



Riding the rails

Short line
railroads serve
South Carolina
behind the
scenes

BY KEVIN DIETRICH | PHOTOS BY
MATTHEW FRANKLIN CARTER

Engineer Allen Gibbs nudges the throttle forward on the 1,750-horsepower General Motors GP9 locomotive, pulling a string of boxcars, tank cars and flat cars, some loaded, some empty, down a stretch of rail in Anderson County. As he gets up to speed, 20 mph on this late spring day, Gibbs has an unobstructed view for at least a half-mile ahead, but he still peers intently forward, never taking his eyes from a section of rail straight as a sunbeam.

As he approaches a road crossing, Gibbs, still peering forward, reaches up and pulls the cord: two long blasts, one short and one final long burst. All the time he scans the track, watching closely for automobiles, people or objects that might damage the train or, more likely, be damaged by the train.

Gibbs and coworker Dennis Martin are making one of their thrice-weekly runs between Honea Path and Pelzer, hauling freight for the Greenville & Western Railway, one of a handful of short line railroads that operates in South Carolina. The Greenville & Western runs on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, the pair are in Aiken, operating the Aiken Railway on a 19-mile stretch of rail. Both lines are operated by parent company Western Carolina Railway Service Corp., headquartered in Greer.

Working in tandem, Gibbs and Martin pick up, drop off and rearrange railcars in a slow-motion juggling routine along a 13-mile stretch of rail with countless spurs. They open and close switches to allow loaded and empty cars to be dropped at the industrial sites the railroad serves. They gather loaded cars that will be moved to a connection point with the major carriers Norfolk Southern and CSX, and they shuttle other cars onto sidetracks, where they'll be collected when needed.

Inside the cab of the diesel-electric locomotive, built originally for the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad in 1957, there's no air conditioning and the only breeze comes from open windows and a small portable fan mounted above the engineer's seat. It's hot, dirty and noisy, and Gibbs wouldn't have it any other way.

"I love short lining," he says. "This is what I picture it being like back in the golden age of railroading."

The first and last mile

For most South Carolinians, railroads conjure images of mile-long CSX or Norfolk Southern trains, either stopping traffic at inopportune times or passing through the countryside, loaded with new automobiles, coal or wood chips. Many don't know that the state, and nation, are also served by an array of short line railroads.



Greenville & Western engineer Allen Gibbs enjoys the variety of work that short line railroading provides. "Everyone is trained on everything," he says. "One day I might be running a train and the next day I might be cutting back brush from the tracks. It keeps things interesting."

Short lines are small railroads that provide the first and last mile of service, moving commodities and finished products from industrial operations located off main lines to locations where the cars can be picked up by the large carriers.

South Carolina is served by a dozen short line railroads, ranging from the Lancaster & Chester Railroad, which has 60 miles of track in operation below Charlotte, to the Port Terminal Railroad, which operates a single mile of track and provides switching services to the S.C. State Ports Authority and other Charleston County industries.

A typical day on the Greenville & Western begins with Gibbs and Martin going over the details of their routes for the day. Both men are qualified as engineers and conductors, so they often take turns operating one of the line's four locomotives.

"On the Greenville & Western everyone's got an engineer's card and everyone's got a conductor's card," Gibbs says. "Small lines are like that everywhere. Everyone is trained on everything. With a big carrier it would take years to work your way to being an engineer.

"I like the variety here on the Greenville & Western," he adds. "There are a lot of different jobs that need to be done; one day I might be running a train and the next day I might be cutting back brush from the tracks. It keeps things interesting."

On this particular spring morning, Gibbs and Martin



Built in 1957, this General Motors GP9 locomotive has 1,750 horsepower under the hood, more than enough to carry the freight for the Greenville & Western Railway. Crew members like Dennis Martin (above) start their day by warming up the 16-cylinder diesel engine that serves as a rolling power plant for the 130-ton locomotive's electric motors. Operating the train is strenuous work that takes place in all weather conditions, but Martin says he wouldn't have it any other way. "It sure beats working indoors."

begin their first route around 10 a.m. The duo has already reviewed their work orders and switch lists, which tell them what they're picking up, where they're dropping off, and where they will need to throw switches to access rail spurs—secondary tracks used by railroads to load and unload railcars.

