

ONE DAY AROUND IOWA CITY

Tackling the Iowa Interstate

BY DAVID PATCH/PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

AN HOUR BEFORE SUNRISE in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, the sky is a deep clear blue with the glow of dawn to the east. Motel parking lots across town overflow with cars displaying University of Iowa stickers and flags that hint distantly at why I am present, although my interests do not include the college football game that will start in about six hours and has attracted nearly everyone else who is here.

For me and my railfan wife, Davonna, a football Saturday in Iowa City means the *Hawkeye Express*, a passenger train shuttling just a few miles from shopping-center parking lots in neigh-

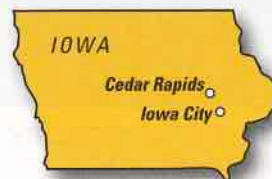
boring Coralville to a makeshift platform near the stadium, will be an attractive photo target sometime during the morning. Even more importantly, the passenger train's presence will constrain the passage through Iowa City's west side of several Iowa Interstate freights that regularly run during daytime hours, making it even easier to strategize a day of train-chasing on a regional railroad whose recent acquisition of modern GE locomotives has distinguished it from its peers and made it a railfan darling.

Oh, and have you heard about the Rock Island "heritage" unit?

I've been keeping track of its whereabouts all week via Internet postings to a Yahoo! Group dedicated to the Iowa Interstate, and based on that intelligence, I'm fairly confident it should be leading the westbound freight from Blue Island, Ill., to Council Bluffs, Iowa, through Iowa City on this day, the Saturday of Labor Day Weekend, 2010.

Iowa City, about 55 miles west of the Quad Cities, is often a good place to start the day while railfanning the Iowa Interstate, since several of its trains have a tendency to converge on the small yard there during the morning hours. BICB, in fact, often meets ei-





ther its opposite, Council Bluffs-Blue Island freight CBBI, or the returning Iowa City-Cedar Rapids turn job, CRIC — and sometimes both — at Iowa City. But on football weekends, Iowa City motel rooms become both rare and expensive, and that combined with our interest in attending the Cedar Rapids Kernels minor-league baseball game on Friday evening has made the northerly city an easy lodging choice, even if we'll likely start our Saturday with a 25-mile drive down U.S. 151. We rise with hopes to intercept the incoming CBBI on the IAIS main line, or maybe overtake the homeward-bound CRIC train on its way to the junction at Yocum.

Except that after a drive-through breakfast stop, we're making that Route 151 trek through Fairfax, Iowa, when the scanner awakens with the crew aboard Iowa Interstate engine 511 calling the Cedar Rapids & Iowa City's yardmaster for permission into his territory at Milepost 9. Not being familiar with the operation, it takes me a few moments to figure out that "the Turn" is running late today, and when I spot Milepost 9 on the track along the highway, I realize our immediate fu-

OPPOSITE: Five EMD hood-units lead an Iowa Interstate extra from Atlantic to Cedar Rapids through Brooklyn, Iowa, where it retrieved Cedar Rapids-bound cars from the rear of westbound train BICB on September 4, 2010, during the author's busy day at the heart of the railroad. **TOP:** Resembling a Rock Island football special of years gone by, the *Hawkeye Express* keeps the railroad occupied west of Iowa City on Iowa Hawkeye football Saturdays, shuttling fans from Coralville to Kinnick Stadium. **BOTTOM:** A single IAIS GEVO unit leads CBBI past its opposite at North Star. CBBI often runs with distributed power on the rear, as was the case this day.



