



*Riding the Iron Horse to the*

# Cowboy Capital

Timetable east between Holden and Peters, GP9E 3804 marches along with cars for the Hunt-Wesson cannery, A.L. Gilbert Bulk Feeds, and the Sierra Railroad interchange on October 24, 1983. DAVE STANLEY PHOTO

BY DAVE STANLEY/PHOTOS BY TED BENSON AND DAVE STANLEY



**B**ARELY AWAKE but thankful for a full night's rest, I pick up the phone and dial Union Pacific's automated voice response 800-number to check my position on the Stockton Engineer's Extra Board. "Good morning, Dave Stanley. You are first out," advises the computer-generated voice, sounding like an aged crew caller gargling with mouthwash while at the same time attempting to enunciate. A few push-button options later, I find the next vacancy is on the Oakdale Local, a 10:00AM call on duty at the former Western Pacific yard in Stockton, Calif.

Eight years have passed since I closed my last throttle following a 41-year railroad career in central California. It's been longer than that since my last call for the Oakdale Local. In my mind, it seems like yesterday. Oakdale, the self-proclaimed "Cowboy Capital of the

World," was founded in 1871, following the arrival of the railroad from Stockton. The first outdoor rodeo in the western U.S. was hosted by Oakdale in 1954 and remains an annual event. Home to a number of successful Professional Rodeo Association cowboys, the town recognizes local rodeo greats such as Ace Berry, Jerold Camarillo, and Ted Nuce, among others, paying homage to them at Oakdale's Cowboy Museum, located inside the former Southern Pacific station.

A bulletined six-day assignment, the Oakdale Local — or LRS94 in UP lingo — remains one of the few former Southern Pacific local jobs reluctantly kept alive by the hierarchy in Omaha. Carloads of grain, canned goods, and lumber, all staples from the SP era, continue to move by rail, justifying service by UP. Besides switching A.L. Gilbert Bulk & Liquid Feeds and Hunt-Wesson Foods, the local



also services the historic Sierra Railroad (today's Sierra Northern) interchange, swapping empty centerbeams for loaded ones.

However, any similarity between UP's LRS94 and Espee's Oakdale Local of years past ends on a 1.3-mile section of track in downtown Oakdale, the last remnant of what was once a secondary route connecting Stockton and Merced.

#### Boom and Bust

SP's Oakdale Branch dated back to May 1, 1871, when Stockton & Copperopolis Railroad completed roughly 15 miles of construction from Stockton's inland port east to Peters, followed by an 11.2-mile extension from Peters to the village of Milton, with the goal of reaching Copperopolis to capture Sierra Foothill copper mining revenue. Unfortunately, the copper boom soon turned to bust leaving



**OPPOSITE:** On May 18, 1973, C-40-3 caboose 1200 brings up the rear of the Oakdale Local on Weber Avenue in Stockton, Calif. DAVE STANLEY PHOTO

**OPPOSITE TOP:** Moments from terminating at Espee's Stockton Yard, Alco S-6 1277 approaches the Santa Fe diamonds at Stockton Tower with lumber and canned goods from Oakdale on August 7, 1973. TED BENSON PHOTO

**ABOVE:** Its work completed, and with the sun setting on November 5, 1982, the Oakdale Local is westbound at Adela, mile 120.6. The train will arrive back in Stockton in an hour. DAVE STANLEY PHOTO

**LEFT:** Dueling Alcos at the interlocking — S-6 1224 drags the Oakdale Local toward Stockton Yard while sister 1242 handles a cut on the west drill track on October 16, 1973. TED BENSON PHOTO

Milton to become nothing more than a rail-to-stagecoach connecting point.

