard in Kansas City, and heads south along Missouri's western border before it veers west to the southeast Kansas crew change point of Pittsburg (milepost 128.2), home to a small yard and office.

Located in the middle of the Kansas City metro area, Knoche (pronounced "kuh-NO-key") Yard is a joint facility shared with the Canadian Pacific. It

contains a tower and dozens of tracks often overflowing with cars, although the 2008 opening of a COFC/TOFC facility south of the city allowed KCS to close the crowded intermodal facility at Knoche.

In contrast the small city of Pittsburg has a modest four-track yard parallel to the mainline. There is also a one-story yard office and a small siding with crossovers to allow the addition of distributed power (DP) locomotives to high-tonnage southbounders for the

step up-and-down grades in Missouri, Oklahoma, and Arkansas.

The heavy 136-pound welded mainline connecting these two distant yards is a single track route with eight passing sidings. Grandview, Drexel, Eve, and Mulberry sidings are more than 10,000 feet long, while Blue Valley, Jaudon, Amsterdam, and Hume sidings range in length from 6,792 to 8,583 feet. All of the line is centralized traffic control (CTC), with approach-lit signals and passing



Pittsburg Sub

Illustration by Otto M. Vondrak. Not all roads, lines and stations shown. Not an official map. ©2015 White River Productions

- AMTK - Amtrak
- BNSF - BNSF Railway
- CBQ - Chicago, Burlington & Quincy
- CP - Canadian Pacific
- CRIP - Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific
- ICE - Iowa, Chicago & Eastern (CP)
- KCS - Kansas City Southern
- KCT - Kansas City Terminal
- MILW - Milwaukee Road
- MP - Missouri Pacific
- SHRX - Belton, Grandview & Kansas City
- SLSF - St. Louis-San Francisco ("Frisco")
- UP - Union Pacific



siding switches controlled by dispatchers at KCS headquarters in Kansas City. South of Grandview is the CenterPoint/IFG (International Freight Gateway) intermodal facility opened in 2008. It has an 8,448-foot siding, but dispatchers do not use it for meets.

Trains do not move very fast on the Pittsburg Sub. The maximum speed is just 55 m.p.h., and there are some permanent 45 m.p.h. speed restrictions. In addition, a 15-mile-long .5 percent grade from about milepost 8 to Grandview's Main Street (milepost 23.5) slows down southbounders. Heavy unit trains manage only 15-25 m.p.h. out of Kansas City. There is also a .5 percent grade from milepost 37 to milepost 29 for northbounders, but since unit trains coming in this direction are empty, the incline is not an obstacle.

Motive Power

Retro Belles are the latest, and in my view the best, addition to the KCS locomotive inventory. Locomotives dressed in white ruled the rails through the 1970s. The first gray-and-yellow engines started appearing in 1988. Eleven years later the first of 50 GE AC4400CWs began arriving. Also gray and yellow, these 4,400 h.p., distributed power-ready engines began replacing the smaller EMD SD45s, SD40-2s, SD60s, and GP40-2.

The first Retro Belle-painted engines began appearing on the property in 2007. These included EMD SD70ACe and GE ES44AC models. This paint scheme of red, yellow, and Brunswick green (which looks black) is based on the colors of Southern Belle passenger trains running from 1949 to 1969. Unfortunately, many engines you see on the Pittsburg Sub are not Retro Belles.

Operations

Ever since the first Powder River Basin coal arrived on the Pittsburg Sub in November 1976, the vast majority of these unit trains have been powered by locomotives from Burlington Northern and successor BNSF, as well as Union Pacific. Unit crude oil trains, which began appearing in 2012, as well as frac sand movements, have also tended to run with non-KCS engines from UP and Canadian Pacific.

In 2014 and 2015, unit coal movements headed south from Kansas City toward many on-line and off-line locations. Most common have been train sets for the La Cygne power station just west of Amsterdam, Mo. Although these trains could drop in the future as some plants put more reliance on natural gas, coal traffic remained strong through the summer of 2015.

Fortunately manifest, intermodal, and grain movements use KCS power, which

is increasingly dominated by Retro Belles. On most days one to three loaded grain trains arrive at Knoche Yard from elevators in the metro area and from Union Pacific storage facilities in locations such as Topeka and Atchison, Kan., as well as Council Bluffs, Iowa. They head south to KCS locations like DeQueen, Ark., and Heavener, Okla., while others go to Mexico. Much of the grain is destined for huge domestic poultry farms. When unloaded, these empty hopper trains come back north.

A pair of daily high-priority manifests (HKCSH and HSHKC) pass over the line between Kansas City and Shreveport, La. Both trains sometimes run with a rear DP. Although they are scheduled to travel over the Pittsburg Sub at night, traffic congestion or mechanical issues can allow you to see them in daylight, especially in the morning south of Kansas City.

