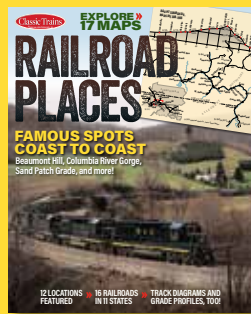


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ON THE COVER

Four Baltimore & Ohio EMD GP40s round the Mance, Pa., horseshoe curve in May 1972. The one-year-old units were the last B&O diesels delivered in solid blue. Tom Biery

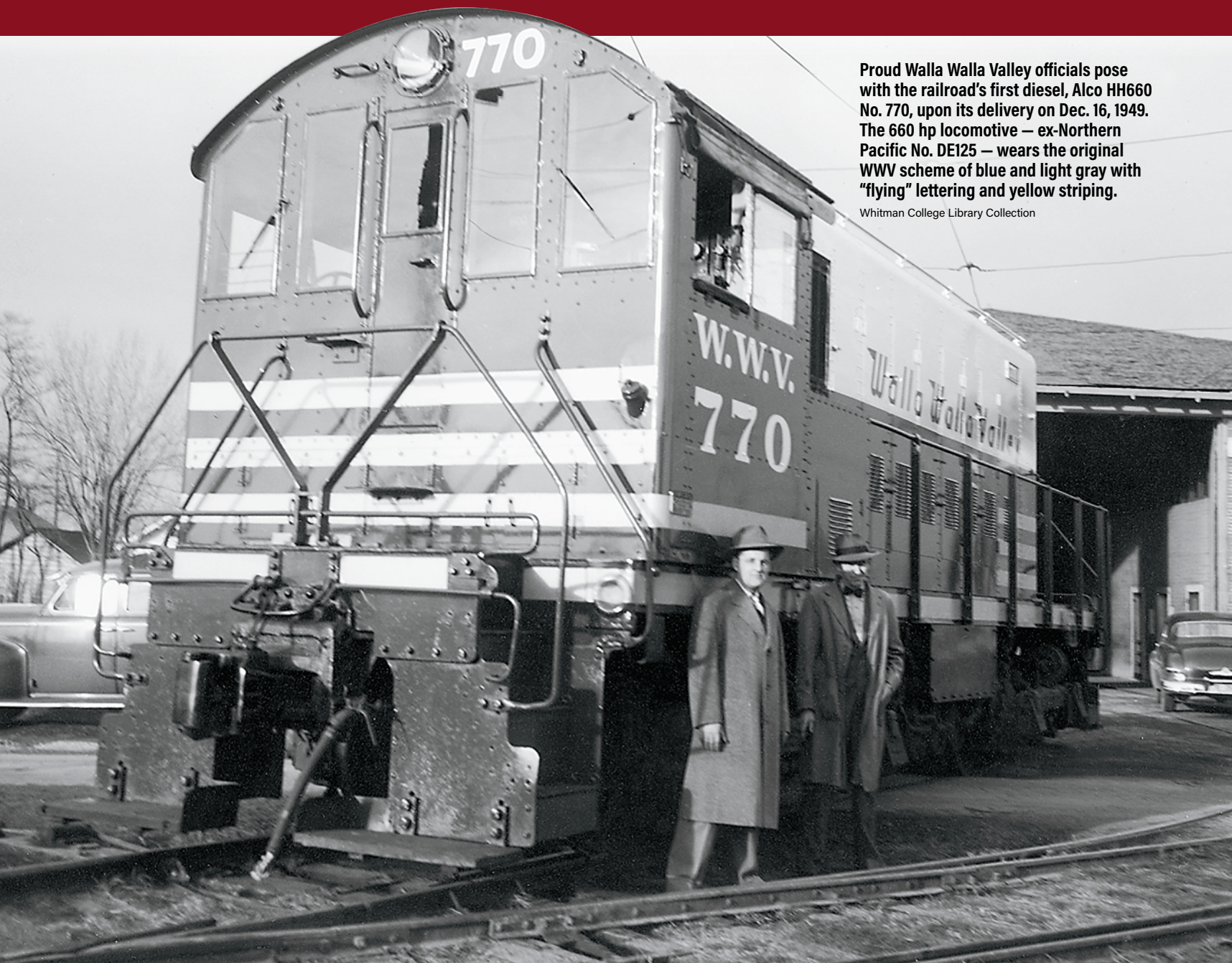
Pennsylvania Railroad work train S-97 trundles over the Wilkes-Barre Branch through Mocanaqua, Pa., on a fall day in 1964. Read more on page 54. William D. Volkmer