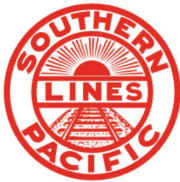
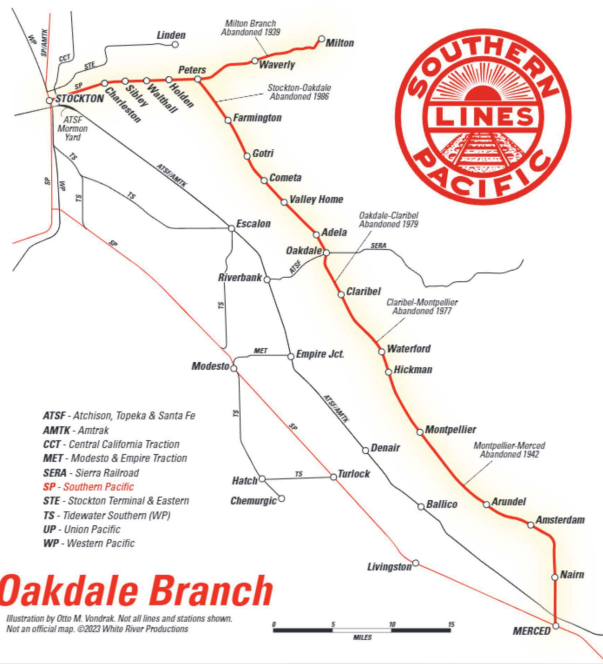
Stepping into the fray came Stockton & Visalia Rail Road, one of many Central Pacific-backed "paper railroads" in California, building south from Peters to Farmington in September 1871. Oakdale was reached the following month. This portion was soon reorganized as part of the Stockton & Copperopolis, and the entire line from Stockton was leased to Central Pacific on December 30, 1874, and transferred to SP on April 1, 1885.

Six years later, track was laid from Oakdale to Merced, skirting the eastern fringe of the San Joaquin Valley and connecting the agricultural and ranching communities of Claribel, Waterford, Hickman, and Montpelier. Thus was born Epee's 72-mile Stockton & Merced Subdivision, an alternative route paralleling and connecting to the Fresno main line at the subdivision's namesake points.

For several decades in the early 20th century, the Stockton & Merced Subdivision was humming with activity. A 1915 employee timetable listed options for seven-day passenger service on the route, including a three-hour journey from either Stockton or Merced, enjoyed aboard first class passenger (later mixed) trains 151 and 152 (and Sunday-only trains 157/158). A pair of second class trains covered the shorter territory between Stockton and Oakdale, with McKeen motorcars handling this deed. At Peters, a connecting schedule with Milton Branch mixed trains 153/154 was available for the few who resided in the unincorporated Calaveras County settlement.

Service to Milton was discontinued in August 1932 and the entire 11.2-mile branch was placed on the chopping block in December 1939. Merced passenger/mixed trains soldiered on until December 1938, then afterward becoming third class way freights 305/306, hauling cattle, corn, grain, produce, vinegar, and wine in addition to lumber products interchanged from Sierra Railroad in Oakdale.

As is all too common in the railroad industry, changing economics often create physical plant redundancy; time was winding down on what was now the

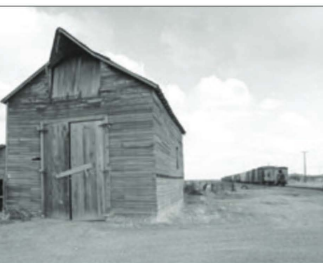


OPPOSITE FAR LEFT: The final eastbound revenue run on the SP Oakdale Branch passes a hay barn near the old station of Cometa, north of Valley Home, on October 26, 1984. TED BENSON PHOTO

LEFT: GP9E 3804 leads the eastbound Oakdale Local down Weber Avenue and out of downtown Stockton on October 24, 1983. DAVE STANLEY PHOTO

TOP: Alco S6 1277 hauls 10 cars timetable west between Gotri and Farmington on August 7, 1973. TED BENSON PHOTO

ABOVE: The final eastbound move beyond Claribel passes the abandoned Waterford station on January 27, 1977. This line once timetabled first and third class trains well into the 1930s. TED BENSON PHOTO





**ABOVE:** The last eastbound revenue train passes grazing cattle at Cometa, mile 114.1, on October 26, 1984.



**RIGHT:** On January 27, 1977, Engineer Chico Tolbert is at the throttle of light engines 3427, 3879 and 3731, crossing the Tuolumne River eastbound en route to Hickman to gather stored PFE mechanical reefers.

Oakdale Branch of the Merced Subdivision. By 1942, trucks had siphoned from the railroad much of its light agriculture and livestock business, the lifeblood of the line. In March of that year, the Interstate Commerce Commission allowed abandonment of 21 miles of railroad on the southern end between Merced and Montpellier following a trestle fire at the Merced River. The original connection in Merced remains today as a short industrial lead, serviced by UP's Atwater Local based out of Fresno.

