

THE RAILROAD WEEK IN REVIEW

September 7, 2012

“Our third quarter shippers survey implies a net freight diversion of 3.9 percentage points from truck to rail during the second quarter.” Wolfe Trahan

It isn't often you can get an entire in one shot, especially here in the east where curves, hills and trees are the norm. Occasionally you luck out. Here, for example, I got the entire 15-car Vermont Rail train as it headed north along a field in the Connecticut River Valley.

The location is south of Bradford, Vermont, and the is Vermont Rail's service between White River Junction and Newport, Vermont. The line was originally built in the mid-1800s and went through a series of ownerships, concluding with the Boston & Maine in 1887. Passenger trains lasted into the 1950s with B&M steam and the railroad's classic Osgood-Bradley coaches from the late 1930s.



According to *The Rail Lines of Northern New England* (© 2000 by Robert Lindsell and available from Amazon), B&M had by 1997 quit the freight service. The state of Vermont bought the line in 1999 and Vermont Railway started running trains under state contract shortly afterward.

I recall visiting the line in those days and it was in pretty rough shape. Trains ran now and then and the locals said it was mostly then. Over the years I've seen improvements along the right-of-way but never a train, so finding this train around Fairlee and chasing it north to Wells River a couple of weeks ago was a real treat. *Photo is Bradford station, circa 1942, by Phil Hastings, Bradford native and premier chaser of steam in the 1950s with his chum and co-author, Trains Editor David Morgan.*





Today Bradford station is a vet's office, surrounded by trees and other greenery. The vet has lovingly maintained it in the spirit of its past. Note too the FRA class 2 track.

I asked around at White River Jct. (connections with Pan Am Rail and NECR) and learned the train now runs on a more regular basis. My train was a respectable 15 cars including tank cars, covered hoppers and center-beam flats. And I had to hustle in my chase. Track speed is now 25 mph and he had a good swing on when I was able to keep pace on the parallel US 5.

Carload railroading is clearly making a comeback in New England. You will recall Verso Paper's glowing remarks about Pan Am Rail's improved service in Maine (WIR 5/11/2012). NECR had a switch crew busy on a yard full of cars when I stopped by. The Pan Am Rail run-throughs with NS and CSX are routinely running 8,000 feet or more. Rigby Yard in Portland is running at peak capacity. This is all good news and I hope to hear more of it at the Fall NEARS session on Cape Cod in early October.

The Wolfe Trahan Third Quarter Shipper Survey reinforces what I'm seeing in the field. This 77-page document is invaluable for its insights on what's happening and why in the world of freight transportation, and the rail section leads off detailing service improvements YTD and thus far in 3Q2012. Improved system train speeds [*which exclude local and yard moves -- rhh*] and yard dwell times are the biggest drivers of better service, say shippers. CP and CSX did best in system velocity while CSX and NS had the greatest strides in dwell-time improvement. BNSF and UP scored best in shipper-perceived service improvement year-over-year.

Even better (and this is where my New England observations are borne out), "shippers expect to continue shifting freight from trucks to trains." Freight movements of 750 miles in the east and 1,500 miles in the west are where the rails can give the trucks a real run for their money. W-T estimates that as much as 50 percent of rail vols is truck-competitive, with a skew toward intermodal which is nearly all truck-competitive -- except for international boxes moving far inland from the ports and which truckers can't really touch.

The report concludes that three factors affect the rails' ability to win share: fuel efficiency, political pressure to relieve highway congestion and improving rail service levels. I'd give this last the nod for the biggest effect. Shippers are reducing inventory base loads, favoring carriers

that can reduce supply chain costs by delivering goods as needed on an all-in cost-competitive basis. The current survey “implies a net freight diversion of 3.9 percentage points during the second quarter.” And I’m willing to bet my 15-car train chase in Vermont was part of it.

Note: WIR is heavy on pix and light on copy because I want to give readers a feel for what I look for when out on the rails. Back to heavy copy 9/14.

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