WALLA WALLA, WASHINGTON • 1968

Twilight of a former interurban in produce country

By Blair Kooistra and Marc Entze



Proud Walla Walla Valley officials pose with the railroad's first diesel, Alco HH660 No. 770, upon its delivery on Dec. 16, 1949. The 660 hp locomotive — ex-Northern Pacific No. DE125 — wears the original WWV scheme of blue and light gray with "flying" lettering and yellow striping.

Whitman College Library Collection



By summer 1968, the Walla Walla Valley Railway had been part of the fabric of small-town life in southeastern Washington for more than 60 years. The one-time interurban line, operating a 14-mile route between Walla Walla and the Oregon border town of Milton-Freewater, went about its six-days-a-week business as it always had, bringing canned and frozen foods and sugar beets from the canneries, packing houses, and fertile fields set hard against the foothills of the Blue Mountains.

Though traffic had declined from its peak in the 1950s, WWV still delivered more than 1,500 carloads a year to owner Northern Pacific at Walla Walla. A much smaller number moved in interchange to Union Pacific at Walla Walla and Milton-Freewater.

It was said you could set your watch by the passage of the daily train to Milton-Freewater. On duty at the old car barn at North 13th and Cherry streets at 8:30 a.m. Monday through Saturday, one of WWV's two Alco HH660 switchers would pull cars from the NP and UP interchanges in uptown Walla Walla, spot mechanical reefers at the cold storage house and tin stock at the can factory, then head south through the orchards toward Milton-Freewater.

The "valley railroad" was a picture of stability. The veteran crew had worked together — and with their customers — for years. Conductor Russell Didion hired out in 1949; engineer Joe Ferraro Sr., way back in 1919. His son, Joe Jr., worked as brakeman and



A crewman flags the crossing with Pine Street (U.S. 40) as No. 775 lumbers down North 13th Avenue in Walla Walla at top. Above, the 770 pushes a load of scrap tin around the tight curve from the Continental Can Co. spur to the WWV main line. Two photos, John Henderson

