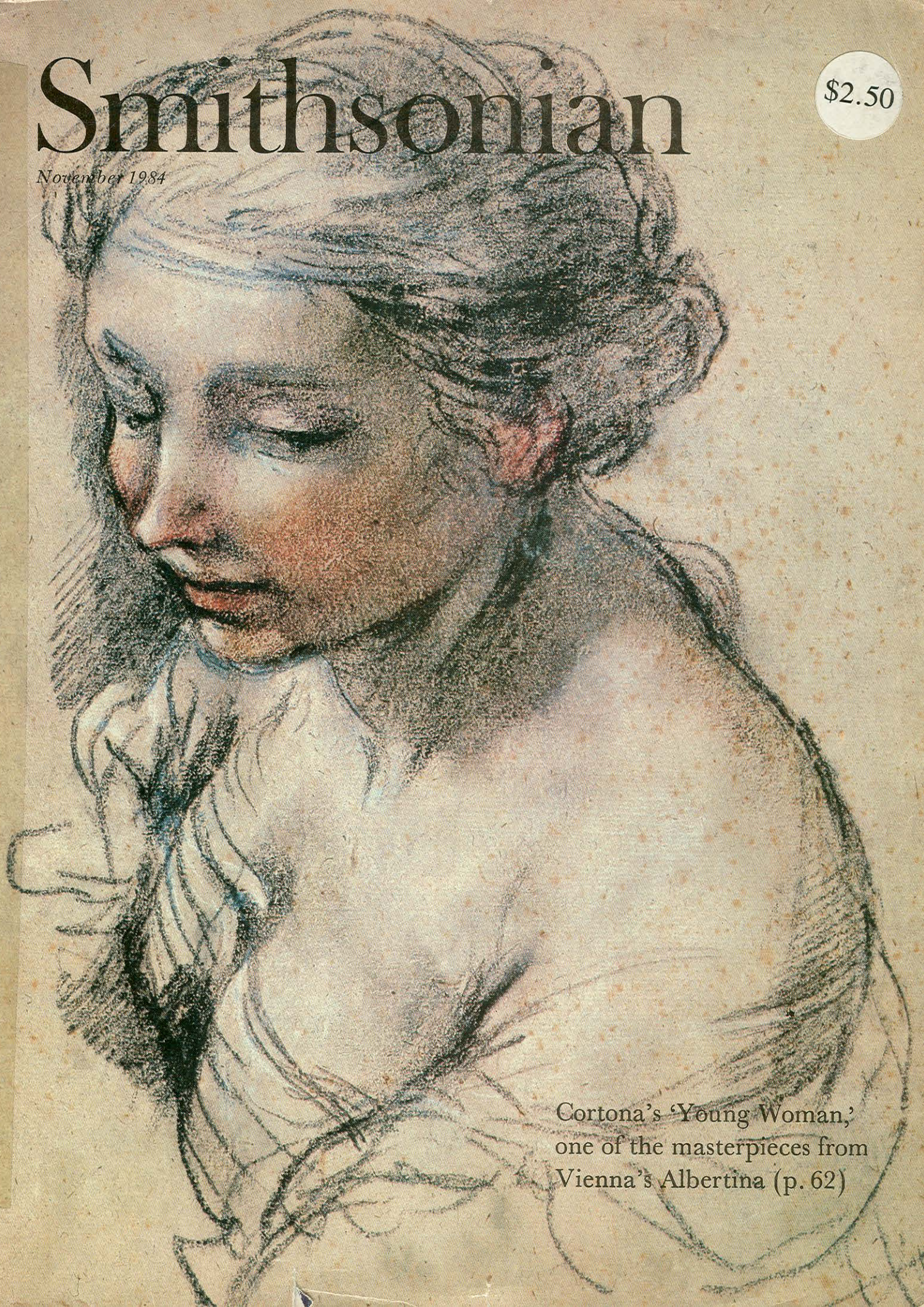


Smithsonian

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Cortona's 'Young Woman,'
one of the masterpieces from
Vienna's Albertina (p. 62)

