

How My Railroad Collection Began

by Jeff Lemke



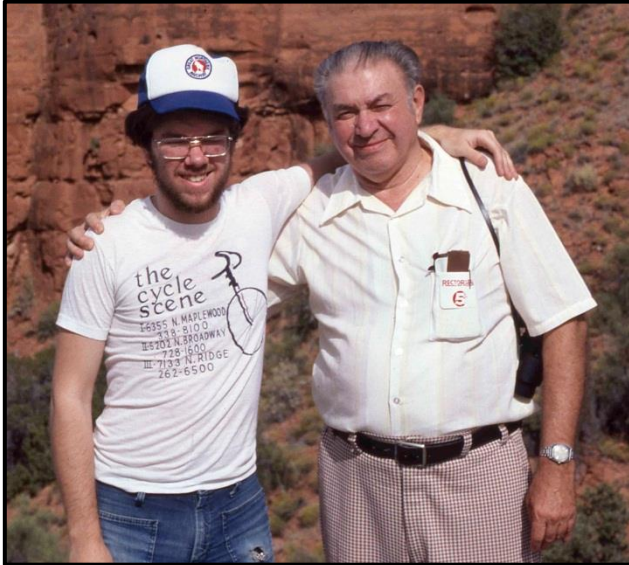
From the early moments of my first trip to Superior, Wisconsin in 1975 through today my interest in the Twin Ports has remained high. There have been many changes at the Head of the Lakes. Through it all the Twin Ports has emerged as a shining star for both Minnesota and Wisconsin. Besides being the largest inland seaport in North America, the wonderful combination of beautiful scenery, rich industrial history, and friendly people make it one of the nicest low-key places that a person can visit in the upper Midwest. Duluth-Superior is a favorite tourist destination especially during the fall colors.

Back in 1975 I was just a kid. I was a model railroader too. What you'd call a green-horn model railroader who lived and breathed the Chicago & North Western System. I grew up along the C&NW's Northwest Line out of Chicago near a small commuter stop on that line at a place called Cary, Illinois. What I saw growing up was the daily parade of yellow and green commuter trains, strings of double-deck commuter coaches, pushed and pulled by an aging fleet of old Electro-Motive F7s and E8s. Pat Dorin's book, "*Chicago & North Western Power*", was by my side as I tried to build and paint what I thought were authentic looking diesel-locomotive models. I did a pretty good job in those days but certainly nothing close to what can be store-bought today in your local hobby shop. But at the time Pat's book stirred my imagination with its photos from around the C&NW system including just a few shots that caught my eye from a place called *Superior*.

My family took one vacation a year. Fortunately for me we went to the North Woods for two weeks every July. Not Disneyland. Not Mexico. Not Florida. We went to the North Woods; period. My dad did all the driving. He loved fishing. That's why we came here. So that he could fish and tell war stories with his army pals from *his* old days. It really was a vacation for him. But he wasn't the only one having a good time. My older sisters also got to flirt with the boys at the resort we stayed at. Being 16 years old I mainly played pool, drank Ne-Hi pop, and munched on Old Dutch potato chips. My mom tended to the family. She made sure we were clean, well fed, and not being abused by the black bears that wandered over from the garbage dump on occasion. And that's the way it was when my sisters and I were kids. Steve's Valhalla Resort is where we stayed. We rented a



cottage there along the shores of Grindstone Lake. A place near Hayward, the Lumberjack Capitol of the World and where the National Championships are still held to this day.



Reaching the age of 16 was a magical time for me. I'll never forget 1975 because that's the year I got my driver's license and my first chance to be truly independent and visit this place called Superior. But access to the car came through my dad, exclusively. My dad was a tall, gentle man. He was a lifetime salesman. He served in WWII fighting in the Pacific theatre where he received the Purple Heart. He came out of that knowing what was really important in life. He treated us well. He treated his friends well too. He knew about give and take. He knew about relationships. There wasn't anything he liked better than seeing everyone around him happy. And more often than not he would be the one giving to make certain everyone was having a grand time no matter how mundane the activity might have been. I was happy that I knew that about my dad. He enjoyed being happy and he worked at making it so. That's me at left. My dad on the right.

