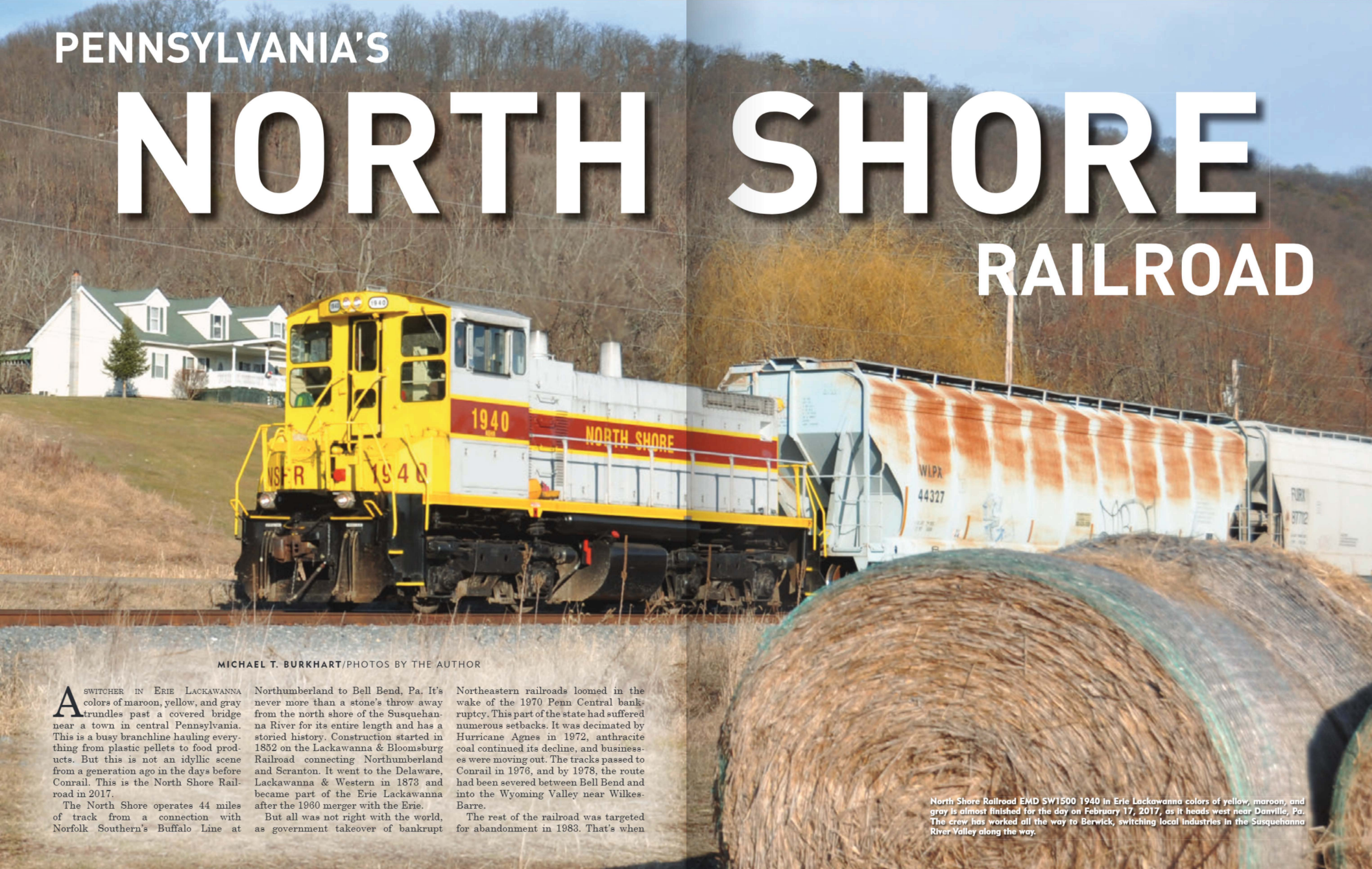# PENNSYLVANIA'S
NORTH SHORE
RAILROAD

MICHAEL T. BURKHART/PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

A SWITCHER IN ERIE LACKAWANNA colors of maroon, yellow, and gray trundles past a covered bridge near a town in central Pennsylvania. This is a busy branchline hauling everything from plastic pellets to food products. But this is not an idyllic scene from a generation ago in the days before Conrail. This is the North Shore Railroad in 2017.

The North Shore operates 44 miles of track from a connection with Norfolk Southern's Buffalo Line at Northumberland to Bell Bend, Pa. It's never more than a stone's throw away from the north shore of the Susquehanna River for its entire length and has a storied history. Construction started in 1852 on the Lackawanna & Bloomsburg Railroad connecting Northumberland and Scranton. It went to the Delaware, Lackawanna & Western in 1873 and became part of the Erie Lackawanna after the 1960 merger with the Erie.

