

So, are you a fan of the Great Northern or the Northern Pacific? If you're like most people, your answer is either "neither" or "both", because if you didn't find both of their operations of interest (the history of the two is so intertwined), you probably didn't care about either one!

Prior to the mega-mergers of the past 30 years, a number of railroads existed that were natural rivals. New York Central and Pennsylvania were probably the most notable, since, prior to the decline of railroading in the East, they were the nation's largest in terms of passengers and freight handled. Which was best? That debate could go on forever. Certainly, the popularity of The Twentieth Century Limited eclipsed that of The Broadway Limited, but Pennsy's passenger line between New York City and Washington, DC had no rival anywhere in the United States. Most would agree Atlantic Coast Line to best Seaboard, mostly because ACL handled more passengers and its main line had greater capacity and was flatter than Seaboard's route along the fringe of the Piedmont. Yet, in this case, the victory is not clearcut, in my opinion. While ACL had a better route to Montgomery and the main freight route from Birmingham to Florida (the AB&C route), it always impressed me that Seaboard offered the only alternative to Southern for Northeast-to-Atlanta and Birmingham traffic, and was the link (with L&N) between Jacksonville and New Orleans...and went directly to Miami without having to hand off traffic to the Florida East Coast. At the opposite end of the spectrum, it's obvious who would be the victor in an overall contest between Illinois Central and Gulf, Mobile, and Ohio.

Here, then, is my comparison between the Great Northern and Northern Pacific. The text presented is meant to be largely objective based on written documentation or known factual material, not personal experiences....with some humor, and even sarcasm, thrown in....

PASSENGER SERVICES:

For the sake of the comparison, I will use an Official Guide of the Railways from December, 1965.

Transcontinental Route:
St. Paul to Seattle

GN 31, Empire Builder, Running Time 35:55, Average Speed 49.61 MPH
NP 25, North Coast Limited, Running Time 38:45, Average Speed 48.83 MPH

GN 27, Western Star, Running Time 40:00, Average Speed 44.55 MPH
NP 1, Mainstreeter, Running time 49:50, Average Speed 37.97 MPH

Seattle to St. Paul

GN 32, Empire Builder, Running Time 37:50, Average Speed 47.10 MPH
NP 26, North Coast Limited, Running Time 39:10, Average Speed 48.30 MPH
GN 28, Western Star, Running Time 39:20, Average Speed 44.84 MPH
NP 2, Mainstreeter, Running Time 46:35, Average Speed 40.62 MPH

The statistics above are based on 1892 route-miles for NP trains, and 1782 route-miles for GN trains, except for GN train 28, whose route was only 1764 miles.

Obviously, the Empire Builder is faster than the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited in both directions, but I believe that the westbound trip is a better representation of the clear superiority of the GN route which encompasses not only mileage, but grade and curvature. This is important, because the astute NP fan could argue that the eastbound Vista-Dome North Coast Limited actually posts a faster average speed than does the eastbound Empire Builder. This is true, but look again. The eastbound Empire Builder is nearly 2 hours slower than its westbound counterpart. Why? (The eastbound Vista-Dome North Coast Limited is but 25 miles slower eastbound than westbound.) Scheduling is clearly the reason. If train 32 was two hours faster eastbound, depending on how the schedule was changed, departure from Spokane would be well past midnight or arrival in the Twin Cities would be well before dawn. The leisurely eastbound schedule allows decent times at these important points.

The westbound Empire Builder needed no such schedule augmentation, and is able to "show its stuff" by besting the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited by nearly 3 hours. The Empire Builder during this time departed Chicago at 300 PM, 2 hours, 30 minutes later than the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited, but still managed to arrive Seattle 15 minutes ahead of it. The later departure time from Chicago for the Empire Builder allowed passengers to connect inbound from Detroit on NYC's Wolverine, from St. Louis on GM&O's Abraham Lincoln, from Louisville on Monon's Thoroughbred, and from NYC's James Whitcomb Riley (which was the Chicago connection at Cincinnati from C&O's George Washington and N&W's Pocahontas.) Connections from these important trains were not available to the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited due to its earlier departure.

While the normal procedure would be to compare GN trains 31/32 with NP trains 25/26 and compare GN trains 27/28 with NP trains 1/2, another running time comparison is interesting. Note that the eastbound Western Star is but 10 minutes

slower than the eastbound Vista-Dome North Coast Limited between Seattle and St. Paul; between Seattle and Minneapolis the running times are identical. Granted, the GN train has 128 fewer miles to go, but it makes 60 positive and conditional stops between Seattle and Minneapolis, while NP 26 makes but 24. And, given the nature of the Western Star during this period (a very heavy, long train with much mail traffic), this is again reflective of the profile of the GN route. Westbound, NP 25 was but 75 minutes quicker than GN 27, a much smaller gap than between NP 25 and GN 31.

After comparing the Western Star with the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited the more logical comparison between the Western Star and Mainstreeter would seem to be pointless, and it pretty much is. With a St. Paul-Seattle schedule nearly 10 hours longer than that of the Western Star, it's difficult to really consider the Mainstreeter to be a competitor in this market. Clearly, its purpose was to serve intermediate communities. One point in defense of the westbound Mainstreeter's schedule is that it had been intentionally lengthened to allow for a decent arrival time in Seattle. If the westbound had the same running time as the eastbound, it would have arrived in Seattle at the unpalatable hour of 400 AM.

Comparing the services offered on board the Empire Builder and Vista-Dome North Coast Limited is tricky. The first to be streamlined in this market, the Empire Builder has long been considered to be the premier train on the route. With abundant lounge space, and more dome seats than any other train, the Empire Builder truly was, in many respects, as the GN advertised, "Incomparable". Yet, in my opinion, the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited, at least with regard to equipment was very much the equal of the Empire Builder. And, though some have actually criticized the NP for placing slumbercoaches on the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited, I believe that these are very useful cars, and were options not available on any GN train. The stewardess-nurse service on the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited also was not a feature available on the Empire Builder.

By 1965, the Western Star and Mainstreeter both offered similar coach seating and meal/lounge service. The Western Star carried sleeping cars, but the only sleeping service on the Mainstreeter was a slumbercoach. Personally, I like the concept of slumbercoaches, and a train like the Mainstreeter would be a good train on which to run them. Unfortunately, I believe they were a hindrance to any long distance travel. It was bad enough that the both the eastbound AND westbound Mainstreeter took three nights to make its trip, but to offer ONLY a slumbercoach (and not a sleeping car) was a severe downgrading of the service. After three nights on the train, one would tend to be a bit claustrophobic riding in a slumbercoach room, especially considering that alternative places to spend some time (domes, lounges) were scarce. But, as stated earlier, the slow schedule probably did little to encourage transcontinental travel as it

was. (During this time, the eastbound Mainstreeter was only slightly faster between Seattle and Chicago than the competing all-stop Greyhound run, and the westbound train was actually slower. Interesting, considering that most of I-90/I-94 has not been completed.)

Also noted in the Official Guide is that the car used for dining and lounge service on the Mainstreeter operated only between St. Paul and Pasco, so the train had no food or beverage service between Pasco and Seattle. While most of the trip was at night, train 2 did depart Seattle at 945 PM, which would mean that some people might want a nightcap or snack before settling down for the night. The Western Star's food service cars ran through to/from Seattle.

Intermediate points on the transcontinental routes:

Some places on the transcontinental routes had supplemental service (other than the Empire Builder, Vista-Dome North Coast Limited, Western Star, Mainstreeter). Most notable are in Minnesota and North Dakota. Great Northern offered service on two routes between the Twin Cities and Fargo-Moorhead, and ran a total of 5 trains (2 via Willmar, 3 via St. Cloud). In addition to the transcontinental trains, GN ran the Dakotan(St. Paul-Grand Forks-Minot), Red River (St. Paul-Fargo), and Winnipeg Limited(St. Paul- Winnipeg) through (or to) Fargo. All of these trains featured on-board meal service, and the Winnipeg Limited (which will be discussed in detail later), had sleeping car service.

The Dakotan was more or less a connecting train to the Western Star at Minot, running on an alternative route, but the westbound train did offer a connection with the overnight CB&Q Black Hawk at St. Paul with an arrival in Fargo over 2 hours ahead of the Western Star and Mainstreeter, which connected with the same train. The Red River was scheduled specifically for patrons between the Twin Cities and Fargo. The nocturnal Winnipeg Limited operated both ways between the Twin Cities and Fargo a schedule similar to the Empire Builder, but via St. Cloud instead of Willmar.

Northern Pacific ran one extra train on its transcontinental route through this area, coach-only trains 3 and 4 between St. Paul and Mandan. The train was the connection at Little Falls, MN with the NP train to and from International Falls, but other than that it was a milk run in every sense of the word. Train 3 left St. Paul late in the evening and arrived Fargo at 446 AM before continuing to Mandan. Train 4 connected with train 2 at Mandan and was the all-stop local to St. Paul, arriving there at the odd time of 255 AM, too early or too late to make decent connections.

Between St. Paul and Fargo, the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited was the speediest

train, and made but two intermediate stops; but all five Great Northern passenger trains were quicker than the Mainstreeter and NP trains 3/4. While all five GN runs through Fargo were full-service passenger trains offering somewhat of a variety of departure times, it's obvious that the service offered by NP was really no better than at any other point along its transcontinental route.

Another common point along the transcontinental route of both railroads is Spokane. By 1965, local Spokane-Seattle trains had been discontinued, with only the through trains from Chicago (St. Paul) to Seattle operating on these routes. Great Northern, however, still operated a 6-day-per week Spokane to Seattle sleeping car. The car, which was available for occupancy at 930 PM, rode the Empire Builder westbound and Western Star eastbound. This compensated for the Empire Builder's 1215 AM departure westbound and the Western Star's relatively early 615 AM arrival at Spokane. Northern Pacific offered no additional local cars.

Seattle-Portland:

This is the lone route where both railroads offered service, but where Northern Pacific's service was superior to that of Great Northern. Three trains daily were operated on the route between Seattle and Portland, one each by Northern Pacific, Great Northern, and Union Pacific. Northern Pacific owned and dispatched the route (though the UP trains used the Milwaukee Road from Tacoma to Seattle). The Northern Pacific train (all trains were unnamed) offered meal and lounge service (and sleeping car service one way, a through operation to Oakland with Southern Pacific), while the Great Northern train offered only minimal snack service by an on-board vendor. Though owned by the NP, the GN train on this route made the local station stops, not served by the NP or UP trains.

