

Travels with Charley:

Hauling Some Hefty Weight with South Shore Freight

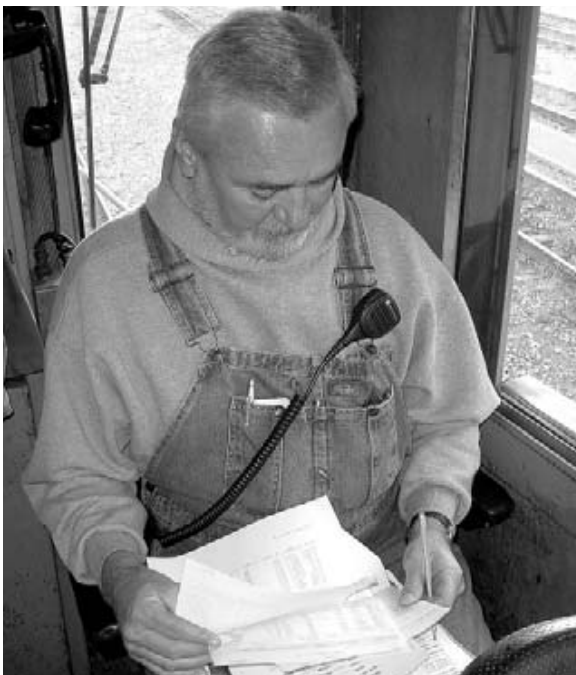
by Charles McKelvy



Engineer Frank Milcarek guides Extra 2002 West out onto the Shore Shore main.



South Shore Freight Extra 2002 West waits at Bailly for a coal train to "shove" into Mittal Steel.



Conductor David Kist tends to the paperwork aboard South Shore Freight's Extra 2002 West.

Next time you have to wait for a South Shore Freight train to pass, please consider that those hard-working railroaders have been relieving high-way congestion since 1916.

Yes, and as I was recently privileged to discover, the Chicago South Shore & South Bend Railroad is so serious about serving their freight customers along the southern rim of Lake Michigan that they made nearly \$9.5 million in capital improvements in 2006. The largest purchase, according to the railroad, was 100 covered coil cars acquired in June 2006 to enhance the company's freight service to its steel customers.

And, as I saw when I went out on the line, South Shore Freight serves such major steel customers as Mittal Steel (formerly Bethlehem Steel), U.S. Steel, Primary Steel-Chicago, and Roll Coater Inc.

South Shore Freight, which is based right here in Michigan City, is truly good for business and good for Northwest Indiana.

So it was only natural that those community-minded railroaders would invite *The Beacher* to send one of our correspondents along with a seasoned South Shore Freight crew for a working day on one of America's hardest working short-haul railroads.

The Beacher's Tom Montgomery and the South Shore's Lance Werner decided that I would be the best correspondent for the job since I keep a full set of work clothes in my closet, and so, on the morning of Halloween 2007, I found myself at the Carroll Avenue Shops staring at a pair of idling orange locomotives and awaiting further instruction from James C. Thompson, the South Shore's able Vice President of Operations.



Meeting an east-bound NICTD passenger train between Ogden Dunes and Miller.

Jim Thompson began with a thorough safety briefing that emphasized that one should always look both ways before crossing any tracks, one should never leave a moving train, and that “any time is train time.” Then he happily informed me that I would ride the South Shore Freight all the way from milepost 32 at Shops west to milepost 75 at Kensington in Chicago and then over the Canadian National (formerly Illinois Central) main to the Belt Railway Company of Chicago in the shadow of the Skyway Bridge at 95th Street to deliver and pick up cars, and then back to the South Shore’s Burnham Yard just east of the passenger station at Hegewisch.

“You’re going to see the railroad from one end to the other,” Jim Thompson promised.

And then he delivered me to the good care of South Shore Freight President Henry Lampe who wished me a safe and productive day on the railroad and graciously consented to an interview for a future issue of *The Beacher*. And, yes, Mr. Lampe, I most definitely want to accept your kind offer, and I am thinking that one of the first issues of 2008 would be the appropriate place in which to publish your thoughts on how the South Shore is “connecting industry and delivering value.”

