

## **On Being a Railfan**

The question directed towards me was innocent enough: “Any big plans this weekend?” I looked away from the computer screen I had been staring at and glanced towards my co-worker. Without thinking, I answered, “Nothing major. I might take a quick trip to Centralia for some train watching, but that’s about it.” Silence followed. Not the usual “that sounds like fun” or “I wish I was doing something like that”. Not a single word. I turned back to my computer, a little embarrassed.

Looking back on this moment, I began to wonder why trains hold such a fascination for me. Clearly they don’t for everybody. I knew that even before what I refer to now as “the incident”. Most people hurry through a crossing when they see a train coming so they don’t get trapped. I slow down and even stop if there’s a chance I might get to see the train up close. Most people don’t notice the myriad of train tracks they pass over, under, and next to on their daily commute to and from work. My heart pounds a little faster as I approach each one in anticipation.

So here I sit, trying to put into words and understand my fascination with trains. Why I feel a knot in my stomach and get excited like a kid at his first baseball game whenever I hear one of the greatest sounds on earth: a train blowing its horn. Why I’ll drop everything, jump in my truck, and head out across town when I hear the local calling signals on my scanner in the hopes I can get there in time to see it. Why every facet of railroading fascinates me.

The most obvious reason is their cool factor. It shouldn’t be physically possible for something so massive to move so gracefully. “Graceful? A train, graceful?” you may

ask. I can't think of a better word to describe it. When a mile-long freight is running at road-speed, it's almost as if it's gliding above the rails. If it wasn't for the horn bawling at each grade crossing, the train itself is amazingly quiet. It hurtles past you in a flurry of controlled chaos and in the blink of an eye a mile or more worth of engines and cars has slid past. It's a very visceral experience, a mixture of fear and fascination. I can only imagine what it must feel like to be in control of that power.

The rush of watching a train pass is only part of the story, and not even the biggest part, for me. It's what goes on behind the scenes that allow the train to run safely and efficiently that really piques my interest. The engineering behind the motive power, cars, rails, and even railroad ties, is impressive to say the least. The classification and scheduling of tens-of-thousands of railcars and the power and crews to move them is a Herculean task that is performed each and every day of the year. And all of this goes on behind the scenes, quietly, by thousands of hard working individuals. Working together they keep goods flowing across the country and allow us the convenience of going to our local Wal-Mart and finding the shelves fully stocked. It may sound corny, but it's true.

For years, how and when trains moved was a mystery to me. I would go to a local grade-crossing and sit for a while, hoping to see a passing train, but it rarely happened. Then, through the wonders of the internet, I began to read and understand that there's rhyme and reason to the movement of freight across the rails. Now, with my trusty scanner at my side, I'm starting to understand, at least a little, the inner workings of the railroad and what it takes to keep the trains running. For me, this is the best part and there seems to be no end to the obstacles that arise when trying to get a train from point A

to point B. These problems are interesting to me; probably not so much to the railroad workers who have to solve them.

So the next time someone asks me what my plans are for the weekend, I may tell them that I'm going to go train watching. If they seem confused, I'll just give them this little paper to read. Or maybe I'll just tell them that I'm going to the movies. Not because I'm embarrassed about being a railfan, but because if you don't like or think about trains, then you just won't get it.

Well, I have to run. My scanner, attached to a big, homemade Yagi antenna located here in my home office, just squawked. The eastbound NS111 is leaving Coapman yard in East St. Louis. If I leave now, I can just make it to the crossing in time.