

The Argonaut Remembered

by Thad H. Carter



Southern Pacific Alco PA 6066 is operating all by its lonesome self on this day's westbound No. 5, the sad remnants of the Argonaut, at one time a through train between New Orleans and Los Angeles. By the time of this photo from Aug. 7, 1962, the train had been cut back to Houston. Steve Paterson

Ms. Della walked down the rock and dirt road in Iowa, La. She had completed another hard day of hoeing other people's gardens, cleaning their houses and running their errands—on foot.

It was another hot afternoon, and the air hung heavy with south Louisiana humidity. The framed shack house in which Ms. Della's husband and 13 children lived was heavy with it. She approached their home, located across the Southern Pacific tracks from the rice mill where her husband toiled. In the distance a whining noise became louder as daily train 5, the mail run from New Orleans to Houston, approached. After discharging mail, the train's diesel began to accelerate out of town.

Ms. Della knew the noise. She had once looked over to the left up the hill to the track where the mail train rattled by. In the coach windows, she made out dusty imprints of a man with a hat, some children, and lots of empty windows. She wasn't sure where they were going. She did not know them; they did not know her. She continued walking toward her home where she would begin preparing supper. Meanwhile, No. 5 blew for the last grade crossing and was gone.

In 1956, SP's Argonaut was still a New Orleans–Los Angeles full-service train with heavyweight Pullmans, coaches, and food service. Once while on a bus rolling down highway 90 to Jennings, La., I happened to see the westbound Argonaut rounding a curve, powered by those beautiful Alco PA locomotives—a back-to-back A-unit set—clad in SP's vivid red-and-orange Daylight livery. They were pulling a rake of heavyweight Railway Express Agency cars, a Harriman-style baggage-coach, and a string of other passenger cars that on this day included a brass-railed open-platform business car at the rear.

Even though we rode the Argonaut at times, it was only between Lafayette and Lake Charles. Yet, during the short jaunt, dad would take me to the hamburger grill car for a cinnamon roll. White-jacketed attendants took verbal orders and served food.



Led by an SP FP7A in the railroad's revered "black widow" scheme—black, silver, and orange—the eastbound Argonaut at Wilcox, Ariz., on April 20, 1958 shows about a dozen head-end cars in front of the passenger-carrying section. The Argonaut spent a large part of its life obscured by the Sunset. M. D. MC Carter, Thad Carter collection

In the late 1950s and through the 1960s, SP was on a campaign to eliminate secondary and, later, primary passenger trains. This was due to real and perceived losses as operational costs soared and ridership decreased. In 1958, the Argonaut was cut back to being a New Orleans–Houston train, No. 5 westbound and No. 6 east. The name was dropped in the process, though some still called it the Argonaut. Gone were the Pullmans and food-service cars. Passengers on No. 5 could avail themselves of a food stop at Lafayette where the train stayed long enough for a short walk to a nearby cafe for a quick bite.

The former-Argonaut's consist had been reduced to a couple of REA cars, a Railway Post Office, and a single coach. Occasionally a fluted-side Daylight-

scheme baggage car would follow the lead unit. Two Pullman-Standard “American Flyer” coaches had been brought over from SP subsidiary St. Louis-Southwestern (the Cotton Belt) to serve on Nos. 5 and 6. Built by Pullman-Standard’s Osgood-Bradley facility as an early attempt at streamlining, these coaches were nicknamed “American Flyer” cars because the A. C. Gilbert Company manufactured models of them for its American Flyer toy train line.

Power for the Argonaut by this time had been reduced to a single unit: usually a PA painted in SP’s “bloody nose” simplified paint scheme. PAs were seldom seen on the route’s premier train, the Sunset, by this time having been replaced by SP F-units.

Occasionally 5 and 6 were pulled by Electro-Motive GP9s equipped with steam generators for train heating. On rare occasions, a single EMD FP7 powered the little train. I once left Lafayette on No. 5 behind an SP F-unit wearing the early “black widow” scheme.

Stops on the train were frequent. In addition to scheduled stops at Schriever, Morgan City, New Iberia, Lafayette, Crowley, Jennings, Lake Charles, Orange, and Beaumont, a variety of towns held flagstop status. Living in little Iowa, La., I often was the only passenger to be let off in town after having boarded with a 75-cent ticket at Jennings.



Another view of No. 5 taken on Aug. 7, 1962, shows it in the station at Lafayette. Judging by the 1958 photo of the real Argonaut at left, No. 5 and counterpart 6 were emaciated survivors; mail contracts were probably what kept the New Orleans–Houston remnants hanging on as long as they did. Note how SP operating practices called for a train's number being displayed in what was normally the locomotive's number boards on the nose of the unit. Only a few other U.S. railroads observed this practice, chief among them the Union Pacific. Steve Paterson, Thad Carter collection

Most towns along the route had mail cranes. The postal employee would hang a single mail bag on the device. As the mail train rolled into town, the RPO clerk would swing out a hook to catch the bag, neatly swinging it into the RPO. At the same time, he might toss off a mail bag filled with letters.

Our local mail courier for 5 and 6 was Mr. Stutsman, an elderly gentleman who walked to the local post office, retrieved a bag, and mounted it on the

mail crane at the Iowa station. The depot was gone at Iowa, so the wait for No. 5 was done in a small hut.

One afternoon, the mail train roared through town, but instead of hooking the mail bag properly, the hook severed it and scattered first-class letters for nearly a mile. The postmaster was on the scene a few minutes later, and a hunt ensued through the tall weeds to retrieve every single letter. Number 5 did not bother to stop or even slow down on its trek to Houston.

One afternoon, No. 5 slowed to a stop and Mr. Stutsman's elderly brother was helped down off the vestibule. He had come for a visit from New Orleans. It was a long jump from the bottom step to the ballast, but he made it with help from the conductor. There were no handicapped cars on the train.

Inevitably, Nos. 5 and 6 were discontinued following a series of ICC hearings. The last time I saw what was left of No. 5, it was minus its coach. The baggage car and the mail car were operating in the consist of the local freight that ran daily from Lafayette to Lake Charles. Whether being deadheaded or completing its mail contract, I don't know. It was a very unglamorous ending for what had once been a crack New Orleans–Los Angeles passenger train on Southern Pacific's Sunset Route.

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