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KCS on Rich Mountain

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Issue 404

FEATURES

32

It's Still No. 3

Today it's known as the "Z CHCSEH9 A," but to some it will always be train No. 3.

Andrew S. Nelson

34

The Amador Central

A cab ride during its final run proves the Amador Central story is one worth telling.

Sean Zwagerman

38

KCS in the Ouachitas

Sluggish two-hundred car trains are part of KCS' history on Rich Mountain.

Paul Walters and Carl Graves

48

To Florida by Auto Train

Leave the driving to Amtrak on the *Auto Train*.

Walter Zullig Jr.

52

Stalking the Moosehead

The author becomes a rail stalker, hunting Canadian Pacific trains in Maine.

George Melvin

56

Images: Cabooses

Its numbers may have been depleted, but the caboose remains an American icon.

Contributing Photographers



James H. Boeger

DEPARTMENTS

- 4 Editorial
- 5 Letters
- 8 Expediter
- 12 Expediter Special Report
- 14 From the Cab
- 18 Canadian National
- 20 Modern Power
- 22 VIA Rail Canada
- 23 Norfolk Southern
- 24 CSX Transportation
- 25 Midwest Regionals
- 26 Genesee & Wyoming
- 28 Union Pacific
- 30 Conrail
- 31 Montana Rail Link
- 62 Canadian Pacific Railway
- 64 Amtrak
- 66 Illinois Central
- 68 Kansas City Southern
- 70 Commuter/Transit
- 74 Burlington Northern & Santa Fe
- 78 The Last Word
- 80 RAILNews Classifieds
- 82 RAILNews Advertising Index

ABOVE: A Soo Line caboose rolls gingerly through Illinois.

COVER: Kansas City Southern train 9 accelerates out of Page, Oklahoma, after meeting helpers. Tim Hensch photo



