



The KCS of the 1970s little resembles the KCS of today

Meandering Along the Kansas City Southern

BY KEVIN EUDALY/PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

OPPOSITE: Three brand-new EMD SD40-2s, 689, 688, and 687, roll a southbound through Grandview, Mo., on June 26, 1980, on what is likely their first revenue run south. They're crossing over Blue Ridge Boulevard, and have made it to the top of the hill from the river bottoms at Blue Valley, 14 miles north and 285 feet lower in elevation, much of which is on a 0.5 percent grade.

TOP: Three decades later, on April 11, 2010, GE ES44AC 4696 leads EMD SD70MAC 3934 about to pass under Highway 58 in Belton, Mo. The trackage to the right in the distance is associated with the new intermodal yard at what KCS calls International Freight Gateway, or IFG. This grain train is destined for the Gulf of Mexico for export.

WE MOVED FROM BEDFORD, IND., to Kansas City, Mo., when I was six. Yogi Berra, famed baseball player, coach, and manager, when giving directions to his house once said, "When you come to a fork in the road, take it." The truth behind the saying was that he lived on a loop, so it didn't matter which way you went. Unlike directions to Yogi's home, few proverbial forks in the road of life work out the same either way. Where we are now has been profoundly affected by an undefinable quantity of forks, each decision at which has steered each of us on our own path in life. My path followed the Kansas City Southern.

My family ultimately landed at a home on the east side of Swope Park, which just happened to be about a half-mile from the KCS' landmark concrete arch bridge over Gregory Boulevard. In the care-free days of childhood and an era before lawsuits and litigation caused railroads to police their rights-of-way, Swope Park along the KCS became the land of adventure. My brothers, neighborhood friends, and I all regularly headed to the wooded edge of the park to explore, hunt with our pellet guns, fish, build campfires, and generally enjoy those sunny days. Hopefully, by now, the golfers have forgiven our flag-throwing shenanigans.



ABOVE: Three SD40-2s power a southbound coal train destined for an Oklahoma Gas & Electric plant on May 21, 1980, not long after the right-of-way was spectacularly cleared on the Kansas City mainline. A brakeman can be seen 14 cars back as this train was having trouble on the hill. Right next to the brakeman is milepost 15, which is measured from a location near the “goose-neck” on the northwest side of downtown Kansas City. The main portion of the Knoche Yard complex lies between mileposts 2.5 and 5.1.



ABOVE: Coal was the salvation of the KCS in the mid-1970s, funneled off the Burlington Northern via Murray Yard on the north side of the Missouri River in North Kansas City. Here a BN U30C splices BN and KCS SD40-2s hauling coal to the Kansas City Power & Light power plant at La Cygne, Kan. Behind the train is the General Motors Leeds assembly plant, served by the Missouri Pacific. This shot is off the shoulder of I-435 near the stadiums that house the Chiefs and Royals on January 17, 1983. Small trees are already growing up along the right-of-way.

The KCS was always nearby, woven into our memories in those wonderful years.

When the railroad interest really took hold around 1972, there became a new primary reason to wander down to the edge of Swope Park. The afternoon train (there was generally only one) was usually a monstrous conglomeration of every freight car KCS could find at Knoche Yard and tie together for a trip south. On the head end of the all-EMD road freights were SD40s and F-units, the latter of which were loud enough to send us down the hill to Gregory on our bikes in plenty of time to catch them grinding up the long half-percent grade from Blue Valley (milepost 9) to Grandview (milepost 23).

By the mid-1970s, KCS was a struggling entity, with enough deferred maintenance to slow trains and an aging fleet of equipment beginning to show signs of the financial struggle the railroad was in. But then came Powder River coal — a river of it flowing through Kansas City via the connection with Burlington Northern. Much of this coal was

destined for Midwestern power plants, and many of them happened to be accessible via the KCS. This windfall was the railroad’s salvation in that era. Welded rail replaced jointed track, new ties and ballast replaced pounded infrastructure, and brand-new SD40-2s arrived. The KCS came back to life.

