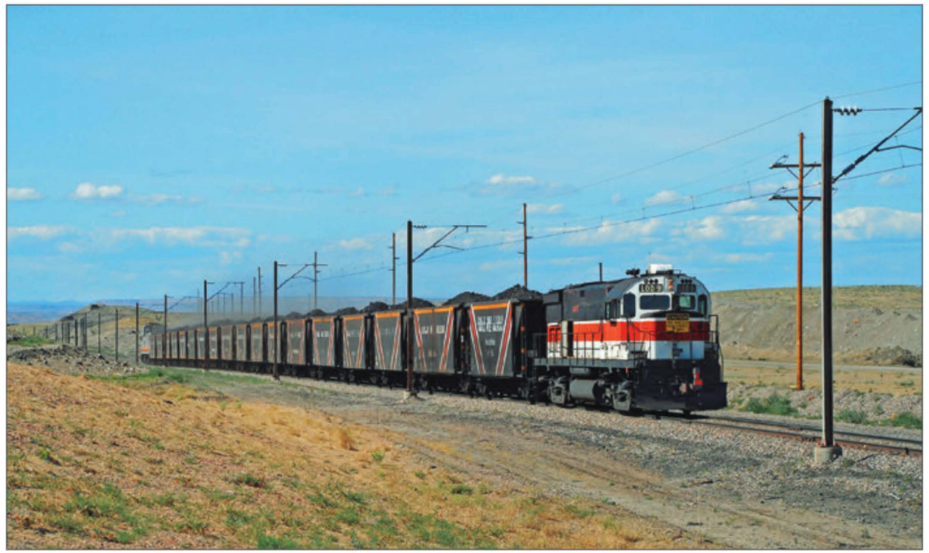

THE LONELIEST RAILROAD IN AMERICA

NAVAJO MINE RAILROAD

BY JIM TIROCH/PHOTOS AS NOTED

In northwestern New Mexico, fifteen miles southwest from downtown Farmington and on the Navajo Indian Reservation, lies an obscure shortline railroad operation. Known as the Navajo Mine Railroad, it is the only standard gauge operation in this part of the state; the closest mainline railroad is the BNSF Transcon line in Gallup, 92 miles to the south. The railroad was constructed between 1973 and 1974 to serve the BHP Minerals (now BHP Billiton) mining operation as a conveyor belt to the Arizona Public Service (APS) Four Corners Power Plant located in Fruitland, N.M.

Of course, railfans are probably more familiar with another private electric railroad in nearby Arizona. While the Black Mesa & Lake Powell, located 200 miles to the west in Page, Ariz., seems to get all the attention, New Mexico's Navajo Mine Railroad toils on in obscurity. The railroad is almost invisible due to its remoteness. While the BM&LP is easily viewable from a parallel U.S. highway, the Navajo Mine has only two public locations where photographs can be taken, which creates a challenge for the visiting railfan.

History

Until the Navajo Mine Railroad was constructed, there was only one other railroad in the Four Corners region of New Mexico, the Farmington Branch of the Denver & Rio Grande Western, which ran from Durango, Colo., to Farmington, N.M. In 1968, the Rio Grange abandoned the branch due to low traffic levels and the line was torn out shortly thereafter.

In 1953 the Utah Construction & Mining Company obtained a permit from the Navajo Nation to start mining operations. Authorities gave their blessing in 1963 and a few months later, UC&M started mining operations and began deliveries by truck to the Four Corners Power Plant, which had just opened.

As the mine field grew, APS conducted a study and found that rail transportation would be a more economical way to move coal to the plant. Construction started on the railroad in late 1973, and in July 1974 the railroad went into operation on seven miles of track. Three ex-Norfolk & Western C425s were the primary power at start-up, painted in a dazzling red, white, and black paint scheme, and 22 Maxon belly-dump style coal hoppers completed the initial inventory of rail equipment. Two trains would operate with nine cars each, leaving four hoppers in reserve for any cars that needed repairs.