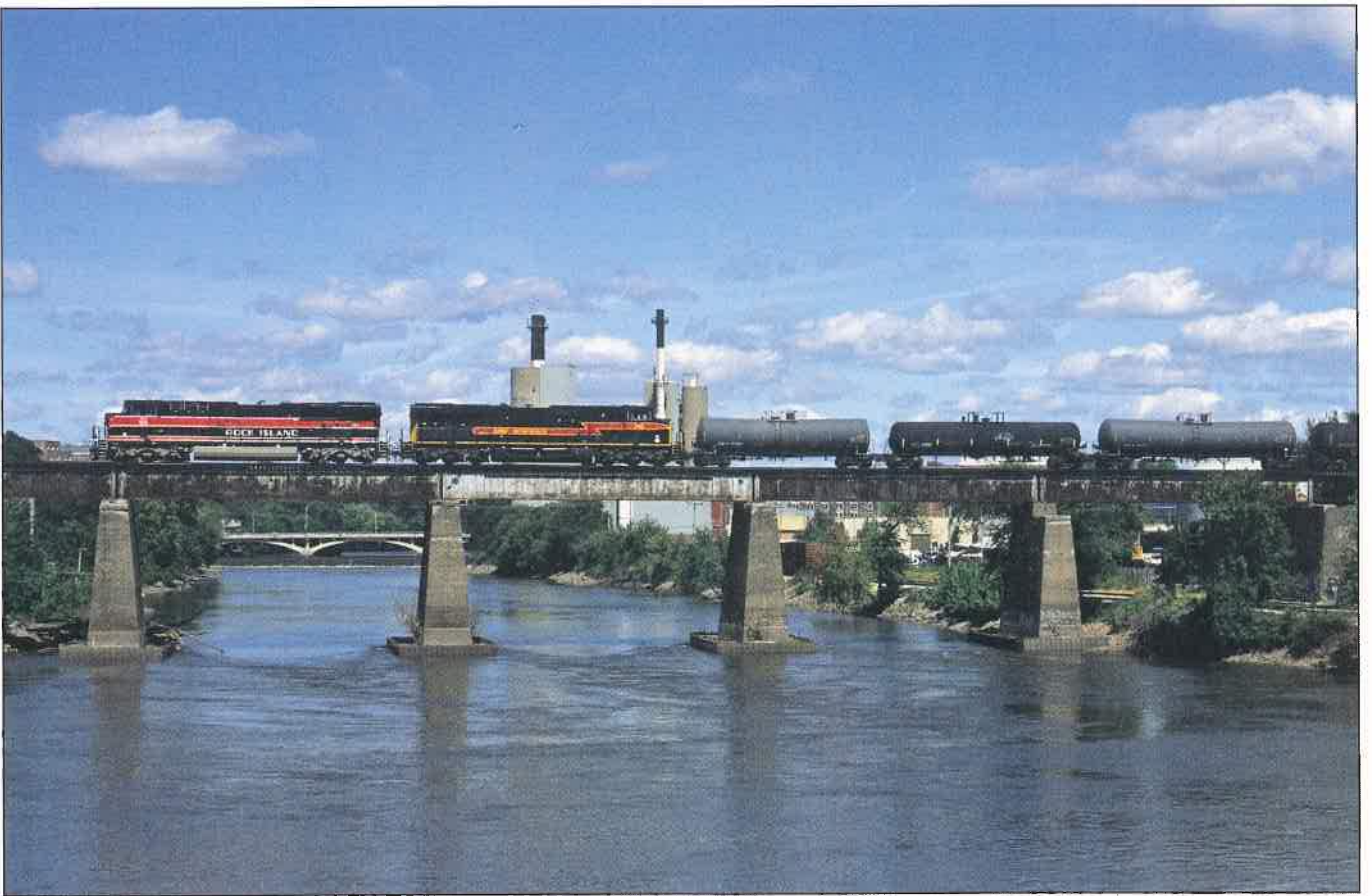
ture holds an oncoming headlight.

Sure enough, we crest the road's next rise to see three big Iowa Interstate locomotives lugging 119 cars up the far side of a low ridge. Turning around to give chase is no problem, and the train's slow speed gives the sun ample time to get above the horizon for three good shots before ICCR noses into the "Crandic" yard complex for several hours of switching and swapping. The day has hardly begun and already we have a bonus train.

We're about to resume the trip down U.S. 151 when I get a cell-phone call from fellow railfan Michael Harding, who after leaving from Ohio the morning before has spent Friday night in the Quad Cities for the same reason we were in Cedar Rapids. He has heard Iowa Interstate 513 West get a track warrant as far as the siding at North Star, where a meet with the CBBI train is planned. This confirms that the Rock Island heritage locomotive is indeed leading today's westbound, but also indicates that the eastbound is surely in Iowa City already, if not on the move east from there by now. Neither of us knows exactly where North Star is, but I figure we can hardly go wrong if I change plans and take I-380 south to I-80, then head east for an intercept near Wilton, Iowa; at the very worst, I'll overshoot the meet point and run into the westbound, whose work in Iowa City surely will give me catch-up time even if I first dawdle with the east-

ABOVE: Laden with traffic from ADM at Cedar Rapids, three big GEs lead a 100-car CRIC into the compact yard at Iowa City. Once its tail clears the west throat, the BICB on a neighboring track will pluck its rear block to take west. Iowa Interstate's mix of traditional standard cab and modern wide cab diesels offer variety for the visiting railfan. **BELOW:** Toward the day's end, the ATRC extra works its way north on the Cedar Rapids & Iowa City's Amana line between Walford and Fairfax, close to where the author had intercepted ICCR at sunrise.