KCS in the

Two Hundred-Car Trains, Saw-bys,

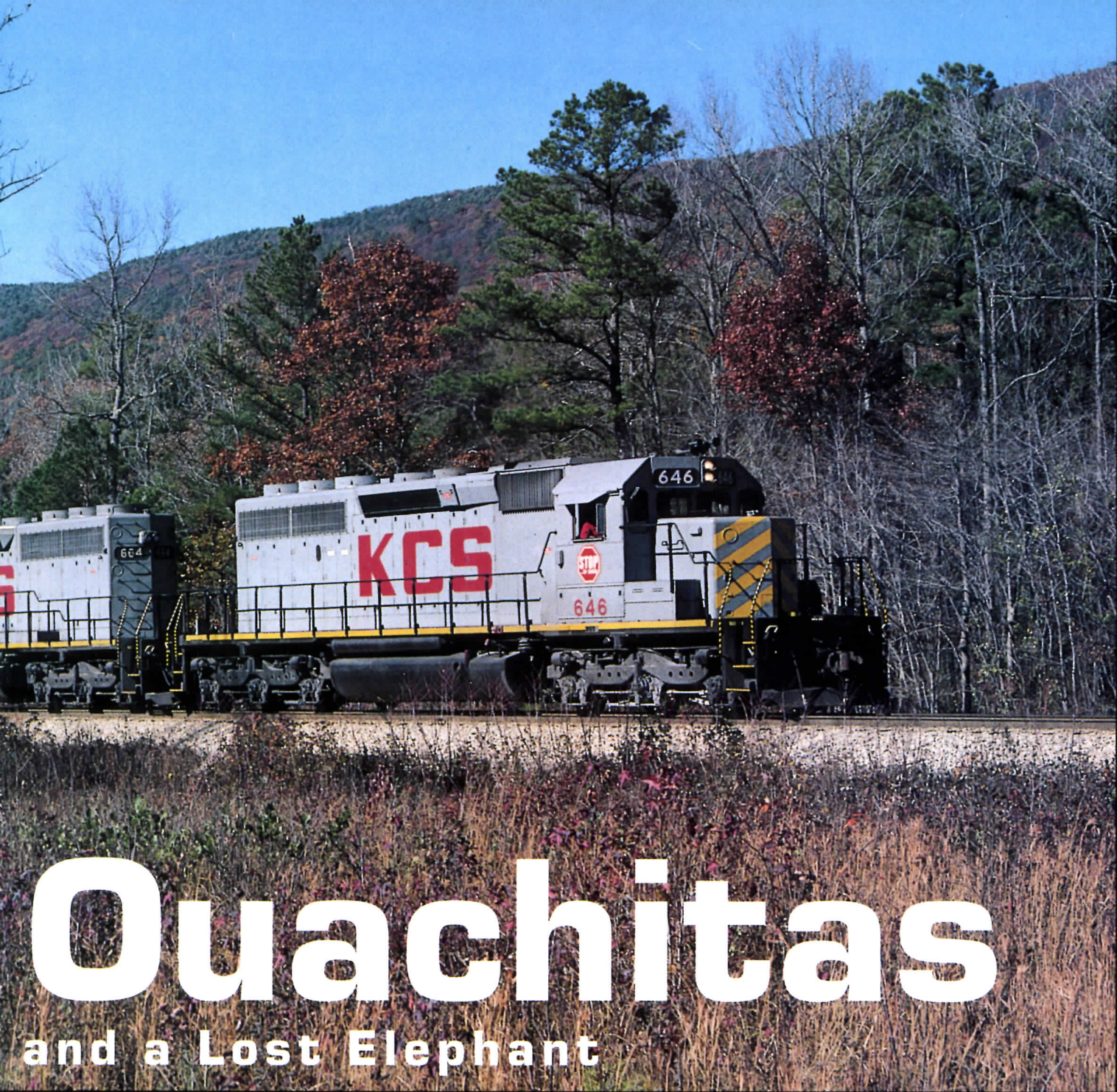
By Paul Walters
and Carl Graves

In 1972, the Kansas City Southern main line through the mountains of southeastern Oklahoma and southwestern Arkansas was as sick as an old man who has smoked his entire life and now—at the end—can find no good reason to quit. A strong wind might have blown the jointed and rusted rail off the rotting crossties. Derailments were common and unremarked, occurring often when the trains reached what crews referred to as “rocking speed”—about 18 mph—when the locomotive and cars would begin rocking violently. In the summer of that year, U.S. 59, the highway paralleling the railroad through the mountains from Heavener, Oklahoma, to Mena, Arkansas (roughly the northern half of the Fourth Subdivision of today’s Gulf Division), was littered with air hoses, couplers, wheels, axles, and boxcar carcasses.

The Mother of All Meets

In those years, management was obsessed with cutting expenses, regardless of the effect on the railroad. To reduce crews, KCS often ran trains in excess of 200 cars—substantially longer than the few available passing sidings. Some of these trains featured remote control, midtrain slave units, introduced in late 1966. A meet of two such trains, called a “saw-by,” was Byzantine and very difficult to describe.

The power of the first train (headed north, we will assume) would enter the south end of the siding, its 200-plus cars rocking behind; traverse the siding’s entire length; emerge back on the main line at the north end of the siding; and continue rolling until the caboose was safely past the south siding switch and off the main line. Then this northbound train would be



Ouachitas

and a Lost Elephant

split so that as many cars as possible remained on the siding. Its front end power would then run backward (south) on the main line, pushing its remaining cars, to the far (southern) end of the siding where it had originally entered, and then continue down the main line far enough so that the southbound train could move forward (southward) until it had cleared that same southern end of the passing siding where the first train had originally entered.

Next the southbound train would back north onto the siding, pushing the first train's cars through the north end of the siding and onto the main line. When the southbound train (now backing north!) had itself moved completely through the siding's north end and onto the main line again, the front end power of the northbound train, along with its remaining cars,

would then roll north and enter the siding's south end until its cars were off the main line.

