

Southern Pacific's

SPRINT TO THE FINISH

STEVE JESSUP/PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

THE SUNSET ROUTE will never be as glamorous as when Southern Pacific operated the line. From the *Sunset Limited* and *Blue Streak Merchandise* trains of yesteryear to SP's onslaught of manifest freights and stack trains in the final days, it was a magnificent run until 1996 when the Espee flag finally came down and was handed over to "Uncle Pete" in Omaha.

In some ways, SP's identity got lost in its last decade as you searched for anything with SP or SSW (St. Louis Southwestern, the official name for SP subsidiary Cotton Belt) markings in a sea of trailers, containers, freight cars, and a multitude of borrowed locomotives.

SP and SSW locomotives could be found, but rarely in solid sets; the company was all about moving goods regardless of locomotive reporting marks or color.

The pace along this route was energetic, which is why the railroad had to address accommodating more traffic. This wasn't your typical Class 1 single-track handling some 20–25 trains a day. How about 30–40? Chalk it up to the wonderful world of intermodal. The number of stack trains coming out of the Port of Long Beach, Calif., seemed endless at times. SP dispatchers had to be at the top of their game figuring out meets and runarounds in mostly single-track territory (exceptions being Beaumont Hill in



ABOVE: Six SP units plus an EMD "bandit" SD40-2 handle MBSMF at Mescal, Ariz., on October 3, 1990. It's a treat to see SD40 7325 on the point, and the entire motive power consist has no GP60s or B40s included.

LEFT: After coming off the Sunset Route at West Colton, SP 7562 continues its westbound journey as it nears the summit of Cajon Pass approaching Hilond, Calif., heading for Bakersfield in November 1993. Typical of SP's last years, motive power consists were an interesting mix and this train has a merger SD45R leading with two GP40Rs, an HLCX ex-Amtrak GP40, and a D&RGW SD40T-2 trailing.

California and two segments in Arizona — a brief section of double track 15 miles east of Yuma and the 35-mile Tucson-Mescal segment).

Thanks to a friend, my observation post of SP's closing act was mostly east of Tucson, Ariz., on the Lordsburg District. I visited on four occasions, and it was far more eye-popping than any other SP location I staked out. On the first visit in fall 1990, I witnessed a traffic rush like never before — 13 trains in five hours

(some that were missed), slowed only by a track gang at one spot where all traffic was routed through a siding. It was a festival of yellow block movements both directions.

Motive Power for the Sunset

I didn't live there or spend near enough time to catch the "good stuff," but I saw SP make good use of its late-model four-axle locomotives. And there were still a few oldies hanging on until the bitter end. EMDs, GEs, home-road units, leasers — all were a part of Southern Pacific's southwest scene.

The last locomotives ordered by SP were primarily assigned elsewhere. They included 279 AC4400CWs (100–378), delivered between April and October 1995. These units found a home on Tennessee Pass where their a.c. traction pulled heavy tonnage on steep grades (see RAILFAN & RAILROAD, December 2018 and November 2020 issues). Their last days have played out on Union Pacific hauling Powder River coal trains to power plants south and east of Wyoming.





ABOVE: MPI SD45 9006 swings off Main 1 onto single track at Mescal with an eastbound manifest on October 4, 1990. It isn't often that the dispatcher will run a heavy eastbound freight on the Number 1 Main, but this morning there is no opposing traffic between Vail and Mescal. The 9006 will, however, meet two at the next siding of Chamiso.

RIGHT: The dispatcher has cleared the railroad for the MBSMF, flying over the Cienega Bridge westbound on its way to Tucson and eventually Los Angeles on October 7, 1990. Today's *Blue Streak* has SSW GP60 9665, SSW B40-8 8073, and an old SP tunnel motor.

Also in the closing group of motive power orders were GE C44-9Ws (8100-8200). Again, these 101 units, delivered between April and December 1994, were not regulars on the Sunset Route. And neither were the EMD SD70Ms, which came to SP in June through August 1994. The railroad ordered just 25 (9800-9824) and mainly used them between Los Angeles and Portland. Of course, any one of these three models could waltz in as a stray, but it didn't happen on my watch.

SP's last two four-axle models? That's a whole different story. They were seen by the tons, and this route was perfect for them as they were built for high-speed intermodal service on mostly flat track. There were some grades east of Tucson, including the summits of Mescal, Dragon, Raso, and Steins. But SP just loaded up on the front-end horsepower, saving any helper service for only the heaviest of freights.

The final four-axle order with GE was a group of B39-8/B40-8 units, with the first 40 (8000-8039) being B39s. These came online in August and September 1987 and were rated at 3,900 hp. The only other B39s outshopped at Erie were the 100 LMX units on long-term lease to Burlington Northern.

