

A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE Kit-bashing a Hy-rail Truck

By Randall Dyer

Over the years, I've learned that people see and do things a particular way for lots of different reasons. Frequently the difference can be said to be a matter of perspective.

Back when the Southern Railroad was running steam excursions, and I belonged to the NRHS, I did a lot of riding, not because I was enamored of cinders or steam but because I wanted to see the countryside from the perspective of the railroad. I never particularly cared what was pulling the train. I was just looking.

Since taking up the railroad hobby 15 years ago, a motor car has replaced the excursion train as my vehicle of choice for seeing the countryside from the vantage point of a railroad track. From my perspective, the motor car is nothing more than transportation. I am not interested in its historical value, or if it goes "putt-putt" or "bang-bang." I just want to see the countryside. So far as I am concerned, the bigger, quieter and more comfortable the car, the better.

For many years, I have traveled to Rapid City, South Dakota, on business at least once a year. I have always been intrigued by the former Milwaukee Road grain track that parallels I-90 for more than 100 miles, particularly the nice through-truss bridge over the Missouri River at Chamberlain. I was aware that the railroad was open to the idea of motor cars. As appealing as it was though, I could never get interested in trailering a motor car from Tennessee to South Dakota.

A few year backs, I noticed an upcoming ride listed in **THE SETOFF** for the Dakota Southern Railroad. Since I needed to go to Rapid City anyway, I arranged my schedule to attend the meet and bum a ride on the track I had admired so long.

On the Saturday morning ride out of Chamberlain, it fell my lot to ride with Dave Pratt, in his nice ex-BN hy-rail truck. I was instantly impressed, and before we had gone half a mile, I knew my motor car days were over! It was big. It was comfortable. We could listen to the

radio. We didn't have to smell half-burned gas. If I had one, I could drive to faraway meets without pulling a trailer. It was the ultimate machine for getting a perspective of the countryside from a railroad track, and I was hooked!

In 1989 I bought a GMC 1500 series pickup truck for my business. As it passed 175,000 miles and then 200,000, the service crew began to be wary of taking it on long trips, though it had never given trouble, and was still in excellent condition. I began to have visions of it as a hy-rail truck, but there was a problem; it was a half-ton truck, and Fairmont 0307 hi-rail gear is designed for three-quarter-ton trucks. Fairmont was adamant. They would not even discuss fitting gear to a smaller truck, even though it turns out Florida East Coast Railroad had a fleet of half-ton Fairmont-equipped trucks in the 1980s.

Research on my part, including a trip to my local auto-body repair shop to review their frame alignment charts, revealed that within the series production years (1988-92, 92-98, etc.) there were NO differences between the frames of a half-ton and a three-quarter-ton truck. The problem was the special highway wheels necessary to make the tires "track" over the rails. Fairmont's wheels are designed for eight-stud hubs, and mine had five. Through various sources, I contacted at least a half-dozen wheel companies. Some made wheels for machinery. Others made wheels for race cars. One made wheels for old Army trucks. On the phone, all said they could make what I needed. Explanations were given. Drawings were made, samples were sent, and one by one they all decided, for one reason or another, they could not do it after all. Liability, you know!

In the midst of all the research and phone-calling, I sold my very nice, award-winning, all-weather cab, ex-Union Pacific MT14. While

And Then the Bucket. Burma Shave

that provided a source of hi-rail funding, I was without rail transportation.

I got sidetracked when another motor car acquaintance told me of the availability of a 1984 Chevy hy-rail truck, in Pennsylvania. He sent pictures and descriptions; it looked all right, but it was 400 miles away, so an inspection trip would be difficult. Deciding to take a chance and go with a truck that was already set up, I bought it, sight-unseen.

The experience of dragging a big, ugly, yellow, one-ton, crew-cab Chevy truck around a corn field with an Oliver tractor for thirty minutes, trying to unjam the front brake calipers so it could be loaded, should have been an omen of things to come. Enough grease on the ramps, and a come-along of proper size, will get anything on a trailer, but that was only the beginning. After replacing the front hy-rail gear with a piece from a set I had already bought, rebuilding the transmission three times, and a host of other things too long to list, not to mention an on-the-road average of seven miles per gallon of gas, I knew my dream of faraway runs was still just that—far away. Luckily I found a local track maintenance company that had a truck just like it and were only too happy to have another. Once again, however, I was without rail transportation.

Still having nocturnal visions of my 1989 GMC as a hy-rail truck, I had just about decided that I was going to have to purchase another old railroad truck, and I began looking at stripped-down hy-railers at a couple of dealers. (Around here it is impossible to buy a hy-rail truck with the gear still on it—liability, you know!) They wanted \$6,500 for 1990 models, \$7,500 for a 1991, and \$8,500 for a 1992, and the trucks all had as many miles as my little '89 model. From my perspective, the difference was simple. I knew how my truck had been treated. I knew how theirs had been treated, too—you could look at the outside and tell!

Remembering my previous research on frames, I concluded that if I could just find a three-quarter-ton wreck and take the axle and wheel parts off it and put them on my truck, I would be in business. Traveling through Roanoke one day, I made a wrong turn, and there, right in front of me, was a 1992, three-quarter-ton Chevy wreck, less cab and bed. The Wheatland Yellow color on the fenders was

what first caught my eye, but then I noticed the Fairmont hy-rail road wheels. The frame was still in good shape, and everything I needed was intact. I asked the owner what he was going to do with it, and he replied that he was going to sell it to me! How right he was!

A couple of days in the alignment shop proved my research to be correct. The pieces all swapped out, and some of the front-end parts were even common between them. Another couple of days at my welder's shop, and my second set of used hy-rail gear was mounted. On its way home from the Fairmont-authorized hy-rail alignment shop, my 1989 GMC rolled over 250,000 miles, and became an official hi-rail truck.

It has electric windows and door locks, tilt steering wheel, cruise control, air-conditioning and a nice stereo radio/tape player. And the best part is that it was, and is, mine—I know all about it, and its condition. It's already proving to be a great hy-rail truck, just like I knew it would be.

So while everyone else is turning cars at the end of the line, I'll just run down to Wendy's and get a burger. And if I get tired or need to leave early to go meet my wife for supper, I won't have to go all the way back to the starting point to pick up my trailer. I'll just leave! I saw the scenery from the perspective of the railroad track on the way down, and after all, it's just a matter of . . . convenience!



Randal Dyer's 1989 GMC hy-rail at Nantahala Siding, Great Smoky Mountains Railway.