

Any 4 a.m. at Sandusky, Ohio

At 4 a.m. on a recent night, Amtrak's westbound *Capitol Limited* train #29 crossed over from Track 2 to Track 1 on Norfolk Southern's busy Chicago Line. It made that shift of tracks at Control Point 240, a computer-aided, dispatcher-controlled interlocking of switches and trackside signals just east of the Sandusky Amtrak station so it could serve the station. But it was just the start of a nightly routine.

The reason that the daily Washington-Chicago passenger train crossed over is that its previous station in Elyria has its lone platform on Track 2 – the south side of the two-track mainline. The Sandusky station has its 80-foot-long platform on Track 1 – the north side. Even though #29 passed five crossovers in the 35 miles since it left Elyria, NS freight traffic kept the westbound *Capitol* from crossing over until the last possible moment before Sandusky.

The *Capitol* made two brief stops at the short Sandusky station platform. One stop was for coach passengers to get on and off. The second stop was for sleeping car passengers to get on and off. A standard-length, 550-foot-long platform would have saved #29 the extra two minutes from having to make those two stops.

But a second station platform located alongside Track 2 would have made things even quicker and easier – not just for Amtrak but for NS too. And Sandusky is just one of nine stations east of Chicago to Cleveland where Amtrak can safely process passengers from only one track.

Amtrak's eight-car *Capitol* had two locomotives, one baggage car, three coaches, one diner, one lounge and two sleepers carrying more than 200 passengers. It accelerated away from the restored historic depot and disappeared into the light-less countryside. After it passed the next interlocking, CP 244 near Bay Bridge, the *Capitol* on Track 1 roared by the eastbound *Lake Shore Limited* train #48.

The daily train linking Chicago, New York City and Boston was waiting on Track 2 for the *Capitol* to finish its Sandusky work. Stopped behind the eastbound *Lake Shore* was a gaggle of three NS freights. The *Capitol* had two freights and the westbound *Lake Shore* train #49 in hot pursuit of it.

NS's Toledo East Dispatcher, seated before a bank of computer screens in Dearborn, MI, watched the symbol for train #29 inch across a schematic of tracks on his screen. It belied the fact that the *Capitol* was already nearing 79 mph. Once his screen indicated that train #29 had cleared CP 244, he pressed the touch-sensitive screen linked to fiber optic cables to move propane-heated electric switches 110 miles away. CP 244's switches on the crossover track were aligned for #48 and a trackside signal turned from red only to green over red.

The *Lake Shore* is 15 cars long tonight, one short of the maximum to which the locomotives' head-end power can supply electricity. The two locomotives nudged forward with three Boston coaches, four New York coaches, one Boston sleeper, two

New York sleepers, the Boston food service car, the New York cafe car, the New York heritage diner, and two baggage cars, one for New York and the other for Boston. Several minutes after clearing CP 244's crossover onto Track 1, #48 squealed to a stop at Sandusky's depot.

Train #48 usually makes two stops at Sandusky, but not tonight. Not with nearly 450 passengers on board. A family wanting to sit together sat two coaches away from where the rest of the Sandusky-bound passengers were seated. So the crowded train made three stops at Sandusky tonight to spot the family's coach car alongside the postage stamp-sized platform.

At 4:15 a.m., only three minutes late, the *Lake Shore* pulled away from Sandusky. At CP 240 just east of Sandusky's station, the *Lake Shore* crossed over again – this time from Track 1 to Track 2 so it would be on the correct track for the Elyria station platform. The Toledo East Dispatcher realigned all of the switches for today's parade of 70-plus NS freight trains.

As the dawn nears, the dance of Amtrak trains from track to track to compensate for inadequate station facilities across Ohio and Indiana was almost over. Soon, order would seemingly be restored – until the next night.

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