ABOVE: With CRIC in the yard, the BICB crew doubles its train together at Iowa City, making several moves on the Iowa River bridge. **RIGHT:** "Heritage" unit 513 leads BICB at the U.S. 6 overpass east of Victor, Iowa, a scene documented by multiple railfan cameras.



bound a bit.

As it happens, North Star is just west of Wilton, and where Iowa Rt. 38, the area's closest access off I-80, crosses the tracks. BICB shows up within minutes of our arrival and takes the siding, and the meet presently occurs just out of sight around a curve to the west. Mike, having already photographed the CBBI a couple of times, chases the westbound back toward Iowa City after the meet, while Davonna and I stick around to watch the eastbound set off a carload of scrap for North Star Steel — hence the siding name — and then get back under way through Wilton. That's enough for me, and I set our sights on catching the football shuttle in action at least once before the Iowa Hawkeyes' 11:00 a.m. game time.


The football train proves to be an easy catch as it grows along U.S. 6 through Coralville, and I return Mike's heads-up favor in time for him to get it, too, closer to the stadium. But with radio communications now having indicated that the Cedar Rapids job is on the move toward home, it's finally time to go to Yocum, the point just west of Homestead, Iowa, where the former Milwaukee Road line

south out of Cedar Rapids joins the IAIS main. The branch, actually Crandic property but now dispatched by the IAIS as far as Milepost 9, rolls over several ridge lines on its way through the historic Amana Colonies and feeds into the IAIS main at a wye. The CRIC train takes a lot longer to get to Yocum than we do, and there are already other railfans waiting for it when we arrive. A few fair-weather clouds add a bit of challenge to the photography as everyone watches the heavy train grind through the wye's east leg and through a radio-controlled switch onto the main line. It will be an easy chase back to Iowa City, all the way past the depot and under the railfans' bridge at Dodge Street, with the passenger train clearing up its warrant from the Coralville pocket along the way.

Iowa Interstate's Iowa City yard is a compact affair, with little tolerance for strings of cars to linger unnecessarily, so CRIC's first order of work upon arrival this day is to hand off its westbound traffic to the waiting BICB train. On other occasions, it sets westbound cars off in a siding at Homestead. The modest delay provides sufficient time for a lunch stop and also allows the sun to be 45 minutes farther west in the sky by the time BICB leaves town, providing for decent nose lighting on the IAIS 513 for the portion of its run between Marengo and Victor, Iowa, where the old Rock runs side-by-side with U.S. 6. By now, there are several more vehicles

in the chase parade, and the BICB has track authority only as far as Brooklyn, where a meet has been set up with an extra eastbound out of Atlantic, Iowa.

It turns out that because of the need to get out of Iowa City before the football shuttle starts running again, BICB has kept its Cedar Rapids block instead of setting it off there for the next night's Turn, which explains why the train had more than 150 cars as it headed west. About half of those cars are handed off to the extra at Brooklyn, giving the assembled railfan paparazzi ample time to get shots of both trains. Satisfied with our coverage of the "Rock Island" unit now, I opt to chase the extra and its five standard-cab EMDs — four GP38-2s and an SD38-2 — back to Yocum and as far up the Cedar Rapids line as the light will allow, which turns out to be almost the exact spot where we first encountered the ICCR at sunrise. The train's heavy slog up the former Milwaukee line's grade allows for several photos before the track turns away from the sun toward the Crandic yard.

There are plenty of happy Iowa Hawkeyes fans seated in the Cedar Rapids restaurant where Davonna and I eat that evening, and we are equally satisfied with how our day turned out, even if it was only partly, and tangentially, related to what transpired on the Iowa City gridiron. But for a railfan, a busy and productive day on a distinctive short line like the Iowa Interstate certainly has a "touchdown" feel to it. 

BELOW: Iowa Interstate 513, the star of the day's show, leads the BICB around the curve past the grain complex at Marengo, Iowa. The Rock Island-themed locomotive pays tribute to the company whose mainline this once was, and continues to attract railfans to IAIS rails.