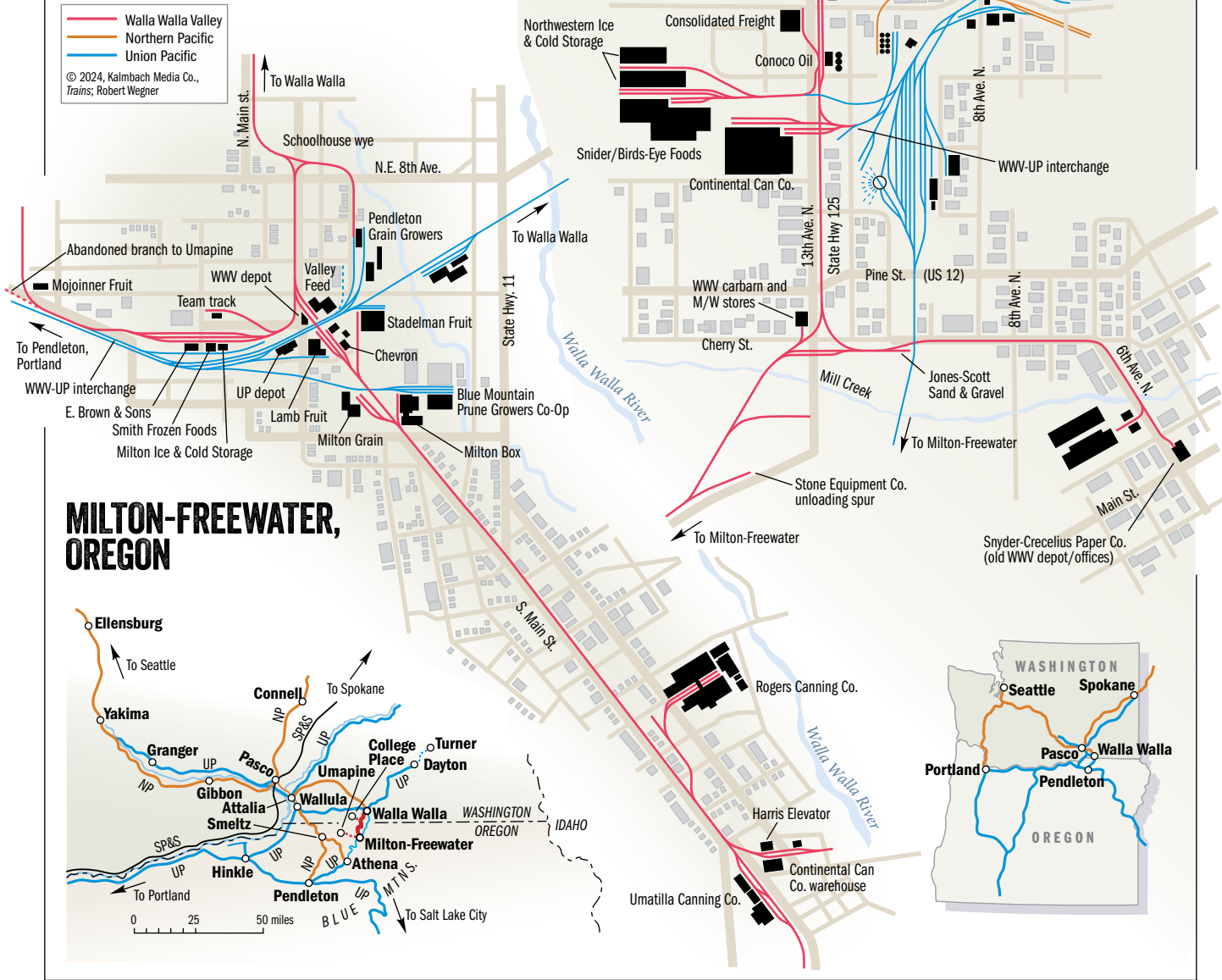
relief engineer; he hired out in 1954. And the calm presence in the fireman's seat, Charlie Curcio, dated his association with WWV to 1923. When he retired at age 75, he guessed he'd traveled 300,000 miles between Walla Walla and Milton-Freewater — all of it at 20 mph or less.

But don't equate WWV's leisurely pace with its pursuit of carloadings. Take a look at the maps of the railroad and the gyrations it made serving as many customers as possible: up back alleys and down the middle of a busy highway; around impossibly tight curves to reach loading docks; and across arch-rival

Union Pacific numerous times. WWV was Northern Pacific's foot soldier in the battle against UP in the Walla Walla Valley.

Outside of the Walla Walla area, few gave attention to the little railroad. Even among die-hard traction enthusiasts, WWV operated in obscurity compared to Union Pacific subsidiary Yakima Valley Transportation, 100 miles west in Yakima, which to its dying day in 1985 continued to operate with steeple-cab electric motors. Having scrapped its electrics in 1950, WWV to many became just another diesel shortline — little more than a Northern Pacific branch.

