



FRED W. FRAILEY

## Behold the life after death of the Rock Island Lines

You're left to ask: Did it have to die?

**At 9:30 on a weekday night**, the children should be in bed, and Mom and Dad are probably yawning. But you won't be going to sleep this evening. Instead, you'll be aboard Iowa Interstate Railroad train BICB, headed down Memory Lane, the birthplace of the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific Railroad, between its namesake towns. The Rock was dissolved in bankruptcy three decades ago, supposedly an unnecessary redundancy in a railroad industry flooded with excess capacity.

Today, the majority of the Rock's 7,500 route miles and the vast majority of its key long-distance routes remain intact in other hands, heavily used and in most cases in far better shape than the Rock Island left them in 1980. There's a message in this.

Your train (it stands for Blue Island-Council Bluffs) was assembled at Indiana Harbor Belt's Gibson Yard and brought a dozen miles to Interstate's eight-track Blue Island, Ill., facility late this afternoon. Interstate should probably ask the Harbor for a refund. The

120-car train is a mess, utterly unclassified, to the consternation of engineer Jake Dawson and conductor T.J. Landuit. For example, the Rock Island, Ill., setout is scattered in nine different spots throughout the train. Nobody bothered to turn the three locomotives, either. So all the power is long-hood forward, led by a GP38-2 and followed by two big ES44ACs. "Spin [turn] the power at Bureau," says the dispatcher in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. But many an hour will pass until you reach that Illinois hamlet.

The first order of business for this crew is to get out of town. Metra, which dispatches Chicago to Joliet, Ill., 40 miles, curfews westbound freights from 3:30 to 6:30 p.m., then allows them out of Blue Island at brief hourly intervals. "Follow 525," radios the operator at BI Tower a few hundred feet from your train at 8:55 p.m. Metra 525 goes west by you at 9:24 p.m., and a few minutes later you get a signal to venture forth.

UD Tower at Joliet holds you briefly for a westbound BNSF Railway intermodal train to go across the diamond, letting you go at 10:42 p.m. Then Dawson calls the tender at the Illinois River drawbridge for a signal. Still, you're captive. A mile from Joliet, you become the tenant of CSX for another 74 miles.

Do you sense that it's tough getting over the road these days? When the Rock Island was declared dead in spring 1980, there was no Iowa Interstate Railroad in the wings waiting to continue operations on its original main line west to Council Bluffs, Iowa. Chicago's Regional Transportation Authority, parent of Metra, jumped in to buy the suburban line to Joliet. Chicago Rail Link got rights to serve freight customers over most of Metra's line. For \$2 million a year, CSX leases until 2030 the Rock from Joliet to Bu-

reau, and holds an option to buy.

If you think about it the way Henry Posner III must (he being chairman of II's parent, Rail Development Corp.) it's a double whammy. Just getting over the road between Blue Island and Bureau, 98 miles, is painfully slow. Freights on Metra are capped at 30 mph and must run under protection of an absolute block, despite the fact that the double-track line is equipped with Centralized Traffic Control. CSX dispatchers seem coolly indifferent to Iowa Interstate trains. In the mid 1960s, Rock Island ran the same suburban operation plus six long-distance passenger trains. Did freights bide their time for hours? No, they got in line and ran with the flow. And Interstate

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handles none of the business originating as far west as Bureau.

As you continue west alongside the upper Illinois River, you realize what Iowa Interstate is missing. In places like Morris and LaSalle, Ill., and everywhere in-between, the midnight sky is ablaze with the lights of refineries and factories. Germany's Ruhr Valley leaps to mind (probably because the two locales have often been compared). Side tracks are everywhere, plugged with cars. At Seneca, Ill., BICB halts for 100 minutes, to meet two eastbound trains. The first is a CSX local, J746, which comes by with 82 cars. Yes, an 82-car local. The second train is your eastbound counterpart, CBBI, with more than 12,000

tons of ethanol and other agrichemicals and farm products.

So don't feel too sorry for Mr. Posner. By sheer dumb luck (his admission), his company bought the Iowa Interstate at a low ebb, for what I suspect were pennies on the dollar. Then came the ethanol boom that tripled carloadings. It's safe to say that with Iowa Interstate, Posner made his family's third fortune.

BICB reaches Rock Island at 7:30 the next morning, the crew having exhausted its allotted 12 hours. Their relief, conductor Stan Thomas and engineer Ed Bowman, will spend the next three hours sorting out the train and getting it in the right order before continuing toward Council Bluffs.

Okay, what does it all mean? Iowa Interstate gets rich. Chicago Rail Link gets rich. CSX gets rich on the New Rock Sub. UP gets rich on the Golden State Route from Kansas City to Tucumcari, the Spine Line from the Twin Cities to Kansas City and the Texas route from Herington, Kan., to Fort Worth. The fact that the Rock Island was dissolved by a bankruptcy judge but flourishes today under a bevy of different owners suggests it wasn't so redundant after all. "Death by regulation," is Henry Posner's term for it.

Six months after the Rock's demise, the Staggers Act largely deregulating railroads became law. Had the railroad persevered — had its clerks not gone on strike in 1979, had the Interstate Commerce Commission not lost patience and ordered service suspended, had the government lent money already appropriated to permit rebuilding of key lines — the shape of today's railroad map may have been far different. **I**

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