The southbound train would then move forward (south) on the main line, pulling not only its own cars but also those cars of the northbound train originally separated and parked on the siding. When all the southbound train's cars, including the extra cars from the northbound train, were clear of the north end of the passing siding, the front end power of the northbound train would then move north again, exit the north end of the siding, then back south on the main line and couple onto its remaining cars.

At this point, the cabooses of the two trains would be coupled—back to back! Then, mercifully, the cabooses would be uncoupled; one train would roll north, and the other would roll south. This arduous

In November 1990, a motive power set with a mishmash of paint schemes—ushers a southbound just east of the Oklahoma/Arkansas border. Paul Walters photo



Paul Walters

In October 1980, a meet is staged at Page, Oklahoma. Though the main line was still jointed rail, its condition had been upgraded.

procedure took one to two hours. Even though we saw it several times, it still seems impossible.

Sometimes a train crew would split a northbound manifest (with 170 or more cars) south of the Ouachitas, sticking some cars in the Gilham, Arkansas siding (m.p. 422), then depositing the rest of the consist in the next siding north (Wickes, m.p. 409.) The conductor and engineer would then take the locomotives back to Gilham, ducking into the siding to let a giant southbound (with midtrain slave units) go by. After that, the crew of the northbound would back onto the Gilham cars, lug them north to Wickes, connect the remaining cars, and continue their northward journey.

From Bad to Worse

Then the railroad began removing passing sidings altogether. The Rich Mountain siding, one of two located in the mountains, disappeared, though the Page siding was spared. One train was rumored to have gone on the ground while standing still! Added trouble flowed from the unmanned midtrain slave units, which often did not respond well to the engineer's commands, causing trains to derail. Then, for reasons unknown, the railroad purchased a few new engines and painted them white. (The previous paint scheme had been dark red.) Shining white locomotives were an incongruous and startling sight as they pulled long, decrepit trains—rocking from side to side, squealing and groaning—through the Ouachita Mountains of southeastern Oklahoma and southwestern Arkansas .

The Mountains

These heavily forested mountains run from east to west like parallel fence rows. When one ridge is crossed, another takes its place, then another, then another, forming an almost impenetrable barrier to civilization. (The first highway across the mountains—U.S. Route 259—was not completed until 1961!)

Prior to statehood, this area was part of the Choctaw Nation—created when the Choctaw were driven at gunpoint from their ancestral home in Mississippi—and completely off limits to federal jurisdiction. Isaac Parker, the famous “hanging judge” of Fort Smith, spent most of his time disposing of criminals brought back from the mountains by the Lighthorsemen, the Choctaw police force.

Railroads avoided this area. The old Missouri Pacific main line to the east ran through Little Rock, then curved southwestward around the mountains to Dallas. The old Frisco; the Kansas, Oklahoma & Gulf; and the Katy lines came south from Kansas City, then swerved west to avoid the rugged terrain. The last line constructed in the area was the Kansas City Southern, which went more or less due south out of Kansas City, then crossed the mountains as best it could, because there was nowhere else remaining for construction.

Had the railroad continued due south from Heavener, Oklahoma (rhymes with “leave-ner”), the several parallel mountain ridges would have required construction of enormous and costly tunnels and bridges. So, deep in the forest, the engineers plotted a course east, running between Winding Stair and Black Fork Moun-

tains. Here the railroad crosses Rich Mountain summit, though the tracks are in the valley; continues east toward Mena, Arkansas; then turns southward again and runs through a gap toward DeQueen and Louisiana.

