

El Chepe

by Bob Schmidt; photography by the author except as noted

Not that long ago, Mexico was a magnet for passenger-train aficionados, with many long-distance routes hosting fascinating and colorful trains. That ended in 1998, when Ferrocarril Mexicano, S.A. (“Ferromex”) took over operation of Mexican rail service from the former companies. The agreement did not provide for the continuation of intercity rail passenger services, most of which were replaced by buses operating on an improved highway network.



Santa Barbara is seen looking down from train 7, now having climbed to a higher vantage point near kilometerpost 703. Date: March 13, 1972.



Train No. 7 prepares to depart Los Mochis, Sinaloa, behind CH-P GP28 805 on March 13, 1972. The consist includes head-end cars, four coaches (built in Switzerland in 1949), a diner and two sleepers.

The lone intercity exception to the abandonment of passenger services is called *El Chepe*, which connects Los Mochis (on the Sea of Cortez) with the city of Chihuahua, over the rails of the Ferrocarril Chihuahua al Pacifico. The train name is a derivative of Chihuahua Pacifico whose reporting marks are CH-P; hence *Chepe*. The train runs 418 miles and passes Las Barrancas del

continent.” Although one can make a case for giving this honor to the old Rio Grande main line through the Rockies, or to the Canadian Pacific west of Calgary, the CH-P is certainly among the top five scenic lines. The tracks pass over 37 bridges and through 86 tunnels, rising from the coast to as high as 7,900 feet above sea level while navigating horseshoe curves and crossing over itself to gain elevation. It is both an important transportation system for locals and a major draw for tourists.



CH-P train No. 7 climbing the grade east of Los Mochis on March 13, 1972.

week on a slightly slower schedule with more stops for locals—15 official stops and more than 50 flag stops where boarding or disembarking can be done at passenger request. First-class trains include two to three coaches, each holding 64 passengers, plus a diner. Second-class trains consist of three or four coaches, each holding 68 passengers, with a snack bar. Ferromex GP28–2s and GP40–2s generally power the trains.



The territory served by the CH-P is populated by the Tarahumara Indian tribe. The Tarahumara are known as long-distance runners, so the CH-P logos have featured running as a theme. Here is an older version, painted on the side of a caboose, showing the person in full stride.

The story of the railroad began in 1861, when the president of Mexico granted a rail concession to Albert Kimsey Owen (1848–1916), a utopian reformer and founder of a co-operative community in Topolobampo, Sinaloa, Mexico (port city for Los Mochis). By profession, Owen was a civil engineer. Upon first seeing Topolobampo Bay in 1873, Owen's dream was to found the perfect city: a colony based on co-operative principles, complete with workers, artisans, and intellectuals, to be supplied by a railroad line from the United States. Since this would be the shortest route to the Pacific (by some 400 miles) from the great industrial cities of the U.S., Owen envisioned Topolobampo as a center for the Pacific trade. The socialist colony had failed by the turn of the century.

Despite the abandonment of the colony, Owen remained interested in the transcontinental shortcut. In 1900, Owen convinced Arthur E. Stilwell (1859–1928) and a group of Kansas City bankers to form a rail line to the Mexican coast. Work began in 1903, and parts of the line were in operation by 1909. The railroad was built as the Kansas City, Mexico & Orient Railway (popularly called "The Orient"). The revolution in Mexico (ca. 1910–20) destroyed much of that nation's KCM&O tracks, disrupted traffic, and caused income to plummet. In 1912 the bondholders threw the company into receivership. In 1914 the road was sold to the bondholders, and Stilwell was ousted from the presidency. At the end of 1925, KCM&O and the KCM&O of Texas together operated 738 miles of road; they reported a total of 330 million net ton-miles of revenue freight and 8 million passenger-miles. Oil in West Texas provided some new income and led to the sale in 1928 of the U.S. lines of the Orient to the Santa Fe Railway. The Santa Fe then sold the Mexican portions. BNSF still operates parts of the U.S. line, but only as branch lines, not as the main line that Stilwell had in mind.

KCM&O. Construction began, both westward from Chihuahua city and eastward from Topolobampo. One of the contractors on the line was Pancho Villa (1878–1923), whose violent revolution later caused much grief to the railroad.

Sleeper 505, Estado de Sinaloa, is shown at San Rafael in 1972. It was built in 1926 as Bexar for Sunset Limited service. Imagine open-window sleepers—heavyweight, no less—in U.S. train service in the 1970s!



