

Union Pacific's Butte Special

by Thornton Waite

The Butte Special was a Union Pacific passenger train connecting Butte, Mont., and Salt Lake City, Utah, providing a vital service to the sparsely populated area in eastern Idaho and southwestern Montana—an area with poor roads to boot. UP provided this passenger service between the two cities for 90 years, operating the trains under a variety of names and numbers. As a night train, the Butte Special had sleeping cars and coaches and survived until Amtrak began on May 1, 1971, albeit on a tri-weekly schedule. It was one of the few north-south UP passenger trains in UP's world of numerous east-west services.



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UP's Butte Special following arrival at its Montana namesake in July 1969. The UP used the Northern Pacific depot here, and the Butte Special even had its own dedicated track. On this day, a number of people off the Butte Special transferred to the eastbound North Coast Limited. mike schaffer

UP's Salt Lake City–Butte line began life in 1871 as the Utah Northern Railroad, later reorganized under the auspices of UP and rail baron Jay Gould as the Utah & Northern Railway. Established by the Mormons, the railroad initially was a three-foot narrow-gauge operation extending northward from Union Pacific's transcontinental main line—the Overland Route—at Ogden through the Cache Valley in Utah. At Pocatello, Idaho, 134 miles north of Ogden, U&N intersected another UP subsidiary, the Oregon Short Line Railway, which built a direct route between UP's Overland Route at Granger, Wyo., and Huntington, Ore. Pocatello thus became an important interchange location for UP.

The next major city on the line to Butte is Idaho Falls, where cars were sometimes interchanged to and from trains plying the Yellowstone Branch. From Idaho Falls it was a 200-mile trip through remote countryside to Butte, the end of the line.

In 1881, even before U&N reached Butte, the railroad advertised a daily express train and two freight trains over the 354 miles between Ogden and Melrose, Mont.—the end of the line at the time and a mere 38 miles short of Butte. The gap was short-lived, with U&N reaching Butte by the end of 1881. U&N trackage actually ended at Silver Bow, Mont., where trains entered trackage rights on Northern Pacific for the remaining seven miles into Butte.

Line or simply the “Short Line.” Complete conversion of former U&N trackage to standard gauge did not occur until 1890. Technically, the new Short Line was not fully absorbed into UP until the end of 1987—nearly a century after the two subsidiaries were merged!

Passenger operations in the early years

In the operation’s first decades, UP’s through trains between Salt Lake City, Ogden, and Butte were pretty much the conventional passenger trains of the era: locomotive, baggage, express, mail, and passenger cars. After the branch lines off UP’s Butte main line were constructed, mainline trains could make connections with branchline runs, some of which were mixed trains—that is, freight trains also providing limited passenger accommodations.

None of the Salt Lake City/Ogden–Butte trains were particularly fast. In 1885 it took 23 hours to travel between Ogden and Butte, and the last scheduled passenger trains in 1971 took approximately 12 hours to travel between Salt Lake City and Butte, a distance of 433 miles. In the beginning years of operation, the trains were scheduled to connect with the transcontinental trains at Pocatello, so the departure and arrival times at Butte were not always at a convenient time.

The first sleeping cars on the line ran in 1881; the railroad reported that it owned five Pullman sleeping cars in 1885, but no dining cars. The narrow-gauge sleeping cars were so small that the berths were too short for a six-foot-tall person. By 1885, U&N was advertising a daily express train, two fast freights, and two more third-class (freight) trains in each direction. The first passenger trains usually comprised a mail-baggage-express car, a smoking car, a passenger coach, and a Pullman sleeping car.



It is May 23, 1947, and UP train No. 34, the Northwest Special, calls at Idaho Falls. Power on this day is 4-6-2 Pacific engine No. 3114. author's collection

In the route's earliest years, when the Utah & Northern was a narrow-gauge line, the postal service ran several different RPO lines. The mail route line was changed from the Franklin & Ogden on Jan. 13, 1880, to become the Terminus & Ogden, and it became the Red Rock & Ogden on June 1, 1880. It reverted to the Terminus & Ogden on Feb. 16, 1881, until Jan. 10, 1882. On that date it became the Butte City & Ogden, and on Dec. 18, 1882, it became the Deer Lodge City & Ogden. By Sept. 28, 1883, it was known as the Garrison Junction & Ogden. This ended on Sept. 28, 1883, when it became the Garrison

known by this name through July 27, 1897, when it became the Butte & Salt Lake City. This continued until the RPO route was discontinued on Oct. 13, 1967, with an interruption of the period between Nov. 23, 1917 and Aug. 24, 1918, during which the route was divided into two parts—the Butte & Spencer and the Spencer & Salt Lake City.

