

Limits of yard limits

“Yards are where you maximize your fun” is a quote attributed to legendary layout designer John Armstrong. Fun comes in assorted flavors, for yard jobs and train crews alike. A yard job can be one of the most demanding of an operating session’s positions, but navigating a yard can also be demanding for crews of road jobs.

Classifying cars is a yardmaster’s ultimate responsibility, arranged in blocks for through trains or in station order for locals. The job also supervises movements of yard engines and trains in the yard. Car storage, especially empties available for loading, is another function. These duties are little changed from the timetable and train order (TTTO) era to the present.

A busy yard has Rubik’s Cube appeal: constant decision-making about handling arriving traffic, preparing outbounds, and switching nearby industries. Much has been written about such yard operation. *A Compendium of Model Railroad Operations* from NMRA’s Operations Special Interest Group is a useful source.

Yardmasters have limits, however. Internet chat groups I enjoy often bat around their authority over main track movements. In fact, a yardmaster controls only yard engines. A dispatcher controls all other movements on main track.

The term “Yard Limit” misleads because it applies strictly to the main track. Today’s General Code of

Operating Rules (GCOR) definition includes, just as it did when it first appeared in the Standard Code, “a portion of main track designated by yard limit signs and timetable special instructions.” GCOR defines yard as “a system of tracks, *other than main tracks and sidings*, used for making up trains, storing cars, and other purposes” (emphasis mine).

Note the important qualifier. Yard limits and yards, you see, are two different things. A yardmaster controls yard engine and train movements within a yard, but not on the main track through the yard.

Yard limit rules in non-signalized territory typical of many layouts allow yard moves and other trains to use the main track without flagging. In the TTTO era, Rule 93 further required clearing or protecting against first-class trains. Except for this, the rules require all main track movements to operate at restricted speed, prepared to stop within half the distance seen to be clear. Unless slowed to restricted speed, a train may not be able to avoid colliding with a yard engine that ducks out on the main.

Yard limits can exist without a yard, and the existence of a yard doesn’t require yard limits on a main track there. Signs and timetable special instructions designate yard limits. An employee timetable can make the full length of a branch or smaller portions of main track near the junction of the



The Winniepeger, No. 405, slows to restricted speed as required by yard limits at St. Cloud on Rich Remiarz’ Great Northern Willmar Division layout. Rich Remiarz photo

branch as yard limits. Both situations call for restricted speed.

The photo shows No. 405, a second-class freight known as *The Winniepeger*, slowing to enter yard limits outside St. Cloud on Rich Remiarz’ layout, set in 1956. Seen in the photo’s background is the Barr Packing Spur, an example of yard limits without a yard. True to his prototype, Rich’s yard limits extend well east of the St. Cloud yard to switch Barr Packing and other nearby industries easily.

I often see a road crew stop at a yard limit sign to ask a yardmaster for permission “through the yard,” when restricted speed is the only real limit. On the other hand, a yardmaster controls any movements a train working a yard makes. For example, “Pull in on the ladder and set out on Track 2. Your pickup is on Track 1.”

Prototype instructions like this come over the radio today. Before radio, a stop was made for the crew to contact the yardmaster on a wayside phone. Instead, a tower or office near the yard might display a sheet metal panel painted with a number designating the arrival track. A cardstock sign could easily model this, though I’ve not seen it done.

Restricted speed in Rule 93 and its contemporary versions enables safe, efficient yard operation. An engineer may get time off should his train collide with any other where these rules apply. Remember, then: movements on the main track in yard limits require restricted speed.

The On Operation column from July 2017, “Put Rule 93 to work,” has additional information on yard limit rules. **MJR**

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