Rich Mountain takes its name from the Queen Wilhelmina Lodge, a resort for the wealthy financed by the Dutch monarch. Indeed, around the turn of the century, the Dutch invested heavily in the infant line, and in gratitude the railroad named several new towns after locations in Holland—such as Amsterdam, Missouri; VanderVort, Arkansas (a siding south of Mena); and DeQueen, Arkansas (an American version of DeGoeijen). However, the hotel on top of the mountain, accessible only by logging roads, was never popular. When it burned, no one bothered to rebuild it until Oklahoma and Arkansas paved the road from Mena, Arkansas, to Talihina, Oklahoma—and named it Talimena Skyline Drive. Then Arkansas rebuilt the lodge, now a very beautiful place to stay, though you cannot see the tracks from the hotel because of the heavy forest.

King Coal

Coal resurrected KCS, whose physical plant in the early 1970s was in as poor condition as any U.S. railroad's, including the Rock Island—then plodding toward liquidation by a bankruptcy court. But Congress passed a law requiring electrical generating plants across the nation to burn coal, even if, as in the case of Oklahoma and Texas, those plants were located near huge natural gas reserves. Never mind that natural gas burns clean, while coal does not. Never mind that natural gas in that part of the country is cheaper than coal by several magnitudes.

And the plot became even more convoluted. Eastern Oklahoma is filled with high-sulphur coal that burns like smoldering rubber. Because Congress decreed that generating plants could burn only low-sulphur coal, railroads, including KCS, began carrying the low-sulphur variety from places like Wyoming to and through places like eastern Oklahoma, which in turn were selling their high-sulphur coal to places like Japan.

The first KCS coal trains were as incongruous as a mink coat on a cow—shiny white locomotives pulling new loaded coal cars across decrepit, creaking, groaning track. According to records, the first Wyoming unit



Paul Walters

coal train rumbled through the Ouachitas in November 1976, on its way to the Southwestern Electric Power plant in Welsh, Texas. Loaded unit trains crept south, and empty unit trains crept north—their hopper cars rocking from side to side—and rail joints squealed like pigs. The railroad discovered that, because many of the passing sidings had been pulled up, there was no place to put all the trains. So, one by one, KCS rebuilt the sidings, poured new ballast, and installed new ties. Then—a miracle—the company laid welded rail.

Kansas City Southern rode the wave of coal to prosperity. Increased traffic demanded improved track, plus the cash to fix it. A rejuvenated bottom line led to expansion—KCS purchased Mid South in 1992, increasing traffic and revenues. By the end of 1994, a decade-long \$500 million overhaul program had completely rebuilt KCS through the Ouachitas and everywhere else.

Photos, Motels, and a Pontiac

Heavener, Oklahoma, population 2,601—the north end of the Fourth Subdivision of the newly renamed

ABOVE: In July 1975, a pair of red GP30s pilots a northbound local through Page, Oklahoma. This paint scheme was replaced with the all-white "ghost" scheme. **BELOW:** In August 1972, a monster southbound train—with midtrain slave locomotives—pounds through Mena, Oklahoma. Note the ancient boxcars.

Carl Graves









Both photos these pages, Paul Walters

PREVIOUS PAGES: Today, the Kansas City Southern through the Ouachitas is a first-class operation. On March 29, 1996, locomotives wearing KCS' latest paint scheme lead train 10 through Rich Mountain, Arkansas. Howard Ande photo ABOVE: The dispatcher often lines up meets at Page, Oklahoma. In October 1980, a northbound coal drag takes the main line as it meets a southbound manifest in the siding.

Gulf Division—is a crew change point on the railroad, with a small yard, engine facility, and mainline refueling station. Train information can usually be gathered at the yard office or (to a lesser extent) from the desk at the Green Country Inn where crews sleep. East of town is a small mountain or large hill, whose summit can be reached by a good hard-surfaced road. At the top is a state park where you can look down upon the hamlet and valley and photograph trains arriving from the north.