UP's line to Montana never rated the latest equipment, but at the turn of the 20th Century the railroad advertised its new buffet, smoking, and library cars which were available on the connecting trains between Chicago and Salt Lake City. The advertisements noted that these cars, introduced in 1896, were the first such cars in service west of the Missouri River and that connections were easily available over the line to Butte.

In 1900 the Short Line advertised train service to Butte showing connections with Union Pacific; Denver & Rio Grande; Southern Pacific; and the Oregon Railway & Navigation Company. The January 1908 OSL timetable gives a good indication of what passenger travel was like early in the century. There were two trains a day in each direction between Salt Lake City and Butte. Trains 7 and 9, both named the Butte & Portland, ran between Salt Lake City and Butte, taking approximately 15–16 hours for the trip. The southbound trains, No. 8, the Salt Lake & Eastern, and No. 10, the Salt Lake Express, took approximately the same amount of time. Connections were made with branchline trains at Idaho Falls as well as with the mainline trains at Pocatello, Ogden, and Salt Lake City. There was additional service between Salt Lake City and Ogden as well as between Salt Lake City and Pocatello and Idaho Falls. Over the years many of the trains carried dining cars, but when the trains did not have a dining car, meal stops were made at places such as Lima, where food was available at the Club House, or at Dillon.



Train No. 31, the Butte Express, departs Salt Lake City in July 1940 with Union Pacific No. 7869, a 4-8-2 Mountain type, in charge. al phelps, author's collection

The first through service from Montana to Southern California was announced on Nov. 27, 1911, when the Butte Miner newspaper reported that on the following Thursday, Nov. 30, through Los Angeles–Butte sleepers would be run over the new (in 1905) San Pedro, Los Angeles & Salt Lake Railroad. In 1919, the United States Railroad Administration, which had been operating the nation's railroads during World War I, continued service between Salt Lake City and Butte (see Table 3) with somewhat lengthened schedules, presumably to cope with postwar-related traffic. It's interesting to note that the trains were listed by number only; names had temporarily been banished. This daily service of two trains each way continued into the Great Depression, with some notable schedule and time adjustments.

war. However, it was reinstated in late 1942 or early 1943. The day trains' unprofitability led UP to apply to the Idaho Public Utilities Commission in 1949 to discontinue trains 33 and 34 between Idaho Falls and the Montana state line. Hearings were held, and despite the protests of the railroad unions and merchants at locations such as Idaho Falls and Dubois, permission to discontinue the train was granted. In that year Union Pacific reported that in Montana it received \$94,478 in passenger revenue, \$85,764 in mail revenue, \$12,946 in express revenue, and \$2,126 in milk revenue, compared to \$1,702,935 in revenue from transporting freight. These figures show how important the mail and express business was to the operations of the passenger trains, since the head-end revenue was greater than the passenger revenue. The IPUC found that there was insufficient use of the trains and that alternate modes of transportation, notably bus service and private automobiles, were available. Permission to discontinue the train was granted on June 11, 1949, requiring the railroad to give 10 days notice prior to actual discontinuance. At this time the night train, Nos. 29/30, was renamed the Butte Special.

Butte Special in the post-World War II era



Train No. 33, the Northwest Special, is southbound three miles north of Humphrey, Idaho, on May 30, 1948. Union Pacific 4-8-2 Mountain type No. 7027 has more than enough power to haul the three cars. The train was discontinued the following year. h. r. griffiths jr., author's collection

Although the day train was discontinued, business on the night train was increasing, reflecting its overnight scheduling, the Butte Special had one or more sleeping cars in its consists. In 1950, UP announced it was adding new sleepers with bedrooms and roomettes to accommodate increasing traffic between Butte and Salt Lake City and Los Angeles. The new cars had air-conditioning, fluorescent lighting, and augmented the existing dining car, coaches, and sleepers.

