

# A VIEW FROM ACROSS THE POND

**In the second of his essays on railways in North America, Michael R Weinman looks at the efforts of two rail freight giants to combat increasing congestion in and around the marshalling yards of Chicago. But first he reflects further on rail safety, the subject of last month's essay.**

Like a popular TV detective show, this column will sometimes have a self-contained plot and a continuing storyline. Looking back to last month's coverage of the train accident at Glendale, California some further thoughts on the marketing of safety have come to mind. Both the North American and UK railways have had to overcome front page reporting of such accidents. Invariably, they involve finger pointing and a temporary dip in passenger numbers as confidence suffers.

Thankfully, the impact is generally short-lived; mass disruption of the type that followed the Hatfield accident is extremely rare. But what about promoting safety (and we can all cite statistics proving just how safe the rail industry really is) as a positive attribute? The short answer is that it can't be done! Studies, as well as savvy intuition, reveal that passengers – and freight shippers – assume safety. It's only on those rare occasions when the assumption is proven ill-founded, that the question of alternative forms of transport, or whether to travel at all, arises.

While it is politically correct and advantageous to point out the rail industry's admirable safety record, it wins little in the commercial arena – it is a transparent attribute. Those responsible for making the trains run on time know that few people will stop to offer congratulations when everything goes to plan. But, delay the punters a few minutes and watch out for the growls and surly stares or mean letters. Safety shares with performance an assumed role, which is hard to market as a plus!

Moving on, it's good to be able to report some positive news from the heartland of America. Chicago, by accident of geography, railway politics and economics, has always assumed a

larger-than-life role as the crossroads of US – and in recent years, Canadian – railways. It is the hub of a large market area, and the junction for the traditional east-west traffic and, with the advent of the North American Free Trade Act, north-south routes as well. With the growth of Pacific Rim intermodal shipments, its role has become even-more vital, although it is now struggling to cope with the volume of traffic. Intermodal traffic is now clogging the city's facilities, both for destination – or highway delivery – containers, and those moving from one railway to another.

The Union Pacific (UP) and the Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF) both act as conduits for tens of thousands of containers that are transported daily from the west coast ports to Chicago at speeds of up to 70mph. But the advantages of speed and convenience provided by rail are in danger of being lost because of mounting congestion in Chicago.

UP and BNSF have re-tooled their terminals in the Windy City, largely as a result of the conversion of much of their traffic from 'loose car' railroading to solid intermodal trains that are often double-stacked. UP began its purpose-built intermodal programme with 'Global I', on former Chicago & North Western (C&NW) and Baltimore & Ohio yard sites, close to downtown Chicago.

Later, a yard that had once been C&NW's major Chicago-area yard and the world's largest, was used to form 'Global II'. This was well positioned to receive intermodal trains from UP (which acquired C&NW, mostly for its west main line connecting Chicago and Council Bluffs near Omaha). Most recently, UP foraged about for a site for 'Global III', finally settling on 1,000 acres in Rochelle, Illinois, some 75 miles west on the

former C&NW main line. At a cost of \$200m, it is well-positioned near motorway interchanges, and is some two miles long and one mile wide, with long tracks and much trailer parking. It has an ultimate capacity of 700,000 container lifts per year, but was also designed for 'block swapping' of groups of intermodal cars bound for differing destinations.

BNSF, a merger of the Burlington Northern and the Santa Fe, went through similar investment. The former Santa Fe Chicago freight yard, Corwith, and the former Burlington Northern Yard at Cicero, both about five miles from Chicago, have assumed major intermodal roles. Next, BNSF opened Willow Springs next to the sorting facility of the major shipper, United Parcel Service in suburban Chicago. Finally, after securing a site of over 600 acres at Elwood, 40 miles southwest of Chicago, BNSF created Logistics Park, a \$250m combined intermodal, automobile and general freight facility. Logistics Park intermodal's 400,000 annual lift capacity gave BNSF's Chicago operation the capacity for three million annual lifts, plus another 800,000 with future development.

Impressive as they are, these developments don't solve the throughput capacity of Chicago. Routes bypassing Chicago are a possibility (some already exist), but getting through Chicago itself remains a major challenge. This is addressed by the railroads' collective CREATE (Chicago Regional Environmental and Transportation Efficiency) plan, a shopping list of small to medium capital improvements to key routes, which will move trains through the spider web of intersecting routes in and around Chicago – if funding can be found! Most local agencies realise the critical need, but eliciting federal and local funding is a challenge. Indeed, a Crossrail for freight would be an idea for future study.

And finally, a brief preview of next month's column, which will deal with passenger rolling stock. I recently paid a visit to Amtrak's passenger vehicle and diesel locomotive heavy maintenance facility at Beech Grove, Indiana – my first visit in 37 years to the place where I once worked. Originally the heavy repair shops

for the Big Four Railroad – which became New York Central, which became Penn Central, which went belly up and ultimately became Amtrak and Conrail – it is located in a corner of Indianapolis that was once on a high-speed route to Cincinnati. Now at the end of a local switching line, in a city served by one Amtrak train a day, moving equipment in and out is costly. The craftsmanship and dedication of the workforce remains high, and investment continues to be made in the facility. But a combination of Amtrak's budget strictures and management policies in recent years has taken their toll on output and quality.

Without a doubt, Beech Grove has the capability of turning out exquisite work, and repairing accident damage seemingly beyond hope. But a long-term vision, modern techniques such as progressive maintenance (which I will

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come back to next month) and support from design, routine maintenance facilities around the system, and of course, the funding agencies, would go a long way to restoring effectiveness. A promising programme is the upgrading of numerous Superliner bi-level long-distance cars for a revitalised Empire Builder (Amtrak's Chicago-Seattle train, which celebrated its 75th anniversary last year). When the upgraded equipment and service offering is launched, this might well be worth a trip (as if 2,000 miles of Mississippi River, Great Plains, Rocky Mountains, Cascade Mountains, and Puget Sound didn't provide enough incentive!). Dust off your passport!

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Logistics Park is helping to ease rail freight congestion in Chicago.

