

My Favorite Hometown Railroad

By Bon French



▲ On June 15, 1966, E8A 648 is preparing to depart Rock Island's Peoria station with the 7:00 a.m. morning trip of the *Peoria Rocket* to Chicago. The 161 miles would be covered in approximately 2 hours and 45 minutes. For years the service was an early morning and late afternoon train in each direction between the two cities.—Dick Neumiller photo, Bon French Collection



▲ It is June 12, 1966, and locomotive 621 has just arrived in Peoria with the "Noon Rocket" from Chicago, Noon being the arrival time. Built by ALCO in 1941, 621 is the only DL109 owned by The Rock. It was repowered by EMD in 1953 earning the nickname of *Christine*. Twin EMD 12-567 diesel engines replaced the ALCO model 244 prime movers. This made 621 mechanically similar to an E6. It was the only such conversion for a Rock passenger unit. Its "humpback roof profile" was the result of accommodating EMD's engine cooling system. While a number of ALCO-built locomotives served in suburban service, there were only three other ALCO-built locomotives in intercity service; one DL103B and two DL107s, all arriving in 1940. All four of these ALCO units were prototypes resulting in constant maintenance challenges. Rock Island and Illinois Terminal were the only railroads that did not use Peoria Union Station. Both of the IT and Rock station survive in 2021. The IT station is owned by the City of Peoria. The Rock station is now a restaurant featuring excellent BBQ meals.—Dick Neumiller photo, Bon French Collection

I have many fond memories of the Rock Island. Of the 14 railroads* in Peoria, the Rock was my "hometown" railroad. There were many reasons for this.

First, it was the only railroad that still had passenger service. There were three trips each way a day to Chicago in the early 60's, then two each way by 1966, then one a day in the 1970's post Amtrak. Not only did our family ride frequently to Chicago on the Rock (think Christmas shopping at Fields), but in November, 1968, my grandmother in Ottawa arranged for me to ride in the cab of the 7 am Peoria Rocket from Peoria to Ottawa. She was good friends with the Thornton family in Ottawa that managed Ottawa Silica Sand, a major shipper. I realized what a big deal this was when I climbed up in the cab before departure and found not only the engineer, Charles O'Connor, and the fireman, Raymond Mackoli, but J.W. Burke, Jr., the road foreman of engines who had traveled from Silvis to accompany me on the trip. I was 16 years old at the time and had no idea that this imposition on their time would be required.

It was a real thrill going 60+ mph over the Rock's uneven roadbed in an FP7 (#402). My grandmother knew I loved trains at a very early age and the best thing she could do with me during a major holiday (Thanksgiving, Christmas) was to take me to the Ottawa depot to see the



passenger fleet go through town, including the Golden State in a cloud of dust.

Second, the Rock Island had three lines in the Peoria area. The first was the main line along the Illinois River to Bureau where the real east/west main line was. The second was the line "up the hill" to Peoria Heights where we lived. (Peoria Heights is several hundred feet above the Illinois River.) This line originally went directly to Rock Island, but in my time only served Pabst's largest brewery in the Heights and various industries in Pioneer Park. I could see the hill trains from my bedroom window struggling up the hill with loaded grain cars up and loaded beer cars down. The RI had a four-track yard in the Heights that was always packed with cars. They worked the brewery on a daily basis and occasionally I was able to ride with the crews. The oldest rail I ever saw in service was on the yard tracks in the Peoria Heights—1896. I knew the RI was falling on hard times but 1896—that rail was 70+ years old!

The third line was the Peoria Terminal, a Rock Island subsidiary, which went south down the west side of the river and then crossed over to Pekin, nine miles south of Peoria to serve various major industries.

On the Bureau line, besides the passenger trains, the Rock had freight trains each way each day to Silvis on the west and the Blue Island/South Chicago yards on the east. I rode my bike down to the Rock Island "north yard" near our house each Saturday morning to see the inbound freights come in. Then I was often able to

▲ Locomotives 625 and 626 were built by Electro Motive Corporation in 1939. General Motors' acquisition of EMC did not occur until 1941. Only 18 E3s were built, 16 A units and two B units, spread among eight railroads. Despite the numbering sequence, they were the second group of passenger diesel locomotives purchased by the Rock. The six TA units, numbered 601-606 and delivered by EMC in 1937, were designed for the original Rocket trainsets. Numbers 607-620 were never assigned to newly acquired locomotives while the deliveries in 1939, 1940 and 1941 were assigned in reverse order beginning with these E3s. When delivered, the E3s were assigned to challenging long runs, Chicago-Denver/Colorado Springs and Minneapolis/St. Paul-Dallas. Even though the E3s were essentially prototypes for future E-unit models, their better performance and greater reliability deterred any future consideration of ALCO locomotives for intercity passenger service. The 625 was in Peoria Rocket service on June 4, 1966. After 30 years of service, the two E3s were scrapped in 1969.—Dick Neumiller photo, Bon French Collection



▲ While the intercity service never became as much of a rolling museum of an eclectic collection of various types of locomotives that the suburban service became, the intercity trains had their fair share of locomotive diversity. 403 is one of a series of 10 FP7s built by EMD in 1949 that soldiered on until the mid-1970s in both intercity and suburban service. In 1969, 13 Union Pacific E units were acquired that ended up on intercity and suburban assignments. FP7s 403 and 409 are at the Peoria diesel shop on February 3, 1968. Nine months later, Bon rode in the cab of sister engine 402 during his cab ride from Peoria to Ottawa.—Dick Neumiller photo, Bon French Collection