The first lightweight American-series Pullman cars were ordered by Union Pacific which acquired 42 examples. Overland Route partners Southern

Streamliner trains, so that service frequency could become daily. These cars were built by Pullman-Standard in 1941–42, and were immediately pressed into service as an invaluable aid to the railroads' effort in moving wartime traffic. With a capacity of 26 passengers each, these cars had four double bedrooms on the vestibule end, six roomettes in the center, and six open sections on the other end—otherwise known as a 6–6–4.

Union Pacific ordered another four American-series sleeping cars following World War II. These came from American Car & Foundry in 1949 with the same arrangement of bedrooms, roomettes, and sections, making them a very versatile car on all classes of trains. The four AC&F-built cars were American Border, American Consulate, American General, and American View. As the years passed, many of the older American-series of cars were retired from revenue service and were converted into maintenance-of-way sleeping cars in the 1970s.



Certainly not under-powered, the northbound Butte Special is on the last lap of its trip into Butte rolling along the Northern Pacific main line parallel to The Milwaukee Road's Pacific Extension main line between Silver Bow and Butte on May 27, 1951. A 4-6-6-4 Challenger, No. 3801, heads up this run. author's collection

Although it was the only Salt Lake–Butte train after 1949, the Butte Special remained an integral part of UP's far-reaching fleet of passenger trains. At Salt Lake City, the southbound Special made connections with Los Angeles-bound trains as well as mail train No. 5. The eastbound City of Los Angeles was advertised as a connection to the northbound Butte Special, but requiring an all-day layover. Mail train No. 6 out of Los Angeles had a better connection, but no amenities beyond its coach seats. At Butte, the Special made connections with Northern Pacific's North Coast Limited, allowing travel between Salt Lake City and St. Paul, Minn., for example—although in later years the eastbound NCL connection at Butte was a rather tight 15 minutes. The Special did, however, make decent connections with the NP bus that shuttled between Butte and Garrison, Mont., where it connected with the Mainstreeter on its route through the southern tier of Montana. Decent connections with Milwaukee Road's Olympian Hiawatha were also available when that train was introduced in 1947, although a schedule change involving the westbound Olympian Hi in the 1950s lengthened that connection quite a bit.

At Pocatello, where the Butte Special crossed paths with UP's Short Line, passengers out of Chicago on the City of Portland could transfer to the Butte Special and vice versa, though the eastbound connection was in the wee hours off the morning

UP rarely advertised its Butte service in later years. The Butte Special was, however, used by businessmen, especially those traveling between Butte and Salt Lake City. The train provided transportation not only for passengers but for mail and express and was an essential form of transportation in the harsh winter months when roads were often snowed shut.

Although train accommodations changed over the years, the train schedules did not vary much. Since the trains had a 12-hour layover at its endpoints, there was plenty of time to service and clean the cars. The trains used a special spur track on the west side of Northern Pacific's Butte depot, while Northern Pacific trains used the mainline tracks in front of the depot.

In 1962, UP converted sleepers American General and American View into a 6-4-4 arrangement. The two sections that were removed became a small dining and kitchen area. These two cars were used on the Butte Special trains, one for each direction, and replaced the train's previous café-lounge car. When there was a relatively large dinner crowd, the sections could be fitted with tables and used as an expanded dining area.

By the late 1960s, the only remaining passenger train on UP's Montana Subdivision was the Butte Special, then running as trains 35 and 36. The final nail in the coffin for the train was the Interstate highway system: Construction of I-15 between Salt Lake City and Butte caused UP's passenger traffic to drop.

For many years, Railway Post Office and express business were the only reasons UP could justify operation of some of its passenger trains, but even before this the railroad was petitioning to discontinue the Butte Special. When the Post Office canceled the RPO contracts, Union Pacific was able to discontinue or cut back much of its remaining passenger service. The Interstate

subsidize the losses using its freight revenues. Interestingly, there was little indication that UP ran late trains or that the trains were dirty or poorly maintained.