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By James Traub

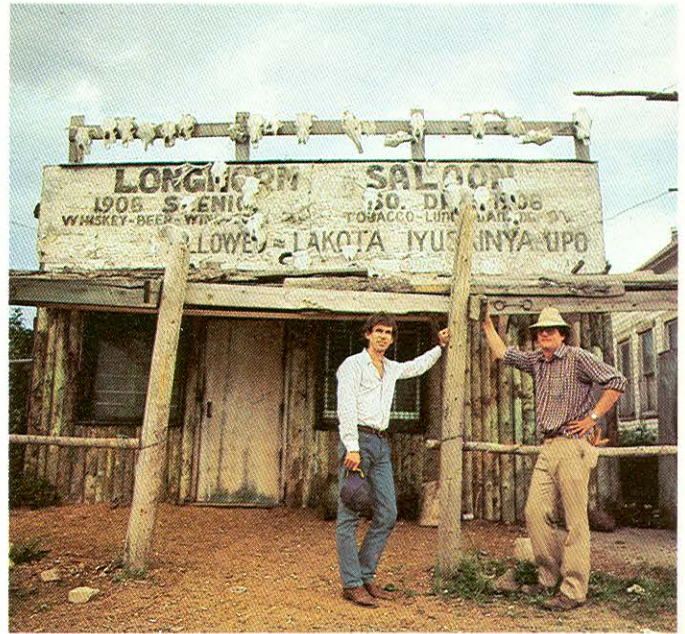
It takes stamina and humor to ride abandoned rails

Two diehards find out that the only thing tougher than getting permission to ride old track is making mileage once you're there

On a sunny morning last summer a battered 1968 Falcon pulled into a gas station in Yankton, South Dakota. In the front seat were the car's owner, Alan Freed, his sidekick, Craig D'Ooge, and the car's temporarily displaced chauffeur, Ghazi Azzabi. In the back seat, crushed into a corner by luggage, tool boxes, photographic equipment and an ice chest, was the author. Freed, curly-haired, blue-eyed and wiry, jumped out of the station wagon and gassed it up. Meanwhile D'Ooge, a hefty and deliberate fellow, sauntered back to a trailer hitched to the car. Chained to the trailer, like a stock car heading for the next race, was an odd yellow contraption with four flanged steel wheels. The vehicle was protected by a roof and a yellow windscreen.

Passers-by had been gaping at this soapbox car for the past 1,000 miles, as Azzabi drove it out from Washington, D.C. A kid in a pickup truck gawked at it now as D'Ooge unscrewed a cap on the gas tank and poured in a few gallons of regular and some oil. "You gonna take that thing out on the tracks?" asked the kid. "That's right," said D'Ooge, poker-faced, as if he were putting the kid on, a favorite pastime of his. But it was true; we were just about to ride across South Dakota—as well as on two short legs of a route in Idaho

Flying white flags to designate an unscheduled run, Weed Route speeder crosses trestle near Avery, Idaho.



Abandoned South Dakota rail route goes through tiny Scenic, where A.L. and C.W. visit Longhorn Saloon.

—at about 15 mph, in a Fairmont M19 speeder. That is, we would ride on the segments of rail that we found to be passable when we got there.

The previous evening Freed and D'Ooge had flown in from Washington to meet up with the speeder in Sioux City, Iowa. Freed is the president and chief executive of the Great Northeastern Pacific South & Western Railroad Company; D'Ooge is vice president for development and research. The firm is looking to fill a slot in outreach and promotion; as yet, however, the only other individual authorized to hold a Great Northeastern business card is a Dutchman charged with selling the firm's so far nonexistent customized china to European markets. Though the Great Northeastern has studiously adopted all the trappings of a great transcontinental railway, it has no rolling stock save the speeder, which Freed salvaged from a New England scrapyards, and two 19th-century velocipedes—three-wheeled wooden railroad handcars. Nor has it a schedule, which is why the speeder always flies the twin white flags that indicate an unscheduled train. The precaution is scarcely necessary, since, for reasons of safety as well as sentiment, the Great Northeastern only plies abandoned track. Thus the Great Northeastern's sobriquet, emblazoned atop its corporate stationery: The Weed Route. The executives, it should be added, are known as A.L. and C.W., in conformity with customary railway practice.