Meanwhile, my brother Lon got his driver’s license and we suddenly had access to railroads all over Kansas City. The KCS drifted into the background while we sought exotic twin-engine Union Pacific power, Santa Fe fast freights *en masse*, the Missouri Pacific streaking into Lee’s Summit on Kansas City’s southeast side, and paint schemes as varied as the rainbow. In Kansas City, it was pick your color, any color; pick your power, any power.

As we ran all over town, though, the KCS was always in the picture — often literally. Then something unique happened. In a matter of what seemed only weeks in 1980, the entire KCS right-of-way was cleared down to the ground. For 50 feet on either side of the



LEFT: On November 3, 2012, ES44AC 4690 works as a DPU on a southbound grain train pounding up the grade toward Rich Mountain at Howard, Ark. The “Retro Belle” paint scheme goes well with fall colors, and this train is disappearing into the trees that obscure most of the right-of-way on the Rich Mountain grade.

tracks, every tree was cut, all brush was removed, and the railroad was opened up like never before, at least in my young memory. Why it was cleared I never quite ascertained. One version claimed the city pushed them to clear the brush, another that crewmen wanted a better view of the train as they snaked up out of Kansas City, but whatever the reason, the result was new photographic possibilities. I focused the camera on the KCS again.

YOGI BERRA ALSO ONCE SAID, “You’ve got to be very careful if you don’t know where you are going, because you might not get there.” As I pushed railroad photography to the forefront, my skills were slowly developed in the sport of chasing trains. There were two distinct and often conflicting goals — one was to enjoy the companionship of other fans while storming about hunting down trains to photograph, and the other was to “get the shot.” Often the best adventures are ones unlooked

for; they come out of nowhere, unfold in front of our eyes, and then recede into memory, often with an associated expense. If we’re alert, we manage to get the camera pointed in the right direction and get the shot.

By the same token, a company like KCS alters itself over time to adapt to markets, competition, and other forces. In the 1970s, it would have been impossible to predict what the KCS would look like four decades later, and most of us thought that it would eventually fall to

RIGHT: The Slater Local rolls slowly across the bridge over the Missouri River at Glasgow, Mo., on May 18, 2017. Acquired in 1997, the route between Kansas City and Roodhouse, Ill., and eventually East St. Louis, added significant mileage to the KCS system. Though the locals are based out of Slater and Roodhouse, Mexico, Mo., is the regular crew change point. This local will work to Mexico and return to Slater. The west end of this bridge was destroyed during the flood in 1993 that disrupted traffic throughout the Midwest and was rebuilt by then-owner Gateway Western.

a merger, and it looked like BN at the time. Instead, BN got busy with the Frisco, then the Santa Fe, and the KCS just kept on being the KCS. As Yogi so aptly put it, "It's tough to make predictions, especially about the future."

As the 1970s became the 1980s, and the next decade passed, the KCS again found its way into the viewfinders. The red paint scheme at the early edge of my photography became the familiar white paint with large red letters, and that disappeared under new gray paint with red letters and yellow chevrons on the nose. The new red, yellow, and black "Retro Belle" style appeared in 2007, trumping all other modern KCS paint schemes, and that livery alone pulled me back in.

By that time the KCS was a much different railroad from that of my youth. The traditional core route from Kansas City to the Gulf of Mexico had been expanded on several fronts. In 1993, the KCS added a 31-mile shortline with the addition of the Graysonia, Nashville & Ashdown, which connected at Ashdown, Ark. Much more significantly, on January 11, 1994, the KCS took over the 1,212-mile regional MidSouth Railroad, with an east-west mainline from Shreveport, La., through Meridian, Miss., to Tuscaloosa, Ala., and via trackage rights into Birmingham. A major portion of this route is known as the "Meridian Speedway," a joint venture with Norfolk Southern.