I do believe, however that since this technically was the NP's railroad, it is discrediting that they did not offer any more passenger service than did the tenants on their railroad. Passenger trains back then, even though unprofitable, were considered by railroad management as good public relations tools. It's odd NP didn't capitalize on this, but I suspect they didn't have the capital to do it, so to speak!

Seattle-Vancouver, BC

Great Northern alone operated passenger service between the two largest metropolitan areas in the region. Northern Pacific's parallel route terminated at Sumas and was freight-only. Contrary to the GN train south of Seattle, the Internationals between Seattle and Vancouver, BC offered parlor car/lounge service and operated twice daily in each direction (in 1965).

The morning International offered a Vancouver connection for passengers on the westbound Empire Builder at Everett, and the afternoon International from Vancouver connected with the eastbound Empire Builder at Everett. Any passengers using NP's Vista-Dome North Coast Limited to/from Seattle did not have the benefit of direct connections with GN trains to/from Vancouver, BC.

In contrast to NP's route south of Seattle allowing trackage rights to competitors, the route north of Seattle was GN's alone...well, except entering the CN Vancouver station. Yes, one could travel all the way across Canada on Canadian National, but the Super Continental and Panorama still needed Great Northern rails to reach western Canada's major city. Today, VIA's popular refurbished Canadian traverses former GN rails to reach its Vancouver terminus.

Twin Cities-Winnipeg

Great Northern was the clear leader on this route, offering the Winnipeg Limited on an overnight schedule featuring coaches, sleeping cars, and breakfast/lounge service. (The Soo Line also offered an overnight train, the Winnipeger, but it had no meal service.) Northern Pacific's service was a Rail Diesel Car which actually operated between Fargo and Winnipeg, via Hawley, Minnesota. Passengers from the Twin Cities would ride the Mainstreeter to Hawley and detrain for an immediate connection with the RDC. No food service was offered, but a box lunch was available at Grand Forks. The NP train did (until later on) operate on a day schedule, which, considering the equipment offered, would be a must. The NP service was actually faster than the Winnipeg Limited westbound (but not eastbound), on a route some 24 miles shorter (Great Northern had the shortest freight route via Barnesville and Ada, MN, which was once the route of the Winnipeg Limited.).

The Winnipeg Limited also connected with both directions at Fargo with the Empire Builder to and from the west. While the middle-of-the-night transfer might not be too tasteful for some, it did allow an all-Great Northern routing between the major Canadian cities of Winnipeg, MB and Vancouver, BC via the International at Everett, with minimal transfer times.

Twin Cities-Twin Ports

Like between Seattle and Portland, NP and GN (and before it was discontinued, Soo Line), offered pool service between these endpoints (but on different routes). Again, Great Northern provided the superior service. Mileage on the routes was about the same. GN trains originated in St. Paul and the NP trains in Minneapolis, which

certainly wasn't a bonus for the NP, since their other trains terminated in St. Paul.

Great Northern's Gopher was the premier train on the route featuring a parlor-buffet car and 3 hour, 15 minute running time between St. Paul and Duluth with only two intermediate stops between Minneapolis and Superior. Its companion train, the Badger was on a somewhat longer schedule and made stops at the small stations. The Gopher and Badger offered complementary schedules between St. Paul and Duluth allowing day roundtrips from each origin point, as well as numerous connections in Minneapolis and St. Paul.

The "also-ran" on the route was NP's Twin Ports-Twin City Express, which was the only NP passenger train other than the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited and Mainstreeter to have a name by this time. The train as coach-only (no food service). Train 66 left Minneapolis at 1050 PM for a nearly 6-hour trip to Duluth, posting a 445 AM arrival. The only positive aspect about this train is that it afforded connections with inbound trains from Chicago at the Twin Cities. Going the other way, NP train 65 was a bit faster at 4 hours, 40 minutes, and the just-after-midnight arrival in the Twin Cities was somewhat more palatable, but the train connected with nothing.

Twin Ports-Pacific Northwest

Both GN and NP had a direct line west from the Twin Ports, but by 1965, GN offered no passenger service, and bus service to Grand Forks via Bemidji was awkward. GN routed passengers on the Gopher and Badger to Minneapolis instead. NP at this time offered two trains daily between Duluth and the main line at Staples, Minnesota. Nicknamed the "Staples Streetcars", both were Rail Diesel Cars; one connected with the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited, and the other with the Mainstreeter. This did allow the NP to post the best time between Duluth and Fargo, and sometimes beyond. The "Staples Streetcar" connection to the North Coast Limited was faster in both directions than via GN's Empire Builder and a connection to/from the Gopher or Badger at Minneapolis. Between Seattle and Duluth, a Western Star/Gopher routing was faster than using the Mainstreeter and its connection at Staples.

While NP receives accolades for providing this twice daily service west from Duluth/Superior (but only running once a day to St. Paul/Minneapolis), the trains fail miserably for comfort. For instance, I would wager that the vast majority of Duluth-bound passengers on NP's Vista-Dome North Coast Limited would skip the 345 AM transfer to an RDC at Staples, and continue through to Minneapolis or St. Paul and then use GN's Badger to complete the trip. Westbound, the 1000 PM transfer time in Staples might not be quite as bad, but many instead probably opted for a parlor car seat on Great Northern's Gopher to Minneapolis as a prelude to their voyage westward

on the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited.

Summary of passenger service comparisons:

Which was the better train, Empire Builder or Vista-Dome North Coast Limited? This topic could be debated ad nauseam, with the debate being largely subjective, but the outcome, I believe is irrelevant. From the Super Chief to the California Zephyr to the Capitol Limited and beyond, most railroads had a premier passenger train, and NP and GN were no different. The true test of a railroad's passenger service are the trains other than the flagship. It is here that Great Northern's clear superiority is most evident.

By 1965, Northern Pacific operated but two trains with sleeping cars: The Vista-Dome North Coast Limited, and train 407(through to Oakland from Seattle via SP; the Mainstreeter had but a slumbercoach) and only three trains with food service. Other than the transcontinental trains, only the Seattle-Portland pool train offered anything more than a coach seat. Other than that Seattle-Portland train and the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited, NP trains competing with GN trains fail and fail miserably with regard to speed, frequency, and on-board services. Most notably, one wonders why NP did not offer additional Seattle-Portland service, or additional Twin Cities-Fargo service on a competitive schedule. Why did Great Northern provide the best service between the Twin Cities and Duluth? The NP route was no longer. The only conclusion can be that, as historically has been proven, the NP was not financially able to create a competitive service, and definitely unable to keep the services going once passenger trains began feeling the strain of highway and airline competition.

More evidence of this is obvious as one looks at the period from 1965 to the 1970 merger. During this time, all Northern Pacific passenger trains except the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited, Mainstreeter, and Seattle-Portland pool train were discontinued. Great Northern experienced its share of cutbacks, too, but the only segments to lose service since 1965 were Shelby-Great Falls and Superior-Duluth (except for mixed trains).

I also would like to propose a "what if" scenario here. The "what if" is a comparison of services offered if each railroad did not run their flagship train, given that, completely for the sake of argument, that everything else would remain the same.

During the time period indicated above (1965), WHAT IF the Empire Builder did not exist, and everything else was the same? Clearly, in this case, the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited would be the undisputed front-running train between Chicago and Seattle, due to the equipment offered. Yet, over all, this would not make the NP the

leading passenger carrier of the two. The Western Star, due to its relatively fine equipment and with a competitive running time would certainly capture a good share of passengers, especially considering its service to Glacier National Park; and though GN would not be carrying the most passengers between the Midwest and Pacific Northwest (since the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited would be the preferred train, and the Mainstreeter would still be there), it still would offer the best service between the Twin Cities and Twin Ports, Fargo, and Winnipeg, as well as the only service between Seattle and Vancouver, BC. Even without the Empire Builder, Great Northern's passenger service would have been considered excellent, since most were "full-service", i.e. not coach-only, trains.

Now, try if you will to imagine comparing GN and NP passenger service if the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited did not exist! For NP fans, this would be inconceivable, and with good reason. Not only was the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited a great train, but it pretty much WAS Northern Pacific passenger service. With the most of the remaining NP passenger services being inferior to those of Great Northern, the lack of a Vista-Dome North Coast Limited would place the NP in a position of complete obscurity. By 1965, without a sleeping car, the Mainstreeter wouldn't even make a decent candidate to be considered as a "flagship".

Granted, such a comparison is irrelevant overall, but it does point out the scope of the service offered on a broad scale. In the Official Guide of the Railways from this period, Great Northern did, at the top of several of the pages of its entry, tout the "Incomparable" Empire Builder, but also was proud to mention its other "great" streamliners: The Internationals, Western Star, and Red River (but surprisingly ignored the Winnipeg Limited and Gopher/Badger, which also provided the best service on their respective routes). In its entry in the Guide, the Northern Pacific heading atop most of the pages (when not indicating "Main Street of the Northwest, which referred to no specific train), boasted being the "Route of Vista-Dome North Coast Limited", and then continued to brag about being the "Route of the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited", and, of course, they were the "Route of the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited", you know. In reality, as stated above, there was little else to brag about.

Some headings would just have looked out of place: "The Mainstreeter; only three nights enroute between Chicago and Seattle"; or "The Mainstreeter between Seattle and Spokane. Overnight Every Night, No Extra Fare." (Oops, that one had been used.) Well, how about: "Northern Pacific. With the only daytime service between the Twin Cities and Winnipeg. Box lunch available at Grand Forks." (They probably would have left that last part out.) Or: "Northern Pacific: Route of the stainless-steel RDC (Railroading's Deluxe Conveyance) fleet, connecting Duluth, Winnipeg, Lewiston to

the 'Route of the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited' ". Just doesn't have a ring to it.....

