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BNSF and Kansas

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Matfield Station
Mark Feiden

BNSF AND KANSAS

A PROSPEROUS RELATIONSHIP

Led by bright orange locomotives pulling railcars stacked with freight containers, BNSF Railway trains are as common in the rolling grasslands of the Flint Hills as the cattle that roam the range.

In fact, about one train every 20 minutes moves through this part of the state, connecting Kansas commerce to the world.

Founded in Topeka more than a century ago, Santa Fe Railway, which with Burlington Northern Railroad merged to form BNSF in 1995, and Kansas have enjoyed a prosperous relationship, thanks to the state's strong workforce and its central location. That tradition thrives today with BNSF maintaining significant operations in nine Kansas communities: Topeka, Newton, Emporia, Wellington, Arkansas City, Dodge City, Argentine (Kansas City), Edgerton and Hutchinson.

In the state, significant BNSF operations include locomotive overhaul and maintenance shops in Topeka, its largest rail switching yard in Argentine, and its innovative intermodal facility in Edgerton.

Boeing 737 fuselages move through the Flint Hills from their manufacturing plant in Wichita to final assembly in Washington State. Additionally, BNSF works in partnership with Johnson County Community College in Overland Park to operate the National Academy of Railroad Sciences, the largest railroad technical training center of its kind.

Altogether, more than 3,300 Kansans work on the railroad, many in the Flint Hills region.

BNSF's modern infrastructure through the Flint Hills was born from the Atchison & Topeka Railroad, which was chartered in 1859

by Cyrus Holliday in Topeka. He saw the promise of a railroad that paralleled the Santa Fe Trail. (In 1863, the words “Santa Fe” were added to the railroad’s name.) Holliday dreamed of a railroad that would extend to Chicago; St. Louis; Mexico City; San Francisco; and Galveston, Texas, passing through the Flint Hills.

While many laughed at Holliday’s vision and considered his ideas lunatic, William Allen White, the famous editor of the Emporia Gazette, wrote: “The Santa Fe is the best thing that ever happened to Emporia. It is one of the best things that ever happened to Kansas. It is easily one of the best things that ever happened to this land.”

The Santa Fe was said “to start nowhere and go nowhere.” Holliday’s idea to establish a rail line in what was then frontier was considered ill-conceived by many but, branch after branch, subsidiary by subsidiary, the Santa Fe would thrive. The original line between Chicago and Southern California was built in stages and completed in the 1880s.

Like other railroads, the Santa Fe’s land grant program helped populate the West with Euro-American settlers. In 1872, the railroad established land agent offices in new towns that developed as track was built west. Agents were charged with sale of the land to Easterners, offering special rates with the ticket price applied to the purchase of land.

One of the largest communities ever established by the Santa Fe Land Department was near Newton in 1874, when more than 8,000 Russian-born Mennonites migrated to the Sunflower State. They left their homeland, where military service was to become compulsory, because they refused to bear arms.

Despite disaster from drought and grasshoppers, the Mennonites raised crops in what before had been the unbroken prairie. The hard red wheat seed they brought with them helped make Kansas the nation’s breadbasket.

Santa Fe Land Department offices were established in London in 1880 with recruiting offices in France and Germany. Immigrants came from Sweden, Wales, Scotland and other European nations. By 1886, the land grant acreage was completely sold; in 1897, the land department was discontinued.

Today, three critical BNSF rail lines operate through the Flint Hills: the La Junta Sub from Elinor to Newton; the Arkansas Sub from Newton to Arkansas City; and the Emporia Sub from Emporia to Wellington. These three lines played a significant role in the state’s history and are directly responsible for establishing many communities in the Flint Hills.

Of the three lines, the Emporia Sub is among the busiest and is critical to the nation’s supply chain. Part of BNSF’s Southern Transcon, the 2,200

miles of track connecting Southern California to Chicago, the Emporia Sub is about two-thirds of the way from Los Angeles to Chicago. Stretching through the Flint Hills, it is one of 11 BNSF subdivisions on the Southern Transcon and the last segment of this busy corridor that is single-tracked.

A multiyear project to install the second track next to the single main line on portions of the Emporia Sub began in 2019, starting with grading work. Once the last section of adjacent mainline track is installed (two bridges elsewhere will remain single-tracked until they can be expanded), the route will be much more fluid and be a shorter and faster connection than the current overflow route through Newton.

The challenge of the terrain and the limestone and shale sitting just below the Flint Hills’ surface are among the reasons why the triple- and double-track constricts to a single mainline for about 50

miles. The new double-track is critical to future rail capacity and the flow of trains through Kansas, resulting in fewer blocked crossings in the Flint Hills and the state.

Equally important is preserving the prairie near the new tracks. When the project began, there was concern that the construction would affect the land, part of the Flint Hills, a scenic prairie marked by few trees where grasses can grow up to 10 feet tall. Communication with local communities and groups helped ease concern, with assurances that the railroad would restore disturbed land with native grasses. BNSF voluntarily consulted with prairie experts for guidance on restoring disturbed areas back to native prairie.

Completing the project is important to the railroad, to the communities it serves and to the nation’s economy. And like Holliday, whose grand vision for the Santa Fe was long ago satisfied, today’s BNSF and its people continue propelling a legacy forward.

DID YOU KNOW?

The shipping of containers and truck trailers by rail – intermodal shipping – is a mode that BNSF and its predecessors helped innovate. Today, BNSF is the largest intermodal railroad, with access to all major North American markets.

Intermodal represents more than 50 percent of the freight the company transports annually. BNSF moved around 5 million intermodal shipments in 2022, which is more than any other North American railroad.