After this legwork is completed, Gibbs and Martin check the locomotive's 16-cylinder diesel engine, which takes just a couple of minutes to warm up. The engine is a hybrid of sorts: it powers a generator which sends electricity to traction motors mounted on each of the locomotive's axles. Technically, the locomotive is electric, but the diesel engine acts as a power plant. The 130-ton locomotive is loud, but the men can still hear each other with only a slight rise in their voices.

They then begin the day's first trip. From the Greenville & Western yard, Gibbs moves the train forward slowly, with Martin walking ahead of the train to stand at a railroad crossing with a temporarily out-of-service crossing signal, where he holds a signal flag to stop any approaching vehicles.

After the locomotive has passed the crossing and Martin has reboarded, the engine moves down the line a couple of miles before making its first stop. Martin climbs down, and, after he has thrown a switch, Gibbs slowly begins to move the locomotive toward several cars on a spur.

He and Gibbs talk by two-way radio, with Martin telling Gibbs how much space he has, down to the final foot before he connects with a handful of empty railcars. This communication is important because if Gibbs hits the empty cars too hard, he could damage the coupling mechanism, too softly and he'll have trouble making a successful connection.

After the first car has been coupled to the locomotive, Martin ensures the air hoses near the couplers are connected. Today's trains use air brakes, which enable the engineer to slow and stop the train as a whole, rather than relying solely on the locomotive's brakes to curb the speed of a train. Martin checks the hoses on all the railcars, to ensure all are connected.

Between 1890 and 1917, it's estimated that nearly two dozen railroad workers died on the job each day nationwide. Today, a methodical approach to safety has made rail one of the safest forms of transportation.

Once connected, Gibbs pushes the throttle forward and the locomotive advances as Martin climbs up and into the cab. The train then moves down the track at 20 mph, with Gibbs conversing easily above the noise of the engine. Martin is less talkative, but both men relate stories past and present about their time on the railroad.

"That house there," Gibbs says, pointing to a brick home surrounded by pasture, "they have a pig that will sometimes come out and run alongside the train."

Farther up the line, Gibbs points out a spot where two trains collided in 1930, killing two men. "There weren't nearly the safety mechanisms in place that we have today. It was a dangerous job."

Indeed, between 1890 and 1917, it's estimated that nearly two dozen railroad workers died on the job each day nationwide. In 2017, by comparison, there were six total deaths related to railroad accidents, according to the National Transportation Safety Board. The advent of automatic brakes, technologically advanced signals and improved communications, plus a methodical approach to safety, have made rail one of the safest forms of transportation.

After a 25-minute trek north, the Greenville & Western train pulls alongside a series of spurs near a chemical plant.

The first step is to drop off some of the empty cars on a spur where they can be collected another day. Then Gibbs moves the train onto another spur, where he and Martin pick up cars loaded with paper products they'll deliver to a large



Two well-trained crew members are all it takes to operate a short line train, but the job can be physically demanding. On the Greenville & Western Railway line between Honea Path and Pelzer, the men take turns at the controls and exiting the train to operate rail switches, perform signal duty at road crossings, and connect and disconnect air brake lines that tie the train together. When engineer Allen Gibbs (right) eases the locomotive in to connect with freight cars, he is in constant radio communication with Dennis Martin, who serves as his spotter.

manufacturing facility on the return leg. Other cars will be dropped off for the Pickens Railway, another short line railroad whose tracks intersect with the Greenville & Western.

Once the cars are pulled from the spur and onto the main line, Martin throws the switch, which will enable the train to head back the way it came.

Once Martin is aboard, Gibbs heads back to the Belton yard. Martin, standing behind him, has been in and out of the engine most of the morning, throwing switches, directing Gibbs and checking air brake connections. The heat, which will top 90 degrees this day, doesn't bother him.

"I like being outdoors. I don't like the cold weather, but I can handle the heat," he says. "No matter the weather, it sure beats working indoors."

