

Meet the best little railroad in Effingham

What begins with an idle question turns into a 2-hour adventure in central Illinois

You probably haven't noticed that my feature stories in *TRAINS* the past couple of years have trended toward smaller and smaller railroads. There's a reason for my doing that. I like to watch busy main lines populated by 70-mph intermodal hotshots as much as any of you. But as a writer, I grow weary of the corporate mentality of Class I railroads. You can't do this, you can't do that, they say; Mr. Big is unavailable for an interview, and don't even think about a cab ride. Gee, sorry I asked!

By and large, the regional railroads and short lines are different. Most are run by entrepreneurs who are proud of what they've accomplished. But their stories remain largely untold. Their welcome mats are usually out, however, and I find it a pleasure to document the trials and accomplishments of these people and their railroads. And maybe it's the model railroader inside me, but I'm discovering that really small railroads can be really cool. Even one that began life 15 years ago as a 400-foot spur.

That would be the Effingham Railroad. I'd never heard of it. Driving across central Illinois with Indiana Rail Road's Tom Hockback, I ask Tom the name of the owner of the Vandalia Railroad. Charlie Barenfanger, he replies. "Charlie also owns the Effingham Railroad," Tom adds, opening his cell phone. "Would you like to talk to him?" Half an hour later we're sipping drinks with Charlie at the McDonald's in Vandalia.

Actually, Charlie no longer runs the Vandalia; Pioneer Railcorp owns it now. But he used that experience to start a new railroad from scratch in the nearby town of Effingham. North-south and east-west interstate highways and Class I railroads, the latter being Canadian National (Illinois Central) and CSX (ex-Conrail), bisect this county seat of 12,000. Charlie's strategic partner, Agracel Inc., an industrial development company run by Jack Schultz, bought a big chunk of land in the southwest quadrant of the CN-CSX crossing and erected a 200,000-square-foot warehouse. Other businesses followed. To serve them Charlie created the Effingham Railroad, beginning with that 400-foot spur off of Conrail. The line has grown to more than a mile long. Charlie is president, and Jack is vice president.

Charlie has a meeting he can't postpone but invites us to find the Total Quality Warehouse when we get to Effingham and ask for Luke. "He'll show you around," Charlie says, bidding us goodbye. He doesn't have to invite me twice.

At the warehouse, we meet Luke Perkins, 24, one of two full-time Effingham Railroad employees, having hired on after high school. His boss, Josh Storck, 34, superintendent of operations, is on vacation this week, making the Effingham literally a one-man railroad.

Luke leads us through the warehouse until an SW1200 becomes visible on an inside track. It still bears its Conrail number, 2716, and looks gorgeous in a paint scheme reminiscent of a 1955 Chicago Great Western switcher. "Want to take it for a spin?" Luke asks us. Once we're aboard, Luke dons his throttle pack and brings the beast to life. Like a puppy, the 2716 trots out of the warehouse and trundles south to the CN interchange track, where I get off to take the photo for this column. Then we reverse course, traverse the warehouse, and emerge on what I decide to call the Effingham Railroad's Northern Division, headed toward the CSX interchange.

At present, Charlie had said, the Effingham has three customers, which account for more than 2,000 carloads a year: the warehouse, a breakfast-cereal company, and a cement company. But a



Effingham Railroad's former Conrail SW1200 No. 2716 shines in the Illinois sun in a paint scheme that reminds the photographer of a Chicago Great Western switcher from the mid-1950s. Fred W. Frailey

bakery occupying a former Krispy Kreme building is about to begin taking carloads, and the railroad offers rail-car storage. It's pretty obvious, from the spick-and-span condition of the Effingham's infrastructure, that this is a successful business.

I ask Luke whether he and Josh really do everything. Yes sir, he replies. Change cross ties and other track work? Yes. Maintain the 2716? Yes. In fact, when we leave Luke plans to give his locomotive a wash "because it's got oil on it everywhere." Funny, I hadn't noticed; I guess I'm too used to Class I locomotives.

We come upon a second locomotive, beautifully painted (by Luke and Josh, naturally). On its flanks, the GP10 bears the name Illinois Western. Charlie had mentioned at McDonald's that he is starting this railroad 50 miles southwest of Effingham in Greenville, Ill., using the same business model as the Effingham Railroad. According to Illinois Western's website, Agracel bought 700 acres next to CSX, and the railroad will build 3.5 miles to connect to BNSF Railway's Beardstown Sub, providing competitive rail access.

Tom and I need to get moving, so we thank Luke and reluctantly get back in my Dodge. I begin reflecting on the adventure that began two hours ago. What an interesting railroad. I begin running through my mind how I'd execute switching moves (you can see a detailed track plan at www.efrr.com). Too late, I wish I'd asked Luke what it feels like to run a railroad all by himself. See, this tiny speck on the corpus of the railroad colossus is already firing my imagination. Railroading is more than just busy main lines and 70-mph intermodal trains. **I**

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