Behold the life after death of the Rock Island Lines

You're left to ask: Did it have to die?

At 9:30 on a weekday night, the children should be in bed, and Mom and Dad are probably yawning. But you won't be going to sleep this evening. Instead, you'll be aboard Iowa Interstate Railroad train BICB, headed down Memory Lane, the birthplace of the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific Railroad, between its namesake towns. The Rock was dissolved in bankruptcy three decades ago, supposedly an unnecessary redundancy in a railroad industry flooded with excess capacity.

Today, the majority of the Rock's 7,500 route miles and the vast majority of its key long-distance routes remain intact in other hands, heavily used and in most cases in far better shape than the Rock Island left them in 1980. There's a message in this.

The first order of business for this crew is to get out of town. Metra, which dispatches Chicago to Joliet, Ill., 40 miles, curfew westbound freight trains from 3:30 to 6:30 p.m., then allows them out of Blue Island at brief hourly intervals. "Follow 525," radios the operator at BI Tower a few hundred feet from your train at 8:55 p.m. Metra 525 goes west by you at 9:24 p.m., and a few minutes later you get a signal to venture forth.

UD Tower at Joliet holds you briefly for a westbound BNSF Railway intermodal train to go across the diamond, letting you go at 10:42 p.m. Then Dawson calls the tender at the Illinois River drawbridge for a signal. Still, you're captive. A mile from Joliet, you become the tenant of CSX for another 74 miles.

Do you sense that it's tough getting over the road these days? When the Rock Island was declared dead in spring 1980, there was no Iowa Interstate Railroad in the wings waiting to continue operations on its original main line west to Council Bluffs, Iowa. Chicago's Regional Transportation Authority, parent of Metra, jumped in to buy the suburban line to Joliet. Chicago Rail Link gets rich. CSX gets rich on the New Rock Sub. UP gets rich on the Golden State Route from Kansas City to Tucumcari, the spine line from the Twin Cities to Kansas City and the Texas route from Herington, Kan., to Fort Worth. The fact that the Rock Island was dissolved by a bankruptcy judge but flourishes today under a bevy of different owners suggests it wasn't so redundant after all. "Death by regulation," is Henry Posner's term for it.

As you continue west alongside the upper Illinois River, you realize what Iowa Interstate is missing. In places like Morris and LaSalle, Ill., and everywhere in-between, the midnight sky is ablaze with the lights of refineries and factories. Germany's Ruhr Valley leaps to mind (probably because the two locales have often been compared). Side tracks are everywhere, plugged with cars. At Seneca, Ill., BICB halts for 100 minutes, to meet two eastbound trains. The first is a CSX local, J746, which comes by with 82 cars. Yes, an 82-car local. The second train is your eastbound counterpart, CBBH, with more than 12,000 tons of ethanol and other agrichemicals and farm products.

So don't feel too sorry for Mr. Posner. By sheer dumb luck (his admission), his company bought the Iowa Interstate at a low ebb, for what I suspect were pennies on the dollar. Then came the ethanol boom that tripled carloadings. It's safe to say that with Iowa Interstate, Posner made his family's third fortune.

Six months after the Rock's demise, the Staggers Act largely deregulating railroads became law. Had the railroad persevered — its clerks not gone on strike in 1979, had the Interstate Commerce Commission not lost patience and ordered service suspended, had the government lent money already appropriated to permit rebuilding of key lines — the shape of today's railroad map may have been far different.

Journalist FRED W. FRAILEY is a Trains special correspondent.