History of the Rail Operation at New Century AirCenter

The railway system at New Century AirCenter was originally constructed by the Navy to support its logistics operations at what was then Olathe Naval Air Station. In addition to bringing in operating supplies for the flight training and other support activities (fuel and oil, aircraft parts, ammunition, food, uniforms and personal items, etc.), the Navy also maintained strategic reserves of certain war material, including glycerin and lead. Virtually all of these materials were moved by rail.

After World War II, the use of rail by the Navy was dramatically reduced. The only regular use of the railway system after the war was to bring in aviation fuel. A tank car unloading system, two 210,000 gallon concrete cisterns and two mobile refueler loading stations remained active until the Navy ceased flight operations in the late 1960s. Tank cars were delivered to the unloading spots by the Santa Fe Railway using local switching crews. From probably the mid-1960s until the late 1970s, very little if any maintenance was performed on the railway system.

In 1970 the Navy moved out of the Air Station and the process of transferring the facility to Johnson County was begun. The Johnson County Airport Commission took over operation of the facility in November, 1973. The Airport Commission began planning and developing an industrial park in the western portion of the facility, in an area that was not needed for future airport operations and development. Because the railway system was already in place and could serve much of the industrial development area, the Airport Commission made rail service a major selling point in its marketing efforts. The rail system was not used at all until 1978, when the Airport Commission secured its first rail-using business. Farmers’ Union Grain Terminal opened a margarine packaging operation under the brand name “Holsum Foods” at the north end of the rail system. While there are no records to confirm it, we believe that some amount effort was made to get the rail system into serviceable condition. We understand that the original intent was for the Santa Fe to switch the industries in the industrial park, but due to the poor condition of the track and the two 11 degree curves in the “main line,” the Santa Fe declined to bring their switchers and crews onto the airport system. The executive director of the Airport Commission at the time (Joe Dennis) was able to arrange for the purchase and transportation (dead-in-train) of an Army surplus General Electric 80-ton switching locomotive. The Airport Commission and the Santa Fe entered into an agreement that provided for the delivery and pick-up of cars by the Santa Fe at a specific point on the airport rail system and the handling of cars beyond that point by the Airport Commission. The Airport Commission was to be paid a switching fee per loaded car handled (originally $10, now $157.15). The Airport Commission was to charge the rail-using businesses whatever fees it deemed appropriate for intra-plant moves and other services it may perform.

Since 1978, a total of eight rail-using businesses have located at the AirCenter. In most cases, the spurs serving these industries were installed by the companies as part of the construction of their facility. In the case of DuPont, they located their facility adjacent to an existing spur. Over the years the Airport Commission has contracted for both routine
maintenance and major rehab of various segments of track. The frequency of track projects has increased over the last ten years. In 1994 we added a runaround track at the BNSF exchange point to make car-handling more efficient for both us and the BNSF. Our most recent effort was a $300,000 project to replace ties, sweeten ballast, and surface the track. We also added a ladder track to our “yard” for additional storage capacity. Over the last ten years we have probably averaged around $50,000 per year for track maintenance/rehab and capacity enhancement.

In 1992, we replaced the GE 80-tonner with a rebuilt-to-order EMD SW8. National Railway Enterprises rebuilt an ex-Canadian Pacific switcher from the rails up in their Joliet, Illinois shop. We had intended to keep the GE in operable condition as a back-up to the EMD, but it was impossible to find parts, so it is now retired and on display in our park. The EMD is maintained by MidAmerica Car under an annual contract.

Except for a few instances when the Airport Commission’s locomotive was down for maintenance or repair, all switching within the airport industrial park has been performed by the Airport Commission since the inception of rail service. On those occasions when the Airport Commission’s locomotive has been inoperable, the Santa Fe has brought its local switching crew (with a “GP” series road-switcher) onto the airport rail system. We believe they have been willing to do this for two reasons: 1) we have considerably improved the maintenance level on the track so that their risk of derailment has been greatly reduced from the early days, and 2) they now have seven customers to take care as opposed to the one in the early days.

Since devoting more resources to track maintenance we have reduced our derailments from an average of two per month to two per year. Most of our recent derailments were caused by track condition. In my opinion some of the “track condition” derailments could have been avoided by better observation by the switching crew (ice-clogged grade crossing, shoving loaded cement cars through a section of track in a known bog area, etc.). The maintenance staff who operate the railway have all received training through the Johnson County Community College. We currently do not have an organized recurrent training program.