For the comparison of passenger services, 1965 was chosen because it was a time when many branch passenger operations had been pared, yet it was prior to the massacre of trains that resulted from removal of U.S. Mail from American passenger trains. For the most part, the year chosen is a good representation of the superiority of Great Northern passenger service. NP fans might have chosen sometime like January 1955 when the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited had domes and the Empire Builder had not yet received its domes for the comparison. While one train does not a rail passenger service make (unless you're the NP or WP, possibly), other post-war years would have been just as unflattering to the NP. For instance:

**1947, when the new streamlined Empire Builder debuted and the North Coast Limited was demoted to try to compete in schedule and equipment to GN's secondary Oriental Limited;

**1951, when ANOTHER new Empire Builder (the "mid-century" version) arrived on the scene, with the previous streamlined Empire Builder equipment creating the new Western Star, making both the Empire Builder and Western Star superior to the North Coast Limited.

**1960. When the Great Northern ceased running the Western Star via Grand Forks and Great Falls, travel time between St. Paul and Helena via GN trains 27-3-235 was 2 hours, 57 minutes quicker than NP's only passenger service to Helena, the Mainstreeter. Eastbound, trains 236-4-28 were 2 hours, 15 minutes faster than NP train 2.

**1969, when, by this time NP had reduced its all-time low of three trains (25-26; 1-2; 407-408), GN still ran two trains from St. Paul to Seattle, once north of Seattle to Vancouver, BC, once south of Seattle to Portland, twice daily to Superior, WI, and in conjunction with its longer distance trains, ran four times daily from the Twin Cities to Fargo.

"I would like to remind you that in recent years the Northern Pacific Railroad has made an effort to discourage passenger service on the southern route" -Senator Mike Mansfield, Senate Congressional Record, April 13, 1971.

COMPARING THE GRADES OF THE TRANSCONTINENTAL ROUTES:

Grades on Great Northern:

St. Paul-Minot, via Willmar, Westbound .4%, Eastbound, .4%
Minot-Williston, Westbound .65%, Eastbound .6%
Williston-Havre, Westbound .4%, Eastbound .4%
Havre-Whitefish, Westbound 1.0%, Eastbound .8%
...(Helper grade eastbound 1.8% Nimrod/Java to Summit)
Whitefish-Spokane, Westbound .6%, Eastbound .7%
Spokane-Wenatchee, Westbound 1.0%, Eastbound 1.0%
Wenatchee-Seattle, Westbound 1.0%, Eastbound 1.0%
...(Helper grade westbound 1.6% to 2.2% Peshastin to Berne)
...(Helper grade eastbound 2.2% for 11 miles Skykomish to Scenic, then 8 miles of 1.6% Scenic to Berne)

Grades on Northern Pacific:

St. Paul-Mandan, Westbound 1.0%, Eastbound .4%
...(Westbound grade is between Fargo and Mandan. Both eastbound and ...westbound there are short stretches of grades in excess of those indicated above)
Mandan-Glendive, Westbound 1.0%, Eastbound 1.0%
Glendive-Livingston, Westbound .5%, Eastbound downhill
Livingston-Helena, Westbound 1.0%, Eastbound 1.0%
...(Helper district both directions between Livingston and Bozeman.
...Westbound is 1.8% for 12 miles: Eastbound is 1.9% for 7 miles)
Helena-Missoula, Westbound downhill, Eastbound .4%
...(Helper district in both directions between Helena and Elliston.
...Westbound is 1.6% to 2.2% for 15 miles; Eastbound is 1.4% for 8 miles)
Missoula-Spokane, Westbound .8%, Eastbound .4%
...(Grade indicated is via St. Regis; Evaro Hill route is 2.2% in each direction)
Spokane-Pasco, Westbound 1.1%, Eastbound 1.0%
Pasco-Seattle, Westbound .8%, Eastbound 1.1%
...(Helper district both directions between Easton and Lester.
...Westbound 2.2% for 6 miles: Eastbound 2.2% for 10.25 miles)

The Great Northern route is clearly superior. While NP trains encounter 1% grades at numerous locations (westbound from St. Paul) prior to reaching the Montana border, a westbound Great Northern train wouldn't see one until beyond the mid-point of its journey, west of Havre, Montana. Great Northern's crossing of the Continental Divide at Marias Pass, Montana is the lowest crossing in the United States north of New

Mexico, and the route, in either direction, has the best profile of any Midwest-to-West Coast railroad in the United States.

To fully grasp the differences in grade, here's a comparison of what it would like to operate a freight train of a specified size over the two routes:

Let's take a train of 7,000 tons (quite an average train by today's standards, quite heavy by those in 1970) assigned two SD45 locomotives (7200 HP) for a trip westbound from the Twin Cities; one train via GN, the other via NP.

The Great Northern train would leave its initial terminal and continue unassisted to Havre. There, another unit would be added, and could be removed at Essex (today, due to the routing via Flathead Tunnel, the unit could not be removed until Rock Creek). The train could then continue with its original two units to Spokane, where a third unit of similar size would again have to be added for the trip to Wenatchee. At Wenatchee, the train would have to be split in two or helped to Skykomish. The original three units could handle 3600 tons, so another three unit engine consist or helper would be necessary for the remaining tonnage. (Today, helpers are not used, trains are doubled as necessary). The train could continue to Seattle from Skykomish with the three units assigned at Spokane.

The Northern Pacific train departing the Twin Cities with its two units could only continue unassisted to Dilworth, Minnesota, where another unit would have to be added for the train to tackle the grades climbing from the Sheyenne and James Rivers valleys, and this additional unit would remain on the train all the way to Glendive to handle the heavier grades of Southwestern North Dakota. At Glendive, the third unit could be removed, and the train could continue with the original two units through to Livingston. At Livingston, a third unit would again be necessary for use through to Blossburg, Montana. In addition, two more SD45 units or equivalent would be necessary to help the train from Livingston to the top of Bozemen Pass.

At Helena, another helper, this one with three units, would be required to push the train to the top of Mullan Pass. Assuming the third road unit has cut at Blossburg, the train could continue unassisted to Sandpoint, where again a third unit would be required for Athol Hill (unless the train was exceptionally short, such as a grain train, the two SD45 units could handle it). At Spokane, a third unit would be required for the trip to Pasco (actually, the ruling grade between Spokane and Pasco was immediately departing Spokane; a routing via the SP&S would allow for a grade some .2% less than the NP).

From Pasco, the train would again require three units to make the hill near Kiona, just

west of Kennewick, and at Easton the train would require three more units to either help the train or split the train in two. In this case the train would again be assembled at Lester, Washington for the run into Seattle. Note the numerous power modifications necessary in this scenario which is based on a train operating with minimal power at any point on its route.

In reality, the Great Northern train would likely just run with two units between the Twin Cities and Havre and three west of there, and arrange for three more units at Wenatchee. The NP train would likely have three units assigned at origin, operating through to destination, receiving helpers at Livingston, Helena, and Easton. In any event, the result is the same: it takes more power, more crews, more time, and more money to run a train on the NP route compared with operating one via the GN route.

Another operating consideration is mileage. On the transcontinental route, Great Northern had the clear advantage; The Empire Builder traveled 110 miles less than the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited, and GN freight had an even greater mileage advantage (since GN freight usually bypassed Fargo, and most NP freight used a longer route via St. Regis instead of Arlee). Even where GN did not have the mileage edge on the NP, sometimes its favorable grades made it competitive with NP. For instance, an all-GN routing between Billings, Montana and Seattle is only 78 miles further than one on the NP, but westbound trains, for instance, would not require additional power or helpers until Wenatchee, whereas NP trains would already have been helped at Livingston and Helena (and Missoula if operated via Evaro Hill) prior to reaching Easton, where it would have to be helped over Stampede Pass.

Between Helena, Montana and St. Paul, Minnesota, an all-GN routing via Great Falls, Havre, New Rockford, and Willmar was but 24 miles longer than on the NP main between the two cities, but the difference is grade. Westbound the maximum grade on GN is .65% between St. Paul and Sieben (only about 30 miles from Helena), and .85% beyond. Eastbound, it's 1.1% for the 17 miles from Helena to Silver City, then .6% maximum to St. Paul. This is in contrast to the numerous grades at 1.0% on the NP across North Dakota, not to mention the climb over Bozeman Pass (1.9% eastbound).

Overall Route Comparisons:

I've already outlined how the Great Northern transcontinental route is superior to that of the Northern Pacific with regard to gradient and mileage. At merger time 1970, the new BN routed most Twin Cities-Pacific Northwest tonnage to a route that included mostly ex-GN trackage. Clearly, the GN route to the Pacific Northwest was superior to that of the NP. Since both GN and NP were railroads built to connect the upper

Midwest with Pacific Northwest, the transcontinental routes were the most important. But, to me, this is not where the GN clearly outclasses the NP...it's the other routes.

Did you ever notice that most of the sites for the NPRHA convention are located on the former NP main line? (Except for maybe Tacoma, which, since it was the first primary NP destination when built would be considered on the transcontinental main) Did you ever wonder why? Because those are the only places where the former NP remains as an important railroad. Yet, the GNRHS conventions have taken place in cities like Sioux City, Duluth, Great Falls, and Bellingham, not exactly known as being along the ex-GN main line. Great Northern had viable routes other than the transcontinental main.

Twenty-Eight years after the Northern Pacific disappeared, I can think of only two of its routes (other than the transcontinental main) that are important to today's Burlington Northern Santa Fe: Seattle-Portland(also used by Great Northern), and Staples-Carlton(the route to Superior for unit coal trains.) Here are some important BNSF lines and terminals located on former Great Northern trackage that continue viable today and were NOT on the main transcontinental route!

The Mesabi Range: This trackage operates north and west of Duluth/Superior. On average, two or three taconite trains operate daily (most handle pellets to Allouez, but there are frequent all-rail movements to Granite City, IL, Chicago, and other locations). Northern Pacific never served the Mesabi Range, but instead went to the much-less-productive Cuyuna Range (off the Carlton to Staples main at Deerwood); the trackage to Cuyuna Range from Deerwood is abandoned.

To Winnipeg: The route from Crookston to Noyes (then to Winnipeg via CN) is BNSF's sole route to the border in eastern North Dakota and western Minnesota today. Connecting routes at Crookston are all former GN routes (to Grand Forks-Minot-Fargo, and to Superior). NP, of course, had a route to Winnipeg, too, and some of it is still in service, mostly in North Dakota (from Grafton). Savvy NP fans will point out that the CN route from Noyes/Emerson Jct. to Winnipeg was actually constructed by the NP at the turn of the century. That's true, but due to financial problems, NP sold the route (and others) to the province of Manitoba in 1910, and it eventually became part of CN. Since it's been quite awhile since the NP had it, and all the access on the US side is former GN trackage, I think this qualifies as an ex-GN route.

