

THE OBSCURE ONES: ICG'S SD40-2s

In the 1980s, SD40-2s ruled most everywhere.
But not on the Illinois Central Gulf

by Nick Tharalson

Quick: Name one locomotive model to which the word "obscure" would never apply. There's a high likelihood that, if you watched trains in the 1980s and '90s, the SD40-2 came quickly to your mind. After all, thousands roamed the western half of the North American continent in Burling-

ton Northern "Cascade Green," Union Pacific "Armour Yellow," and Canadian Pacific "Action Red." To the east, huge fleets of the diesels populated rosters of Conrail, CSX, and Norfolk Southern and its predecessors.

When TRAINS named the SD40-2 as one of the 10 locomotives that changed railroad-

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ing [see January 2009 TRAINS], author David Lustig noted, "You had to really look to find [a railroad] that didn't [own one]." Erie Lackawanna, Boston & Maine (plus the other Guilford properties), and Florida East Coast do come to mind.

But there were small fleets, too, including the 10 on the Rock Island, and fewer than 100 each on the Kansas City Southern and Missouri-Kansas-Texas. However, Illinois Central Gulf possessed what was likely the smallest fleet purchased new. This road bought four SD40-2s, and they remain so obscure that TRAINS omitted the line from its list of original owners. In fact, not until the renamed IC picked up 44 ex-BN SD40-2s did this standard unit outnumber the predecessor SD40 variants on ICG.

The quartet was intended for a unit coal train service, but as most things do in the railroad world, they eventually moved into the mainline locomotive pool. By the early 1980s, they were running system-wide, numbered 6030-6033, above ICG's SD40As.

In 1982, I was working overnights at a Waterloo, Iowa, radio station. I took my cameras to work, and when I finished in the morning, I'd drive past the local yards looking for some action, or something unusual. I had been after those SD40-2s because of their obscurity, and had gotten one or two of them on occasion. One cloudy, damp Sunday morning, I arrived at ICG's Waterloo yard office. A coal train, with all four of those rare units on the point, in numerical order, was just leaving! The chase was on.

I took several poorly lit, poorly focused shots, starting at the Sinclair elevator west of Waterloo. There was a cut of 25 grain hoppers ahead of the coal hoppers, which made for a different shot. I eventually made it to Ackley, where the ICG crossed Chicago & North Western's ex-Minneapolis & St. Louis main, and took this photo.

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These SD40-2s were not the rarest units on the ICG. That honor went to the two ex-Columbus & Greenville SD28s. Soon, the ICG would take over the lease on a fleet of ex-Rock Island SD40-2s, and in 1991, it added the ex-BN fleet. The four original units labored on, but not without incident. No. 6033 met its fate in a wreck in Mississippi, but the others soldiered anonymously today in Canadian National's fleet.

So allow me a tip of the hat to these overlooked SD40-2s. They often toiled in obscurity, unlike their more famous fleets of brothers. But they did the job they were built for and filled the role of being "the best freight engine ever built." I

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