WALLA WALLA VALLEY RR WASHINGTON, 1968



MILTON-FREEWATER, OREGON

Interurban roots

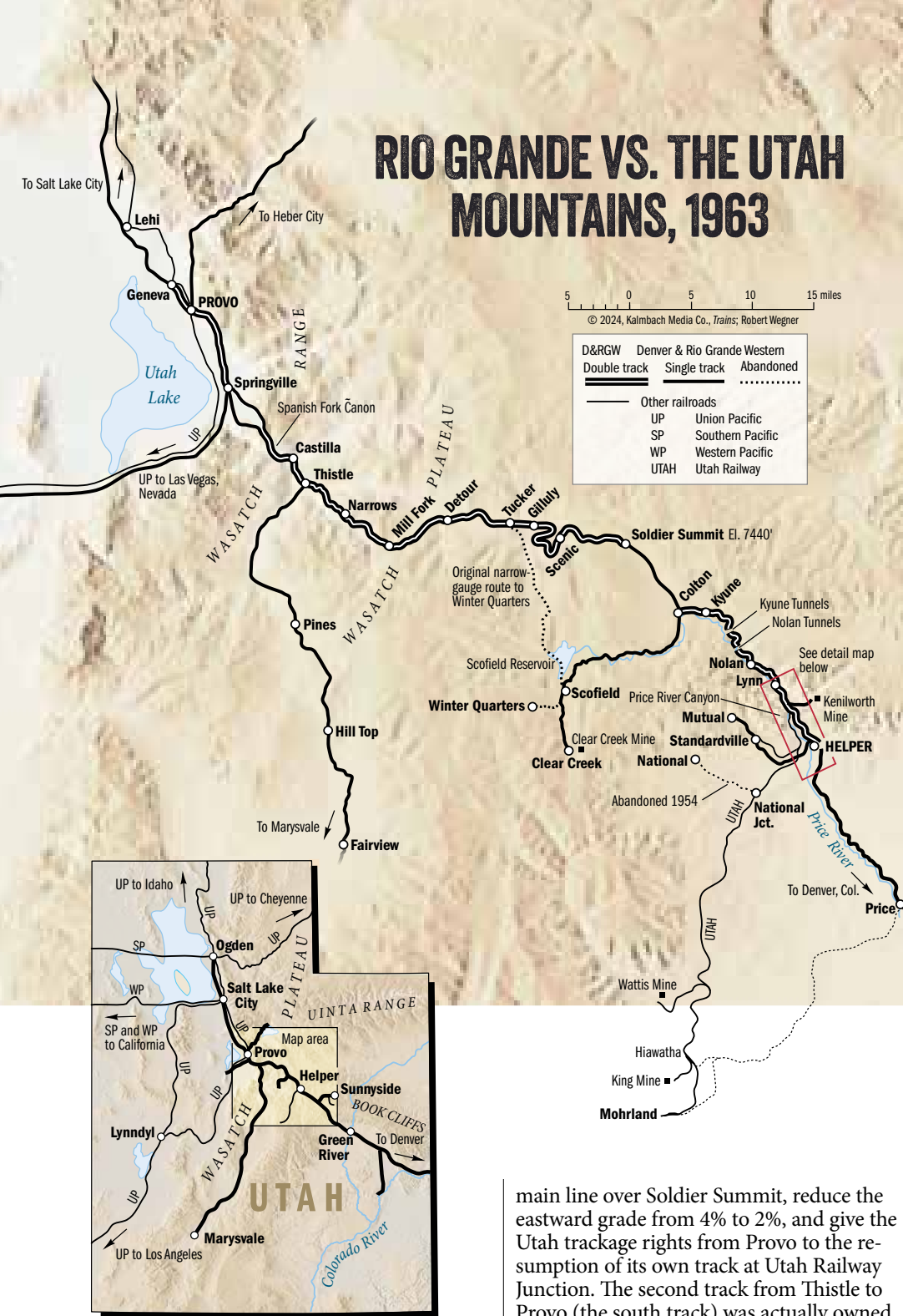
Such obscurity wasn't deserved. Walla Walla Valley's story was typical of many interurbans in the West during the first decade of the 20th century. These railroads were chartered by local businessmen and soon purchased by steam railroads, which found their potential as freight generators far more useful than their value as passenger carriers. Walla Walla succumbed to "interurban fever" in 1905, when the Walla Walla Valley Traction Co. incorporated to operate trolley routes in the city and an interurban line connecting it with College Place and the southern Walla Walla River valley towns of Milton and Free-water, already served by Union Pacific. The trolleys survived until 1925; passenger service