The Weed Route's dimensions are strictly mock-epic. C.W. likes to stroll into small towns, flash his

Photographs by Jorge Diaz



In the Badlands, weeds and flowers overgrow a flat stretch of old Milwaukee Road, abandoned since 1980.

business card, and announce that he's arrived to buy up the railroad. But he writes reams of serious letters to railway executives requesting permission to use their track. Even abandoned track is private property, and using it without permission constitutes trespassing. The Great Northeastern takes its hobby most seriously. Aware of the perils of the rails, A.L. mans the speeder's controls with the vigilance of an engineer—which he once was. But A.L. and C.W. love the thing they spoof, and see it as something more than a ramble through the countryside. Travel by abandoned track offers a view of an America so deeply forgotten that it is presumed vanished. The railways made America, and then America began to shed the railways. Without the trains the little towns became isolated, eccentric and almost lvelorn.

But the Weed Route does not advertise itself as a free-floating Department of Folklore Studies. The director of an executive seminar program (A.L.) and a public affairs specialist at the Library of Congress (C.W.) have plenty of opportunity for scholarship and contemplation; what they lack, like most of us, is adventure. And the Great Northeastern has that one element common to all adventures, great and small—unpredictability. Sometimes the track on the most recent map has been turned into a state road by the time you arrive. Sometimes trees have grown up between the rails. And mechanical failure is a regular feature.

Day One: We began with magnificent expectations. We would start off in the southeast, at Yankton, and ride the 88 miles north and west to Platte, where the tracks ended. Then we would drive north and west to Chamberlain, riding from there all the way to Rapid City at the western edge of the state. There we would recover, at least in imagination, the Milwaukee's long-lost glory. In one great competitive spasm, from 1906



On two-day side trip; speeder leaves the Milwaukee east-west South Dakota route and heads to Deadwood.

to 1909, the Milwaukee had flung down this southern branch route as well as the western extension of its great transcontinental route, across the northern part of this state and on to Seattle. (Later, in Idaho, we were to travel along this track.) Almost immediately thereafter, the railway went into a decline. It went bankrupt in 1925 and again in 1935 and began eliminating track. But only in the early 1980s did the Milwaukee abandon or sell its western track, including the transcontinental route from the Minnesota-South Dakota border all the way to Seattle.

That we were able to travel abandoned track at all was a testimony to someone's sense of history. Throughout the West much of the Milwaukee's track was torn up and sold for scrap, as if the life that roared into being with the trains were best paved over and speedily forgotten. But not in South Dakota: there the state government, in a burst of farsightedness or perhaps sentimentality, bought the track.

But we never put down the speeder in Yankton, or anywhere between there and Platte. When we drove out of Yankton and reached a railway-crossing sign at the top of a hill, we craned forward and fell silent: weeds stretched for miles where the track should have been. We were stymied. A state official had promised, more or less, that the track would be passable. So much for state officials; so much for promises. Then A.L. spied the tracks, covered by the road and buried be-



This abandoned stretch with its century-old trestles was laid in 1891 by the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy.



Frequent challenge to A.L.'s railroading skills—new road over the old track—sometimes caused derailment.

neath rocks, years of overgrowth and—worst of all—trees. We climbed back into the car and headed for Chamberlain, at the eastern bank of the Missouri.

It was here that we first put down the speeder. We parked below a Pizza Hut at the edge of a state highway, and gingerly unloaded it. A clear, deep dusk had fallen, and the sun was spreading a rippling gold wedge across the river. With A.L. at the throttle, C.W. slipped the crank into the shaft at the side of the engine and gave it a few smart turns. The engine coughed, caught, sneezed explosively, and the speeder chugged toward the Missouri.