GE's upgraded model was the B40-8, providing 4,000 horsepower. SP decided to take 54 (8040-8093) between July 1988 and May 1989, which gave them a total of 94 Dash 8 models for rushing hot trains between Los Angeles and Memphis, Chicago, and New Orleans. While SP and a few other roads had B40 standard-cab units, Santa Fe was the first to order Dash 8s with the North American



cab, starting a trend in locomotive production.

EMD's answer to high-powered four-axle models was its GP60. The first three demonstrator units saw the light of day in October 1985. After these units toured the country, SP, Santa Fe, Norfolk Southern, and Rio Grande stepped up to the sales counter. While D&RGW ordered just three and NS purchased 50, SP and Santa Fe made the production

ABOVE: Climbing up Main 2 on October 7, 1990, is the LXCXF led by SSW B40-8 8089. The train is passing the semaphore signal and water tower at Pantano.

RIGHT: Hallmarks of Southern Pacific's Sunset Route were these cooling towers, including this one at Mescal, Ariz.; unfortunately, they are all gone. SSW B40-8 8073, SP SD40T-2 8296, SP SD45T-2 9314, and SP SD40T-2 8266 power the hottest train on SP, the *Memphis Blue Streak Merchandise Forwarder* (MBSMF), on October 3, 1990.



worthwhile. Santa Fe grabbed 40 standard units (in blue and yellow) plus 63 with North American cabs (in red and silver "Super Fleet" paint) and 23 cabsless companions — a total of 126. And that was nothing compared to SP's order. The company brought in 195 between December 1987 and January 1994 (9600-9794). The last unit, 9794, marked the end of EMD's Geep series when railroads began to shift exclusively toward six-axle units as main line hauls became heavier.

One interesting note about EMD's demonstrator GP60s (numbers 5, 6, and 7) is that they were built with the SP light package, including horizontal nose headlights plus the red warning light, and upper horizontal oscillating headlights. Ironically, SP did not order that package, nor did it want the rounded edges of the nose and cab, choosing instead to stick with sharper angles.

As it did with the Dash 8s, the road used Southern Pacific lettering on some units and Cotton Belt lettering on others. The GP60s sounded the same as the classic SP locomotives with their distinctive three-chime horns. If something else was heard, it was likely a foreign unit on the point.

Working with the newer locomotives were well-worn SD40T-2 and SD45T-2 tunnel motors plus rebuilt SD45s, SD40s, and GP40s. The birth of T-2s dates back to 1972-1974, and SD45s sprouted as far

back as 1966. Age took its toll on hundreds of these units, but even with new locomotives and rebuild programs, SP was still power-short in every corner. The road relied heavily on pooled and leased power, and because the Sunset Route had the most traffic and the high-priority trains, it had the greatest variety of locomotives. The line was often dubbed the "Rainbow Route," and motive power books were even published to document this period of SP's storied history.

Train Capital of the Southwest

Here's how a typical day, October 1, 1990, played out in those years. Amtrak 2, the eastbound *Sunset Limited*, departs Tucson under partly cloudy morning skies. One of Amtrak's P30CH units, 718, is on the point followed by the usual F40PH. The train blows for the Euclid Avenue crossing, adding a light horn acknowledgment to three railfans taking pictures, two of whom just stepped off the train at the station. After the train rolls by, it's off to SP's PFE Yard for a quick look-around.

One westward freight is quickly ready to depart, and we're getting discover that our host has not exaggerated in describing this route as motive power heaven. The manifest has eight units — five from SP, two UPs, and a GECC B40-8. The UPs are ex-Missouri Pacific-lettered units — C36-7 9013 and SD50 5035.

That's all for now. But just wait until tomorrow and the next day (and the day after that)!

October 2 — it's cloudy and there's a light rain as we head east of town, stopping at Irvington Road to see an unusual unit set out from eastbound train WCK-CM (West Colton, Calif.–Kansas City, Mo., Manifest). It's EMD SD40-2 6305, an ex-Milwaukee Road in Soo Line's "bandit" orange and black scheme. The freight left Tucson with MPI SD45 9009 on the point along with SP 8383. It had picked up SP 7338 and EMD 6309 (an SD40-2 in Soo Line colors) before dropping 6305. That was a wild consist to start!

The train finally reaches the end of double track at Mescal before meeting the westbound ADHFT (APC containers with auto parts for Hermosillo, Mexico). UP SD40-2s 3345 and 4106 (ex-MoPac)

RIGHT: In addition to the newer four-axle GP60s and B39/B40-8s, SP still had old locomotives battling to the bitter end. In Tucson's PFE Yard, SP B30-7 7843 shows its age in November 1991 as it prepares to pick up a cut of cars. Also in the consist are D&RGW GP35 3050, Santa Fe B36-7 7490, SD45R 7424, and GP60 9765.