But all was not right with the world, as government takeover of bankrupt Northeastern railroads loomed in the wake of the 1970 Penn Central bankruptcy. This part of the state had suffered numerous setbacks. It was decimated by Hurricane Agnes in 1972, anthracite coal continued its decline, and businesses were moving out. The tracks passed to Conrail in 1976, and by 1978, the route had been severed between Bell Bend and into the Wyoming Valley near Wilkes-Barre.

The rest of the railroad was targeted for abandonment in 1983. That's when

North Shore Railroad EMD SW1500 1940 in Erie Lackawanna colors of yellow, maroon, and gray is almost finished for the day on February 17, 2017, as it heads west near Danville, Pa. The crew has worked all the way to Berwick, switching local industries in the Susquehanna River Valley along the way.

ABOVE: Switchers painted for Lycoming Valley and North Shore wait for Norfolk Southern to clear up so the crew can make a late afternoon run to the Canadian Pacific interchange in nearby Sunbury on November 21, 1999. The additional interchange point was negotiated as part of the Conrail split. RIGHT: Lycoming Valley SW9 238 in fresh paint (built for the Pittsburg & Shawmut in 1953) and North Shore SW8 365 (built for the Lehigh Valley) head for the Norfolk Southern interchange at Northumberland on November 21, 1999. They will run south into Sunbury for cars from Canadian Pacific.

the Joint Rail Authority of the Susquehanna Economic Development Corp. – Council of Governments (now known as SEDA-COG) stepped in and purchased the line. By 1984 the North Shore was running trains, under the leadership of Richard D. Robey, who had an extensive background at the Baltimore & Ohio, Pittsburgh & Lake Erie, and Octoraro Railroad. Today's North Shore Railroad Company is part of a 200-mile system of six railroads that includes the Nittany & Bald Eagle, Juniata Valley, Union County Industrial, Lycoming Valley, and Shamokin Valley.

Along the Susquehanna, the North Shore passes through Danville, Bloomsburg, and Berwick. This is a historic section of central Pennsylvania, and residents have a keen sense of the area's past. Numerous cast iron mileposts (calculated from Hoboken, N.J.) still stand, as well as several stations. In Northumberland, which was founded in 1772, the interchange track with Norfolk Southern is behind the Front Street Station, now a restaurant which still boasts its brick platform.

"You can't be a railroader today without being an industrial historian," Robey, now retired, told the local newspaper in 1998 during a charter for shippers to show off $500,000 in improvements. "We wouldn't be in this business if we didn't think it had a future."

The next borough of note is Danville, the Montour County seat, where the railroad crosses busy Route 54 at grade, then ducks between downtown buildings and skirts the state hospital grounds, complete with old stone structures and brick power plant adjacent to the tracks. East of Danville, the line passes well-kept farms.

Parts of the route were once extremely busy interchange points. Rupert was a bustling connection between the Erie Lackawanna and the Reading, but today there's no trace of the yard or any railroad buildings. The massive Reading span built in 1933 over the Susquehanna River to Catawissa still stands, and is privately owned. This spot on the map remains home to the 1847 Rupert Covered Bridge crossing Fishing Creek. At 164 feet, the Burr arch span is the longest of the 23 covered bridges in Columbia County. The structure, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, was rebuilt with additional piers and steel underframe in 2001. The North Shore crosses the creek on a three-span deck bridge.

In Bloomsburg, a vibrant college town with a historic Main Street, the Autoneum Automotive North America plant is one of the North Shore's largest customers. The sprawling factory off West Fifth Street makes acoustic carpet for vehicles and got its start as the Magee Carpet Co. in 1901. This is the same family that had the Magee Transportation Museum for a decade in the 1960s and early 1970s just north of town. The museum, known for its trolley operation, closed in 1972 following Hurricane Agnes.

Another location of note is the "Deadwood Flats" station in Espy, about three miles east of Bloomsburg, which was home to the Carroll Park & Western, another tourist operation. It ran two miles on an unusual four-foot gauge in the 1960s and early 1970s. In 1970, the station was used in the Academy Award-nominated film *The Molly Maguires,* depicting an undercover detective sent into coal country to expose a secret Irish-American society fighting oppressive mine owners, starring Sean Connery. In its heyday, the CP&W had quite a bit of equipment, including an operating Climax and tank engine. The station still stands, empty, as well as a water tank.