Eastern South Dakota Cities: Great Northern routes in South Dakota have stood the test of time. The route to Yankton from Sioux Falls has been abandoned, and the route to Aberdeen from Breckenridge is currently not used as a through route as a result of

BN's acquisition of the South Dakota Core Railroad (former Milwaukee trackage), but ex-GN terminals at Willmar, MN, Watertown, Sioux City, and Sioux Falls continue to anchor rail operations in eastern South Dakota. While several segments of ex-GN trackage have been abandoned in South Dakota, overall, GN routes have fared better than those operated by the Milwaukee Road and C&NW, once the major players in Eastern South Dakota. By the way, did anyone besides me think that it was odd that GN, the principal railroad of Northern North Dakota, served so much of South Dakota, while NP, the principal railroad of Southern North Dakota, never entered South Dakota?

Sioux City, Iowa: Continues to be a major point for locals, through freight, and grain gathering. The line from Willmar, Minnesota to Sioux City is BNSF's leading grain producing route, and is slated to undergo massive upgrading in the next few years to handle more through traffic. Northern Pacific didn't enter Iowa.

Great Falls, Montana: Continues to be a major point for locals and grain gathering, and it's the major yard on the only route in the Intermountain West between Canada and Great Basin. The route is also used for ribbon rail loaded trains from BNSF's Laurel, Montana rail plant destined for points west of Sandpoint, ID; the reason: too much curvature on the ex-NP main (MRL) at Lombard, Montana makes the trains susceptible to derailment. As of late, the route is being used for grain and coal between the Midwest and West Coast, avoiding former NP trackage (MRL). Recent capacity enhancements are in the works to allow even more traffic to be diverted away from MRL. (See below)

Kettle Falls, WA: This route north from Spokane is busier than ever. Though no longer going to Nelson, BC, the one-time terminus, the route has been upgraded to handle ore shipments from Alaska which are moved by ship to Everett, then rail to Spokane and to Waneta, BC for the smelter at Trail. Lumber products round out the rest of the traffic. It's amazing that BNSF is so important to this area of British Columbia, where GN's Hill and CP's Van Horne had fought for dominance. It's one area in Canada where the GN (long after it was no longer the GN) triumphed over CP.

Vancouver, BC: The route from Everett north to Vancouver, BC is also busier than ever. The route serves the Roberts Bank, BC Superport, and still provides trackage rights to Canadian National to enter Vancouver, western Canada's major city. NP did have a parallel route in the area. Originally running from Black River and Seattle to Sumas, the route is intermittently abandoned south of Sedro-Woolley, but in service beyond. Daily trains for Sumas now originate at Everett, and use ex-GN trackage to Sedro-Woolley and former NP trackage to Sumas where an interchange is made with CP and the Southern Railway of British Columbia. The ex-NP branch to Bellingham

is nearly all abandoned.

To California: The extension of the "Oregon Trunk" to Klamath Falls and on to Bieber features 2 to 3 trains daily over most of the route. Since the UP-SP merger, BNSF has purchased the line from Bieber to Keddle where trackage rights are used both directions on former WP main line. The ex-GN yard at Klamath Falls is the focal point of route, not only marshaling trains on north-south routes, but occasionally originating trains that operate toward Denver on UP trackage rights. Northern Pacific didn't enter California. They had their chance to make the construction of the route to Bieber a joint effort with the GN, but didn't think it was viable (or didn't have the money?), and didn't want to jeopardize their friendly connection with the SP at Portland. Great Northern's construction of the "Inside Gateway" has guaranteed that there will be rail competition along the west coast.

As stated earlier, when trying to think of a former Northern Pacific station that was not on the transcontinental main but would qualify as even a minor terminal today, I can't think of one.

MISCELLANEOUS OBSERVATIONS:

Some objective, some subjective....

A....To access the Orient, James J. Hill formed the Great Northern Pacific Steamship Company. The two major vessels were appropriately named the Great Northern and the Northern Pacific. The Great Northern in latter years served in World War I and World War II(renamed the H.F. Alexander). The Northern Pacific sunk in 1917. Meaningless, perhaps, but reflective of the relative financial conditions of the two companies nonetheless.

B....While only 8% of trackage in the U.S. was land-grant, the Northern Pacific's main fell into this category. While some of the early predecessor roads that formed the Great Northern in the Midwest had land grant roots, the railroad overall was mostly privately financed. Only during the depression did GN not declare dividends, and unlike most railroads (including the NP) during this period of time, the GN never was insolvent.

C....Heralds, Logos, Symbols, etc. Few symbols nationwide were more recognized than Rocky, the Great Northern Goat. Not only was this animal a logical choice, since

its habitat could be viewed from Great Northern trains, but sure-footed "Rocky" also exemplified Great Northern's rock-solid financial position. Truly appropriate, truly an American classic. I would, however, ask the average NP fan to define the word "Monad", and I'm sure most couldn't. The symbol used by the Northern Pacific is most accurately described as that of Yin and Yang, with origins in ancient China. For this reason alone, when I hear the NP referred to as the "All-American Railroad", I take one look at the Yin Yang symbol and know that moniker isn't accurate, since it is not of American origin and has religious and philosophical meanings. While in use by the NP, the symbol was well known, but what, if anything, was it supposed to represent, and how many were aware of its meaning? The puzzling thing for me is that the Northern Pacific with a rich history and traversing a diverse and beautiful landscape (it was, as they said, "The Yellowstone Park Line") couldn't come up with something more, well, at least domestically-oriented.

D....Names of Passenger Trains during the "modern" era. Yes, I agree, Vista-Dome North Coast Limited was a classic. But what about the rest? I admit that names like the Alaskan, might have been a stretch, but who came up with Mainstreeter? I know where it comes from, but there isn't a lot of creativity here. As defined: 1.) resident of section of country centering around its small towns (but I thought NP went to all the big towns), and 2.) One characterized by materialistic self-complacent provincialism. Wow. But, again, like the symbol of yin and yang, considering where the NP went, Mainstreeter was the best they could do? And what about the rest of the NP passenger trains? Why did most of them (except the abortive Twin Ports-Twin City Express) not have names? Actually, this was probably appropriate, because given their nature (mostly coach-only), they hardly deserved to be called anything. By contrast, GN came up with all the best names: Winnipeg Limited, Gopher, Badger, Red River, Dakotan, Internationals. You had some idea of where they went from the name, and the names were all relevant. The lack of creativity on the part of the Northern Pacific is amazing.

E....Railroad Stations. I know that many NP fans are proud of some of their ornate stations. They are beautiful. Certainly more fancy than many corresponding ones on the Great Northern. They would have been worthwhile if 1.) The NP throughout the years had proved to be so financially well-off that such facilities could be justified, and 2.)The amount of passenger and freight traffic generated supported the construction of buildings this size. For the most part, neither is true. By the way, where was this "Hennepin Ave. Station" used by the NP in Minneapolis, their largest on-line city? I can't find reference to it anywhere except NP timetables.

F....Service to National Parks. Great Northern's service to Glacier National Park is famous. The railroad lobbied Congress for its creation, which today is one of the

nation's top ten most visited, in spite of its location away from centers of population and its short season. Here, Great Northern originated the slogan "See America First". Many of the hotels constructed by GN are still in use today, and remind visitors of the importance railroads played in settling America. Glacier National Park was the only national park along the main line of a railroad (sorry, NP fans, Theodore Roosevelt was not upgraded to national park status until 1978, 8 years after the NP ceased to exist.).

The NP was "The Yellowstone Park Line" touting its service to that park, certainly more-visited than Glacier. Yet, NP's influence over Yellowstone could not match the effect GN had on Glacier. Glacier was almost a GN creation (the GN had a lot to gain from its being designated a national park), but Yellowstone, the world's first national park, was named in 1872, before the NP was constructed. Certainly, NP contributed to Yellowstone, but so did Union Pacific, and to a lesser extent, Burlington. And during the 50's and 60's airports in nearby Jackson, Belgrade, and West Yellowstone siphoned off rail travelers.

Glacier National Park even today, remains relatively inaccessible. And, being a Montanan, I'm partial to Glacier...after all, most of Yellowstone is in Wyoming. And, as the saying goes in Montana, whether you be in Glendive or Kalispell, "Glacier has all the beauty, Yellowstone gets all the glory."

G....On line scenery. Could anyone deny that the NP featured more scenery than the GN? Not me. In fact, about 110 miles and 3 to 10 hours more depending on which NP train you were riding. But we've already discussed how slow the NP trains were. Yes, overall, on the transcontinental routes, the NP route was much more scenic, and Great Northern got a lot of good press about serving Glacier National Park without it being mentioned how little there was to see between Minot and Cut Bank aboard the westbound Empire Builder. I will say one thing in the defense of the Great Northern's route, however. Judging the NP to be more scenic is tainted by the fact that this determination is Montana-oriented. When they think about scenery, everything I've ever read bases the choice on what you see traveling across Montana on the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited or the Empire Builder.

However, if you were a resident of Western Washington, and Seattle in particular, and the only impression of your area would be from an inbound passenger train, would you choose the GN route or the NP? On the longest days of the year, riders on the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited into Seattle would see some spectacular mountains and get a good view of the Cascades just prior to arriving at Stampede summit. But after dropping into the Green River watershed, that route is a tunnel of trees until the train magically appeared at East Auburn. From there to Seattle, it's typical suburbia

and big city industrial areas right up to the arrival at King Street Station. You don't see one drop of salt water. You don't see the Pike Place Market or Seattle Waterfront or the Space Needle or the Chittenden Locks or Shilshole Bay Marina (proof Seattleites have more boats per capita than anyone!) or Puget Sound or Ferries or the Olympic Mountains or Mount Baker or Sunset Falls. Truly, these are the essence of Western Washington. They are, of course, all visible, even today, from the Empire Builder.