BELOW: Two SP GP60s and two tunnel motors lead an eastbound freight around a curve near the Cienega Bridge on the Number 2 Main in November 1994. This is where the Number 2 Main ducks under the Number 1 Main, joining to form a single line 13 miles ahead at Mescal (now all double-tracked). Unit 9600 was SP's first of 195 GP60s ordered from EMD beginning in December 1987.

lead this train. The next stop is Benson, but we're looking for a drier spot with broken clouds and better lighting. Sibyl turns out to be ideal for photos, and it would nicely accommodate us for the next two days.

On this morning, it's just the right place for five trains. The dispatcher has halted the eastbound manifest plus a light engine move behind it for three westbounds. The first is SSW 9694 with the *Memphis Blue Streak Merchandise Forwarder* (MBSMF), the hottest of all SP intermodals. Next is SP 8011, a double-stack headed to Long Beach. And third is SSW 9625 with the HOCIM (Houston–City of Industry, Calif., Manifest).

All are sent through the siding as the main at Sibyl is out of service for the day. The clouds finally break with sun and blue skies overhead — just in time for MPI 9009 and the light engine move. That, too, was a crazy consist with EMD demonstrator GP60 7 on the point, followed by EMD 5, EMD 784 (ex-Conrail), SP 8552, EMD 740 (ex-Conrail), SSW 7255, SP 8304, SSW 6874, D&RGW 3097, and SP 7244. And that closes the book for this particular outing as the remaining half of the day is consumed by other activities.

On October 3, the morning is clear and sunny — what a difference from the previous day's weather. We race out to Sibyl again just in time for the start of



ABOVE: SP merger-painted SD45T-2 9207 and four trailing units pass under the classic cantilever signal at Wilmot, Ariz., eight miles east of Tucson. This train is the westbound APL from New Orleans to Los Angeles, symbolized the AVAXT, running on October 4, 1990. Along with the *Blue Streaks*, these were also handled with high priority.

LEFT: At Beaumont, Calif., an eastbound hotshot is wasting no time as it heads toward the SP Gila and Lordsburg districts of the Sunset Route in February 1991. Eight units provide plenty of power for this light train including B40-8 8084, GP60 9609, three tunnel motors, and three SD45Rs.

heels is SSW 9668 with another ultra-hot train, the BSMFF (*Blue Streak Merchandise Freight Forwarder*).

Once those trains hit the double track to Tucson, the dispatcher lets loose with an eastbound power light move, again with 10 units. SSW 8091 leads with eight other SP/SSW engines plus MPI SD40M-2 9001. Another eastbound follows with SSW 9663 on the point of the MXEST (Mitsui stack to East St. Louis, Ill.).

Now it's time for yet another ballast burner as westbound SP 7325 and six trailing units are in charge of a second

a massive SP parade. The main is open, and first up is westbound SSW 9638 with the HOCIM. Behind it is SP 9612 with another HOCIM. Next coming up the siding is eastbound SP 8008 with the WCHOM (West Colton–Houston Manifest). That train will wait for SSW 9655

with the KCCIA (Kansas City–City of Industry Autos).

After getting some shots there, we move west to Mescal for more fun. SSW 8073 is zipping west with the MBSMF, making for a very nice picture with the HOCIM (West Colton–Houston Manifest). That train will wait for SSW 9655

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ABOVE: Two GP40Rs with SSW 7281 on the point lead the Curtiss Local eastbound at Mescal on November 4, 1991. The train will turn south at Benson and take the Douglas Branch a few miles to Curtiss, located next to St. David, Ariz.

RIGHT: The Sunset Route was often dubbed the "Rainbow Route" thanks to the incredible number of foreign units running on SP. One example is this eastbound freight on Main 2 approaching the semaphore at Pantano in November 1994. Following SP SD45T-2 9239 is MPI SD40M-2 9001, IC SD40R 6066, and Santa Fe C30-7 8135.

MBSMF. Trailing the 7325 is another EMD ex-Milwaukee SD40-2, this one 6306.

As morning turns to afternoon, there is still no letup in the action. A regional local heads east with three Geeps, the lead unit being SSW GP40-2 7265. That move is followed by SP 8003 West on the KCCIA. And behind that comes the 9655 again. From the time this train hit Sibyl, traffic was too thick to make any significant progress westward. The 9655 sat at Fenner, Benson, or Chamiso — or perhaps all three — for three meets and four runarounds.

We wait for one last freight before wrapping up things at Mescal. SP 8541 takes a manifest east with four units, two of which were D&RGW GP40 3062 and EMD ex-Milwaukee 6300. Back at Tucson, we see one more eastbound, the SSW 9627, leading a Chicago-bound Sealand stack train. At the end of the day, we check off nearly all the trains listed on the lineup.