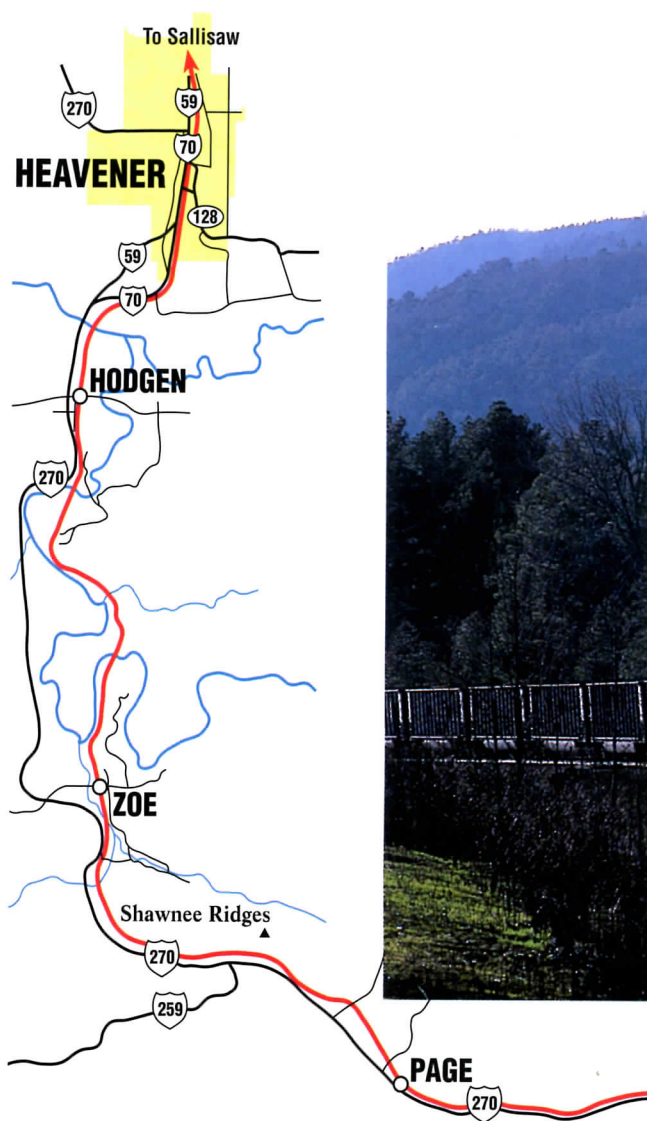
The Green Country Inn is a comfortable place to stay, if the train crews haven't filled it—reservations are recommended. A few miles to the north, in Poteau, the county seat, are two much larger motels, the Trader's Inn and the Black Angus Inn. The Black Angus has a good restaurant.

South of Heavener, at Hodgen, begins the ruling grade of 1.5 percent up Stapp Hill. From Hodgen, the tracks are separated from the highway (U.S. 59), and photographic opportunities are few. One gravel road north of Zoe can yield a satisfying shot of afternoon eastbounds, because the tracks are running north and south. Both road and tracks continue south for several miles, then gradually swing to the east. The highway descends into a narrow valley. The railroad continues climbing, levels, then begins a brief descent toward the passing siding at Page, which is reached by a blacktop road turning north off U.S. 59 at a small white clapboard church in the forest.

Page is one of only two passing sidings in the mountains; meets are common. Here the line runs almost due east-west and begins another 1.5 percent climb to the summit at Rich Mountain. The photographic opportunities looking west are minimal. Looking east, however, the photographer sees Windy Stair Mountain rising beyond the tracks like the wall of a green stockade, almost perfectly level at the top, running east and west as far as the eye can see.

To the east, the next easily accessible photographic location is on the border of Oklahoma and Arkansas. You will know you are there when you see a country drinking establishment on the south side of the highway. There are two doors—one marked Oklahoma, the other Arkansas. You purchase beer in Arkansas, but you drink it in Oklahoma.