Martin first came to the Greenville & Western to help rewire one of the line's locomotives. He eventually hired on with the line full time and worked his way up to his current position.

Gibbs says railroading is in his blood; his grandfather worked as an engineer for the Southern Railway, which served the South for nearly a century before merging with the Norfolk and Western Railway in 1982 to form Norfolk Southern.



The business of rail

The Greenville & Western is operated by Steven Hawkins and his wife, Cheryl. Steven began his railroading career at age 20 with the Carolina Piedmont Railroad in Laurens and went on to positions with short lines in Texas, Missouri, Nova Scotia and Oregon. He also worked on three divisions of Norfolk Southern before deciding to return to South Carolina and start his own short line operation.

In 2003 he formed Western Carolina Railway Service Corp.

and Western Carolina Railway Consulting Service, spending part of his time scoping out existing stretches of rail that were underused by other companies but that might be turned into profitable short line operations.

In 2006, Hawkins was the successful bidder for 13 miles of former CSX track between Honea Path and Pelzer. Greenville & Western Railway was born. The business operates today out of an old depot that once belonged to another short line, the Piedmont and Northern Railway, in Greer.

“The wheels of railroad negotiation often turn very slowly, so for me to go from being a virtual ‘unknown’ to a successful first acquisition in just 3½ years, that’s actually pretty fast,” he says.

Over the years, Hawkins has upgraded the track, and regulators responded by allowing Greenville & Western trains to increase their top speed from 10 mph to 25. The company also won the right to haul more cars containing “hazardous” material, such as ethanol and other biofuels. By 2014, his railroad was moving about 10,000 carloads of freight a year.

Hawkins expanded in 2012, acquiring 19 miles of track in Aiken County from Norfolk Southern. The Aiken Railway, which is served by Aiken Electric Cooperative, has grown from approximately 1,000 carloads a year to about 1,300 annually.

The Greenville & Western serves a range of customers, including Belton Industries, Belton Metal Co., Komatsu America and a pair of chemical companies. The Aiken Railway serves Advanced Glass Yarns, Grace Davison, Active Minerals, and Carolina Eastern, a feed and seed company.

All in a day’s work

As Gibbs powers the train back to the Belton depot, he talks again about safety, specifically one of an engineer’s worst fears: striking a pedestrian or vehicle. Gibbs has never had a mishap, and he intends to keep it that way.

“One time I came around a bend and there was a girl, a high school senior, lying on the tracks, with props all around her. Her boyfriend was there, her dad was there and a photographer was there,” Gibbs says.



MILTON MORRIS

Steven and Cheryl Hawkins operate their railroad businesses from the former Piedmont and Northern Railway depot in downtown Greer. A \$1 million renovation is now underway to create a public events and meeting space. For updates, visit historicgreerdepot.com.

“We were going 25 miles an hour, so we were able to stop. I got out and asked them what they were doing, and they said they were shooting the girl’s senior photo,” he continues. “I said, ‘You know there are trains that run on this line,’ and they told me there weren’t, pointing to some rust on the rails. I turned around, looked back at my engine and said to them, ‘That’s a train, isn’t it?’”

Gibbs says that during his time at Norfolk Southern, he knew plenty of engineers who had experienced the trauma of hitting cars and individuals. “Among the guys I worked with at Norfolk Southern, it wasn’t ‘Have you hit someone?’ but ‘How many have you hit?’”

On this day, there are no cars at the mostly rural crossings and no individuals walking the tracks. As the train rumbles along, the only life to be seen up close is a horse, which, unperturbed by the noise of the locomotive, stands against a fence near the rails and watches intently. It’s a bucolic scene that could be taken from the 1950s.

By the end of the day, the pair will have moved more than four dozen railcars for delivery or loading, picked up an assortment of products from several different companies and moved empty railcars onto spurs, for future use by customers.

“I take a lot of pride in what I do,” Gibbs says. “These locomotives are million-dollar pieces of equipment, and it’s a lot of responsibility. I’m proud the company trusts me to handle a piece of equipment like this, and I’m going to make sure I do it correctly.” ☺