Chicago & North Western Leased Ore Cars
By John Hagen

In the mid 1970s, the CNW leased 41 ore cars from the Bessemer and Lake Erie (BLE). Now the CNW of this era was known for leasing/buying a lot of used equipment, including many locomotives and a lot of freight cars. At about the same time CNW leased 61 ore cars from the Duluth, Missabe and Iron Range (DMIR). In fact, the DMIR cars were numbered in the 121001 to 121160 range and the BLE's in the 121161 to 121204 range.

The cars were quite similar in appearance however the BLE cars were longer; 27' 2" coupled length versus 24' 0" of any of the "modern" era (steel car) of Lake Superior ore cars. Both had a capacity of 70 tons. The inside width of both was 10' 5" but the extreme outside was 10' 6" on the BLE's while the DMIR's were 10' 9". Inside length was 20' 7" for the BLE compared to 19' 10" for DMIR.

Shown is one of the 10' 5" wide Lake Superior cars which were for use on the Superior ore docks. - John Hagen collection
CNW ore car #121184 shows one of the many relettering schemes the CNW used on the cars. - Charles Wickman collection

The lettering on this car end still shows B.&L.E. #20121 on CNW ore car #121173. The car appears to be out of service after a hard life on the rails. - Charles Wickman collection
So far as what differentiated a Lake Superior car from a Lake Michigan car appears to be in the width. Superior cars were in the range of 10' 4" to near 11' extreme width while Michigan cars were in the 8' 6" to 9' range. This meant that the Michigan cars could use any dock but Superior (or Minnesota) cars could not use the docks at Marquette or Escanaba due to the close track spacing. Also per Dorin’s “Great Lakes Ore Docks and Ore Cars” (Iconografix), only the Milwaukee operated rectangular-sided ore cars on Lake Michigan docks.

For you HO guys, the original MDC Roundhouse diecast, rectangular-sided ore cars used the Milwaukee Road cars as a prototype.

The impetus for this piece was my desire to produce decals for the Atlas “O” scale ore cars, which were based on the BLE 27' 2" cars. Although similar to the Lake Superior cars, the added length is very obvious if one looks at the truck area. While the Lake Superior and Lake Michigan cars all have the outer wheels extending out from the frames, the BLE’s car wheels are completely covered by the frame. Also, the frame extends out from the superstructure a bit while the others do not.

The BLE cars were never used to haul ore to the dock, which negated any need to match the cars to the loading docks. All the docks on Lake Superior and Lake Michigan used ore pockets that were 12' long, which lined up with the lake boat’s ore hatches. So a cut of 24' cars, properly spotted, would dump their loads directly into the pockets. Eastern cars were dumped in rotary dumpers at Carnegie Steel plants in the Pittsburgh area which is why they differed in length from Midwest region ore cars.

Lake Michigan cars, which were 10' 6" wide, were for use on the Escanaba ore docks. Actually, CNW’s ore cars varied from 9’ 11” to 10’ 6” or even 10’ 9” - John Hagen collection
The Pittsburgh, Bessemer and Lake Erie Railroad Company was founded in 1897 by Andrew Carnegie to haul iron ore and other products from the port at Conneaut, Ohio, on Lake Erie to Carnegie Steel Company plants in Pittsburgh and the surrounding region. On the return trip, Pennsylvania coal was hauled north to Conneaut Harbor. The BLE's shops were located in Greenville, Pennsylvania; hence the Greenville name.

On the CNW the cars were used on “all rails” or for hauling other commodities. I have found no evidence that the BLE cars ever hauled ore to Escanaba. So, being a Wisconsin guy all my life, with a distinct fondness for the CNW, I decided that a CNW ore car would be a good thing. Having decals that could be used to produce a close-to-accurate CNW ore car using the Atlas model is something that should be done.

After Dorin’s book came out, there was at least a start to doing such a decal set. Of course that was only a start. Something I learned is that finding and getting all the needed data to do a decal set can be a challenge. But over the past four years I have come up with sufficient information to make up a set to allow a modeler to make any variation of the CNW ore cars.

Following are three pictures of Atlas O scale ore cars showing three somewhat different variations. The photos are actually 1:48 scans of the Atlas car (appropriately a BLE car) with the Atlas lettering Photo Shopped out and my artwork for the decal set Photo Shopped in. Note the lack of resolution due to needing a small file size

A photo in Dorin’s book was used to make the decals for ore car #121165. The “CNW” and road number are not in proper alignment but are correct for the car.

John Hagen
Number 121180 has photographic evidence of it being prototypical. There were only 6 to 8 of the BLE cars that were repainted. Also, the photo I have shows the consolidated stencil, ACI code panel and the circle-in-a-box wheel recall emblem. These items are all included in the decal set as most, if not all, the cars would have had them applied at some point. - John Hagen

Car 121170 is basically the same as 121165 in that it is a "patch job" relettering. The only real difference is the stenciled CNW logo. I have no photographic evidence of this but have read that some cars did have this logo. Apparently there could be variations on the patch jobs. - John Hagen

So this is what I know about the ex-BLE ore cars on the CNW. I hope you find it interesting. If you have further information or if you would like a higher resolution version of the decals, email me at sprinthag@yahoo.com.