H....On line population. The Northern Pacific called itself the "Main Street of the Northwest" because it served more of the bigger cities along the way. Did it serve more people than did the GN? Again, things are relative. For one thing, even today, even "major" cities like Fargo, Billings, and even Spokane hardly qualify as major metropolitan areas, so that claim is relatively pointless. Much like the scenery argument, it is apparent that Great Northern hauled more freight than did the Northern Pacific even though it ran through an area that was somewhat less populated and somewhat less scenic than did the NP. One reason is, of course, GN's superior route had a lot to do with attracting traffic, and the other is that GN went to many more places than did NP and really did serve more people.

While GN served a greater on-line population in Minnesota and North Dakota than did NP, the Northern Pacific route across Montana and Washington was two to three times as populous as the GN route - IF you only looked at the transcontinental route. Remember, GN served places like Butte, Helena, Great Falls, and Billings in Montana which fed the main line. In Washington State, clearly the domain of the NP, GN was helped by its Everett-Vancouver, BC main, an area where the NP was weak. Again, Great Northern cities off the transcontinental route are some of its greatest strengths. In other words, while Miles City, Billings, Butte, Missoula, and Yakima really are bigger than Glasgow, Havre, Cut Bank, Kalispell, and Wenatchee, Great Northern served a lot more people in British Columbia, South Dakota, Iowa, and California than did the NP.

I....Freight train schedules from the Official Guide of the Railways, 1965. Not a lot of specific information can be derived from the railroads' freight schedules, but some things are of interest. NP fans might be interested in knowing that NP trains 600/601 were actually scheduled to be faster than GN trains 82/97 between the Twin Cities and Seattle. Both 600 and 601 were faster than the Mainstreeter, as it had limited on-line pickups and setouts. The Burlington schedules are the best indication, however, of what was moving where. All the trains indicated between Chicago and the Twin Cities (81/83/97 westbound and 82/88 eastbound) correspond in time AND SYMBOL to connecting Great Northern trains to and from the Northwest. The obvious conclusion is that these were through trains, and much of the traffic was, as GN was the preferred connection.

Burlington power often ran west of the Twin Cities as did GN power operating to Chicago. At Laurel, Montana, trains 79/80 to/from Lincoln were run-through trains with Great Northern. It was not unusual to see Burlington power operate west of Laurel on GN freight trains, either. In another touch of class, GN named some of their freight trains, and like the passenger trains, the name did a fair job of indicating where they ran: Winnipeg, Fargo Fast, Valley Special, Great Lakes, Northern States, Texas, West Coaster. NP didn't name any of its freight trains, but after they came up with Mainstreeter and Twin Ports-Twin City Express for two of their passenger trains, I'm glad they left well enough alone!

J....Always linked. Like it or not, ever since the turn of the century (when James J. Hill acquired control of the NP and CB&Q), the operations of GN, NP, and CB&Q have been linked. I get the impression that many in the NP camp deny this to be the case, but that doesn't change reality. Anyway, this also wasn't necessarily to the benefit of GN operations, either. When I compared the Empire Builder and Vista-Dome North Coast Limited, I chose a schedule from a time when the trains operated separately. Later on, when the trains were combined between Chicago and St. Paul, the Empire Builder suffered from the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited's longer route and running time.

Combined out of Chicago, the Chicago departure was based on the arrival time of the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited in Seattle. It had to arrive early enough to allow the equipment to be turned the same day. The Empire Builder missed several connections when the departure time had to be moved up to accommodate the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited's schedule. Then, when the trains were separated west of St. Paul, it could not be placed on its optimum running time because 1.) it would then arrive Seattle prior to 600 AM, and 2.) Portland passengers would then be penalized in Spokane or Pasco waiting for the Portland cars off the always-slower Vista-Dome North Coast Limited.

This scheduling problem was the same eastbound, too, but most pronounced just prior to Amtrak day, 1971. The Empire Builder departed Seattle at 345 PM, which was somewhat later than its 1965 departure time, but it was based on the scheduled arrival time necessary to pick up the Portland cars in Spokane, which, of course, was based on when the Portland train had to deliver its Vista-Dome North Coast Limited cars at Pasco. Even though the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited left Seattle 75 minutes ahead of the Empire Builder, the Empire Builder was 4 minutes ahead leaving Spokane. By Fargo, the lead was 2 hours, 18 minutes, arriving at 1225 AM. Since it had to wait for the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited which wouldn't arrive St. Paul until 750 AM, the Empire Builder's running time between Fargo and St. Paul averaged

only 39.1 MPH. In addition, it is common knowledge that it was then not unusual for the Empire Builder to wait for a late-running Vista-Dome North Coast Limited. I understand the reason was the numerous slow track restrictions along the former NP route.

MISCELLANEOUS OBSERVATIONS (continued):

Some objective, some subjective....

K....A Black Day. I continue to be intrigued by the fact that Merger Day, 1970 is indicated in black on the NPRHA calendar every year. I get the impression that some in charge of producing this calendar wish to show this in a negative light. Regardless of the actual intent, by showing this in this way, it is imposing one person's or group's opinion on everyone else. I have no doubt that many on the former Northern Pacific dreaded the prospect of merger.

Those in Livingston, Montana were especially vocal. They realized through traffic would immediately be diverted to the Great Northern (which did happen). Yet, it's interesting that these people could reasonably expect the NP not to have merged. Railroading was in the decline in the late 1960's..could the NP had made it alone? It's hard to say, but I still think that indicating merger day as a "black" day is a judgment call whose place is not on the NPRHA calendar. After all, the NP was merged, so someone must have thought it was a good idea. No doubt there were many GN and CB&Q employees who disliked the prospect of the merger, due the uncertainty of it all. GN employees in places like Butte and Helena probably feared their jobs would be lost as traffic was shifted to the larger NP yard facilities.

Overall, however, it is my opinion that most NP employees, acknowledging that their routes were usually inferior to that of GN, dreaded the day when many trains operating over the NP would be shifted to GN routes.

L....Operating Capacity. In addition to mileage and grade, track capacity also affected a railroad's ability to handle traffic. Here, too, the NP was inadequate. At merger time, it's interesting to compare the siding capacities in Western North Dakota and Eastern Montana:

Between Mandan, ND and Huntley, MT, sidings greater than 7,000 feet in length:
...(All single track/ABS)(out of 59 sidings indicated in the timetable)

Lehigh, ND - 7,498

Beach, ND - 11,564

Marsh, MT - 7,117
Rosebud, MT - 7,081
Finch, MT - 10,800
Custer, MT - 7,019

Between Minot, ND and Havre, MT, siding less than 7,000 feet in length:
...(CTC or DT251-254 territory)(out of 35 sidings indicated in the timetable)

White Earth, ND - 6,967
Tioga, ND - 5,648 (not a controlled siding, this is CTC territory)
Frazer, MT - 6,322 (not a controlled siding, this is CTC territory)

Not only were very few of NP's sidings inadequate for the longer trains of the future, but few were anchored to allow trains greater than 100 tons per operative brake to use the siding. Since all coal trains are this heavy, it made for some interesting dispatching, especially if there was a westbound train, such as a grain train, that was also over 100 tons per operative brake. Such restrictions were virtually unheard of on GN trackage, even off the main line.

Some Great Northern "branch lines" even had main line capacity with regard to siding length. For instance, in the 320 miles between Mossmain, MT(Laurel) and Shelby, MT, Great Northern had 12 sidings of 6,200 feet in length or greater, longer than the average siding between Mandan and Glendive, which is known to be a very torturous railroad. To be fair, the NP between St. Paul and Magnolia (west of Casselton) was mostly double track (GN owned one track from Minneapolis to Sauk Rapids) and was CTC with long sidings between Laurel and Spokane. As I understand, this was in anticipation of the merger, when the Twin Cities-Casselton main would handle the transcontinental traffic, and Huntley-Spokane route would handle interchange traffic off the CB&Q from the south and east.

M....Montana Rail Link. The top news story of 1987 in Montana was the creation of Montana Rail Link when the BN(ex-NP) main line (and branches) were sold/leased most of the way between Huntley and Sandpoint. Since then, MRL has enjoyed 10 prosperous years of operating BN and BNSF trains between Laurel, Montana and Spokane, Washington, which is the vast majority of traffic on this route. As indicated above, changes are in the wind in the latter 1990's. BNSF has shifted all coal and some grain shipments off MRL to a route via Great Falls. The ability to shift this volume of traffic to what is basically a 320-mile ex-GN branch line (from Laurel to Shelby) without any capacity improvements is a tribute to its construction by the Great Northern (see "L" above), since the siding locations and lengths were not changed since the 1970 merger.

Since the traffic had been rerouted in 1997, BNSF has constructed a couple of additional sidings and has lengthened others, with more improvements planned. Depending on the extent to which the traffic on the MRL will or can (again, their contract guarantees a certain number of trains)or will be routed, change is certainly in store for the ex-NP route in Western Montana. Just about everyone in Montana has opinion on MRL, and it usually ranges from being the savior of the route (since BN threatened to abandon the line and route all the traffic via Great Falls earlier), to being considered a big blow to labor in that MRL employees operate the railroad with fewer work-rule restrictions than were in place on the NP/BN.

In the course of its ten years of existence, MRL has gained quite a following in the railfan community due to the volume of traffic, exotic power, and its scenic route. Many NP fans either are proud of the notoriety MRL has received in the railfan community, or are still somewhat embarrassed that "their" main line railroad was chosen to be "sold" and run as a regional carrier, which, considering the through nature of most of the traffic on the line, is an anomaly.

Regardless of varied opinions on this controversial topic, one thing is clear: BNSF's decision to route the traffic is clearly based on economics. They really don't care how their traffic gets from Laurel to Spokane and vice versa, as long as it's as cheaply or as dependably as possible. While there are likely some political considerations also, cost is the prime factor. This is where NP/GN comparison becomes relevant. While it is easy to think that BNSF is attempting to pressure MRL to accepting their trains at a lesser cost, it's important to remember why this section of the railroad was transferred to a regional carrier. The former Northern Pacific main line between Laurel and Sandpoint can be an expensive route over which to operate a train, and it's entirely possible, in fact, quit likely, that BNSF can do it cheaper in some instances on its own route.

This is a comparison of the operation of a standard 14000-ton (108 car) grain train over the two routes.