At Berwick, there is a small transload yard off Ruhmels Lane. A switch diverges and heads up a steep grade to North Oak Street, where there are two blocks of street running into the Berwick Industrial Development Association (BIDA) park, home to numerous businesses. This was the site of American Car & Foundry, which built freight and passenger cars at this location until it closed in 1961.

North Shore SW8 365 is westbound along the grounds of the Danville State Hospital on April 13, 1999. This section of the railroad features rolling farmland, old industrial buildings, and classic downtown vistas.

CP - Canadian Pacific
DLW - Delaware, Lackawanna & Western
EL - Erie Lackawanna
NS - Norfolk Southern
NSHR - North Shore Railroad
RDG - Reading Company
SVRR - Shamokin Valley Railroad
UCIR - Union County Industrial Railroad

North Shore Railroad

Illustration by Otto M. Vondrak. Not all lines and stations shown.
Not an official map. ©2017 White River Productions

ABOVE: The old "Deadwood Flats" station in Espy, Pa. (between Bloomsburg and Berwick), was home to the now-defunct Carroll Park & Western tourist operation in the 1960s and early 1970s. It also played a bit part in the 1970 film "The Molly Maguires." The station is currently empty and dormant. RIGHT: Still wearing for Norfolk Southern black, SW1500 2317 with North Shore lettering rolls west along River Drive near Danville on October 14, 2004, passing the 1812 Schultz Farm.

From Berwick, the track continues another ten miles to the Susquehanna Steam Electric nuclear power plant at Bell Bend. The plant has the distinction of being one of the last nuclear plants in the U.S. to come on line, in 1983. This section is rarely used, except for the occasional delivery of dry storage casks or transformers.

Current Operations

Weekday crews come on duty first thing in the morning at the 1915 Lackawanna freight house off Priestley Avenue in Northumberland, which is the headquarters for the North Shore system. The brick structure was being used as storage by an RV dealer when North Shore started operations 33 years ago. An enginehouse was built later. Like any customer-centric shortline, North Shore's chores depend on what's been left on the interchange track as well as client needs. Tuning into 160.455 MHz will help keep abreast of the crew's plans.

Motive power is a half-dozen SW1500 switchers and four GP38 variations all painted in maroon, yellow, and gray. However, just about any power from the all-EMD North Shore family can show up. Many of the SW8 and SW9 locomotives that served for years have been sold, with several passing to Standard Steel in Burnham, Pa. North Shore also has trackage rights out on the Buffalo Line, so runs may also be made north or south of Northumberland to connect with other family lines. As always, respect private property.

Following a freight is straightforward. After picking up cars at the interchange and making up its train, the crew heads east. Route 11 roughly follows the tracks all the way to Berwick. Several shots can

LEFT: Photographic highlight of the North Shore is the 1842 Rupert Covered Bridge over Fishing Creek near Bloomsburg. Rupert was once a busy interchange point between the Reading and Erie Lackawanna. BELOW LEFT: North Shore SW1500 1940, built in 1968 as Southern 2317, passes an old DL&W milepost near Lime Ridge, Pa., marking the distance to Hoboken, N.J. BOTTOM LEFT: For a short time in late 1999, Wellsboro & Corning Railroad SW8 800 (built in 1951 for the Lehigh Valley) was hauling freight on the North Shore on December 8, 1999. WCOR was operated by the North Shore between 1993 and 2008.

be had before the train gets to Danville, where the train squeezes through the canyon of historic buildings off Mill Street, as well as skirts the state hospital grounds. Following River Drive (which becomes Legion Road) out of town, the line runs past well-kept farms. This road intersects with Route 42 south of Rupert, passing alongside the old Pennsylvania Canal as well as "Profile Rock," which hangs over the roadway and is said to look like the face of an Indian.

The shot not to be missed is at the Rupert Covered Bridge, near the intersection of appropriately named Train Street and Covered Bridge Road. In Bloomsburg, the crew may spend quite a bit of time working the carpet plant off West Fifth Street. The landscape east of Bloomsburg is decidedly different from the fertile farmland to the west. The tracks are on a tangent for a dozen miles and parallel Route 11 through an industrialized, congested, and developed area. Upon arrival in Berwick, the crew will work the small yard and a few days a week run up the hill to the BIDA complex. By 5:00 p.m. or so, the crew will be back in Northumberland.

North Shore is community-minded and often runs public excursions to benefit local nonprofits and the chambers of commerce. There are several trips planned in October and November of 2017 — fall foliage trips October 14 and Christmas trips November 25–26. Visit www.nshr.com for more details. Spend a day in the historic Susquehanna Valley taking in a railroad that holds a bright future while not forgetting its colorful past. ▣

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