



A northbound Canadian National freight train moving toward Chicago passes another train waiting on a rail siding in Peotone.

*Photo: Mike Voss*

## Will County becoming global hub for railroad industry

**By Robert Themer**

rthemer@daily-journal.com

815-937-3369

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As diesel gas prices hit historic highs, there is another transportation milestone unfolding -- the rebirth of the railroad industry, which is transforming Will County into a global hub as the home of the third-largest container port in North America.

Each day, milelong trains carrying hundreds of semitrailer boxes pull into the Burlington Northern Logistics Park and other shipping facilities at Elwood.

An incredible 10,000 semis come and go over local, state and interstate roads on a daily basis, according to an estimate from the Will County Highway Department. Trailer boxes filled with Midwest corn and soybeans make return trips to as far away as China, bolstering prices for local farmers.

Major manufacturers have located Midwest distribution centers around the Burlington facility and the CenterPoint Intermodal Park, which is built on the site of the former Joliet arsenal abandoned in the 1990s by the U.S. Army.

"The freight railway industry is enjoying its biggest building boom in nearly a century, a turnaround as abrupt as it is ambitious," wrote Frank Ahrens of The Washington Post in an industry analysis last week. "It is largely fueled by growing global trade and rising fuel costs for 18-wheelers."

In the 1970s the railroads were crippled and many were forced into bankruptcy. With consolidation allowed by the Staggers Rail Act of 1980, today only seven major rail lines remain running on 162,000 miles of track, he wrote.

But the industry is now growing. In 2002, 4,700 workers were laid off. In 2006, more than 5,000 were hired. Since 2003, industry-wide profits have doubled, and stock prices have soared. The U.S. Department of Transportation projects a near-90 percent increase in rail freight by 2035, according to the Post. This year, the industry is expected to spend nearly \$10 billion to add track, build switchyards, terminals and tunnels.

While the expansion is good for the area, it is not without growing pains.

CenterPoint plans more intermodal centers in Crete and north of Elwood. Other firms are looking at centers in Beecher, Wilmington and west of Morris.

The growth has put a strain on Will County roads.

In The Daily Journal region, CSX and Norfolk Southern bought the Conrail operation, including the east-west line that runs through Kankakee. The Canadian National bought the historic Illinois Central system and is seeking federal approval to acquire the Elgin, Joliet and Eastern loop through Waukegan, Joliet and Gary to route trains around the traffic clogs in Chicago.

The proposal, which could triple or quadruple rail traffic on the route, has met with widespread opposition from affected communities and has raised concern with state and federal legislators.

On Friday, the Surface Transportation Board announced that it will require a study of the impact on the area through 2015, including rail traffic estimates, crossing safety, hazardous materials shipping and the impact of present and planned Amtrak and Metra service.

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