We had begun, it turned out, in Speeder Heaven. As we rattled down the track we startled all its sleeping life into activity: butterflies flitted around us, grasshoppers pelted the windshield, and birds shot out from beneath the bridge. The weeds were low, the track was good. We rounded a bend and suddenly we were out over the broad Missouri. Cars passed to and fro on a bridge to the north; how commonplace they seemed! Alone on a high bridge, touched by the last rays of the sun, we felt majestic. We crossed the bridge, interrupted a volleyball game behind a trailer, and came to a dead stop in front of a stand of trees that had sprung

The author, a free-lance writer who lives in New York, specializes in telecommunications and foreign issues. This was his first speeder trip.

up between the rails. To our right stood a shack and a rusting, green Pullman sleeper from around 1910. In better days it had been used by the track crews as an improvised inn. Our day was over, too.

Day Two: Before he left Washington, C.W. had telephoned the Murdo fire department in the middle of the night to check on track conditions. The conversation had gone as follows:

C.W.: Are there any trees out there?

Fireman: Trees?

C.W.: Yeah, you know, *trees?*

Fireman: You want any trees around here, you're going to have to *plant 'em.*

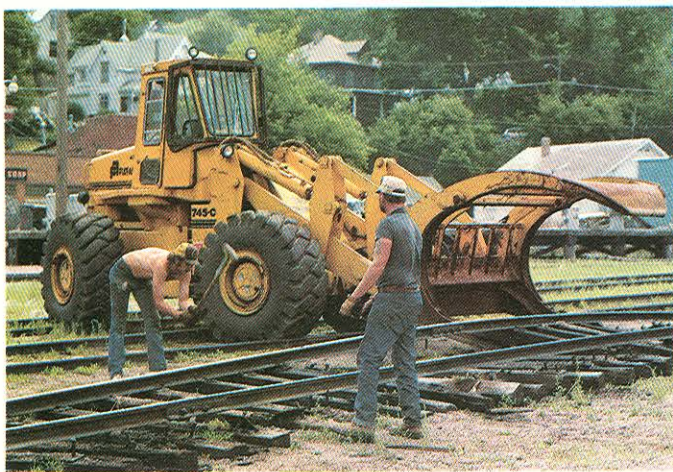
So the route ahead had looked good, as always—at least from a distance. We hoped to ride today from the first passable track we could find west of Chamberlain to Murdo and beyond—maybe 120 miles or so. We found clear track between the towns of Reliance and Kennebec and unloaded the speeder. We stood in the middle of endless, dun-colored prairie. The weeds undulated before a stiff breeze. The vast scale seemed to burlesque our miniature enterprise.

We set off in high spirits. Two hundred yards later we had our first mishap. We were heading uphill into damp weeds almost as high as the speeder, and we gradually slowed to a halt. Our helmsman ordered us to start pushing. As we inched our 600-pound monster uphill the loveliness began to drain out of the day.

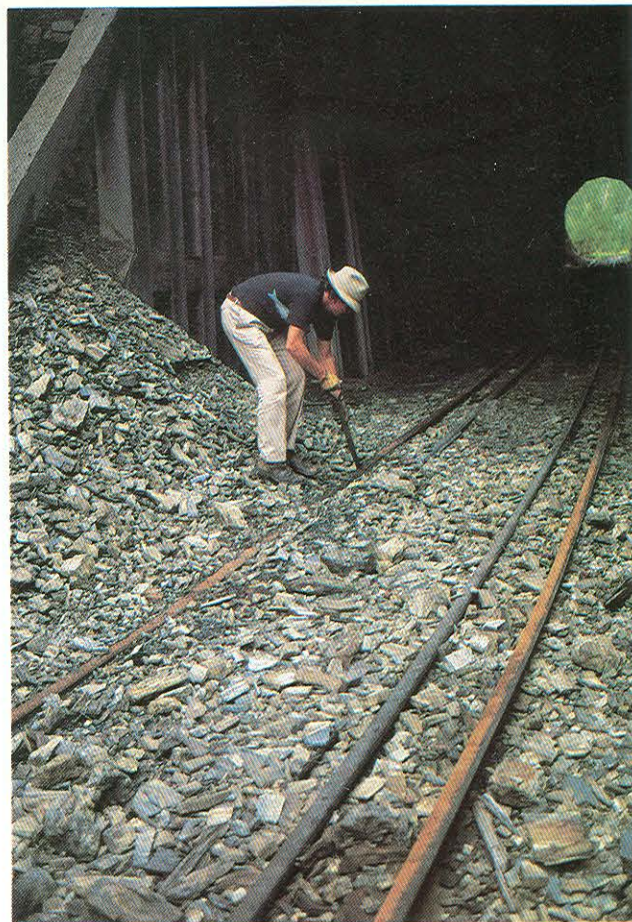
Riding the abandoned rails

C.W., a man who specializes in finding comfortable places to recline, loudly regretted our failure to pack a bulldozer.