Via MRL: A train inbound from Sheridan, WY will have four SD40-2 units or equivalent. At Laurel, a 5th unit of equal horsepower will need to be added. When the train arrives at Livingston, MRL pushes the train on the rear with a minimum of four 3000-HP units for the assault on Bozeman Pass. The helpers are removed at Bozeman, and the train continues unassisted to Helena (all 5 units are needed for 1.0% climb up Winston Hill).

At Helena, TWO 4-unit helpers (all 3000 HP), or a total of 8 ADDITIONAL units are

required to push the train to the top of Mullan Pass at Blossburg. The helper consists are cut in the train one-third, and two-thirds back. Needless to say, this a time-consuming procedure at Helena, which is also the case at Blossburg (or Elliston or Garrison) when the helper units are cut out. And, of course, it requires TWO helper crews for each train. (And, just to clarify, a grain train can make the top of the hill with 12 units, instead of 13, which would be the 5 road units and two 4-unit helpers.) At Missoula, the common procedure is to cut one of the five road units off and return it to Laurel, where power is always short.

Via BNSF/Great Falls: A train inbound from Sheridan, WY with four SD40-2 units or equivalent will require no additional power at Laurel, and will turn north at Mossmain without entering Laurel terminal. A fifth unit is required eventually, and every attempt is made to add the unit at Great Falls, but the train can continue to Shelby without it, since the ruling grade is only .6%.

From Shelby, it's only a bit over 80 miles to the top of the Continental Divide at Summit. These trains receive a helper between Cut Bank and Glacier Park (between 60 and 12 miles from Summit) for the pull through Bison. The helper consist usually is two SD40-2 units, but can be less. The only reason the helper is added (to the rear) is to prevent "breaking in two" at the east switch at Bison. In no instance is the helper cut in. Usually, these trains retain their 5 units through to Spokane, though it is not uncommon to cut one at Troy and work it back to Whitefish or Havre.

The all-BNSF route is about 96 miles further than via MRL, but requires two less helper crews and many fewer locomotives. The advantage of the BNSF routing is most evident when these trains are operated with distributed power west of Great Falls. In this case, the train is repowered with four C44-9 units (usually), two on the point and two remotely-controlled on the rear.

When this is done, the train requires no additional power for the remainder of its trip to Spokane, eliminating any helper costs. Even if distributed power was a consideration on an MRL routing, additional power would still be required in some form at Livingston and Helena in a quantity that more or less makes using distributed power pointless on this route. Regardless of any political decision that may influence the routing of trains away from Montana Rail Link, the reality is that their railroad is still the torturous ex-NP main line, over which operating heavy trains is difficult. It might actually come to pass that the MRL will be the savior of this line if the contract guaranteeing a certain amount of traffic turns out to be the primary reason for its use.

Overall, there is very little of the former NP main line where very heavy trains can be operated efficiently. Some routes will survive in spite of their grades due to earlier

management decisions, such as Spokane to Pasco (ask an SP&S fan which route between these cities was best by far and why!), where no alternate exists. Other routes will be threatened, and the MRL is not alone. This is a personal observation only, but eventually, BNSF will realize that loaded coal trains can operate between Glendive and Casselton via Minot (instead of Mandan) with fewer people (no helper crew as is now required from Glendive to Fryburg), and 40% less power (1.0% grade versus .6%), while traversing only about 50 more miles (and in some cases actually LESS mileage, depending on the destination of the train, in the case of those going to Grand Forks, Winnipeg, or Cohasset, MN.). The former Milwaukee Road line east of Terry, Montana also offers a route east with lesser grade, and in some instances, fewer route miles (depending on the destination of the train) than the ex-NP line.

N....Amtrak Service. This topic was not included in the comparison of GN and NP passenger service because Amtrak was created after the Burlington Northern merger of 1970. It's also a vague area to discuss due to the political nature of Amtrak, i.e., that many are based on political influence rather than those of an objective nature. Some comparison is justified, however. Obviously, the biggest point in any NP-GN Amtrak comparison would be the selection of the Empire Builder as Amtrak's lone Chicago-Seattle train in 1971. Most of its route traveled ex-GN trackage, except for the part of the route between Sandpoint and Seattle, which was NP. The decision to keep service on the ex-GN route and discontinue that on the ex-NP route was based on public need (there was little alternative public transportation along the former GN line), and existing ridership (which was a product of public need to a certain extent, but also characterized the level of service provided).

In June of 1971, Montana's senator Mike Mansfield (the Senate Majority Leader) was able to influence Amtrak to agree to start passenger service over the former NP route. Initially, the train (the North Coast Hiawatha) was combined with the Empire Builder at Minneapolis and Spokane (and again, causing Empire Builder passengers to wait for a slower train on the ex-NP route). This was probably the first time in modern history that the NP main line had passenger service over more of its route than did the GN line (since the Empire Builder was routed via Yakima), even though the North Coast Hiawatha operated tri-weekly most of the time.

In 1973, the North Coast Hiawatha operated as a separate train the whole way from Chicago to Seattle, but ran via the ex-GN route between Spokane and Seattle, allowing for both the ex-GN and ex-NP routes to have passenger service over most of their main lines (and, at times, for the first time ever, for a passenger train operating on the former NP route through Southern Montana to post a faster running time between the Twin Cities and Seattle, since the Empire Builder ran via the ex-NP route between Spokane and Seattle.)

In 1974, Amtrak ran a train between Spokane and Seattle, just for patrons of the World's Fair that year in Spokane (the Expo '74). The train used the former GN route due to the continuing ridiculously long running time of the ex-NP line via Yakima. (The GN route featured a slow 8.5 hour schedule as it was!)

In 1978, budget restraints resulted in the Empire Builder being reduced in frequency to four days per week, with the North Coast Hiawatha continuing at three days per week in effect, providing one daily train by one route or the other. In the fall of 1979, further cutbacks resulted in the elimination of several long distance trains nationwide, including the North Coast Hiawatha. The Empire Builder was reduced to only three days per week, and was rerouted between Minneapolis and Moorhead from the ex-GN main via Willmar to the joint GN-NP main to St. Cloud and ex-NP main to Moorhead.

This meant that the ex-NP transcontinental main had passenger service between Minneapolis and Moorhead(Fargo) and between Sandpoint and Seattle, with ex-GN route retaining service all the way from Fargo to Sandpoint. In 1981, owing mostly to BN's desire to downgrade the former NP main west of Pasco, Amtrak rerouted the Empire Builder between Spokane and Seattle to the faster ex-GN route via Wenatchee. At the same time, Amtrak added a Portland section to the Empire Builder from Spokane, which uses mostly ex-NP track between Spokane and Pasco. In 1982, the Empire Builder began operating daily, and has remained so, except for a period of two years in parts of 1995, 1996, and 1997.

The Empire Builder continues as one of Amtrak's most popular trains (during the summer is often Amtrak's most-riden train, and always produces the greatest number of passenger miles per train mile of any Amtrak train) being a transportation anomaly carrying many riders on America's most sparsely-populated Amtrak route. The vast majority of the route is ex-GN with only St. Cloud-Fargo(remember the GN owned one main from Minneapolis to St. Cloud) and Sandpoint-Pasco as being former NP trackage.

Most of the former NP transcontinental main line is devoid of passenger service today. While rail passenger service through southern Montana would be a welcome transportation addition, it's interesting that now most Montanans, regardless of their residence, acknowledge that the Empire Builder is a vital resource to transportation-starved northern Montana. It's now only the rare fanatic railfan or uninformed out-of-stater that makes a comment on Amtrak using the wrong route across Montana.

Thanks largely to the state of Washington, the NP-GN-UP joint main line between Seattle and Portland has continued to see three trains per day operated by Amtrak,

with certain exceptions. This was the service level offered prior to Amtrak, and though technically an NP route, as stated earlier, the continued presence of passenger service is not an NP endorsement, since the host railroad provided no more service than the tenant roads did over most of the life of the operation.

Amtrak operated service between the Twin Cities and Twin Ports (endpoints varied on both ends of the run) between 1975 and 1985. Needless to say, this train used the ex-GN trackage, since the ex-NP route was downgraded (and partially abandoned) after the merger. This service was sometimes subsidized by the state of Minnesota.

Amtrak operated service over the ex-GN route of the Internationals between Seattle and Vancouver, BC between 1972 and 1981. Thanks to the state of Washington, which is also responsible for augmenting Portland-Seattle service, trains between Seattle and Vancouver, BC began running again in 1995, and continue to do so.

Clearly, the Empire Builder has stood the test of time as an Amtrak train, in an era where few other intercity passenger trains remain, running on mostly an ex-GN route, including serving Grand Forks, which is not on BNSF's main freight route, which is yet another unique feature! Except for the Seattle-Portland line, which at one time featured trains operated by three railroads, the only cities along the ex-NP transcontinental route with passenger service are those that are lucky enough to be along the short distances where former NP track is used by the Amtrak Empire Builder. And while the North Coast Hiawatha would have been an NP fan's last hope for continuing on the tradition of the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited, this train is rapidly becoming a footnote at Amtrak, operating for less than 30% of Amtrak's history.

Indeed, both the North-Star/Arrowhead(Twin Cities-Twin Ports) and the Pacific International/Mount Baker International, which are/were operated on non-transcontinental ex-GN trackage, have more seniority as Amtrak trains that does the North Coast Hiawatha. And, if Amtrak service offered on ex-NP lines is compared to NP-operated service in 1965, it's interesting to note that not only do the vast majority of ex-NP stations NOT have rail passenger service, but many are located on lines which have been abandoned totally or partially (i.e. Pullman to Lewiston, to International Falls, the Winnipeg branch, the Twin Ports-Twin Cities line).

O....Stampede Pass Renaissance. 1996 saw the reopening of the ex-NP main line across Stampede Pass, which was Northern Pacific's crossing of the Cascade Mountains. For more than a decade prior to this, the line over the pass itself was unused. The line east of Cle Elum was sold to short line Washington Central Railroad. Due capacity restraints on its two remaining lines across Washington (the ex-GN line

via Wenatchee and the ex-SP&S line via Wishram), BNSF made the decision to buy back the line sold to Washington Central and upgrade the entire route. The cost was rumored to be about \$135 million. Needless to say, this was BIG NEWS among Northern Pacific fans, and understandably so. With more of their railroad abandoned or shortlined than any of the other three major original BN merger partners, it certainly qualifies as good news when an abandoned route is revived.

