

Intermodal facilities hanging on in Iowa

Mile after mile, trains loaded with containers rumble through Iowa. Wine from Europe and soybean byproducts bound for Asia, there are few limits to the type of products on these trains.

The limits are found in how the products are shipped and the cost to get them from one place to another. Most imported goods arrive in the U.S. via ship into one of the major ports. Containers or semi-trailers loaded with goods bound for the continental U.S. are either loaded onto rail cars or trucks at those ports. Containers and trailers can be switched from rail cars to semis anywhere in the country at what are known as intermodal ramps.

In the past, Iowa's railroads were a hotbed for intermodal activity. Larry Mesenbrink of the Office of Rail Transportation says the early "circus" consisted of a mound of dirt or "ramp" for a semi to drive up and unload a trailer onto a flat rail car. Because of the increase in container shipments which don't include the

wheel base of the trailer, these earthen "ramps" were replaced by more sophisticated equipment, most notably a crane to lift containers or trailers onto and off of rail cars. Tim Woods, Iowa Interstate Railroad's director of intermodal, says, "With the cost of rail lines into an intermodal facility and the crane (approximately \$250,000), these facilities cost millions of dollars to construct."

In the 1990s the major rail companies such as Union Pacific, Burlington Northern Santa Fe and others, know as Class 1 railroads, invested heavily in large intermodal facilities in states skirting Iowa. These ramps, located in places like Illinois and Kansas City, offered better rates to shippers. The high cost of operating the ramps with railroad employees, coupled with the railroads' desire to make up full trains of intermodal business caused most of the smaller ramps in Iowa to close.

Mesenbrink said, "In 1980 Iowa had 23 active ramps in 15

cities, today we have three. In 1985 nationally there were 4.5 million loads shipped through intermodal sites, in 2000 there were 9.4 million loads. Even with the increase in shipments, Iowa, which is basically a rail gathering system, became a 'pass through' state for these intermodal operations. The Class 1 railroads invested heavily in larger facilities outside Iowa. Of the three small intermodal ramps that remain in the state, all are on the Iowa Interstate line."

"It's all about relationships," said Woods. "The Iowa Interstate is the Union Pacific agent in Iowa. We also work with several other Class 1 railroads to establish intermodal equipment (trailer or container) availability and offer rates for shippers."

Because of the increase in shipments and the decrease in the number of available ramps, the large intermodal operations have become congested and shippers are pressing the Class 1 railroads for solutions. Woods said, "We work with several intermodal shipping groups that lease trailers or containers. A third party intermodal company will contact several businesses, such as Maytag in Newton and Barilla in Ames, and arrange to group shipments together intermodally. The businesses get a better shipping rate through the third party and the rail lines increase their number of loads."

Mesenbrink sees the tide turning the next five to 10 years. Class 1 railroads are beginning to encourage intermodal "reload" or public dock sites where small numbers of intermodal loads can be brought into or shipped out of Iowa. "This is being driven by the shippers," he said. "They are pushing to reduce the congestion

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Containers are lifted from wheeled chassis and placed on rail cars.



MVE honored for dedication

For the past 12 years employees in the Motor Vehicle Division have given of themselves to Iowa's Special Olympics. At the opening ceremonies of this year's Olympics, the tables were turned as Special Olympics organizers presented Motor Vehicle Division Director Shirley Andre and Office of Motor Vehicle Enforcement Director Mike Winfrey with the first Scott Bryant "Unsung Hero" award.

Both Andre and Winfrey are strong supporters of Iowa's Law Enforcement Torch Run activities held throughout the year to raise money for Special Olympics. Andre and Winfrey said the honor really goes to those peace officers in MVE who raise money for the Torch Run by doing everything from sitting on top of a WalMart in a rainstorm to diving into the frigid waters of Big Creek in November, to selling T-shirts and wrist bands. MVE Motor Carrier Investigator Mark Loney was instrumental in getting the Office and Division involved in the Torch Run fund-raising activities and spreading the word to others in MVE and the Division about what a difference this makes. Over the past 12 years, their efforts have generated more than \$250,000 for the Torch Run.

Participating in this year's Torch Run from MVE were runners: Sgt. Rod Rhiner, Sgt. Kevin Steele,

Haz. Mat. Specialist Joe Farnsworth, Motor Carrier Investigator Mark Loney, Motor Vehicle Investigators Donna Kelso and Kelly Owen, Motor Vehicle Officers Jason Maahs, Terry Aldridge, Tracy Barker, Phil Smith, Ron Caudle, Wes Schwanke, Glen Goode, Darren Reid, Scott Knudtson, and Matt Mardesen. Escorting the runners in patrol vehicle were Officers Kyle Tigges and Steve Robinson and participating as part of the Honor Guard during opening ceremonies were Chris Moline and Jeff Franzen.



MVE Director Mike Winfrey and Motor Vehicle Division Director Shirley Andre with the Special Olympics torch

The award was named for Scott Bryant, an officer at the Iowa State Penitentiary in Fort Madison who was running in the Law Enforcement Torch Run in 2004 when he was struck and killed by a motorist. The award recognizes those who contribute to the Torch Run and Special Olympics in spirit, dedication and enthusiasm in an effective, yet unheralded way. The award was presented to Andre and Winfrey by Bryant's family.

Said Andre, "It was really a surprise, and neither of us felt like we deserved it. That said, it means more than words can ever say."

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at the large ramps and also keep the cost down. We had a shipper from Des Moines who was importing containers of wine. It was going to cost them as much to get the wine from Chicago to Des Moines as it did to get this shipment from Europe to Chicago. Luckily, Tim at the Iowa Interstate ramp in Newton stepped in and helped make more economical arrangements."

Physics plays a big part in which commodities are shipped intermodally. Woods said, "The shipment of intermodal trailers is decreasing while the shipment of stackable containers is on the rise. The heavy haulers like Cargill and ADM who ship grain byproducts would like to use 40-foot containers, but because the weight of these loaded containers exceeds the acceptable road limit in Iowa, these

shippers have to find other options. There are several different axel-container combinations available to shippers, which work great for the Maytags and others who ship lighter-weight materials, but not many of them work for the heavy-haulers. We need to find a solution for them in Iowa."

Other considerations in the state include the fact Des Moines has been granted "port authority" by the federal government. Mesenbrink explains that containers could be brought into Des Moines without stopping for inspection in another city. Woods said this out-of-state port authority is often a bottleneck to Iowa shippers costing time and money, "Because loads have to stop at another port, it's just another delay in the shipper's supply chain. Having an intermodal facility in Des Moines could drive many other economic developments such as warehousing and import businesses."