We finally climbed back into the speeder and sailed along for a couple of miles. Then we smacked into a fallen branch, popped into the air, and derailed. Half a mile later we stalled. Several times we stopped to tighten the belt that engages the rear axle and thus provides acceleration. Once we were stymied by a tar road that a farmer had poured right over the tracks, a rather dramatic property claim. As the hours went by and our stops piled up, time and events grew increasingly scrambled. It was hot, and our faculties were slipping. Several times we stalled; other times we pushed. At some point somebody, probably A.L., said, "At least we haven't come to a fence yet." Immediately we pulled up in front of a barbed-wire fence. Farmers



In Deadwood, part of 100-year-old route is torn up by a scrap dealer; city hopes to preserve some of line.



One of C.W.'s favorite jobs: clearing rubble from rails so speeder can pass through tunnel to Deadwood.

take fences very seriously, and don't like to have them damaged. So we yanked the fence up, rolled the speeder over the tracks, and put the fence right back where we found it. A few miles later we yanked up another fence; then a third. The novelty wore off.

By the time we had been out on the track for three hours we had 12 miles to our credit. As the grain elevator of Kennebec finally hove into view, the weeds turned into shrubs, and the shrubs into trees. We pushed the speeder over one tree. We chopped down another with a hatchet. We pushed the stupid machine to the road, and collapsed.

Driving west, checking out the track at crossings, we finally found passable rails again at the tiny town of Okaton—11 miles *past* Murdo. So much for late-night reports on track conditions. Again we set off on the rails. The unfamiliar sound of the machine—the put-put of the engine against the racket of the wheels—frightened a herd of antelope. We watched a column of them race toward us from the dark bowl of earth below. In perfect file they sprinted up the track just in front of us, bounded over it and raced up the facing hill. Darkness fell and the rails grew invisible. We seemed to be sailing across the prairie along some un-

fathomable tide, part of the nighttime world of owl and deer.

Day Three: We began the day by driving a few miles out of Kadoka and turning off the highway at Weta. There was no town there; in fact there was nothing at all. We were in the middle of the arid and dreadful Badlands, driving through mountains of sculpted clay, scraped by wind and water over millions of years into fanciful shapes—pyramids and cubes and cylinders—whose tops were elaborately ridged, as if with molding.

By the time we set down the speeder at around 10 A.M. it was already over 90 degrees. We seemed to be poised at the edge of an oven. We rode quickly, awe-struck and even appalled by the unearthly bleakness. Sometimes we passed by the edge of a butte, and we could see and even touch its pale, crumbling clay. The hills formed a wall behind us, so that we seemed to be enclosed in a desert. We saw few horses, fewer cows; once we spied a house miles away at the foot of a mountain. What if we ran out of gas? We decided to push on, hoping that a human being or two lived in the next town, Interior.

A tour with the mayor's husband

Interior turned out to have a road, a service station, a sign pointing to a restaurant somewhere, and a mayor. The mayor, Pat Harvey, worked the gas station with her husband, Donald. It would be safe to say that they were surprised to see us. The last passenger train, according to Donald Harvey, had come through in the early 1950s; the last freight, around ten years ago. Since then, silence. Donald Harvey was about ten years older than his wife, weather-roughened, thin-lipped and painfully deliberate. He was pleased enough, after some prompting, to recount Interior's quite odd history. Like so many of the towns along our route, Interior had lived and died with the railway. When the tracks were laid around 1907, what had been a scattered community of homesteaders became a railhead. At the time the town was called Black. But a few years later a letter arrived from the U.S. Department of the Interior, and everyone was so smitten by the name that they decided to adopt it. Or so the story goes.