on the interurban lasted until 1931. When passenger service ended, it contributed only 7% to WWVTC's revenue. By then, freight traffic (mostly fruit) was paying the bills. The railroad had been sold twice — the last time in 1921 to Northwestern Improvement Co., a Northern Pacific holding company — and renamed Walla Walla Valley Railway. The NP immediately began improvements to its new "Interurban Division." Built to handle one- and two-car passenger trains on hourly headways, WWV couldn't handle the glut of freight traffic that choked the railroad. Between 1921 and 1925, nearly 900 cars of prunes moved annually off the WWV. New sidings, spurs to a dozen fruit packing sheds, and interchange tracks were constructed. A

4.4-mile branch to the Baker-Langdon orchards was built, as was an extension (jointly constructed with Union Pacific) to Umapine, northwest of Free-water. The Umapine branch was one of WWV's few missteps in its early history, as the promised orchard lands never produced as expected; the line was abandoned in 1943.

The tree fruit industry was susceptible to freezes, insect infestations, and market downturns. The economic depression drove fruit prices so low that Walla Walla's chamber of commerce promoted pea canning to diversify the area economy. Peas were ideally suited to the local climate, needing less moisture than wheat. Peas also introduced nitrogen back into fields that previously lay fallow every

RIO GRANDE VS. THE UTAH MOUNTAINS, 1963



After World War II, railroads dieselized, and homes and businesses converted to clean-burning, less-expensive natural gas. Only in Utah did the Rio Grande's coal business emerge from the 1950s still strong, mostly because of four huge industrial concerns: U.S. Steel's Geneva Works, six miles compass-north of Provo; Kaiser Steel at Fontana, Calif.; Kennecott Copper's Utah Copper Division at Bingham, west of Salt Lake City; and Nevada Mines Division at Ely, Nev.

Imagine visiting Castle Gate in 1963. You find a railroad in transition. Mergers are afoot that will realign historic transcontinental traffic patterns and deprive the Rio Grande of connections and overhead business. Improved highways and trucks are kicking the props out from under every branch line without a big mine at the top end. And the coal traffic is changing from a loose-car retail business serving numerous small and medium-sized mines and hundreds of one-man coal dealers to a unit-train business serving a few large mines.

Fundamentally, the challenge remains the same: mine coal and lift it over Soldier Summit. High-quality low-sulfur coal is mined from thick seams — commonly 8-10 feet thick — outcropping in canyon walls along the eastern front of the Wasatch Plateau, in the Book Cliffs and Wasatch Plateau coalfields. Many of the mine portals are up on a canyon wall, and inclines are common. Most mines load six or more grades of coal, from cheap “mine-run” that's anything from two-inch chunks down to dust, to expensive lump coal destined for the stove grates of schools, stores, and homes. Some of the mines still have boxcar loaders, a Rube Goldberg folding-chute contraption that unfolds into the corners of boxcars to gently deliver lump coal into the car without breakage. But the days of boxcars queuing at coal mines ended with the car shortages of the Korean War.

At Rio Grande mines, consumer coal is chuted into home-road drop-bottom gondolas at more than a dozen stations, while the Utah Railway uses 2000 “Utah Coal Route” gons jointly owned with Union Pacific. Metallurgical coal for Kaiser and Geneva originates at captive mines on the Sunnyside Branch east of Helper. Kaiser owns the Sunnyside Mine, and U.S. Steel the Geneva Mine a few miles farther south on a U.S. Steel-owned short line, the Carbon County Railway. By originating the move, U.S. Steel gets a much lower rate than it would with an all-D&RGW move. Kaiser washes its coal at a mine-mouth prep plant at Sunnyside, while U.S. Steel has a big wash

main line over Soldier Summit, reduce the eastward grade from 4% to 2%, and give the Utah trackage rights from Provo to the resumption of its own track at Utah Railway Junction. The second track from Thistle to Provo (the south track) was actually owned by the Utah, but operated as if it were Rio Grande track.

