

# A Fresh Look At Nebraska



By LuAnn Schindler

In the introduction of "My Antonia," Willa Cather writes: "While the train flashed through never-ending miles of ripe wheat, by country towns and bright-flowered pastures and oak groves wilting in the sun, we sat in the observation car, where the woodwork was hot to the touch and red dust lay deep over everything."

When the Nebraska author jotted those words 90-some years ago, lines of steel crisscrossed the country, transporting weary travelers at modest speeds. The slow-paced rocking of rail cars represented a way of life, a peaceful reminder explaining why the journey – and how one reaches a destination – remains important.

Nebraska's railway history features a handful of little engines that could and several steam engines blazing through our state's past and present.

Union Pacific completed its route across Nebraska in 1862, becoming the original great Platte River road. The Burlington and Missouri Railroad crossed along the southern and western sections of the state, naming depots in alphabetical order; the Fremont and Elkhorn Valley Railroad transversed the northern interior. Offshoots branched along the tracks, tracing a route into small communities, connecting Nebraskans with the outside world.

Eventually, approximately 96 Nebraska railroads boarded windows instead of passengers, the cabooses' red lights dimming in the distance. Life in the slow lane gave way to fast cars and faster airplanes.

Today, Union Pacific's main line in central Nebraska represents the most active freight corridor, with nearly 135 trains dissecting the geography between Gibbon and North Platte. The world's largest train yard, Bailey Yard, covers 2,850 acres in North Platte and includes 300+ miles of track. The Golden Spike Tower elevates eight stories high, offering a panoramic view.

Amtrak's California Zephyr connects Chicago to San Francisco. The silver wind blows into Omaha, Lincoln, Hastings, Holdrege and McCook. Amtrak pumps nearly \$1.75 million into our state's economy and employs 19 workers.

Railroad tourism continues gaining steam. The Fremont and Elkhorn Valley Railroad features Nebraska's longest and largest tourist railroad. Operating along a 17-mile stretch, the train ventures from Fremont to Hooper and crosses several historic spots, including Indian Road and the Mormon Trail. Riders can enjoy a scenic trip from Fremont to Nickerson or travel on the dinner train to Hooper.

It's a journey into the past.

Four years ago, I took my freshman English class to ride the FEVR after we read "My Antonia." I wanted them to experience Cather's girlhood journey from Virginia to Red Cloud's wind-swept plains. I wished they could comprehend the uncertainty immigrants faced when they boarded a train, sometimes spending life savings on a ticket to a dusty depot. I hoped they recognized the simplicity of a lifetime removed from today's world filled with Blackberries, instant messaging and e-mail.

I needed them to feel the chug of the engine racing past never-ending miles of corn fields, from modern city to tilled farmland, past watering holes, while we sat in the passenger car, where September's clamminess clung to the wooden benches and our clothing, and Nebraska history infiltrated our minds.