In 1997, KCS acquired the Santa Fe-controlled Gateway Western, a 408-mile route across Missouri and western Illinois with a tumultuous past — KCS was the sixth owner since 1972. It connected Kansas City with East St. Louis, Ill. That same year, KCS and a Mexican partner began operation of Transportaci3n Ferroviaria Mexicana (TFM), a result of the privatization of Mexico's railroads. In 2005, KCS bought out its partner, resulting in KCS becoming the sole operator.

In 2001, KCS bought 87.5 miles of former Southern Pacific right-of-way between Victoria and Rosenberg, Texas, which was still under railroad ownership even though the tracks had been pulled up many years previous. With the goal of bypassing a more circuitous



UP trackage rights route that connected to its Mexican lines, KCS cleared and rebuilt the line and put it in service in 2009. KCS also owns an interest in the Texas-Mexican Railway and the Panama Canal Railway.

In less than two decades KCS expanded from its traditional core to a much larger system, a shift that significantly impacted railroad operations. From the "TOLMAK" states (the name of a KCS business car that was an acronym for *Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Missouri, Arkansas, and Kansas*) KCS expanded into Illinois, Mississippi, Alabama, and Tennessee, and via haulage rights, trackage rights, or lease arrangements into Alabama, Iowa, and Nebraska. Trackage in the U.S. totals over 3,200 miles. South of the border, the railroad expanded into 17 of the 31 Mexican states with a system in Mexico totaling over 2,600 miles.

THE SOUTHERN HEART of the railroad is Shreveport, La., where KCS is the dominant rail player — one of the few similarities between the KCS of the 1970s and today. Local switching duties and transfer runs send two-axle power seemingly all over town, while the mainlines keep traffic moving north, south, east, and west. Shreveport is its own subdivision, referred to as the Shreveport Terminal Subdivision.

Two subdivisions run south, the busy Beaumont Subdivision between Shreveport and Beaumont, and then on to Houston, Laredo, and Mexico, and the not-so-busy old Louisiana & Arkansas, still referred to as the "L&A" by crews, heading south to New Orleans via Alexandria, La.

To the east is the Meridian Speedway, handling traffic between Shreveport, Vicksburg, Jackson, and eventually Meridian, Miss., where it connects



ABOVE: In early 1994, KCS took control of MidSouth Rail, striking a deal with Norfolk Southern and adding what is known as the "Meridian Speedway" to its route map, so named because it shuttles high-priority traffic between Shreveport (and Dallas to the west) to Meridian, Miss. Near the midpoint is Vicksburg, where rails cross the Mississippi River from Louisiana into Mississippi. Once in Mississippi, trackage finds its way through three tunnels in Vicksburg, this one under Business Route 61. This eastbound manifest has crossed the river going southeast and swung to the north in this late afternoon view on April 6, 2017.

Left: Spring Street in Shreveport is one of the busier control points in the area. Located just south of downtown and east of Wilson's Alley, it sees a variety of KCS traffic. In this view taken on July 3, 2017, a loaded coal train is making a complicated backup maneuver to get from Hollywood on the line to Beaumont, to Spring Street, and will then move west and south on the BNSF to get to its destination, essentially wyeing the entire train. These are the DPUs, which carried a crewman while making the reverse move. At right, KCSM (KCS's Mexican subsidiary) SD70ACe 4065 is waiting for clearance to take its train south to New Orleans using the "LRN Connection" to access the Alexandria Subdivision.

to the NS, and eventually, Birmingham. A major part of the traffic on this route is intermodal stack trains moving between both Kansas City and Dallas to the Southeast. The eastern end of this former MidSouth territory is a maze of



branchlines and former shortlines.

North of Shreveport at Blanchard, La., a mainline wye takes traffic to and from the route to Dallas. Once the territory of an every-once-in-a-while-local behind aging F-units, this is now a much improved intermodal route feeding the Meridian Speedway east of Shreveport.