Here the better view looks west, with Black Fork Mountain rising behind. From this point, chasing

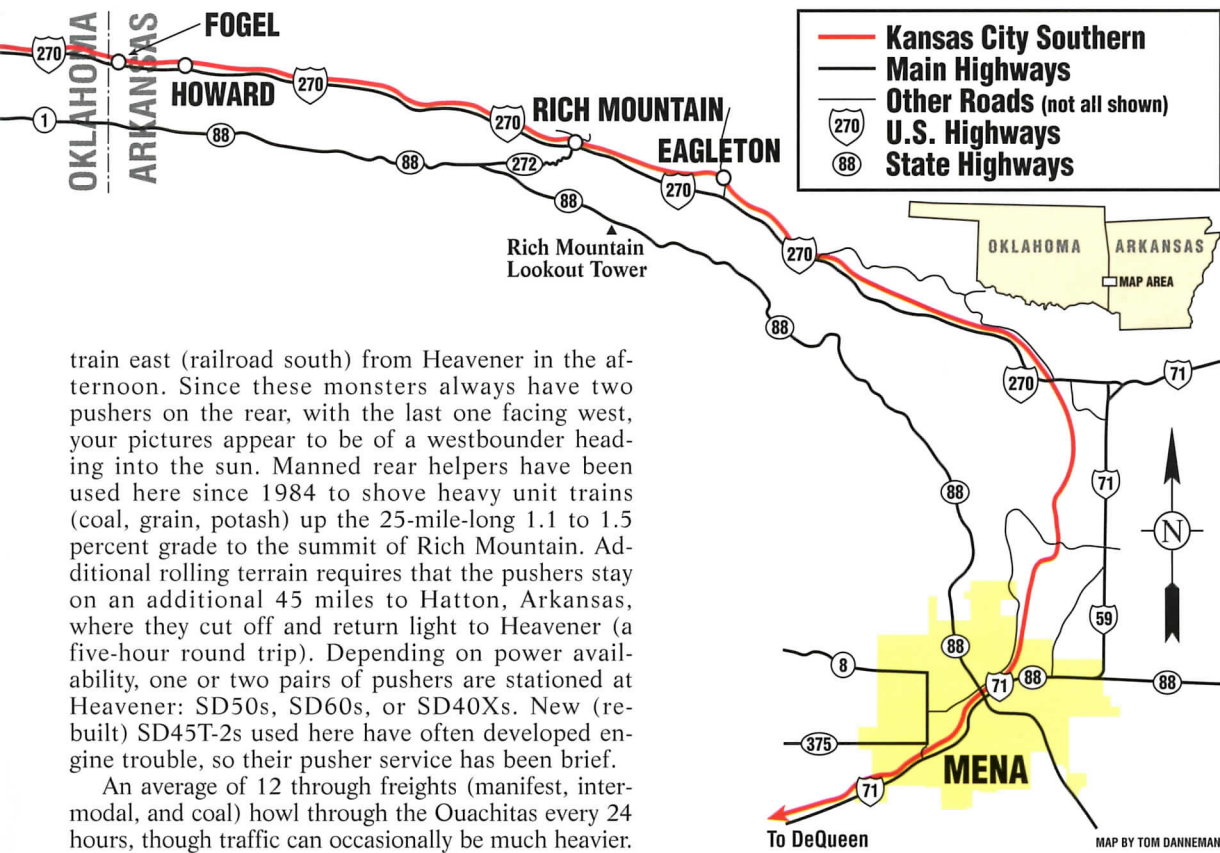


southbound trains (heading east) is easy and exhilarating. Loaded coal drags struggle to maintain 12 to 14 mph, as do grain and potash trains. Intermodal traffic may speed along at 25 or 30 mph. The highway runs directly beside the tracks, and favorable photographic locations are everywhere. Because of the slow train speeds, it is quite simple to obtain several decent shots of a single train.

The summit is reached at Rich Mountain, the other passing siding in the hills. Photographic opportunities at the west end of the siding, looking west, are likely. This passing siding was removed in the 1970s, then replaced, and now sees frequent use.