Since the new line was not connected to the national rail network, all equipment was shipped to the railroad by truck. Bridges at the time would not handle the weight of the rail equipment on tractor trailers. The trip from Gallup was mostly made over dirt roads, usually with a bulldozer in front to create a path when these roads turned into nothing more than two ruts in the ground.

It was soon discovered that dirt and coal dust were clogging the oil bath filters on the Alcos, causing the units to overheat and shut down, resulting in delays and interruptions of service on the single-track railroad. As a result, the locomotives were modified with a new exhaust and filter system. The modification changed the appearance of the units with the addition of a huge muffler on top of the three locomotives. The new system worked well, helping to alleviate the problems with clogged filters and making the engines more reliable, but the filtration issue was never fully resolved.

OPPOSITE: Non-powered "owl" No. LOD9 trails a northbound load towards the APS Four Corners Power Plant in Fruitland, N.M. The car was built as an Alco C425 for the Norfolk & Western, but had been ordered by the Wabash. JAMES HICKEY PHOTO

LEFT: Alco C425 No. LOD8 (ex-N&W 1002) was part of the initial diesel fleet acquired in 1974. The second-hand diesels were later modified with more robust air filtration systems to help combat contamination from coal dust. RICHARD REIFF PHOTO

BELOW: The Navajo Mine Railroad is isolated from the national rail network. Taken at a rest area in Colorado, one of the new Maxon hoppers ordered ordered as a result of the 1984 line extension sits on a heavy duty flatbed drop deck trailer. RICHARD REIFF PHOTO

Extensions and Electrification

In 1984 the railroad was extended another 7.5 miles to tap new areas of mining, and a review of the rail operations was conducted at the same time. Due to rising diesel fuel costs and a desire to increase tonnage, it was concluded that electrifying the operation would save money in the long run.

By the end of 1984 the railroad completed the 25,000-volt overhead catenary system, and acquired two retired E60CPs from Amtrak. A third E60CP from New Jersey Transit would join the roster in 1995. Along with the electrics came an additional 20 Maxon hoppers, bringing the fleet up to six locomotives and 42 cars.

No other changes were made to the roster until 2005, when three former Ferrocarriles Nacionales de México (NdeM) E60C-2s, built for a proposed electric operation, were purchased at bargain-basement prices from General Electric. They had been traded in by Ferromex, one of the new operators of the former NdeM when the country privatized its rail system.

Motive Power

The Navajo Mine Railroad operates an exotic mix of locomotives, the most interesting of which are the Alco C425s. Numbered LOD7-LOD9, the locomotives were purchased second-hand from the Norfolk & Western in 1974. An interesting side note to these units is that they were actually ordered by the Wabash as Nos. 582, 584, and 587, yet were delivered to the N&W as Nos. 1000, 1002, and 1005 following the 1964 merger. Upon my visit in September 2015, I observed the exhaust stacks and the radiator sections have been plated over, indicating these units have had their prime movers disconnected. Used as cab-control cars, the de-motored Alcos

are known locally as "owl cars," although the reason for the name is unkown. They remain the only Alcos in New Mexico.

For the first ten years of operation, the Alcos were the primary power. When the railroad was extended and electrified in 1984, two E60CP electric locomotives were purchased from Amtrak. Numbered LOE20 (ex-Amtrak 963) and LOE21 (ex-Amtrak 968), they were originally built to power Amtrak's long distance passenger trains at high speed along the Northeast Corridor. The units did not live up to expectations and their speeds were limited far below what they were designed for. Before being placed in service on the Navajo Mine Railroad, the two units had their trucks replaced from retired Amtrak GE P30CH units. In 1995 New Jersey Transit E60CP No. 961 was added to the roster as LOE23. The three original electric units have since been retired and scrapped with the arrival of new power in 2005.