On this trip we'd hardly unpacked the car at Grindstone Lake before I decided to ask about our relative proximity to this place called *Superior* that I read about in Pat's book. I knew it had to be north from where we were. But that's about all I knew. So I walked into the tavern inside the lodge building. I reasoned that's where all the local knowledge had to be; the tavern, right? It was a simple but colorful place on the inside. A cavalcade of beer signs hung on the walls. Local brands like Fitger's, Grain Belt, Royal 58 and Northern Beer were complimented by the familiar Old Style, Hamm's and Budweiser logos too. There was an electric bowling machine, a pinball game, a green felt pool table, and a Wurlitzer juke box too. The bar faced the lake and everyone seated there could watch the fisherman come and go from the boat docks through two huge picture windows. It was a grand view across that lake. The bar stools were chrome with red leather seats. And perched atop each of about 25 of those bar stools sat all the local "fishermen" who came in to "take a break" as my dad used to say. I remembered from previous trips how the guys in the bar were always talking about what they knew and how right they were. They even got into arguments about how right they were. So it made perfect sense to me to seek out knowledge from the locals who claimed to know so much about absolutely everything.

I asked how far it was to Superior. "Superior is two hours from here", is what I was told. "Kid, you don't even need a map. Drive two hours straight up Highway 53. You can't miss it". Everyone at the bar that day shook their heads in agreement. But we'd already been in our '74 Buick LeSabre for the better part of a day. Chicago to Hayward was 420 long miles in those days. As my mom would always say, it was a trip and a half. Much of the interstate highway system was under construction that year so the driving was slow going. Five of us were snugly packed into that car. The trunk was filled with more than just our suitcases. We also had an old Evinrude boat motor and a gas tank packed in there that Grandpa loaned to us so we could cut down on boating expenses at the lodge. Most of our personal belongings were packed inside a home-made box strapped to the roof of the car. Although I knew dad was a generous guy I figured I'd better wait a day or two before I asked him if I could borrow the car. Plus, it made sense to me that if he had a day or two of fishing under his belt and a few Old Styles inside of him, I might stand a better chance of getting a positive response to my query about borrowing *the only car my family owned 420 miles from home!*

So I waited for the right opportunity, namely, a good weather forecast! On the third day we were playing pool at the clubhouse and my dad asked what I was going to do with myself for the next couple of days. Grinning like the cat that just swallowed the canary I asked my dad in Harry Chapin style, "What I'd really like Dad is to borrow the car keys, see you later, can I have them please?"

The fishing must have been good enough and the beers cold enough. Dad was in a good mood when I asked. Before I knew it I got the A-OK to head for Superior the next morning. I had everything I needed. I had my trusty Vivitar 35mm camera that I bought two weeks prior at the Montgomery Wards department store in Crystal Lake. I had a dozen rolls

of Kodachrome 64 film that I bought at K-mart. I had a fold-out gas station map of Wisconsin that dad always kept in the glove box. And I had thirty bucks cash in my wallet. The way I had it figured that was plenty of money to cover lunch, dinner, and another tank of gas to get myself back to Grindstone Lake after I shot the C&NW at Itasca. I still have that very same folded up Wisconsin road map right here inside my desk. It has red felt marker traced over the road lines to make sure I'd find my way back home that day. As it turns out that was the very beginning of my collection of Duluth-Superior memorabilia and railroadiana.

I hopped into dad's car at about 7am, roughly 20 seconds after I woke up the next morning, and headed north. It was a perfect day for photography in the North Woods. Plenty of sunshine. Brilliant blue sky with the dramatic puffy, white clouds. You know the kind of sky I'm talking about. Well, my anticipation grew as each mile clicked over on the odometer. A mile or two from Superior I caught my first glimpse of the Twin Ports and Lake Superior. It lasted just a few moments from a high vantage point on the highway overlooking the endless birch and pine forests. The shimmering lake and towering bluffs of Duluth appeared suddenly, and then disappeared again behind the endless stands of trees.



Entering Superior from the south I remember going past the truck weigh station and marveling at the bright red asphalt used on the divided highway back then. That's long gone now. Has been for years. But maybe you remember seeing it too. Just a few more minutes of driving and I passed the Superior city limit sign. And then there it was on my left. The Chicago & North Western's Itasca Yard. Just like in Pat's book. I made a U-turn in the Choo-Choo Restaurant parking lot to drive through the yard. The Choo-Choo is an interesting little joint that serves some of the best burgers in Superior, and arguably, Duluth too. If you've never been inside the Choo-Choo you're missing something special in its simplicity. Terrific hamburgers and cold beer for just a few bucks. But it wasn't lunch time yet, I couldn't drink beer back then, and I wanted to get the lay of the land along the North Western's yard. After all, this is what I came to Superior to see, right?

As luck would have it an old North Western GeeP/slug diesel set was pulling down the main track. This was the 1548 and BU-2, a transfer locomotive set used to run interchange traffic between Itasca and Duluth and return. The 1548 was a GP7 model from EMD and the BU-2 was originally built in 1939 as an NW-1 switcher. In 1975 they were a staple in the Ports for C&NW transferring freight between Superior and Duluth. I caught another pair, the 1526 and the BU-1 the following year in 1976 on a wrecker train just behind the Choo-Choo. In 1975 the wrecker was black so this had been repainted over the winter into the yellow and green paint scheme. I reckon that the reason the C&NW painted

that wrecker into nice bright colors is because it got used so much. It's difficult to remember a time when there weren't freight cars derailed in Itasca Yard. Every time I rolled into town there was something at Itasca derailed or tipped over.



