

Q While browsing a railcar photo site, I came across an interesting Burlington Northern car. The photo's caption calls it an "air repeater car." What is its purpose? Where is it mainly used?

Tom Huffman, Fort Worth, Texas

A An air repeater car is used to keep up the pressure in brake air lines in very cold weather, when the temperature can cause metal brake line couplings to shrink and rubber air hoses and gaskets to become brittle, all of which lead to air leaks. As trains got longer in the 1960s, it wasn't possible to keep up with the leaks. Enter the air repeater car.

Great Northern converted a 40-foot boxcar into its first air repeater car, Air Car 3, in 1964, and two more in 1969. The cars contain a diesel motor, a fuel tank, an air compressor, and a thermostat that would automatically turn the system on when the temperature got low enough. The cars were stationed along the Hi Line, the former Great Northern line through Minnesota, North Dakota, and Montana.



Burlington Northern car BNH 4, seen at Grand Forks, N.D., in 1996, was built in 1955 as Great Northern boxcar no. 5158. It was converted to an air repeater car in 1971. Note the manway door and stirrup step on the side and the twin indicator beacons on the roof. Cody Grivno photo

The cars were a success, and BN built a total of 30 over the next 17 years, all converted from various retired boxcars. In addition to the "Air Repeater Car" stenciled on their sides, they were also identifiable by the manway door and stirrup step installed in the side and the indicator beacon on the roof. (The beacon was there to let the train crew know when the compressor was running.) All

were painted Cascade Green and white. Other railroads, such as Canadian National, Canadian Pacific, and Southern Pacific, built their own versions. You can see a picture of a contemporary CN version (called a "Distributed Braking Car") in the November 2021 "Ask MR" and read more about them on Trains.com by searching for "Cody's Trackside Finds." **MR**

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