

RIDING THE 2013 NS WHISTLE STOP TRAIN

by
Charles H Bogart

From April 9 to 12, 2013, Norfolk Southern (NS) ran an Operation Lifesaver Whistle Stop Train from Buffalo, New York to Huntingburg, Indiana. Its route was as follows: Day 1, Buffalo, New York, to Ashtabula, Ohio; Day 2, Cleveland, Ohio, to Marion, Ohio; Day 3, Columbus, Ohio, to Sharonville, Ohio; Day 4, Cincinnati, Ohio, to Danville, Kentucky; and Day 5 Shelbyville, Kentucky to Huntingburg, Indiana. The purpose of the train ride was to provide First Responders and the news media with an engineer's view of the track. The main points emphasized were the dangers a train faces at rail/highway grade crossings and when encountering trespassers walking alongside of or crossing the track. Also on board the train was Dr. Jerry Rose with twelve members of the University of Kentucky's AREMA RailCats.

Mary Ann and I as Operation Lifesavers were invited to ride on the train from Cincinnati to Danville. I was also allowed to nominate three First Responders to ride on the train. I reached out to three railfans, a Kentucky State Trooper, the Versailles, Kentucky, Deputy Fire Chief, and a Lexington/Fayette County Firefighter/EMT. They all immediately accepted the invitation to ride.

Boarding of the Whistle Stop Train was between 7:00 and 7:30 AM at the NS Gest Street Yard for an 8:00 AM pull. Before boarding the train Dr. Rose had me give the RailCats a briefing concerning the history of the line we were going to ride over. The main topic was how Cincinnati built the Cincinnati Southern south from Cincinnati to Chattanooga and that the city still owned the rail line and leased it to the Cincinnati, New Orleans & Texas Pacific (CNO&TP). NS only ran over the line because they controlled CNO&TP. Interestingly after my briefing two gentlemen who had been standing by and listening to my talk introduced themselves as officials of the Cincinnati Southern who were riding the train to see what the line looked like. I found out from them that CNO&TP's lease on the Cincinnati Southern expires in 2026, a fact that I did not know.

The train consisted of two locomotives and four cars. Leading the train was locomotive NS #3052, a GP40-2 in its Operation Lifesaver logo paint scheme. She carries a digital TV camera above her number board. NS #716 is a RPE4C Road Slug. All RPE4C Road Slugs are mated to GP40-2 locomotives. Behind these two locomotives came four coaches, NS #28, NS #29, NS #27 and NS #32. NS 28 was built as a 40 seat passenger/crew car by Pullman in 1949 as NW #501 for use on the Powhatan Arrow. The crew quarters were removed in 1958 and its seating increased to 68. NS #29 is a 58 seat car was built by Pullman in 1948 as NW #533. It was renumbered in 1984. Both NS #28 and #29 are outfitted with overhead flat screens. NS #27 was built as a passenger car by Pullman in 1926, and in 1971 it was converted to a museum/exhibit car. Bring up the rear of the train was NS #32, an observation car used as a research car. It has two one bed staterooms, two rooms with bunk beds, a full galley, and dining room that seat eight. The end of the car has a full window to allow unobstructed viewing of the track.

With a light rain falling boarding of the train started at 7:15 AM, near the Gest Street Yard Tower. Inside the guest found donuts and coffee. After a short but thorough safety briefing the train pulled from Gest Street Yard at 8:00 PM. Fortunately the rain held off until we crossed the Ohio River Bridge once in Ludlow the rain came down in sheets as we climbed Erlanger Hill. The volume of rain

combined with the train's forward speed and lack of windshield wipers on the window in front of the camera degraded the video being streamed to the car's TV monitors. However, any day you can ride a train over the Ohio River, via the Cincinnati Southern Railroad Bridge, and up Erlanger Hill is a good day.

As we ran southward the rain decreased in intensity and by the time Georgetown was reached the rain had ceased. Unfortunately water drops clung to the protective glass screen in front of the video camera obstructing full viewing down the track. During our trip one of the train's passengers kept sending out a steady stream of progress reports as to the train's location, with the result that "FOMERS" and "GERFS" were constantly encountered along the way.

This was Mary Ann's and my third outing with the NS Operation Lifesaver Train. I kept a fairly close watch of the monitors along our route, but noted no vehicle speeding across the track as we approached a grade crossing. This was a first. Also the only trespassers we encountered were at Lexington. A gentleman at one point was found riding his bicycle alongside the railway right of way and around the University of Kentucky a number of students were encountered walking the right of way.

I did visit the Exhibit Car. It was divided into three sections: the first section had an Operation Lifesaver display, the second a mock up of an operating locomotive cab with computer generated visuals, and the third a history of NS with models of all of the heritage locomotives on display. Standing around the NS heritage models were a group of First Responders, actually railfans, reporting on which of the Heritage Locomotives they had seen and where this had taken place.

During our run south we would be run around two southbound stack trains and run pass one stack train and one general merchandise train sitting in sidings. The yards at Ludlow, Erlanger and Lexington were all lacking in cars. The Toyota Autorack Loadout Yard and the Georgetown Intermodal Yard however were both full of cars. The Danville Yard was also a beehive of activity. The R J Corman Lexington Yard, visible below the CNO&TP track, was full with various boxcars, hoppers, and gondolas. From what could be seen on the TV monitors and out of our car's windows the CNO&TP track and right-of-way was well cared for. There was no trash lying trackside and we passed two NS track crews and one signal crew out working.

There had been two reasons both Mary Ann and I wanted to ride this train. The first had been crossing the Ohio River and the climb up Erlanger Hill. The second was of course was crossing High Bridge. I still remember the first time I crossed it on an NS steam excursion. When we left Wilmore I was given the train's PA mike to tell our guest a quick history of High Bridge and what they could expect to see. Even the NS people stood to look out the windows as we crossed over the bridge. As normal when riding over High Bridge an undercurrent of excitement permeated the car and I have no problem with people who have to fall back on four letter words to express their thoughts as they look down river at Shakers Landing or up river toward Dix River.

We were due Danville at 11:00 AM but it was 11:30 by the time we reached Danville. I had thought that we would off load at the Danville Depot for our motor coach return to Cincinnati, but instead we pulled all the way through the Yard before offloading. At Danville we picked up a Subway sandwich and got on buses for the run back to Cincinnati. We were underway shortly before noon and reached Gest Street Yard about 2:15 PM. It had been a great day riding the rails.