I spent an hour or so taking photographs of the scenes at Itasca including the locomotives, cars, yard office and the roundhouse. In 1975 you could drive right into the facility and get friendly waves and smiles from the crews. There weren't any problems walking through the facility taking pictures to your heart's content. No release forms. No hassles of any sort really. It was marvelous fun. But in 1975 I was utterly unfamiliar with the area I had no idea that the seemingly large yard at Itasca was actually one of the smaller rail facilities within the Ports. After shooting pictures at Itasca, I was down to ten rolls of Kodachrome film and it was only 9:30am. Continuing north into Superior from Itasca I passed under the wood trestlework that allowed C&NW tracks to access the lakefront.

Popping out on the other side of that installation I came to know what "large" meant in terms of the railroad scene in Duluth-Superior. The former Great Northern's Allouez iron ore dock facility crossed what was now Hwy. 2/53, jutting out into the harbor, with three massive iron ore docks now operated by Burlington Northern. I was fortunate enough to find a two unit set of old paint 6000 Class SD9 locomotives shoving a cut of 40 shorty ore cars up to the docks for spotting and unloading. Navigating a few twists and turns I made my way down to the foot of the docks, climbed the stairs 100 feet into the air to the ore dock office, and got a chance to watch the SD-duo spot ore cars high above the water on Burlington Northern Dock 2. A huge ore boat, the Thompson, was loading alongside of Dock 1. It was a grand scene to observe. I can tell you that my interest in the C&NW was fading quickly as I took in the industrial enormity of what the Great Northern had created at Allouez. In fact, I kind of wished I hadn't shot the two rolls of film at Itasca. Back then, film was *the* major constraint. There wasn't anything digital about shooting photos. You couldn't just keep shooting or download anything to free up image space inside your camera. A person with a limited budget had to ration their frames of film to be able to record all the *important stuff* before they ran out of film. And we hoped we had all the camera controls set correctly to begin with because it would be a week or more before we got the developed film back from the lab to see if our images turned out at all. ASA speed, shutter speed, aperture set correctly. It was truly a different time.

Travelling west from Allouez I discovered the old Northern Pacific ore dock next just beyond the silver steel truss bridge that permitted Hwy. 2/53 to cross the winding waters of the Nemadji River. Today that bridge is gone. The Nemadji is located in a depression between the Allouez docks and the NP dock. This depression allowed me the opportunity to see the entire NP dock from a distance of about half a mile. And as I drove closer the enormity of even this single dock set in. The dock was still intact, all chutes in place, and the massive all-wood trestle approach stretched out for nearly a mile before it came back down to earth at the NP's Hill Avenue ore yard. A little farther west of the NP's ore dock was Superior East End. The massive grain and flour elevators of King Midas rose a hundred feet into the air. Beyond that there were even more elevators, cement and limestone docks, and railroad tracks running in every which direction.



It was only Ten O'clock AM. The realization was setting in that that I couldn't possibly have enough film to last even one day in this place called Superior. There were simply too many interesting scenes to observe and record. And I hadn't even gotten to the big rail yards yet. Not having a detailed map of Superior and knowing little about the town's layout I figured the best thing to do was to follow the tracks as best I could. Surely this would lead to something good. So I followed the tracks and elevators around to Winter Street and Oakes Avenue where Superior Union Depot sat, and still stands today. It was known for a time as the Superior Antique & Art Depot. Empty now, I believe the building is for sale as I write this in 2012. But on this day an Amtrak E8 and four stainless steel passenger cars had just pulled up to the depot for a station stop. This was Amtrak's Arrowhead, the train from St. Paul, which replaced the Badger and Gopher



trains that used to make this run under the Great Northern, and later briefly, Burlington Northern flags.

Superior Union Depot was THE passenger station in Superior at that time. It was also the headquarters of the small terminal line, the Lake Superior Terminal & Transfer Railway. The LST&T, or Terminal, had its offices in the north end of the building including the superintendent's office, yard master's office, and the train crew's locker and lunch room facilities. A crew on one of their old NW2



switchers rested alongside of the Arrowhead waiting for them to clear before they could go back to switching out forty-foot boxcars in the Terminal yard. I could see from my vantage point on the depot platform at Superior Union Depot that the Terminal's yards stretched out to the south in a sort of gentle s-curve fashion. There appeared to be a steel highway bridge over the yards down that-away too. I followed that course next. At the south end of the Terminal yard was their old wooden roundhouse and engine facility. I snapped some more shots there, and then spied the old steel viaduct that crossed the yard. This was the original iron Belknap Street viaduct. Not the modern steel and concrete affair that exists today. The old viaduct was a somewhat rickety, hodge-podge looking riveted structure that the railroads actually constructed near the turn of the century to prevent train-automobile accidents. Belknap Street originally crossed all of the rail yards in West Superior at grade, as did a sister bridge south at 21st Street. Back in the day that must have been almost a hundred railroad tracks to cross at one time. Surely there had to have been great loss of life and limb back in the latter days of horse and buggy and the early days of the automobile.