Before he was born, said Harvey, Interior had "the third biggest rodeo in the world." The rodeo was held near the old railway station, so that the swells from Chicago scarcely had to leave the fancy Pullmans in which they rode down and spent the night. Thousands of people tore the town apart for days. Before the Depression, Harvey recalled, Interior had at least three bars, five cafés, a pool hall, three general stores, a hardware store, a lumber store. One side of Interior was destroyed by fire in 1937; a year or two later, the other side went up in flames. Now the old railway station

sits on a farm 20 miles away. Donald Harvey, almost animated, insisted that we inspect the foundations lying in the weeds. The concrete was dated 1907.

Interior appeared to be about as depleted as a town could get until we arrived in Scenic, a former railhead now not far from the Oglala Sioux reservation, 30 miles and two ghost towns later. A tiny dog, and nothing else at all, moved in the town's only street, which was broad enough to be the boulevard of a city of 10,000. A few Indian men lounged in dusty lots. The frame buildings along the street were keeling over, planked up and stuck with posters advertising a vanished rodeo. Out behind this miniature town was what appeared to be the biggest used-car lot in South Dakota. At least 500 cars and trucks had been parked every which way in the midst of an open field. It turned out that the woman who owned virtually everything in Scenic also operated a car-parts business.

The general store sold a great many used and dusty articles—boots, shirts, socks, plants, jewelry, knives, velvet paintings. But its most precious object was the wholly intact jawbone of what appeared to be an ox, displayed inside a glass case. When I asked what it was, a stocky woman, later identified as the owner of the store and the cars, answered, "It's a titana; kind of like a dinosaur." I later learned that it was indeed the jaw of a titanothera, a prehistoric animal related not to the dinosaur but rather to the horse.

As I was leaving the store I noticed a boy who was squirming oddly. I looked down at his feet; he was break dancing.

Day Four: In the 1870s the Black Hills of South Dakota were the get-rich-quick capital of a get-rich-quick country. Prospectors were climbing all over one another in a spasm of gold fever. In 1891 the Chicago,



After navigating a road that crosses the tracks, C.W. and A.L. jump out to give slowed speeder a push.



Between bouts on the rails, speeder rests on its trailer in front of the Franklin Hotel in Deadwood.

Burlington & Quincy Railroad brought a branch line up the center of the hills and into Deadwood. But the Burlington Northern, successor to the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy, ran its last freight train on that route October 24 of last year—a date that lives in infamy in some quarters.

For the next two days we would be taking temporary leave of the Milwaukee's track in favor of the route to Deadwood and back, a route that had been recommended for its beauty and isolation. That morning we had hosed all the impacted grasshopper parts out of the radiator, and eased out the clods of earth that were choking up the wheels; but the 47 miles from Hill City up to Deadwood were still slow going. For the first time we were running through mountains, laboring up grades so steep that it had taken two or three locomotives to haul freight. After the immense plains we seemed almost enfolded in the hills. We rode through 100-year-old tunnels built with arches of wooden beams, and over trestles supported on wooden piles. Once we tootled past the wreck of a massive gold-processing plant built right into the hillside, its peaked front all staved in.

We rode in the darkness, until we could only feel the hills on either side of us. Often enough we came to a road built over the tracks. A.L., who races a Porsche in his copious spare time, would slam on the hand brake at the last moment, rolling us over the gravel and back on the track on the other side. This was a bravura performance when it worked, though it sometimes made for a pretty messy derailment.

Deadwood was the first real town we had come to on the speeder. It was quite a shock. We waited at a busy

road as cars whizzed by, and then crawled across like a fearful old lady. We passed through backyards and trailer parks, emerging across the street from an A&W. Finally we left the speeder in a parking lot, next to the old BN freight station and engine house. The main line of tracks through town had been cut off, it turned out, by a wholesale food warehouse.