Beyond Rich Mountain, there are a few photographic opportunities for trains in either direction. There is an excellent afternoon shot of northbound traffic at Eagleton (just east of Rich Mountain siding). Another promising shot of southbound trains may be taken farther east where U.S. 59 crosses the tracks on the way to Mena. Though the scenery east of Rich Mountain siding is splendid, the tracks are separated from the highway. Most railfans approach this area only after obtaining the many easier shots to the west.

One of the most enjoyable experiences of railfanning in the Ouachitas is pursuing a loaded coal



In February 1986, a duo of white KCS SD40-2s and three Burlington Northern locomotives march a southbound coal drag by Black Fork Mountain, Oklahoma.

train east (railroad south) from Heavener in the afternoon. Since these monsters always have two pushers on the rear, with the last one facing west, your pictures appear to be of a westbounder heading into the sun. Manned rear helpers have been used here since 1984 to shove heavy unit trains (coal, grain, potash) up the 25-mile-long 1.1 to 1.5 percent grade to the summit of Rich Mountain. Additional rolling terrain requires that the pushers stay on an additional 45 miles to Hatton, Arkansas, where they cut off and return light to Heavener (a five-hour round trip). Depending on power availability, one or two pairs of pushers are stationed at Heavener: SD50s, SD60s, or SD40Xs. New (re-built) SD45T-2s used here have often developed engine trouble, so their pusher service has been brief.

An average of 12 through freights (manifest, intermodal, and coal) howl through the Ouachitas every 24 hours, though traffic can occasionally be much heavier.



Inset, Tom Kline; above, Bob Plough

INSET: On October 11, 1996, KCS GP38-2 4004 watches the sun's last rays fade behind the tallest building in Mena, Arkansas. The locomotive is tied up for the night following a day of switching chores on the southern side of Rich Mountain. ABOVE: On September 10, 1994, the dynamic brakes of KCS 652 and mates hold piggyback train No. 9 in check on the 1.3 percent grade just south of Rich Mountain, Arkansas.

On a recent trip to the mountains, one of us awoke to discover six trains, about 15 minutes apart, heading south through the mountains, with northbounds in the passing sidings at Page and Rich Mountain.

In addition, one or two Dodgers (locals) operate each day from Heavener to Waldron and Ft. Smith, Arkansas. The Ft. Smith Dodger operates over the last remaining segment of the old Frisco route from Ft. Smith to Paris, Texas, abandoned by Burlington Northern in the 1980s. This line followed the Kiamichi River through the Ouachitas, and in many ways was as beautiful as the KCS line across Rich Mountain.

Manifests connect Kansas City, Shreveport, and Beaumont, while an intermodal train goes from Kansas City to New Orleans. The most common coal train (averaging 37 loads south per month for 1995) is No. 91 (and No. 92, the northbound empty counterpart), servicing the Southwestern Electric Power Company plant in Welsh, Texas. Less common are No. 97 and No. 98, traveling to and from Mossville, Louisiana.

There are also grain and soda ash trains (the former have symbols in the 700s, the latter are carded as 3 and 4) appearing irregularly. Gone are the days when remote control slave midtrains helped lug 200-car monsters through the mountains. The longest trains today are 130-car empty covered grain hopper movements, but even these are rare.

Although KCS introduced a new gray-and-yellow paint scheme in 1988, you can still see classic "white knights." These units are Electro-Motive Division six-axle, with four-axle locomotives for the Dodgers.

Since 1995, the coal trains have often been powered by the dark green-and-cream BN SD70MACs, although occasionally blue-and-white Oakways or BN green units make an appearance.

In part because there are no massive tunnels on the KCS, nearly all locomotives passing through the mountains are clean and a joy to photograph in the beautiful Ouachita National Forest. When flooding forced Southern Pacific to detour trains through Heavener in 1993, local KCS employees were amazed that power so dirty could actually be in good enough mechanical condition to pull freight cars.