As can be seen by a glance at the KCS route map, Shreveport is strategically located and is consequently home to a large yard and shop complex. With the addition of the MidSouth system, strategic purchases and alliances in southern Texas leading to Mexico, plus the KCS' dominance in north-south traffic in the central part of the country, Shreveport's importance has consistently escalated. Though there is the occasional lull, a morning on the south side of downtown at Wilson's Alley will almost always reward the photographer.

ON OCTOBER 22, 2016, longtime friend John Hake and I were meandering down the KCS out of Heavener, Okla. The route from Heavener to Mena, Ark., via Rich Mountain has been well covered in the press for several reasons. It's a very busy piece of the railroad in the middle of the north-south flow of traffic. It arguably has the best scenery anywhere on the system and has

easy access with adjacent roads through much of this section. Yet another part of the appeal is the grueling nature of the grades that slow trains down sometimes to a crawl, especially southbound traffic between Page, Okla., and Rich Mountain, Ark.

Our first chase started with ES44AC 4833 leading a southbound manifest. Our first shot was the two units popping out of the "tunnel of trees" at Howard, Ark., a shot repeated countless times over the years as it was one of the few open places to shoot on the climb to Rich Mountain. John had seen information indicating that KCS was clearing brush in the area, but so far, the morning photographs looked just like those from previous trips.

About the time I made some comment doubting any significant brush clearing, we swung around a curve and gasped. The railroad in front of us was wide open — every tree, bush, and blade of grass had been eliminated right down to the ground. Immediately I thought of Kansas City in 1980, and as Yogi put it, "It's like *déjà vu* all over again." This, however, was in the mountains and the ensuing chase of the 4833 revealed countless photo opportunities from the shoulders of parallel U.S. 59.

We spent two days up and down the mountain. The third day (a Monday) we had a lack of southbound traffic, and by

ABOVE: In the heat of the chase on October 22, 2016, we followed this first southbound of the morning up the grade to Rich Mountain at the usual 15 m.p.h. This is railroad north (geographic west) of the summit, about a half-mile from the north switch of the siding. To the left is U.S. 59, which parallels the railroad up the grade to Rich Mountain.

OPPOSITE TOP: The dead of winter still has the dark greens of the pines, as seen in this view at milepost 363 on January 25, 2017. This northbound freight with ES44DC 4834 leading is south of Howard, Ark., drifting down toward the Oklahoma state line and then Page, where the tracks turn back to the north and head for the crew-change point at Heavener, Okla. The 18-inch stump in the foreground gives some indication of the magnitude of the brush-clearing effort.

OPPOSITE: With summer coming on, this late afternoon northbound with 136 cars in tow pulls out of the siding at Rich Mountain after meeting a southbound coal train visible in the distance on April 24, 2017. In short order, he'll be drifting down the grade to Page, crossing the state line into Oklahoma in the process. Before the brush-cutting, this entire scene was blocked by trees.



the end of the day, had to begin to work our way back north, but we did so with an oath to return.

A look back through my KCS slides from the early 1980s revealed that the brush clearing would only hold up for a couple of years before sprigs and saplings would begin to once again clutter up shots, so the window on cleared brush is pretty narrow. The mountains of Arkansas likely grow brush about as fast as the Kansas City area, and maybe even faster.

The siding at Rich Mountain is generally referred to by crews as simply "the mountain," so when working the area a meet at the mountain means there's action nearby. For a few seasons, a couple of years, or a small blink in time, the right-of-way on the most scenic portion of the KCS will be unobstructed for action on the mountain, but experience indicates that the reprieve from the "tunnel of trees" will be short-lived, at least until the next brush-cutting *déjà vu*, all over again. ☐

Kevin EuDaly is the founder of White River Productions and the publisher of RAILFAN & RAILROAD. No vehicles were submerged in the course of producing this article.