Occasional shipments of grain from Montpellier and wine from Chateau Martin's winery in Waterford kept the branch on life support into the early 1970s. Unable to financially justify the line's continued existence, SP in April 1973 petitioned the ICC to abandon 13.27 miles between Claribel and Montpellier.

As was common practice elsewhere, the dormant main track was used for long-term car storage. In this case, 142 Pacific Fruit Express mechanical refrigerators were parked in spring 1976 south of Hickman on the last miles north of Montpellier.

**OPPOSITE TOP:** Easing down Weber Avenue in Stockton at the WP Second Subdivision diamond, the Oakdale Local passes flagmen protecting the Union Street crossing on October 16, 1973. In a few moments the local will be off the branch and onto the east drill track for the final mile into the yard. **TED BENSON PHOTOS**

On a cold, dreary Thursday, January 27, 1977, shortly after the ICC approved SP's petition, one final run was made over the now-abandoned railroad to gather the stored reefers and return them to Stockton. Three GP9s — SP 3731, 3879 (one of 20 factory low-nose units on the roster), and 3427 — provided the motive power out of Tracy, with bay window caboose 1763 bringing up the rear. Two hours and 45 minutes after the cab hop left Oakdale, Engineer Chico Tolbert rolled back to town with more than a mile of derelict PFEs in tow. The last train from Hickman became the longest train ever run over the south end of the branch.





ABOVE: Surrounded by feed hoppers, Geep 3768 spots three loads into the A.L. Gilbert Oakdale facility on November 5, 1982.

RIGHT: With a sizable train on its drawbar, Alco S-6 1246 hustles toward Stockton, crossing the Stanislaus River bridge north of Oakdale on May 18, 1973.

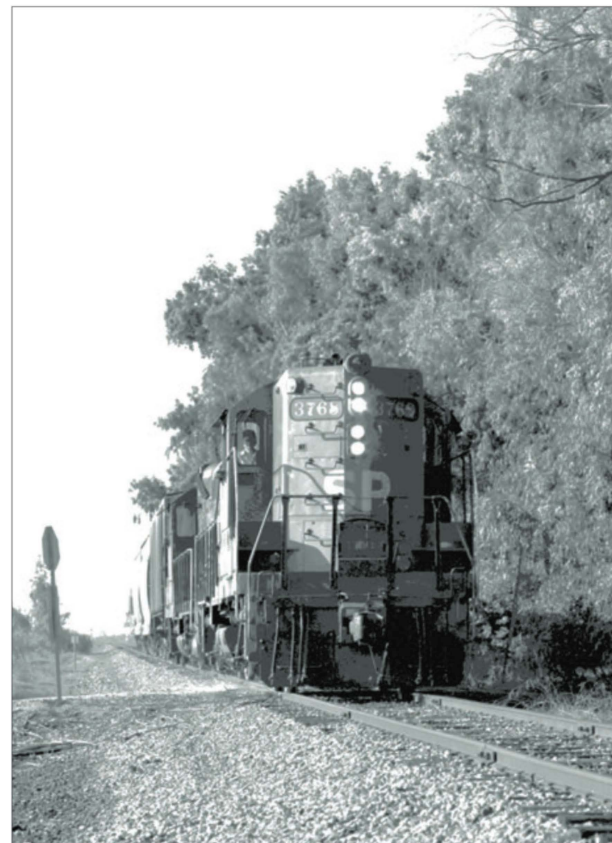
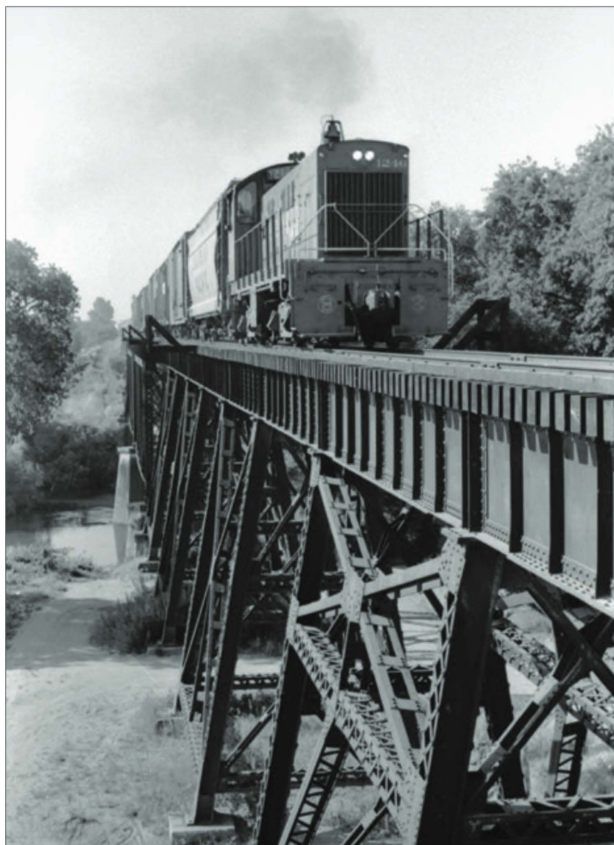
BELOW RIGHT: Traversing what was once listed as the Stockton-Merced Subdivision in SP Western Division timetables, Alco S-6 1246 points the westbound Oakdale Local past Sierra Railroad's Oakdale shop and its trio of Baldwin S-12s on May 18, 1973. DAVE STANLEY PHOTOS