Once Mr. Lampe was satisfied I was good to go out on the property, I was entrusted to the care of Engineer Frank Milcarek, Conductor David Kist, and Brakeman Chuck Stantz and invited to climb aboard the lead unit in a pair of GP38-2 locomotives that were part of an order of ten built in 1981 for the South Shore by General Motors Electro-Motive Division in LaGrange, Illinois.

And, yes, all ten are running strong and proving to be incredibly reliable haulers of freight. And, you fellow choo-choo cuckoos will be happy to know, the



need to sound the whistle, or horn, in the following sequence before every crossing: two longs, a short, and a long.

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The bane of a brakeman’s existence – throwing switches. Chuck Stantz says he has lost count of all the switches he has thrown in his 10 years with South Shore Freight.

Train 2002 crosses the final bridge on the way to the CN main at Kensington.

GP38-2 is powered by a 2,000 hp, 10-cubic inch, two-cycle diesel engine with DC motors over four axles. Three of those mighty orange locomotives can haul 17,000 tons of freight over the railroad, so when the folks at the South Shore say they have been relieving highway congestion since 1916, they mean it.

And my South Shore hosts meant what they said when they promised a great day of railroading with Frank Milcarek, David Kist, and Chuck Stantz, all three of whom hail from the La Porte area. Of the three, David Kist was the most senior with more than 33 years of service and less than two years until retirement. Frank Milcarek is a 15-year veteran, and Chuck Stantz, who is also a Qualified Engineer, has been aboard for ten years.

Conductor Kist bid me take the seat of honor on the port bow (sorry, once a sailor, always a sailor), and Engineer Milcarek then piloted us back a ways on the South Harbor Branch where Brakeman Stantz “lashed” seven cars from Kingsbury to the trailing engine.

Looking up from his ever-present pile of paperwork, Conductor Kist explained that we were running as “Extra 2002 West” and that we would proceed to Bailly where we would pick up an additional 18 cars.

“We’ll end up with about a 3,000-ton load,” Conductor Kist said.

And so we did. And so I soon learned that our maximum speed for the day would be a vigorous 35 mph and that “light engines”-- or those who no trailing cars -- may go as fast as 55 mph.

And I discovered at 11th and Franklin that locomotives trip a circuit there that activates three stoplights at a time along 11th Street. And, yes, those signs along the right-of-way with a big “W” on them do mean “whistle,” and they do mean for the engi-



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And, yes, all three members of my host crew earnestly hope that you will make the following early New Year's Resolution and start sticking to it now: Look both ways before crossing any and all tracks, and when the crossing lights are red, stop and remain stopped until the crossing is free.

Watching cars dodge the gates ahead of us was not fun, and I cannot imagine what it must be like for veterans like David Kist, Frank Milcarek, and Chuck Stantz.

I do know that the three of them worked a productive 10-hour shift on Halloween. They dutifully

delivered every car to its proper destination before parking their locomotives at Burnham Yard for the next shift and catching an eastbound passenger train for home.

What impressed me most was how focused and friendly the three of them were throughout a long, and sometimes trying day. They had a serious mission – moving tons upon tons of vital freight – and they accomplished it with a sense of purpose that other professions would do well to imitate.

So next time the gates go down and the lights begin to flash, do not hesitate to salute South Shore Freight for their vital service to our region.



A hardworking crew at day's end at Burnham Yard: (left to right) Conductor David Kist, Engineer Frank Milcarek, and Brakeman Chuck Stantz.



David Kist proves that conductors do more than paperwork and talk on the radio.



Keeping track at the Belt Railway Company of Chicago yard near the Skyway Bridge.



A hardworking crew at day's end at Burnham Yard: (left to right) Conductor David Kist, Engineer Frank Milcarek, and Brakeman Chuck Stantz.