Unfortunately, even though BNSF originally announced that the route would be handling up to 12 trains daily, this traffic has never materialized since the line has reopened. One reason is that the clearance in Stampede tunnel was never increased to handle today's stack trains. Another contributing factor is the chronic shortage of motive power. Sometimes, it is necessary to run trains from Pasco to Seattle via Wishram simply because a sufficient number of engines do not exist to power the train via Stampede Pass (a 2.2% grade versus 1% via Vancouver, at Napavine). Hopefully, BNSF will see the traffic increases it had originally forecast. With all the euphoria over minimal traffic returning to the former NP main in Washington State, it's somewhat ironic that other BNSF routes in the Northwest that have seen traffic increases seem to have been largely ignored in the railfan community.

By some coincidence, two examples (both previously discussed) are former Great Northern lines: (Laurel)Mossmain-Shelby and Bend-Bieber. The Mossmain-Shelby route is seeing more traffic than ever (being routed away from an ex-NP route), and the "Inside Gateway" is seeing traffic frequency approaching that when the Great Northern, Western Pacific, and Santa Fe cooperated to run numerous trains between Washington, Oregon, and California. Not only are these routes "branch" lines (when compared to GN's Midwest-Pacific Northwest "main" line), but both now often experience a train frequency greater than that of the ex-NP main line over Stampede Pass. Both of these routes involve a fundamental change in the operation of traffic over their respective lines, so, in the whole scope of things, it's interesting they don't merit the same amount of publicity as does Stampede Pass.

P....Reliability. Another area where the NP crowd has the greatest pride is the perceived reliability of their route. I have seen stories about many GN detours on NP, and another contributing factor to this is the fine photography of NP historian Warren McGee, an NP employee from Livingston. Numerous photos have documented GN trains on NP track (to the point that one such photo appears on the NPRHA calendar!), especially during extensive flooding in 1948(near Libby) and 1964(Glacier National Park). I remember reading in one railroad publication (I believe it was TRAINS), where Mr. McGee had worked an NP train while detouring over another railroad, which, according to the article, is a tribute to the reliability of the NP route.

While I cannot dispute the individual stories (or would I want to), I can also add that in 17 years of working as a dispatcher on the BN Montana division which more or less handled ex-GN trackage within Montana, there were numerous detours of "south line" trains for flooding at places like Livingston, Garrison(1975), and Thompson Falls. And while I never worked for the railroad until after it had become the BN, I can state without fear of contradiction that I saw NP's Mainstreeter changing crews in Cut Bank more than once. In other words, such comparisons based on operational exceptions are relatively pointless, except in certain circumstances (such as the BNSF ex-SLSF "River Subdivision" near Cape Girardeau Missouri, which everyone knows is going to succumb to Mississippi River floodwaters sometime during each Spring.

Although it IS true that there are people that actually believe that the Spring, 1983 mud slide at Thistle, Utah was God's way of telling Amtrak NOT to reroute the then-San Francisco Zephyr off the UP onto the Rio Grande between Denver and Ogden!!!). And, incidentally, I can't help but think that part of Mr. McGee's attraction to the detouring Empire Builder in 1948 (it ran from Havre to Helena, then via NP west to avoid flooding at Libby) was a chance to see a bonafide streamliner is his part of the state, unlike the pokey North Coast Limited, that would not achieve streamliner status for years.

And, as another observation, I wonder if the detouring Empire Builder, in spite of its circuitous routing would STILL best the endpoint-to-endpoint running time of the North Coast Limited, which would not be speeded up to become the "Faster"(but never fastEST) version until 1952. In addition, in the winter of 1977-1978, the Amtrak Empire Builder, which, at that time operated via the former NP between Spokane and Seattle, detoured either via the Milwaukee Road or the ex-GN route for about five months due to washouts on the Stampede Pass line. After the train started detouring via Wenatchee, I can remember selling Amtrak tickets in Northern Montana and explaining to confused passengers who were concerned about the train detouring. "In this case", I explained, "detouring means that you get to Seattle about an hour and a half earlier than scheduled."

FANTASY RIDE COMPARISON:

Wouldn't it be great to ride the Empire Builder or Vista-Dome North Coast Limited of 1965 again? Well, unless time travel is invented, it isn't possible, but I would like to simulate such a trip...just to compare the schedules of each.

It is just after noon at Chicago Union Station, and the Chicago, Burlington, and

Quincy Railroad is once again about to dispatch one of its crack streamliners - The Vista-Dome North Coast Limited, for a westbound departure. Passengers who arrived early in the morning connecting from eastern roads like B&O, NYC, PRR, and EL are already in the station, since their transfer time is quite adequate. At 1230 PM, CB&Q 25 departs Chicago Union Station for Seattle and Portland.

The prime competitor to the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited, of course, is the "Incomparable" Empire Builder. But Empire Builder patrons needn't hurry. Their train won't depart for two and one-half hours later, at 300 PM. As 300 PM approaches, passengers filter in from La Salle Street Station off NYC's Wolverine from Detroit, and James Whitcomb Riley from Cincinnati and Indianapolis. And, right there at Union Station, connecting passengers arrive from St. Louis and Springfield, IL off GM&O's Abraham Lincoln, with ample time to make their Empire Builder connection. These passengers were all able to depart cities within 300 miles of Chicago and connect with the Empire Builder with minimal layover. A connection to the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited would not be possible without leaving on a train the evening before, due to its earlier departure from Chicago.

It is now 300 PM, and train 31, the Empire Builder (combined with the Afternoon Zephyr) departs Chicago. By this time, the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited is already running "Where Nature Smiles 300 Miles" along the Mississippi River between Savanna and Dubuque, some 160 miles from Chicago. Both the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited and Empire Builder post comparable running time along the CB&Q racetrack to the Twin Cities. The Vista-Dome North Coast Limited arrives at St. Paul at 720 PM and becomes Northern Pacific train 25, departing at 745 PM. After a quick 10-minute stop at the Great Northern station in Minneapolis, NP 25 is clear of the Twin Cities at 820 PM.

The Empire Builder is still 75 minutes east of St. Paul on the CB&Q. CB&Q train 31 arrives at St. Paul at 945 PM and becomes Great Northern train 31, which leaves at 1020 PM. Departure from Minneapolis is at 1050 PM, still exactly two and one-half hours behind the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited, which, by this time, is already over halfway across the state of Minnesota. NP train 25 during this time posted the fastest running time of any train between Minneapolis and Fargo, the next common point for these trains. In addition, GN train 31 takes a route some 10 miles further, and posts a station dwell time at Fargo some six minutes longer than NP 25. The result: The Vista-Dome North Coast Limited departs Fargo at 1223 AM, almost 3 hours ahead of the Empire Builder which departs at 321 AM. It's the biggest lead NP 25 has had in "the race" so far.

But the Empire Builder has a straight shot across North Dakota via the Surrey cut-off.

So does the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited, too, but it's interesting to note that on their respective routes across the Flickertail state, the Empire Builder will move about 70 miles to the north of the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited, but by the Montana border, will have traveled fewer than 10 miles more! NP 25 is hampered by the North Dakota badlands that slow the train down and add miles of curvature. The Vista-Dome North Coast Limited greets the dawn at its first Montana station stop at Glendive, at 637 AM, about 40 miles from North Dakota.

The Empire Builder doesn't arrive at its first Montana stop, Wolf Point (some 80 miles from the North Dakota border) until 1020 AM. For the time being, the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited's lead would seem secure. But Glendive is where the mileage difference between the GN and NP routes begins to become obvious. While the GN route across Northern Montana, clearly IS IN Northern Montana, one can't say the same thing about the NP. Glendive, in fact, is in Northeast Montana, being closer to Saskatchewan than to Wyoming. While the NP is considered the "south line" railroad in Montana, it enters the state in Northeast Montana, and after leaving Missoula, exits the state in Northwest Montana. The penalty for this route is the extra miles.

The Vista-Dome North Coast Limited clips off mile after scenic mile along the Yellowstone River. Arrival at Livingston is at 1257 PM. While some 340 rail miles west of Glendive at this point, the train is almost some 100 miles south of Glendive's latitude. At 107 PM, NP 25 departs Livingston, tackling its first really BIG hill, Bozeman Pass. Meanwhile, The Empire Builder is still out on the Montana prairie...it leaves its major intermediate servicing point of Havre at 140 PM, just as the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited is dropping into the Gallatin Valley at Bozeman.

Departing Havre, the Empire Builder is still in the prairie, but that's not to say the grade hasn't increased. After the relatively mild crossing of the Choteau de Missouri in North Dakota, it's been river grade to Havre. Now, west of Havre, the grade climbs to 1%. Yet, even later in the day when assaulting the Continental Divide, it will not face a climb to match that which the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited has already conquered atop Bozeman Pass.

About 75 minutes west of Bozeman, the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited gears up for its next formidable obstacle - the Continental Divide at Homestake Pass. It's a slow, curving climb to the top with a magnificent view of Butte on the other side. The grade is 2.2%. Arrival at Butte is 419 PM. Meanwhile, almost exactly due north, the Empire Builder has just left Cut Bank at 403 PM. Finally, after viewing mountains to the south and north throughout the late morning and afternoon, the face of the Continental Divide and Glacier National Park lie straight ahead for GN 31.

Things don't look too good for the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited at this point. After a commanding lead at Fargo, circuitry and grade has eaten away at its lead over the Empire Builder. One salvation does remain, however, as leaving Butte, NP 25 has many miles of valley floor running to look forward to - mostly at fast speeds. GN 31 has yet to ascend and descend its first mountains of the day. As a result, the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited exits Missoula at 644 PM, some 26 minutes before the Empire Builder leaves the corresponding western Montana stop at Whitefish.

Ahead lies the next common point for these two trains: Spokane, Washington. But the Empire Builder isn't able to close the gap any more enroute to Spokane. The GN route veers well to the north leaving Whitefish in search of a level route, and its line between Sandpoint (also a point common to the GN and NP main, but not a stop for either of these trains) and Spokane is somewhat longer than that of the NP. By the time GN 31 arrives in Spokane at 1145 PM, NP 25 has been there (in at 1047 PM) - and gone (out at 1100 PM). Switching out the Portland cars for the SP&S delays the Empire Builder even more. It departs Spokane at 1215 AM, an hour and 15 minutes behind the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited. Yet, in spite of arriving at Spokane some 58 minutes behind the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited, it has picked up exactly two hours on NP 25 since leaving Fargo, North Dakota.