Diner 603 (a former Union Pacific modernized heavyweight), Barranca de Oteros, at San Rafael on March 1, 1972.



1940s and 1950s. Existing companies were consolidated into the F. C. Chihuahua al Pacifico in 1956, and the ends of the CH-P were finally connected on Nov. 23, 1961. A giant sign commemorating the completion was erected at the entrance to a tunnel, above the horseshoe curve at Santa Barbara.

Passenger service



Interior of Ciudad Juarez, looking through the dining section toward the rear observation lounge on Jan. 3, 1975. tom kopriva, robert p. schmidt collection

Early trains on the completed CH-P consisted of hand-me-down heavyweight cars, mostly from the Santa Fe and Union Pacific. The principal trains

the Rio Grande river from Presidio, Texas. Travel time was listed as 24½ hours westbound and an even 24 hours eastbound. Train consists included head-end cars, coaches, a diner, and two sleepers (said to be 10 section–2 compartment–1 drawing room cars, but other configurations were used). In the early years, these trains were powered by Fairbanks-Morse H16-44 road-switchers, some equipped with steam generators, built in 1952. EMD GP28s replaced the F-Ms by the early 1970s.



Interior of diner 603. The leatherback chairs give away the UP heritage.

Several diesel railcars built by Fiat provided other services. These ran four days a week between Chihuahua city and Ojinaga, twice weekly between



Interior of sleeper 505. The porter is making up the section berths for the night; note the Pullman blanket.

Special excursion trains from the U.S. were popular, beginning in the 1960s. Private tour operators would assemble trains, including a colorful assortment of sleepers from various railroads, and run over the line as passenger Extras.



The Vista Train, location unknown, but probably not far from Chihuahua city on Sept. 27, 1971. The dome is former Missouri Pacific while diner-observation car Ciudad Juarez is a Texas Zephyr veteran, former FtW&D.
Jim Buckley

Starting in the early 1970s, a scheduled excursion train, called the *Vista Train*, ran tri-weekly between Los Mochis and Chihuahua city on a daylight schedule. The streamlined consist included two coaches (believed to be ex-Rock Island), a dome coach (ex-Missouri Pacific), and a diner-observation car (ex-Ft. Worth & Denver, a Chicago, Burlington & Quincy subsidiary). When new, this train was quite nice, but over the years reportedly the equipment was allowed to deteriorate quite a bit.

The CH-P also ran mixed-train service from La Junta (114 miles West of Chihuahua city) to Juarez, which is opposite El Paso, Texas, and on several other routes.

ancient sleepers. At some point, the eastern end of that service was cut back from Ojinaga to Chihuahua city.



The new CH-P logo on the side of a coach. This logo also suggests running, although the design is more abstract and subtle. The image suggests a running foot wearing a “huarache,” a minimal kind of footwear resembling a sandal, which is flexed because it is secured to the foot with two straps.



The modern-day El Chepe, pausing to load passengers at El Fuerte on March 9, 2017. The cars are lettered for both the railroad and the train's name.

El Chepe today

El Chepe is a wonderful ride. The coaches and diner are spotless and the ride is smooth. The railroad is not run by a bunch of control freaks—enjoying the breeze and photographing the passing scenery at an open vestibule Dutch door is allowed, and jockeying with the crowd for a place to take unobstructed photos resembles some steam fan trips I have experienced.



The coach interior of a Chepe car. Many of the passengers are older people on tour to the canyons. The 64-seat coaches currently in use were assembled in Mexico, from “kit” parts manufactured by the Japanese firm of Kinko Sharyo, in the early 1980s. The photo was taken on March 9, 2017.

Anyone can ride *El Chepe*, but reservations are required. For additional information in English visit their [website](#). The listed ticket prices might seem extremely high, but remember that the prices listed at *El Chepe* Web site are shown in Mexican Pesos. For some reason, the symbol used for the Peso is the same as the dollar sign (“\$”), which is confusing. At an exchange rate of roughly 20 Pesos to the dollar, the prices are actually quite reasonable. The other way to travel the line is with a tour group—see your travel agent or check numerous current offerings on the Web.





“Animal dancers” seek tips from travelers at the station stop in El Fuerte on March 13, 1972. I have some doubt as to whether the animal masks are authentic to the Tarahumara culture, but they are certainly impressive.

It is a great trip. Don't miss it!