▲ Three GP7s are crossing the Peoria & Pekin Union's Illinois River bridge returning from the P&PU's East Peoria Yard after making an interchange delivery. P&PU, now a Genesee & Wyoming property, was a terminal switching carrier jointly owned by the 14 freight railroads serving the Peoria-Pekin area. In history this area had considerable originating and terminating traffic as well as significant interchange business. Consolidation of the railroads diminished the role of Peoria and other places as major interchange points. In 2021 the railroad is named the Tazewell & Peoria for the counties on either side of the Illinois River. This is the same naming convention as the parent company. The original railroad was named for the two adjoining counties in the Rochester, New York area in which it operates.—Dick Neumiller photo, Bon French Collection



◀ Between Joliet and Peoria, the Rock Island operated in the DesPlaines/Illinois River valley, in some cases literally on the northern or western shore of the river. The Illinois River begins at the confluence of the DesPlaines and Kankakee Rivers at a point between Joliet and Morris. This provides for a scenic and curve filled ride in what otherwise would be the flat lands of Illinois. On August 4, 1968, two days before its discontinuance, train number 14, the 3:00 p.m. Rocket from Peoria is along Illinois Route 29 just north of Peoria as it approaches Mossville. E7 633 is on the headend. The Hoback family home in Mossville was between the railroad and the river not far from this location.—Dick Neumiller photo, Bon French Collection



▲ We are in Chillicothe on April 7, 1968. Today's version of train number 14 again has E7 633 providing the motive power. In 2021, Iowa Interstate operates a daily local between Bureau and Peoria with extra grain trains for interchange in Peoria on an as needed basis. This depot was donated by the railroad in 1980 to the City of Chillicothe. It has been beautifully restored and painted in traditional barn red with white trim. It is called the Rock Island Railroad Museum. A restored former Santa Fe caboose is also on display.—Dick Neumiller photo, Bon French Collection



► In February 1967 Bon was riding in the cab of switch engine 834, an EMD SW8, as this inbound freight entered North Yard northeast of downtown Peoria. Bon received an invitation to ride from his favorite engineer, Mr. West. The bridge in the background is the west approach of the US Highway 150 bridge over the Illinois River. ▲ Mr. West posing with 834 on that February day. ▲ In November 1968 there was a minor derailment in Peoria. The inbound morning Peoria Rocket could not reach downtown. Passengers are boarding the "3:00 p.m. Rocket" from the Peoria Water Works road crossing at the north end of North Yard. Yes, that is Bon's trusty bike in the foreground.—Three photos Bon French

ride with the switch crews breaking up these trains into cuts for the TP&W, P&PU, IT, CB&Q, C&NW, etc. and the "downtown" RI yard for local delivery. I have many of these switch lists to this day. The north yard had six tracks and it was often filled to the brim as the two trains typically had 70-80 cars each and had to double into the yard.

I think the crew thought that I was probably safer in the cab of the switch engine than on the ground. Many of my photos are taken through the window glass of the engine. Most often this was SW8 #834 with Engineer Mr. West. My photos of him and engine are labeled "my favorite engineer."

I got to know many of the people working here even though I was only in grade school. They could see my enthusiasm for the railroad, but every one of them admonished me not to work for the railroad. It was a sobering impression. There were many tales of an industry in decline, the Rock in particular. Even I could see that the Rock was a "four bolt" railroad whereas the near-

by Santa Fe in Chillicothe was a "six bolt" railroad in terms of rail joints. The Santa Fe was clearly the superior railroad.

None of this dampened my enthusiasm for the Rock. Once I got my driver's license, my friends and I would chase the evening freights north out of Peoria (after the evening *Rocket* arrived). This was great fun (at 30-35 mph) paralleling the Geeps or F units in notch eight for miles along Route 29 on a warm summer evening. The crews would wave to us and we to them as they honked for every road and driveway along the way. It was a simpler and more innocent time and I have very fond memories of this. Fortunately, Route 29 was a four-lane road between Peoria and Chillicothe, so we were not holding up any traffic.

So fast forward from the late 1960's to today, the Pabst brewery has long been closed and the line up the hill to Peoria Heights is a bike path. The Peoria Terminal line to Pekin is partially in use as part of the ADM ethanol plant in Peoria,

but is largely abandoned on the south end. The PT's Illinois River bridge at Pekin has long since been dismantled. The Pekin trackage is in daily use served by G&W's Tazewell and Peoria Railroad. The line to Bureau is in good shape and sees several trains a day on the Iowa Interstate. When we stay with my mom in Peoria Heights, I can still hear the Iowa Interstate trains blowing for the roads and driveways along Route 29 and the river. While I know that the Rock Island is long gone, it takes very little to imagine that the Rock is still running and I am chasing the evening freights along the river.

*The 14 railroads were the ATSF, GM&O, IC, P&E (NYC), Pennsy, IT, M&StL, C&NW, P&PU, TP&W, CRI&P, NKP (N&W), CB&Q, and C&IM. These railroads had 19 lines into Peoria. The CRI&P had three, and C&NW, TP&W, and GM&O each had two lines. For the ATSF, this counts the Pekin branch, but not the Transcon which went through Chillicothe, Illinois, 20 miles north of Peoria.