Four miles of track were retired between Oakdale and Claribel in 1979, followed five years later by a petition to abandon the remainder of the branch into Stockton. The final revenue run to Oakdale over the original S&C route occurred on October 26, 1984. After that date, portions of the branch main between Stockton and Valley Home were used for car storage until 1986 when the line was formally abandoned and scrapped, save for the 1.3-mile parcel in downtown Oakdale. A second short piece of the branch remains active in east Stockton, serviced since 1988 by Stockton Terminal & Eastern Railroad.

To facilitate abandonment of the direct line to Oakdale, an agreement with then-prospective merger partner Santa Fe was negotiated in October 1983 allowing SP running rights from Mormon Yard in Stockton to Oakdale via Riverbank, creating a more timely passage for the local. This agreement remains in effect today with UP, BNSF, and Sierra Northern as the key players.

#### The Oakdale Local

Today's Oakdale Local performs on a much different stage from the one we encountered as young rail photographers in the early 1970s. Gone are the scarlet and gray Alco S-6 switchers and EMD GP9s, once dedicated power for the Oakdale and other locals, replaced by a pair of Armour Yellow GP38s or 40s. Missing too are the veteran Southern Pacific train and enginemen, some of whom I had the pleasure of working with for a few years after the 1996 merger. All knew the



Oakdale Branch like it was a pathway through their own backyards. Today's trainmen are, by and large, a new generation of UP employees, crews who unfortunately know little of the original route or its history.

With BNSF and Sierra Northern mechanical track warrants tucked into the control stand of our GP40, today's Oakdale Local navigates the transfer into BNSF's Mormon Yard. Continuing southeast for 24 miles over BNSF's Stockton Subdivision, the short freight passes the Mariposa intermodal facility before storming through Escalon at track speed, reaching Riverbank in just over a half-hour. After stopping to line the train onto Sierra Northern's former Santa Fe steel, LRS94 gallops over the final 6.6 miles into Oakdale. After a bit of maneuvering in the Sierra Northern yard, the UP Local eventually lands on the last vestige of SP's Stockton & Merced Subdivision.

During momentary pauses while switching Oakdale's Hunt-Wesson cannery in my last years with Union Pacific, I couldn't help thinking about the original SP line we occupied and the trains that passed over that significant stretch of rail. Happily, a few of those trains live on in images Ted Benson and I were able to capture almost a half-century ago. ■

*The author would like to thank Ted Benson for his assistance with this story.*

TOP LEFT: The last eastbound revenue run on the original SP line on October 26, 1984, finds SW1500 2531 framed in the depot palm trees at Peters, once the junction of the 11.2-mile Milton Branch. TED BENSON PHOTO

LEFT: A late afternoon arrival finds GP9Es 3768 and 3412 passing Valley Home en route to Oakdale on November 5, 1982. DAVE STANLEY PHOTO

BELOW: Conductor George Napoleon releases high hand brakes at Hickman as stored PFE mechanicals are readied for the trip to Stockton on January 27, 1977. TED BENSON PHOTO