Of course, an advantage that the Empire Builder has, in spite of its 75-minute deficit leaving Spokane, is that it has shed its Portland cars. The Vista-Dome North Coast Limited still must accomplish this - but at Pasco, and will experience a similar delay. Another problem for NP train 25 - the one that will ultimately doom it to lose the race, is Northern Pacific's incredibly circuitous route across Washington State. By the time the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited has arrived at Pasco, it will have traveled as many miles going south as it has going west. Indeed, Pasco is only about 20 miles from the Oregon border! After setting out its Portland cars, departure for NP 25 is at 216 AM.

The Vista-Dome North Coast Limited continues north and west up the Yakima River valley. Departure from Yakima is at 415 AM. Meanwhile to the north, the Empire Builder has started its assault on the first steep climb of its trip: the climb to Cascade Tunnel, where the grade stiffens to 1.6% and eventually 2.2%. (Of course, by now, such climbs are "old hat" to the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited, which has already topped two 2.2% hills (Homestake and Evaro), one 1.8% hill (Bozeman Pass), and has another to go (2.2% Stampede Pass)). By the time NP 25 has departed Ellensburg at 513 AM, GN 31 is inside 7.79-mile Cascade Tunnel - already on the "downhill run", whereas Stampede Pass still lies ahead for the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited.

At 655 AM, the Empire Builder arrives at a Pacific port. Well, it's Everett, along

Possession Sound - not Seattle. Station dwell time here is some 20 minutes-longest of any stop along the route, except for St. Paul and Spokane, which, unlike Everett, are understandable. Here, passengers for Bellingham and Vancouver, British Columbia detrain to await GN's morning International train. Departure for GN 31 is finally at 715 AM. Ahead lies the scenic run along the Sound to the Emerald City. Departure from the Seattle suburb of Edmonds is at 744 AM.

At the same time (almost, anyway, 743 AM) the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited emerges from its run along the Green River at East Auburn, where there is a 9-minute delay to detrain passengers enroute to Tacoma, via a connecting bus. Departing East Auburn at 752 AM, NP 25 swings north onto the Portland-Seattle main to make a mad dash for Seattle. Just south of Seattle, the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited meets GN train 460, a local train from Seattle destined for Tacoma and Portland. NP train 25 arrives at its terminus, Seattle's King Street Station at 830 AM, some 1892 miles from St. Paul. But it has company. Already in the station, having arrived some 15 minutes earlier, is GN train 31, the Empire Builder, only 1782 miles from St. Paul.

Yes, in spite of spotting the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited some 2 hours, 30 minutes at Chicago, the shorter distance and lesser grade has allowed GN 31 to overtake its competitor. In addition, Empire Builder passengers are winners in another respect: connections. That same GN train 460 that met the inbound Vista-Dome North Coast Limited just outside of King Street Station has already received passengers from GN 31, affording passengers a faster trip between, for instance, Spokane and Tacoma than was available via NP train 25, without the hassle of a bus trip from East Auburn. And, were you riding the Vista-Dome North Coast Limited enroute to Vancouver, BC? Too bad, because while GN's morning International train made direct connections with the Empire Builder in Everett (see above), passengers off NP train 25 would have over six hours awaiting Great Northern's afternoon International for passage to Western Canada's major city.

Did you enjoy the race? I bet most of you knew who would win ALL ALONG. Returning eastbound, we will compare the secondary trains on each route, Northern Pacific's Mainstreeter, train 2, and Great Northern's Western Star, train 28. It's evening at Seattle's King Street Station and both trains are in the station. Both trains are going east, but the Mainstreeter is facing south and the Western Star facing north. The Mainstreeter is the first to depart at 945 PM; the Western Star follows at 1000 PM. Both trains climb the Cascade mountains in the darkness.

At Ellensburg, the Mainstreeter turns south toward Yakima and then southeast to Pasco, arriving there at 431 AM. This is also the place where NP 2 receives passengers off SP&S train 4 from Portland. Unfortunately for these passengers, who

left Portland at the same time the Mainstreeter departed Seattle, they have been waiting since 200 AM! NP 2 departs Pasco at 500 AM, and arrives in Spokane at 801 AM, some 10 hours, 16 minutes and 396 rail miles from Seattle.

But GN's route from Seattle to Spokane is 67 miles shorter, so by this time, GN 28 isn't even in Washington, having just departed the station stop of Priest River, Idaho at 759 AM. The Western Star had arrived Spokane at 615 AM, dropped its local Seattle-Spokane sleeper, and received its passengers from SP&S train 4, who had but an hour layover between trains. Departure was 645 AM.

The Mainstreeter departs Spokane at 830 AM, an hour and 45 minutes behind the Western Star, which has gained two hours on NP 2 to that point. The next common point for the two trains is Sandpoint, ID. The Mainstreeter narrows its competitor's lead to only 1 hour, 23 minutes here.

In Western Montana, GN 28 departs Whitefish at 210 PM; NP 2 departs Missoula at 330 PM. The Western Star exits the mountains at Glacier Park Station at 435 PM. By this time, the Mainstreeter has to traverse two more mountain passes. As the Western Star departs Havre, (835 PM) midway across the state of Montana, the Mainstreeter is approaching Logan, still well in Southwest Montana. When it finally exits the mountains for good at Livingston at 1025 PM, the Western Star is midway across Eastern Montana, between Malta and Glasgow.

When GN train 28 arrives at Williston, the first North Dakota stop at 220 AM(Mountain Time), the Mainstreeter is between Custer and Hysham, some 200 miles from the North Dakota border. The Western Star arrives Minot at 550 AM and detrains its passengers for the Dakotan and continues its limited-stop trip across North Dakota, and is already east of New Rockford when the Mainstreeter enters North Dakota around 815 AM(Central Time). When the Western Star exits North Dakota at Fargo at 1002 AM, the Mainstreeter is only a few minutes out of Dickinson.

Unlike its westbound counterpart and the Empire Builder, the Western Star takes a route from Fargo to Minneapolis about 18 miles shorter via St. Cloud. This route is also shorter than the Mainstreeter will take. Arrival for GN train 28 in Minneapolis is at 240 PM, posting a Seattle to Minneapolis running time equaling that of the eastbound North Coast Limited. Meanwhile, back in North Dakota (still), the Mainstreeter has just departed Jamestown.

The Western Star exits Minneapolis at 250 PM and completes its run on GN in St. Paul arriving there at 320 PM. Passengers that don't want to wait for overnight sleeping car service to Chicago via CB&Q's Black Hawk elect to transfer to CB&Q's

Afternoon Zephyr, which departs St. Paul at 400 PM.

Back in North Dakota, the Mainstreeter finally arrives in Fargo at 415 PM, some 6 hours, 22 minutes after the Western Star has passed through. NP 2 completes its trip on NP rails arriving at St. Paul Union Depot at 1020 PM, a full 7 hours behind the Western Star, with a running time some 7 hours, 15 minutes longer.

As Mainstreeter passengers await departure of their connection to Chicago (CB&Q's Black Hawk due out at 1120 PM), Chicago passengers off GN's Western Star have already arrived in Chicago at 1045 PM, still in time to connect to trains like the Midnight Special, Manhattan Limited, and Motor City Special. Mainstreeter passengers will not arrive in Chicago until the next morning at 740 AM, almost 9 hours later.

CONCLUSION:

So, there's my comparison between the Great Northern and Northern Pacific. What does it mean? Not a lot, really. Is the reason I prefer the GN because it's superior to the NP in nearly every aspect noted here? No, because, frankly, being better than a competing railroad isn't good enough. The Great Northern was only a medium-size railroad, yet was a railroad of superlatives. It has best gradient of ANY railroad between the Midwest and West Coast, it constructed Cascade Tunnel, the longest in North America (at the time, but still longest in the U.S.), it constructed the Allouez Ore Docks, largest in the world (when in full operation), was the only transcontinental railroad constructed without benefit of land grant, and was instrumental in the creation of Glacier National Park (the "Crown of the Continent"). There are other points that set the Great Northern apart, but suffice it to say that the Great Northern didn't get to be "Great" simply by topping the Northern Pacific.

It is also true, however, that this does not there is anything inherently flawed about the Northern Pacific. Like any other railroad, it has its idiosyncrasies that make it unique. It has a rich history...but as far as anything special, I just can't see it. (The NP has always been somewhat of an "underdog", but compared to the Milwaukee or Erie, not even close.) It is my opinion that many fans of the Northern Pacific either suffer from an inferiority complex or take themselves too seriously.

I have friend that had once worked for the GN, NP, and Milwaukee. His observation about the company officers of these railroads is that while those on the GN and Milwaukee were, for the most part, personable and quite approachable, those on the NP tended to be distant in the eyes of their subordinates. Another friend who is a big fan of the NP once told me in front of numerous others that James J. Hill's importance

in American Railroading has always "been blown way out of proportion, especially by the GN crowd". While he is entitled to his opinion, it's interesting that in their July 1998 issue, an article in TRAINS magazine listed Hill as the most influential "Railroad Titan" in the history of North American railroading. Granted, whether you love him or hate him, Hill was a tough act to top.

Growing up in Cut Bank, Montana as I did, all the railroaders I knew worked for the Great Northern, as did my father, who was a telegrapher for GN and BN for 37 years. Dad went to telegrapher's school in Superior, Wisconsin in 1946. Following the war, most railroads, especially "out west" needed telegraphers. He wanted to go to Montana, Idaho, or Washington, and chose Great Northern over NP or Milwaukee due to its financial stability. Following the mergers over the years, I have come to know many former Northern Pacific employees, and can truly say that most are indeed fine railroaders. While one railroad might have had a faster route or a better passenger service, there is a particular "art" in making your specific piece of railroad work, and the NP employees certainly knew their stuff, too.

Admittedly, I don't have a personal story to relate about the Northern Pacific, and if I did, perhaps I'd feel differently. However, my respect for the Great Northern, as I hopefully have indicated here, is also not based on a specific personal experience, but on the preponderance of facts that point to the conclusion, that, indeed, it was "Great".

Mark Meyer (onetime resident of Cut Bank, Montana)