To lessen the grade, the classical solution is to lengthen the grade. On Soldier Summit, Rio Grande's engineers accomplished this by draping a tremendous double-horseshoe onto the side of the mountain above Gillyuly. Passengers on Amtrak's *California Zephyr* marvel to this day when they come over Soldier Summit at night westbound and see the headlights of an eastbound train three levels of track below them in the canyon, then watch in fascination as the train climbs toward them.

But railroads that live by coal, die by coal.

United States Smelting, Refining & Mining Co., owner of big coal seams at Hiawatha, a smelter at Midvale, and several money-making metal mines in the mountains around Salt Lake City, to think it needed its own railroad to the coal fields: the Utah Coal Railway, later simplified to just Utah Railway. It surveyed a superior low-grade alignment and built east from Provo in 1912.

The Rio Grande, rather than allowing a competitor to sneak into its henhouse, cut a deal with the Utah Railway to double-track its

Four GP30s move a fast westbound freight upgrade west of Lynn in 1963, mostly interchange traffic from the Burlington and Rock Island in Denver. Around more of these 8-degree reverse curves, an FT helper set is shoving on the rear. It will cut off on the fly at the top of the 2.4% at Kyune. Don Sims





The Northumberland, Pa., area on the Pennsy hosted a wide variety of diesel motive power in the 1960s. To wit: Pennsy passenger train 570, the daytime Harrisburg-Buffalo run, rolls into Sunbury behind steam-generator equipped RS3 8445 (one of only two RS3s built with a high hood; the other is Western Maryland 192) and E8 4293. The Pennsy stored a number of steam locomotives at the Northumberland roundhouse pending disposition to museums, including Madison Incline veteran 0-10-0T *Reuben Wells* (left), now at the Children's Museum in Indianapolis.



Jack-of-all-trades work train S-97 trundles over the Wilkes-Barre Branch through Mocanaqua, Pa., on a fall day in 1964 behind GP9 7241. All of the Northumberland-area branch lines had poor track, but the Wilkes-Barre Branch was especially treacherous because it ran along the Susquehanna River and had a soft subgrade. Derailments due to soft spots and slipouts were common. Right, RS3 8836, still wearing its handrail-like trainphone antenna, visits South Williamsport with a tidy mainline local on March 22, 1965.

painted Tuscan Red. These were being shipped a few at a time to nearby Renovo Shop for conversion to maintenance-of-way sleepers and tool cars.

In late 1966, I was promoted to assistant master mechanic at Renovo. My responsibilities also included work at small outlying shops at Wilkes-Barre, Williamsport, and Elmira, N.Y., which were similar in size and stature to Northumberland.

The entire complex formed a hub of sorts for what was loosely referred to as the Susquehanna District of the Northern Division. During the steam-locomotive era, Northumberland roundhouse played host to several class 11s 2-10-0s that were used as helpers and head-end power for iron ore trains that came down from Erie, Pa. These were required to negotiate the rather steep grade eastward through Shamokin to Mt. Carmel, where the ore was interchanged to the Lehigh Valley Railroad for delivery to the steel mill at Bethlehem, Pa.



About 1957, the flow of ore from Minnesota to Bethlehem via Erie and Northumberland ceased, replaced by ore from eastern Canada and Liberia, which arrived via the Port of Philadelphia. As a result, the last steam locomotives were stricken from the roster.

This meant that Northumberland roundhouse became redundant. But instead of tearing it down, the railroad chose to store one of each of several classes of retired steam locomotives inside until further disposition to museums could be arranged.

When I got there some seven years later, Northumberland had been relegated to the

role of operational hub for six branch lines: the 39-mile Watsonstown Secondary Track (a.k.a. the Berwick Branch); the 63-mile Montandon Secondary, which stretched from Lewisburg to Lemont running through two tunnels (the track continued three more miles to Bellefonte); the 27-mile Shamokin Branch, from Sunbury to Mt. Carmel; the 20-mile Selinsgrove Branch from Selinsgrove to Middleburg (the remainder of the track to Lewisburg had largely been abandoned); the 15-mile Lykens Valley Branch from Millersburg to Lykens; and last but certainly not