Deciding that the Belknap Street Bridge could give me the best lay of the land I parked the car and walked the length of the bridge, camera hanging from my neck, with two more rolls of film tucked into my blue jeans. Belknap Street crossed the LST&T tracks, the NP's Belknap Street Yard, and the Great Northern's monstrous yards in West Superior. The sidewalk was located on the south side of the two lane bridge so that's where I walked heading in a westerly direction. I snapped some pictures of the yards and cars from above. Before long I reached the mid-point of the bridge and decided if traffic allowed me to do it, that I'd run across to the north side to see if that view was any better. I hopped the steel girder between the sidewalk and lanes of traffic and walked across for a quick peek to the north. **Holy cow!** I caught my first glimpse of the old Great Northern Belknap Street roundhouse with Covered Wagons stretching as far as the eye



could see. The whole of the rest of the GN and NP yards stretched out before me. And to the north lay the full extent of the coal and grain elevator complexes in Superior. Beyond that, I could see the massive Missabe ore docks, Rice's Point, and downtown Duluth, Minnesota off in the distance. This was big time railroading! The late morning sun and a roundhouse full-up with vintage first generation diesels made my day. I practically ran the mile back to my car so I could drive the rest of the way to the roundhouse. The LeSabre and I rumbled across the wobbly viaduct. I parked the car in the limestone gravel parking lot behind the GN's old full-circle roundhouse. Feverishly opening up *all* of the remaining boxes of film I packed my pockets full of film cans. I was "all in" on this field trip. But I had just 7 rolls left to shoot and there was barely enough money for both lunch *and* gas to get back to Hayward. I was hungry and there was an A&W Root Beer stand just down the street. I guess with both my dad *and* his wallet back at Grindstone - that meant I wouldn't be buying more film today. *Dang it.*



The BN still had a great many of the old Covered Wagon F-unit diesels in service. At Superior this included BN units in the 600, 700 and 800 series, along with a handful of GeePs in old paint jobs, and a dozen or more SD7s and SD9s that were the yard switchers of choice in Superior. While shooting scenes at the roundhouse from atop Belknap St. viaduct a four unit set of U25Cs rumbled past me on a coal train while I watched an A-B set of BN green EMD F9s being spun on the 120 foot turntable, then placed on a radial track next to a pair of Terminal switchers in their old GN inspired paint jobs. Meanwhile on the south side of the bridge three different crews each with their own SD9 switched out cars in front of the yard office along Elmira Avenue. And a fourth SD9 was moving a string of bad order ore cars into the large steel car shops for repairs. The place was bustling with railroad activity. Rail movements could be seen in ten places at once.

I spent the rest of the day photographing things at the Superior roundhouse, inside and out. Duluth would have to wait for another trip because I didn't have the time, the film, or the money to take on Duluth this day. My first trip to the Twin Ports started a lifetime adventure of exploring and learning about its rich railroad history. From here I was able to explore more of Superior, Duluth, the iron ranges, and all the little towns in surrounding communities as well. And I was able to grow our collection exponentially with the photographic works we acquired from other photographers including



this wonderful view of the sky blue Covered Wagons from the late, Russ Porter. Russ made this shot in 1970 right after the BN merger atop the Belknap Street viaduct looking into the heart of the Great Northern's shops complex. The large building center (behind the brown and black sand cars) survives as part of Manion's Wholesale Building Supplies. All of it was built by the Eastern Railway Company of Minnesota. Eastern merged into Great Northern about 1900. When BN took over in 1970 it was the largest employer in Superior. The city made this an historical landmark site in 1976. But everything you see here (except Manion's) is gone. Our collection includes more than 1,800 views of the old GN Shops.

The vast majority of what I shot on film and have collected since 1975 has completely disappeared from the railroad scene making each image I restore a treasure to view and share with friends and family.

Thanks to your interest and enthusiastic support our first two digital image disc projects are now sold out. I'm working with Zenith City Online to share more of these images along with a different story each month about railroad history in Duluth-Superior. You can read all about it at ZenithCity.com.

Cheers!

Jeff Lemke