The most distinctive KCS operation is the QKCNL, which employees call the Q-train. This daily southbounder usually leaves Knoche Yard sometime in the morning with manifest cars and a rear DP. At the IFG facility south of



RIGHT: Train QKCNL heads south at 86th Street in Kansas City, Mo., on November 2, 2014. A recent brush cutting operation has opened up this new location to photographers. The entire KCS route from Air Line Junction to the top of the hill in Grandview, is without a public grade crossing. CARL GRAVES
BELOW: Two SD70ACes power a cut of Schneider double stacks arriving at the yard throat tracks at Knoche Yard from the west on July 26, 2008. Brand new BNSF SD70ACes 9233, 9245, and 9239 have just been set up for operation at Mid America Car and have been delivered to the KCS for movement west to BNSF Railway's former Santa Fe Argentine Yard on Kansas City's west side. KEVIN EUDALY



ABOVE: Manifest train MKCSH is about to pass under the J Highway overpass on the south edge of Amsterdam, Mo., on March 16, 2009. **LEFT:** KCS's pristine trio of executive F-units is on the final leg of a Kansas City tour on August 31, 2011. The engineering special operated west out of Union Station, through Santa Fe Junction, up to the NS (former Wabash) yard, then east to Birmingham and south through Air Line Junction, where this photograph was taken, and back to Union Station. All three are former Canadian National F9s. KEVIN EUDALY



Grandview, the Q-train does a backup move into a yard siding to pick up intermodal and automobile cars, which the train attaches behind the DP. This train then continues south to Pittsburg, Shreveport, and the Mexican border at Nuevo Laredo. The northbound counterpart, the QSHKC, which I have not seen with a DP, performs setouts and pickups of intermodal and auto racks and parts cars at IFG. It is an easy train to chase. Q-trains running in each direction

usually have Retro Belle power.

Two added Pittsburg Sub trains run just between Knoche and IFG. The IVNKC is a CSX-originated train that heads west from Marion, Ohio, and enters KCS rails in the East St. Louis area (Venice, Ill.) for the rest of its journey to Kansas City. Its counterpart, the IKCVN, is put together at IFG before it heads north to Knoche Yard, where it turns east toward Marion. Usually these trains use CSX or UP power, although I

caught it once with a pair of Retro Belles. These colorful intermodal trains tend to operate at night. Later in the day, a yard switcher shuffles cars around the IFG grounds, which is fenced and off limits to the public. As of July 2015, the IVNKC runs daily except Monday, while the IKCVN operates daily except Saturday.

Total rail traffic on the Pittsburg Sub is modest, with a slight drop-off as one goes south. In 2014 and the first half of 2015, an average of 20 trains every 24 hours passed between Knoche yard and IFG yard, the farthest south that the two intermodal trains go. Traffic falls a little more south of the wye at Amsterdam, Mo. (milepost 61.6). Here at least one coal load per day heads to the nearby La Cygne power station, unloads, and then returns to Kansas City. From Amsterdam to Pittsburg, the average daily train count is about 16, although traffic volumes can vary.



ABOVE: This northbound empty grain train is about to arrive at Knoche Yard late in the evening on July 13, 2008. The KCS train will cross the UP's grade-level line into Neff Yard in moments and swing around the curve to the west and enter Knoche Yard. RIGHT: A two-car northbound local freight behind GP38 No. 2040 is crossing the UP diamond at Air Line Junction at the entrance to KCS's Knoche Yard on September 9, 2011. The GP38 was built as Penn Central 7800, and became Conrail 7800, then Chicago, Missouri & Western 2040, Gateway Western No. 2040, and finally KCS 2040. KEVIN EUDALY PHOTOS



Following the Pittsburgh Sub

A good scanner is vital to help you track and shoot trains, especially those with Retro Belle motors. I use AAR Channel 10 (160.260), where I hear the dispatcher as well as hot box detectors. Unlike most railroads, the KCS has a separate frequency (AAR Channel 16, 160.350) for crews to talk to the dispatcher, but it is much less useful.

Important information flows from the dispatchers, many of whom have Southern accents that reflect the days when the dispatching center was in Shreveport. The dispatcher identifies every train by the lead locomotive's company and engine number as well as the direction of travel. They also authorize the departure of every train heading south from Knoche Yard.

One can identify the southbound Q-train because the dispatcher will tell the crew, as it approaches IFG, that it has permission to occupy the business track and to make a mainline back-up move to grab intermodal or auto cars.

Added tips come from trackside hotbox detectors and KCS employees. Broadcasting on AAR Channel 10, On Channel 10 you hear train crews calling wayside signals, such as "KCS 4042 North. Clear North Jaudon. Out."