Day Five: Deadwood used to be the most famous city in South Dakota, the home of Wild Bill Hickok (in the weeks before he was murdered) and Calamity Jane (until she took her mythic presence elsewhere), at the heart of the biggest gold-producing area in the Western hemisphere. Now that the boom has gone elsewhere, and even the brothels have closed, Deadwood keeps fat on a steady diet of tourists. The main street is given over to bars with Old West names, and buses leave regularly for the cemetery where Wild Bill and Calamity Jane are buried. But while the Wild West is a strictly commercial proposition, the railway is a far keener memory. Bill Walsh, one of the owners of the Franklin Hotel, used to hand the freight engineers coming off duty the keys to the bar, and assess the damages later. He sat in the cab of the last freight, and preserved the engineer's orders. "They still come in here to cry sometimes," he says, sounding like he wouldn't mind doing some crying himself.

But Deadwood won't give up the railway without a fight and is currently negotiating with the Burlington Northern, and the scrap dealer to whom much of the track has already been sold, to purchase a portion of the line. An outfit called the 1880 Train currently runs antique locomotives and railway cars on a ten-mile route out of Hill City; its president, Bill Heckman, hopes to expand this route, while other private interests want to run a separate excursion train between Deadwood and the neighboring town of Lead. It is a labor of commerce, of course, but also of love. City attorney Reed Richards, who is handling legal negotiations with the BN and the scrap dealer, is a member of that fraternity which is hypnotized by trains, as if he recalled a past life as an engineer.

The track we'd rolled in on was being torn up

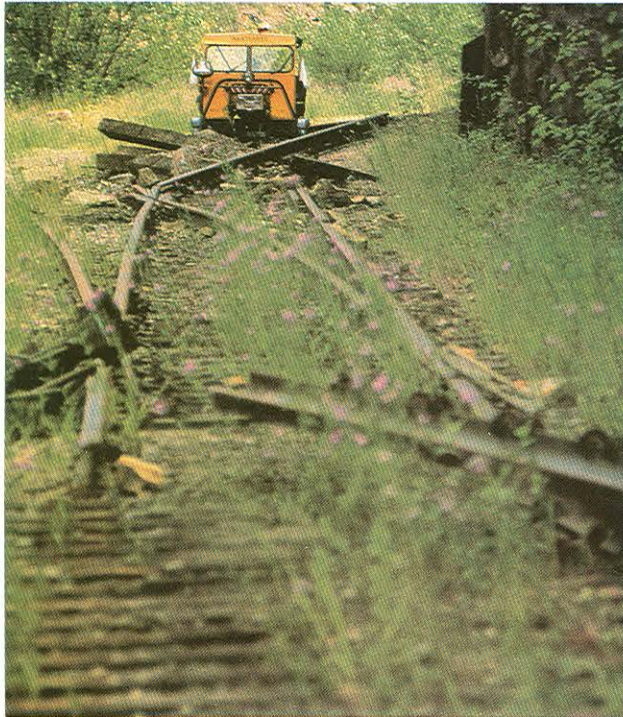
As we were leaving Deadwood, the very track we had rolled in on (not a section the city of Deadwood wants to purchase) was being torn up by an enormous front-end loader, equipped with a custom-built grapple which slipped beneath the track and uprooted it. The scrap dealer moved along right beside this awesome vehicle, whacking out the ties with a sledgehammer. He had bought the track for about \$10,000 a mile. It was too bad, he agreed with a shrug, that the track had to go; he hated to see it happen, but that was his business. He moved on to the next tie. And so,

Riding the abandoned rails

between one hammer and one machine, 100 years of history, of memories, were being obliterated.

Day Six: Nobody save the scrap dealer has much use for abandoned track nowadays. Many train lines are slipping into the past. But in one area a significant stretch of the Milwaukee Road's transcontinental route west of Miles City, Montana, has remained in service. In northern Idaho, two months after the last Milwaukee employee was laid off in April 1980, the

Alan L. Freed



Speeder comes to stop near Avery, Idaho—end of the line; next working track on old route is 700 miles east.

Potlatch Corp. stepped in and bought the railroad. The company decided to carry its own timber to the mills, though it hired a firm in San Diego to actually run the railroad. The trains don't run as often as they used to, but jobs, the track and a sense of continuity have been preserved.

