

SANTA FE Searchlights



STEVE BARRY/PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

AS RAILROAD PHOTOGRAPHERS, it seems we have spent a lot of time over the past decade or so chasing signals. Every railroad seemed to have its own unique system, and you could often tell at glance which railroad you were on simply by looking at the signal head style and its supporting structure. It didn't matter if it was the Southern or the Southern Pacific — each was distinctive.

The nationwide implementation of Positive Train Control has only accelerated the demise of readily identifiable signals. As PTC marches across the country, the ubiquitous hooded signal has become the standard. At one time these modern signals identified with Union Pacific; now they're everywhere. Norfolk & Western color position light

signals, Chesapeake & Ohio's massive cantilever mounts with tri-light signal heads, and SP's lower quadrant semaphores have either completely vanished or had their numbers greatly reduced.

If there ever was a ubiquitous signal style of the past, it would be the searchlight signal. These could be found on many railroads from coast to coast. Their single lens required colors to be changed mechanically, and anything mechanical is subject to maintenance and failure. Now even these once-common signals are falling at an alarming rate.

Following the Center for Railroad Photography & Art conference in Lake Forest, Ill., in April, a few friends of mine set out along the former Santa Fe mainline in Illinois seeking searchlight

signals. It seemed appropriate — my friends had gone through their own Santa Fe searchlight signal search just a few years ago at that holiest place on Chico's Road, the Tehachapi Mountains. Their photographs from the foray into the Land of Lincoln stuck in my mind, and when July rolled around, I had five days to spare and a good weather forecast in Illinois. I set out on my own Santa Fe searchlight signal sojourn.

Edelstein — A Great Place to Start

One of the most famous places on the former Santa Fe (now BNSF Railway) in Illinois is the small town of Edelstein. Each end of the crossovers here is protected by a set of searchlight signals on overhead signal bridges. The east



ABOVE: Just after sunrise, an eastbound train approaches the west signals at Edelstein, Ill., on July 18, 2017.



TOP RIGHT: The searchlight signals at Williamsfield have been turned aside, replaced by generic GRS signals. The cutover happened just the day before. A westbound train passes under the new signal bridge behind BNSF ES44C4 6515.

RIGHT: An eastbound train led by UP AC45CCTE 7782 rolls under the east signals at Edelstein. The view is from the Illinois Route 40 overpass.



ABOVE: Sunset finds the signals at Edelstein illuminated for a westbound train.

RIGHT: The cantilever signal bridges at Verona are silhouetted by the rising sun.

BELOW RIGHT: A BNSF westbound snakes through the reverse curve at West Chillicothe behind ES44C4 6764.

end is readily shootable from the Illinois Highway 40 overpass or a private crossing at ground level; the west end can be seen from a public grade crossing. This was my first stop, and the access and variety of angles made it the place I did the most shooting.

I had a list of the surviving searchlights in the area between Galesburg and Verona (west to east). Signals would be found at Yost (East Galesburg), Williamsfield, Edelstein, West Chillicothe, East Chillicothe, Toluca, Ancona, and Verona. Each location had signals at each end of the crossovers located there. The tracks run pretty much dead east-west from Yost to East Chillicothe, so eastbounds were favored in the morning and westbounds in the afternoon. From Toluca to Verona, the tracks are on a northeast-southwest alignment, favoring westbounds most of the day.

The only signals I did not attempt to find were the ones at East Chillicothe, as Google maps indicated they were deep in BNSF private property. At the other locations, I was able to reach at least one set of signals with a bit of poking around.

The Search for Searchlights

My first day along the Santa Fe started in Edelstein on July 17 (as indicated above) and covered westward to Yost and eastward to West Chillicothe. The west signals at Yost could easily be seen from the County Route 9 crossing in East Galesburg. I did not find the east signals at Yost. A maintainer at the site indicated Yost would lose its searchlights next.

At Williamsfield, the searchlights were done — the new signals had been



ABOVE: BNSF ES44C4 8063 leads an eastbound train just after sunrise at Edelstein.

LEFT: Heading west, BNSF ES44C4 7176 rolls under the cantilever signal bridge at Verona. This bridge is one of the easiest to photograph in the area, as it is located along a residential road with a grassy field separating the road and railroad.



cut in just the day before. Still, I paused for a shot of the transition, since it was part of the story. We've already covered Edelstein, and next is West Chillicothe, visible from Blue Ridge Road.

The next two days were spent between Toluca and Verona. Toluca's west signals are accessible behind the fire house, while you can get near the east signals on a public road on the south side of the tracks. Ancona's cantilever bridge for

the west signals are behind a feed mill, while the east signals, mounted on individual masts, are right at a grade crossing. Finally, Verona's cantilever signal bridge at the west end of the crossover is one of the easiest to see and one of the most photogenic, located along a grassy lawn in a residential area.

Trains are frequent on the line — it is a major artery out of Chicagoland — and much of the line is covered by ATCS

Monitor. You do need to be prepared to do some driving, however, as it is 20 miles or more between each set of signals.

It won't be long before this stand of searchlights is gone. Containers full of new signal parts can be seen at several of the locations. For now the two best spots, Edelstein and Verona, have no immediate indication of replacements.

Don't delay your own search for searchlights — the end is near. ■