

Bye-Bye Box Car: Well Not Yet!

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One of the most enduring icons of railroading has been the box car. They have outlasted steam locomotives and caboose cars. Over the 180-plus years of U. S. rail history, these boxes-on-wheels have transported everything from high-value merchandise to the annual grain harvest, from hardware to hard liquor, from corn flakes to appliances.

Back in the late 1970's, after the then-newly-formed Conrail organization recruited some bright young people to reinvent their marketing effort, one of them famously predicted that by the year 2000, the box car would be gone, a relic of the past, to be replaced entirely by the truck-trailer and container-on-rail-flat-car alternative, now called "rail intermodal". Well, that has not happened to the extent foreseen. The box car still plies the rails, albeit in greatly reduced numbers.

What has happened is that the role of the box car has changed. Now often relegated to handling heavy, relatively low-value, less time-sensitive commodities, there are probably fewer than 150,000 of these units of rolling stock now in service. This would compare with upwards of 700,000 box cars in the 1950's, on the eve of the transformational shift of so much freight from rail to road. It was no coincidence that the Interstate Highway development program commenced in 1956.

However, the most regrettable "miss" in the young Conrail man's forecast is that rail intermodal has never achieved its full potential. A notable exception, and a major success, involves the movement of a significant portion of international containerized trade from coastal U.S. ports to inland distribution centers. While port-related rail intermodal activity represents a commendable response to the shift of much U.S. manufacturing off-shore, rail penetration of domestic freight haulage potential remains woefully under-developed. There are many reasons for this. For one thing, it is a formidable highway-competitive challenge. The port business is also much more compatible with the current freight rail "wholesale" business model, than is the larger flow of more "retail-oriented" domestic, time-sensitive, highway-competitive traffic.

Often, rail intermodal falls short of the old boxcar, dock-to-dock, delivery system. Too many rail-borne trailers and containers are dumped onto congested urban highways for the final 100-300 miles. Trucks on I-81 in Virginia are bad; but north and east of Harrisburg, PA, that's arguably worse.

However, President Obama's recent decision to promote and fund high-speed passenger rail development in the U.S. potentially opens the door for corresponding development of compatible high-performance passenger and intermodal freight rail in

common corridors. There is no reason why some of these corridors could not also accommodate high-value, time-sensitive, domestic intermodal rail freight. Keeping more tonnage on rail to the end of the line would be a great, though difficult, accomplishment. Meanwhile, don't completely write off the box car. It still has some utility. #####