Those with scanners should program 160.260 (dispatcher to train) and 160.350 (train to dispatcher). Yankees, take note—you're in the South. People talk like it. A "merkel," for example, is what happened when Jesus turned the water into wine. "Hepyu" is what people in hospitals do. "Teejus" is what long articles about Class I railroads are. Hotbox detectors, employing their own form of mechanical English, broadcast at m.p. 331.4 (north of Heavener, which is m.p. 338); m.p. 348 (between Heavener and Page); and m.p. 363.8 (between Page and Rich Mountain).

The best time of the year for photography along this stretch of the KCS is fall. Although the foliage this far south is usually muted, the air is clear. Winter is also good, though don't expect snow. The forest is mixed hardwood and pine, so even in January there is greenery. When the leaves have fallen from the deciduous trees, moreover, you can take several shots that are blocked by foliage the remainder of the year.



Tim Hensch

Spring can be very beautiful when the redbud and dogwood are in bloom, but spring can also be very wet. Summer is the worst time to visit the mountains because of haze and frequent rain.

Mountains generate rain, and the Ouachitas catch ample Gulf moisture. At dawn on a summer morning, you can often watch a fog bank crawl *down* the mountain side, turning what had started out bright and sunny into a hot, damp, and murky sauna bath.

Perhaps the most notable characteristic of the area is the density of its foliage. A circus maintains its winter headquarters in Hugo, Oklahoma, south of the mountains near the Red River. In the early 1970s, one of the circus elephants escaped, and neither the circus nor the local authorities could find it. The story made the national news, because the idea of losing an elephant in Oklahoma, which outsiders always assume to be flat and treeless, fit neatly into the “dumb Okie” stereotype. THE NEW YORK TIMES even sent a reporter, who was strapped to a horse and sent into the wilderness by the county sheriff. The elephant was located at about the same time as the reporter.

We first visited the area in summer 1972 and, not knowing any better, spent the night at Page in an old Pontiac. This country is hot, and at three in the morning, a Pontiac with its windows rolled up became an inferno. Opening the windows was foolhardy, however, because this country breeds mosquitoes the size of coins. For this reason, and also because we eventually became gainfully employed, we’ve lodged at motels on later visits.

A Schnauzer with a Bite

Kansas City Southern is a strong company with good

earnings and operating ratios, but the Surface Transportation Board’s July 1996 approval of the Union Pacific-Southern Pacific merger has made it more difficult for it to thrive among ever-expanding mega-lines. The STB rejected nearly all KCS’ attempts to win merger concessions, and the merged lines have diverted some traffic from KCS rails. Remember, too, that not long ago (July 1994) KCS agreed to be taken over by Illinois Central (though the deal fell through). Moreover, roads that railfans thought would remain independent forever (Santa Fe, for example) have recently been merged out of existence.

Although KCS is a schnauzer among Saint Bernards, it retains a mean bite. Its purchase of Gateway Western (December 1996) is providing it with badly needed access to St. Louis and Chicago. Business on its east-west transcontinental line (Dallas to Meridian, Mississippi) is growing, as is KCS’ determination to retain existing coal contracts and add new ones. By outbidding UP (December 1996) for Mexico’s strategic Northeast Railway and sending traffic south of the border via trackage rights over the Texas Mexican Railway, KCS hopes to become a major player in the expanding trade between the two nations.

The physical plant is sound, the locomotives sparkling. Thus, on balance, prospects are reasonable for KCS to survive as an independent company into the 21st century. Its locomotives will likely continue echoing off Winding Stair Mountain as southbound coal trains struggle into the grade.

However, a few railfans will remember the railroad’s errant past—vividly illustrated by two hundred-car trains, decrepit track, saw-bys, and a lost elephant in the Ouachita Mountains. [RailNews](#)

In September 1994, KCS 702 pounds past the depot at Mena, Arkansas. Kansas City Southern is one of the last railroads to equip its locomotives with Mars lights.