



BY TOBY KOLSTAD

Car design: going, going ... gone as far as we can go?

While contemplating the current state of affairs of the North American rail-car fleet, the lyrics from Oscar Hammerstein's musical *Oklahoma!* kept playing in my mind: "Everything's up-to-date in Kansas City, they've gone about as far as they can go!"

Like the *Oklahoma!* cowboy who was awed by the progress he had seen during a visit to the big city, I am impressed by the percentage of freight cars currently moving over the rails that were designed and introduced

soon replace.

However, unlike the cowboy who could not see the advent of the automobile and other innovations that were just around the corner, I have become accustomed to change and even come to expect it.

That is why the second part of the lyric seemed to me to be so ironic: Is my subconscious right in telling me that we have gone as far as we can in new rail-car design? Are none of the new car designs destined to become so popular that they will replace an existing fleet in a few years?

Two car types with radically new

by the high cost of new cars.

For the aging multilevel fleet of 53,000-plus cars, there are two new designs that differ from the old single-deck flat car with an attached autorack.

In the late 1990s, a multilevel autorack car based on a doublestack well platform was introduced; and in 2003, an aluminum multilevel flat car was designed that eliminates periodic repainting to control the iron filings from steel decks that damage automobile paint surfaces. So far, though, orders for both of these designs are only in the hundreds. Maybe flat automobile sales, coupled with the uncertainty about the future of SUV demand, is keeping autorack buyers on the sidelines.

THE WEIGHT FACTOR

Perhaps we'll have to wait until the 315k weight limit is approved for the next fleet-changing car design to appear. If so, it would be the first time in more than 50 years that a successful new, fleet-changing car design has not appeared during a 10-year period.

During the 1960s, several car types — including jumbo covered hopper cars and rotary coal gondola cars — hit the market. In the 1970s, the all-steel Plate C 70-ton box cars and the rapid-discharge open hopper made their debut. In the 1980s, the aforementioned doublestack well and center-beam cars surfaced. And in the 1990s, aluminum coal cars became popular. But nothing new since then.

Maybe we have "gone as far as we can go." **PR**

Toby Kolstad has been in the railroad industry for more than 30 years, including stints at Illinois Central Gulf Railroad, Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad, a car builder and a lessor. Currently a consultant on rail-car matters and a principal in Rail Theory Forecasts L.L.C., he can be reached at TKolstad@aol.com.



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during the past 20 years. I'm not talking about cars that merely are newer and bigger, but cars that are radically different from anything that had been seen before; cars that were built very quickly, and in large enough numbers, to replace entire fleets within 10 years of their introduction.

TWO DESIGNS WITH POTENTIAL

First sold in 1985, doublestack well cars quickly replaced more than 100,000 89-foot flat cars and helped shift the rail intermodal focus from trailers to containers. Designed in the late 1980s to handle lumber shipments, 73-foot centerbeam flat cars ended the reign of plain flat cars, which had handled that traffic for decades. And the aluminum coal cars that are so common today were rarely seen in 1986 among the steel cars they would

designs could end up replacing the aging box-car and multilevel flat-car fleets.

The Plate E, 110-ton box car was introduced more than 10 years ago, but deliveries to date have replaced less than 25 percent of the Plate C, 70-ton box cars built in the 1970s; more than 86 percent of the 128,000 50-foot box cars are '70s vintage.

Although the new box cars have up to 30 percent more capacity for lumber or paper products, they also cost two-and-one-half times as much to build as the old cars did. Railroads can't seem to reconcile the economics of the paper and wood products traffic with the increased new-car costs. A few years ago, it looked as if TTX might buy significant numbers of this car type, perhaps ending the reign of the old 70-ton fleet. But TTX, too, seemed to be put off