I seriously doubted this kind of action



could be topped. I was right, but no outing was any less interesting. The next day involves a chase of MPI SD45 9006 leading an eastbound manifest. Taking the faster Main 1, we grab shots at the Cienega Bridge and the end of double track at Mescal. Two westbounds are photographed next, a Tucson-bound grain train with a rear-end helper at Benson and the KCWCM meeting the 9008 at Chamiso.

Continuing east, we take another shot of 9006 on the line's second summit at Dragoon before netting two more westbounds, SP 6861 (HOCIM) and SSW 7260 (MBSMF). Then it's back to our favorite spot at Sibyl for a quick parade of even more westbounds. The first is SSW 9648

with another MBSMF, then 6861 again as he was stopped at Tully (first siding west of Dragoon) for the *Blue Streak* run-around. Finally, the afternoon's closing act is a westbound APL train with SP/ATSF merger-painted SD45T-2 9207 on the point. After shots at Sibyl and the Cienega Bridge, the best photo is at Wilmont as the train passes underneath SP's classic cantilever signal.

Coming back into town, we are surprised to see EMD 6305 still sitting at Irvington. The late afternoon sun is perfect for a roster shot. Up until that moment, we didn't have a well-lit picture of it. And after seeing a few of these ex-Milwaukee units running around, I am determined to turn one of my N-scale Milwaukee



ABOVE: On the perfect morning of October 3, 1990, SP 9612 at Sibyl is the second train in a massive parade on the Lordsburg District. The 9612 and four additional units are pulling the HOCIM with some of its trailing cars seen just to the left of the plow. Before evening, 11 more trains would be captured on film.

SD40-2s into an EMD "bandit" model. I choose the 6345, seen on the first *Blue Streak* at Dragoon.

One last effort is made to snap some black & white photos. For this, we click shots in Tucson, out at the Cienega Bridge for the MBSMF west, and at the old water tower and semaphore at Pantano for the LXCXF (Long Beach-CSX Forwarder).

It's a Wrap

Several thoughts were running through my mind on the trip back home. I had known for years that SP in the Southwest was a great show. And my friend was certainly getting the better end of the deal with a lot more action and variety. I had to make plans to get back and, fortunately, a few business trips took me to Arizona and Southern California. It was a must if these were SP's last days, although even with the failed SP-SF merger, we weren't terribly persuaded the end was near. As it turned out, we were extremely grateful to document the tail end of the company's existence before the curtain fell.

I returned in November 1991 and again in February 1994. My last chance to photograph Southern Pacific came in November 1994. Not much had changed in four years. The line was as busy as

ever and the motive power consists were as crazy as ever. And that all lasted through the first few years of Union Pacific ownership.

This final trip did not disappoint with a day of six eastbounds and three westbounds captured on film. In true SP fashion, one eastbound had SP SD45T-2 9239 on the point followed by MPI SD40M-2 9001 (seen four years earlier), Illinois Central SD40R 6066, and Santa Fe C30-7 8135.

In between my first and last trips to Arizona, I had a couple of opportunities to catch SP in Southern California. With most of the time spent kicking around Cajon Pass, I saw a couple of trains on Beaumont Hill in February 1991. Then in November 1993, we tried to pick off more SP traffic on Beaumont. Starting at West Colton and moving east, we were rewarded with six trains. The last one involved a chase as it came off the Sunset Route westbound and headed up Cajon.

That train's motive power consist and what we documented at the West Colton locomotive facility before leaving were a true reflection of SP's last years — lots of trains to move and using any locomotives that could help. The westbound manifest consisted of SP SD45R 7562 (in merger paint), SP GP40R 7123, SP GP40R 7122, HLXC GP40 659 (ex-Amtrak), and

D&RGW SD40T-2 5377. Power at the West Colton locomotive facility included Conrail C32-8 6612, CSX SD40-2 8249, EMD SD45 3127 (ex-Southern), ATSF B36-7 7484, Seaboard System SD40-2 8207, Illinois Central SD40-2R 6005, Conrail SD40 6291, Conrail C39-8 6005, BN SD60M 9268, and several SP units scattered about.

Even though I grew up on Southern Pacific's Coast Line, I didn't see much in the first 15 years of my life. There were a few trains here and there, but once I became a serious rail enthusiast during my college years, SP was a delight to watch. It seems as though there was always something interesting running on the line. Even when I left SP territory, it followed me up to Seattle with run-through power on BN trains 111 and 112.

In SP's final years, there was never a dull moment, especially on the El Paso-West Colton section of the Sunset Route. It was a brilliant — and very memorable — sprint to the end! 📸

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