In 1967, UP petitioned the Board of Railroad Commissioners in Montana to discontinue Pullman sleeping-car service, but permission was denied. On Dec. 20, 1967, UP petitioned the ICC to discontinue train No. 35 (the Butte Special from Salt Lake City to Butte) and No. 36 (the Butte Special from Butte to Salt Lake City) effective Jan. 22, 1968. Following widespread public protest, the ICC ordered the railroad to continue train operations another four months, through May 22, 1968, while it considered the petition. Public hearings were held at Salt Lake City, Ogden, Pocatello, Idaho Falls, Dillon, and Butte, all cities on the route.

The hearings showed that the Butte Special was the only remaining north-south passenger schedule serving these communities. The northbound train took 12 hours, leaving Salt Lake City at 7:30pm and arriving at Butte at 7:30am. The southbound train left Butte at 7:30pm and arrived at 7am the next morning. This equated to an average speed of 33 m.p.h., including the 53 station stops (most of them conditional).

Normal motive power in the early 1960s was two E9 diesels, but beginning in 1965 freight cars were added to the train between Salt Lake City and Pocatello, requiring a third diesel. This freight was piggyback and other high-priority business destined from Salt Lake City, Clearfield, and Ogden to the Pacific Northwest. It was coupled behind the passenger cars, complete with a caboose at the end of the train. Freight cars were handled on the Butte Special about four times a week, and the trains' length was limited by Idaho regulations to 30 cars.

Butte, which returned empty. On Dec. 1, 1967, the Railway Express Agency removed its messengers from the Butte Special and began transporting express by truck.



The Butte Special has recently arrived at Salt Lake City with a baggage car, one of two modified American-series sleeping cars, and two coaches in this late 1960s view, taken sometime after the November 1967 discontinuance of the U.S. Mail RPO contract. author's collection

The ICC felt that the Butte Special's continued operation was essential to the local economies and as a dependable form of transportation in inclement weather. They concluded that the railroad should operate the train three times a week.

Union Pacific introduced a tri-weekly schedule on June 1, 1968. It went north on Thursdays, Saturdays, and Mondays, and south from Butte on Fridays, Sundays, and Tuesdays. A total of 51 stations were served by this time, of which 18 were flag stops. Losses continued to mount, however, and on April 9, 1970, UP again petitioned the ICC to allow discontinuance of the train effective May 13. Again, the ICC required a four-month waiting period, until Sept. 15, to make its decision. Hearings were again held in Salt Lake City,

with two locomotives used in the winter months to provide adequate steam heat. Passenger cars were in the 5400- and 5500-series, the same as those used on the railroad's streamliners, and the baggage cars were from the 6300-series.

The ICC concluded that the operation of the tri-weekly train would not impose an undue burden on Union Pacific. Some thoughts were expressed concerning whether a daytime train would be preferable to the night train.

The states of Idaho and Montana felt that a mixed-train service between Salt Lake City and Butte should be provided. There was no clear reason why the railroad couldn't provide a mixed train service to Butte, especially since it had run a mixed train from Salt Lake City to Pocatello starting in 1965. The ICC also noted that the railroad had not actively promoted the use of the Butte Special and seemed more interested in discontinuing it.

With the arrival of Amtrak on May 1, 1971, the Butte Special, one of Union Pacific's few remaining passenger trains, was discontinued, ending almost a century of railroad passenger service in eastern Idaho. UP's final Butte Special, No. 30, departed from Butte on April 30.



NP at Silver Bow as an NP switcher works local industries in the distance.
both, Jim Heuer

Newspapers ran obligatory articles on the last run, and the need for continued passenger service. A journalist from the Idaho Falls Post Register reported on his ride from Idaho Falls south. The train, which was scheduled to arrive at 12:45am on the morning of May 1, came in at 1:10am. Eight passengers boarded the last run at Idaho Falls. The reporter noted that the cars, although worn, were in good condition and comfortable. Even Idaho Falls, one of the larger towns along the line, no longer had a ticket agent, and fewer than 100 passengers had boarded the trains there during the previous month. Fewer than 40 passengers a day had boarded the train in Idaho in the previous year. Greyhound bus service was faster, with tickets costing the same as a railroad ticket, and Western Airlines took less than an hour to reach Salt Lake City.