In order to travel working track, the Weed Route had to make an unprecedented compromise: it agreed to accept a chaperon. We traveled throughout with a high-rail car, a pickup truck with retractable flange wheels, which is used to maintain and inspect track.

The trip from the depot in St. Maries to the railway's southern terminus at Bovill was oddly uneventful: we had no fences to dismantle, no weeds to fight through. I recalled a comment C.W. had made a few days before, as we stalled near Rochford. "You know," he said, to no one in particular, "this may seem perverse, but I'm actually *glad* we break down once in a while, as long as it doesn't take too long to fix." C.W. savored the accidental, the unexpected; he liked bad motels for their badness.

On the way back, A.L. put his boots up on the speeder's windscreen and let the machine more or less run itself. Before he got a master's from American University and joined the paper-chasing class, A.L. led a fairly picaresque life. His father was with the railroad, and A.L. decided to do likewise. He prevailed on his father to arrange for him an interview with a Penn Central executive. Impressed with the young graduate, the official said that he would be happy to find a place in the executive training program. "But you don't understand," said A.L. "I want to be an engineer." A.L. recalls the look of shock that passed over the executive's face. "Young man," the other finally said, "I have a son in college, and it's costing me \$10,000 a year. If he said he wanted to be an engineer, I'd kill him." But A.L. persevered, working as a locomotive fireman for three years and, for the next two, as a full-fledged engineer. Now, a scant ten years later, he is the chief operating officer of the Weed Route.

Imagining what the surveyors had seen

Day Seven: When the westward expansion of the Milwaukee to Seattle was authorized in 1905, surveyors set off into wild territory. In one 50-mile stretch in Montana they found only a single dwelling. In the area around Bovill there was nothing at all save the bear, the elk and the deer. As we rode the 50-mile route to Avery, east from St. Maries, it was not at all hard to imagine what the surveyors must have seen. The track itself barely made a mark on the grandiose landscape, the finest yet. We kept to the slow rhythm of the St. Joe River as it cuts its way through the mountains in long, lazy curves. We stayed inside the river

valley, looking straight up at cliffs and mountains covered with pine, cedar, fir, cottonwood. When the sun appeared we could see the silver glitter of the aspen leaves, and the brilliant light green of the grass on islands in the river. We saw no towns, few trailers, few animals. The old stations were gone. The route had almost returned to its primitive state.

As we climbed up to Avery the river diminished to a trickle, and we began to smell the scent of resin. Pine trees, shorn of their bark and limbs, were piled on flatbed cars in a long file reaching into town. Avery was the same story retold. Named after a daughter of William Rockefeller, who sat on the board of the Milwaukee, the town came into being when the rails came through in 1908, reached its peak around World War I, and went into a long decline. Now it has only a scattering of houses, though almost all of them have their own satellite dishes. As we skirted the remains of the town we saw an odd five-door garage—a speeder shed, from the forgotten days when speeders were used here. It was empty.

And then we saw something almost chilling—the

end of the line. We had arrived at the eastern edge of Potlatch's patch of railway. In the center of the track lay a pile of ties and uprooted metal. Each tie, exposed after decades, bore an orange rust mark. A switch had been knocked over, and lay in the dust. Another had been flung into the weeds. Beyond the heap of metal, the gravel roadbed tapered down and vanished into a dirt path. The path rolled on uphill over a dramatic curved trestle and away to the east. Only 20 years ago the fabulous Olympian Hiawatha had arced like a bow around the trestle as it charged back through Montana, South Dakota and beyond.

Now as we faced eastward, we seemed to stand at the edge of a quaint island, a delicately preserved place, looking out at the mainland where real life went on. So we had felt that first morning in South Dakota, laboring uphill while cars sped by at the edge of our vision. The little islands, in strange, obscure places that nobody bothers about, are shrinking all the time. Railway track is being abandoned apace. It's a melancholy situation, of course, but it promises to keep the Weed Route in business for a long time.

In front of an abandoned yard office in Avery, A.L. and C.W. take a break. At one time, Avery was the only

stop between Missoula and Spokane for Milwaukee Road's Train No. 15—the famous Olympian Hiawatha.