In the last few years, I have noticed that there are fewer photo opportunities on the Pittsburgh Sub north end (Kansas City) than there were in past decades. Due to increased security and safety concerns, foliage, and fences, I no longer attempt KCS photos in Knoche Yard and from the main line south to Swope Park. Although one can get photos of trains rumbling over Swope Park viaducts at 63rd Street and Gregory, parking and vistas are tighter than they used to be. There is a decent shot from the small 86th Street overpass farther south, but for me an easier place to wait is Grandview. The Main Street crossing (milepost 23.5) is the north end of a long passing siding and the south end of the sustained .5 percent grade out of Kansas City. Often a northbound is sitting at Grandview, waiting for the dispatcher's permission to head toward Knoche yard or tracks of the Kansas City Terminal (KCT). Empty

KCS coal and grain trains often use the KCT to exit the Kansas City metro area, bypassing crowded Knoche yard. From the Thunderbird Road exit off Highway 150 south of Grandview, I once got a grab shot of the IVNKC arriving at the IFG yard. The exit ramp is not a good place to linger, however, because there is very little extra room here, and close by there is a Honeywell nuclear component factory with tight security.

A good place to wait on the south edge of the Kansas City metro area is near the Highway 58 overpass in Belton. From the bridge one can get decent elevated photos in either direction, especially looking north to the South IFG signals on the intermodal yard's south end, which is approximately milepost 29. East of the overpass, you can drive north on Prospect Road, which will give you a chance to photograph the switcher without trespassing, as well as one spot

to the north where you are right next to the tracks. South of the Highway 58 overpass, the pace of road traffic and life in general is much slower.

From mileposts 29 to 62.4 at Amsterdam, there are many photo opportunities easily accessible from county roads. Drive west off the Highway 58 overpass and turn left (south) on Missouri Highway D. This road will take you to many grade-level crossings near or in the tiny community of Cleveland (population 661), the passing siding and hamlet of Jaudon, and the siding and town of Drexel (just over 1,000 residents). From Drexel, take local highways 18 and Y to Amsterdam. Main Street of this little place (population 262) has a one-block downtown reminiscent of the rural South. Nearby is a Dutch windmill and a KCS caboose. On the town's south edge there is a nice overpass (Route J), from which you can get good elevated photos of southbounds.

From Amoret (six miles south of the Amsterdam overpass) to the passing siding at Eve (milepost 98.9), the line is very hard to follow. There are few good roads in this somewhat depressing territory, which was once the site of surface coal mines. I recommend that you take Highway J west a few miles from Amsterdam past the huge La

Cygne power station and lake to U.S. Highway 69. This fast four-lane road will take you quickly to Fort Scott, Kan. Here you exit onto U.S. Highway 54 east, which will lead you to a relatively open overpass on the north end of the Eve passing siding. Vistas are good in either direction, although sun angles nearly always favor southbounds. South of here the terrain is tough to navigate, so I suggest you return west to Fort Scott and continue south on Highway 69. With enough patience and a Kansas highway map or Kansas DeLorme Atlas, you can find your way to Mulberry (population 516), just west of the Missouri line. On the south edge of town, take East 14th Street east to the overpass, which is called Missouri Highway P. Here you can get shots of southbounds as they go past the south end of the Mulberry passing siding. Then retrace your steps to the west and turn south once again on U.S. 69 for the short drive to the crew change point.

The final stop on this KCS subdivision is Pittsburg, Kan. In addition to the yard and crew change point, the town has restaurants, motels, and convenience stores. There is an overhead shot just north of the yard at Cayuga Street. This road loops south and becomes Rouse Avenue, which you can take to another

overpass location, East 21st Street. Just below it is the yard office. Unfortunately there is a big chain link fence on either side of this small bridge, but by walking beyond the fence on the west, you can get some acceptable photos. In addition, if you have a small lens, you can fit it through the fence and get a picture with a different angle. From the overpass west side beyond the fence, you can take a photograph of the big idling locomotives that crews attach to the rear or in the middle of heavy southbounds. While there on April 4, 2015, I counted 11 engines: seven Retro Belles, two KCS gray units, one UP, and one CSX engine. Earlier that day, I caught the QKCNL at Highway 58, getting photos of it there, at Cleveland, Amsterdam, and Eve before taking a few final shots in Pittsburg, where it got a new engineer and conductor and departed.

Enjoy the Chase

Whether you follow a southbound from Kansas City to the crew change point over 120 miles away, or you focus on a smaller segment of the line, the KCS Pittsburg Sub is worth your time. Despite the photographic challenges, there are rewards, especially capturing the growing number of great-looking Retro Belles. ■

BELOW: A southbound loaded grain train passes under the Highway 58 overpass on November 18, 2014. It has just passed the IFG CenterPoint intermodal yard located a short distance south of Grandview. CARL GRAVES