Three former Ferrocarriles Nacionales de México E60C locomotives numbered EA010, EA020 and EA021 were acquired to replace the E60CPs. They were built for NdeM in 1982 but never turned a wheel since the line they would have operated on was shut down. Upon arrival in New Mexico, the units were extensively modified to operate on Navajo Mine's 25,000 volt overhead catenary. Renumbered LOE32, LOE33, and LOE34, modifications included a large bulky box on top of the unit and platforms to raise the pantographs, since the cantenary wires are strung much higher than normal. The reason for the extra height is due to the numerous haul roads that use oversized mine trucks. Railings have also been added to both ends of the locomotives.

Operations and Railfanning

Finding the railroad is relatively easy. Farmington is a good three hour drive up U.S. 550 from Albuquerque via Bernalillo. Once in Farmington, follow U.S. 64 west. After passing through Kirtland, turn left onto County Road 6675, then turn right onto N 367. N 367 will turn into Indian Service Road 5086, and continue straight. As you approach Morgan Lake, you will see the power plant. Be mindful to keep to public areas.

Operations on the Navajo Mine Railroad are straightforward. Two trains of 20 cars are operated during three shifts five days a week, Monday through Friday. If output of the plant needs to be increased, service will operate on Saturdays. The trains make approximately 12 round trips a day, six for each set. While one train is at the power plant unloading, the one-man crew switches to the other train set and takes it south to be loaded. The railroad itself is capable of operating three trains at once, but historically only two are run at any given time, and the frequency of the trains is dependent on the amount of stockpiled coal at the plant.

The southbound trip is led by a non-powered owl car, while the northbound trip is led by one of the former NdeM electrics. This makes perfect sense because the railroad does not have a loop at either end of the railroad, and because the trains are loaded with a front end loader, and are dumped at the plant itself.

One of the main reasons the railroad is not very well known is because of its inaccessibility. Only two locations on the railroad are open to the public. The first one is at the plant itself, where a public road crosses over the railroad at the entrance to the plant. Permission may be obtained to access a little path that follows the tracks for about a quarter mile if there is a locomotive parked on the siding there. Be careful, though, because in order to get to the path, you must cross the haul road that is used by large mine trucks.

The only other location where the public can gain access to the railroad is five miles south at Area III. This is Table Rock Road, the only public grade crossing on the line. One may park a car in the middle of the road here, since it sees virtually no traffic on this dirt path, and watch the trains. Do not attempt to park in the parking lot before the crossing, since this is private property and you will be asked to leave. Do not attempt to go further than the crossing; I made that mistake in trying to find another location, and being in a rented Toyota Corolla, I almost ended up in an arroyo!

It should be mentioned again that the railroad is on the Navajo Indian Reservation. The nation is considered sovereign, and iyt has its own laws. The Navajo Reservation does have its own police department, and like other places, does not like people trespassing on private land. Since the area also has a rich history of the Pueblo, Navajo, and Anasazi, the land is considered sacred, so please respect the Navajo laws and heritage. It should also be noted that bobcats and rattlesnakes have been known to inhabit the area, so extra caution must be taken.

With a simple, straightforward operation, shooting the Navajo Mine Railroad is one trip a railfan must take. Sure, the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge is only 60 miles away in Durango, and the BNSF Transcon with over 100 trains a day is only 90 miles away in Gallup, but why not skip those and go after a railroad that is rarely seen and seldom mentioned? You can also impress your friends with the Navajo word for "railroad," *konh-na-al-bansi-bi-thin.*

Jim Tiroch, 31, lives in the St. Louis, Mo., area with his wife, Amy, and their dog, Jarvis. Besides being a railfan, His other hobbies include breeding aquarium fish, and he is an avid Cardinals baseball and St. Louis Blues hockey fan.

ABOVE: One of the former NdeM E60s leads a train north back to the power plant at the only public grade crossing on the entire railroad, Table Rock Road. JAMES HICKEY PHOTO

BELOW: Navajo Mine No. LOD 7 (ex N&W No. 1000), pulls forward with empties heading back to the open pit mine. The owl cab-control cars have their radiators and exhausts plated over, but the Alco 251 prime mover is still believed to be inside the car body. JAMES HICKEY PHOTO