

CHASING TRAINS IN NORTH DAKOTA AND MONTANA

by

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During October 2017 Mary Ann and I chased BN/SF trains across North Dakota and Montana. Well, more correctly, across Montana. In following BNSF tracks across North Dakota all we saw were track gangs out working. During our overnight stay in Minot, North Dakota, once the sun went down, we heard all kinds of BNSF train traffic running through town. For our trip, I had purchased both the Montana and North Dakota Atlas and Gazetteer, plus Sonrisa Publications' Dakotas and Montana books. All the books were very helpful, the Sonrisa books providing railroad radio operating frequencies. As my old hand-held scanner had died earlier this year, I also spent \$49 on a Pofung BF-F8HP hand-held HAM radio (KD4CSC). I programmed it with all of the railroad frequencies so we could monitor current railroad radio chatter as we drove down the road.

Our route of travel was US 2 westward from Duluth, Minnesota, to Essex, Montana. Except for some excursions down farm roads and county roads to reach rails, most of our railfanning was done from US 2. It seemed like anytime I pulled over to park trackside for a photo opportunity one or more persons would stop to check and see if we needed help. What was sad was to drive into many of the small towns located trackside and see abandoned stores, schools, and homes. Some of these towns were steps away from being ghost towns.

At one town where I parked near a grain elevator waiting for a train, I got into a conversation with the grain elevator operator. He said when he started working at the grain elevator in the early 1970s some 16 farms brought grain to his elevator. Today these 16 family farms had been consolidated into two corporate owned farms. One of these farms plants some 20,000 acres in grain but only has two permanent families staying on the farm year round. During planting and harvesting, contractors come in and help with the plowing and planting and then return for the harvesting. He went on to say all farming is now done by computer operated equipment tied to GPS satellites. The farmer, using modern mapping and GPS, can now make maximum use of his tillable acreage. He said that in 2017 he will move more grain through his elevators than was done in 1980 when there were ten times as many families farming year round.





BNSF 6500, a GM SD45-2, and BNSF 5831, a GE ES44AC, are pulling a loaded grain train away from a grain silo complex that was starting to load a new cut of empty grain cars.



CREX 1343, a GE ES44AC, is seen working a grain silo complex near Williston, North Dakota.



BNSF 7454, a GE ES44DC, and BNSF 6773, a GE ES44C4, sit on the mainline on the western edge of Kremlin, Montana, waiting for a stack train to pass eastward. Then it is off to Seattle, Washington, with a load of 150 grain cars. BNSF had two helper locomotives tied to the back of this train.



BNSF 6907, a GE ESS44C4; BNSF 5074, a GE C44-9W; BNSF 6004, a GE ES44AC; and BNSF 6714, a GE ES44AC, lead a grain train east past grain silos near Lohman, Montana.



BNSF 5533, a GE C44-9W, and BNSF 7095, a GE ES44C4, have a high green to continue east on the mainline. The passing track has a Maintenance-of-Way gang tamping its ballast.



BNSF 5533, a GE C44-0W, is in pusher service helping a 155-car long grain train west to Havre, Montana.



BNSF 7018, a GE ES44C4, is sitting in a siding west of Williston, North Dakota, waiting for the Empire Builder to run by.



BNSF 7570, a GE ES44DC; BNSF 6632, a GE ES44C4; and BNSF 6065, a GE ES44AC, lead a grain train through a landscape of wheat fields near Shelby, Montana.



AMTRAK locomotives 42 and 75 lead the Empire Builder west through wheat fields that stretch from horizon to horizon near Malta, Montana.



This is a long-distance telephoto picture that I enlarged with Photoshop and shows BNSF 689, a GE C44-9W, and BNSF 6711, a GE ES44C4, running west with a grain train in the middle of Montana. I had seen the train off to the south; upon making out that the train was led by a Warbonnet, I put my foot to the gas and ran like crazy down US 2. I had to dart down a private farm road to get near the track to take this photo.



Amtrak 84 and 192 are east bound with the Empire Builder. Waiting to head west are BNSF 5283, a GE C44-9W; BNSF 8937, a GM SD70MAC; and BNSF 7391, a GE ES44DC.



BNSF 8000, a GE ES44AC, and BNSF 5235, a GE C44-9W, run east through fields of grain with the Rocky Mountains in the background.



BNSF 8137, a GM SD60M, with an unknown BNSF locomotive, is parked on the mainline next to a grain silo waiting for permission to head west. In front of the train, a track gang is working on the switch leading into the passing track.



BNSF 8137, a GM SD60M, and BNSF 7318, a GE ES44DC, are seen passing grain silos near Glasgow, Montana.



BNSF 6983, a GE ES44C4, and BNSF 3933, a GE ET44C4, with a train of autoracks, cross the large trestle at the west side of Cut Bank, Montana.



BNSF 4758 and BNSF 4056, both GE C44-9W, lead an oil train east from Culbertson, Montana. Note the spaced car between the locomotives and the tank cars. A spacer car was also located at the end of the train to separate the pusher locomotive from the tank cars. All spaced cars carried lettering showing they were in spacer car service and were not to be removed from the train without authorization.