Cooking on the Southern Pacific

For the kitchen crew of a 1920's dining car, life was defined by long hours, hard work, and race

By Thomas C. Fleming, with Max Millard

THOMAS FLEMING COLLECTION

In a photo taken during his tenure as an SP cook, Thomas Fleming, age 21, is seen in Berkeley, Calif.

IT WAS IN JUNE 1927 that I arrived back home in the San Francisco Bay Area to try to find work on the railroads. I was just 19, but in reality I was the head of the house. My sister Kate had not gone out into the world yet, and my mother worked as a domestic. I gave her most of what I earned because she had a house to run.

Most passenger trains in the Bay Area stopped in my hometown of Oakland. The Bay Bridge and the Golden Gate Bridge had not been built yet, so railroad passengers from the north or east had to cross the bay by ferry. The only train arriving in San Francisco from out of state was Southern Pacific's *Sunset Limited* from New Orleans.

Oakland had plenty of trains, though. It also had the state's largest black population outside of Los Angeles. I figured this was because Oakland was a railroad terminal. Blacks went where they could get jobs. Southern Pacific, Western Pacific, and Santa Fe all had terminals in Oakland, and all hired blacks, not only for dining cars, but as chair-car porters and, in the yards, for maintenance crews. SP hired the most because it operated more trains than the other two combined.

Catching on as the fourth cook

I'd heard that both SP and the Pullman Company put on extra cars in summer, which meant bigger train crews. Pullman, which owned and operated most of the sleeping cars, club cars, and observation cars on U.S. railroads, had a maintenance yard in nearby Richmond, but I went instead to the SP commissary in West Oakland to look for openings. The man at the dispatcher's window said, "No," but told me to stick around and wrote down my name. Several other black men were there, waiting, including some students looking for summer jobs.

I stayed until 4 p.m. that day, and went back for two more days. Finally the dispatcher came out and offered me a job as fourth cook. He signed me up and told me the number of my dining car, which was in the yard being stocked for a trip to Los Angeles the next morning.

When I entered the dining car, the chef gave me a white jacket, checkered denim trousers, and a white cap (which all cooks wore), then sent me to the commissary with a waiter to get supplies.

As I walked through the yard, I saw many men and women maintenance workers, mostly black,

INTERIOR OF HEAVYWEIGHT SP DINING CAR: SP PHOTO, JOHN R. SIGNOR COLLECTION; ILLUSTRATIONS FROM SP BOOKLET "FIRST CALL FOR DINNER," 1926

all over and inside the cars, hosing them down, cleaning them with brushes, and using vacuum cleaners on the seats. Some carried coal for the ranges in the kitchens. Others installed ice in rooftop air-conditioning compartments.

The commissary was a combination warehouse and kitchen supplying all food and beverages sold on SP trains leaving Oakland. Southern Pacific had everything the public would get in a luxury hotel—lamb chops, pork chops, filet mignon, chateaubriand, fresh green vegetables, milk in 10-gallon cans, cases of eggs, fresh fish, shrimp, oysters, and lobsters. We carried it all in a big two-wheel hand truck.

The commissary bakery made pound cakes and raisin bread, and it packaged special flour mixes for biscuits, shortcake, muffins, and hotcakes—all you had to do was add milk and stir. They even gave us dough for pies.

The chef took me over to a large grindstone and showed me how to sharpen knives. Most cooks had their own personal knives and large kitchen forks. Apart from that, all we had to furnish was our shoes.

The chef was the boss

The jobs were sharply defined. The chef was the boss of the kitchen: he ordered all the sup-

ABOVE: SP PHOTO, JOHN R. SIGNOR COLLECTION; RIGHT: JOHN R. SIGNOR COLLECTION

When Fleming worked SP trains into Los Angeles, he arrived at the old SP/Union Pacific Central Station on Alameda Street, torn down to make way for 1939's LAUPT.

plies and handled the charcoal broiler, on which he broiled steak, poultry, and fish. The second cook made the soups, cooked the roasts in the oven, and handed out orders to the waiters. The third cook was the fry cook; he worked the range.

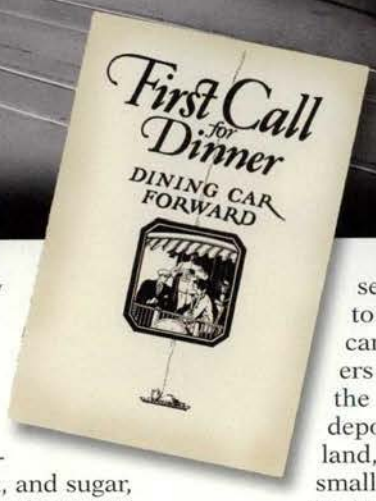
The fourth cook was primarily the dishwasher, but you also had to peel potatoes, shell peas, clean vegetables, and help with whatever the chef or second cook asked you to do. Sometimes they'd put you on the frying pan because they were supposed to be teaching you to be a cook so you might be promoted to third cook, then second cook, and eventually chef.

The only white person in the dining car was the steward, who was nominally the foreman of the whole crew. He saw that every procedure was followed religiously by the waiters. When a diner paid for his meal, the waiter turned over the receipt and money to the steward, with the exception of the tip.

Next in authority was the pantryman. He was a sort of headwaiter whose duty was to keep the pantry clean, to take care of supplies like butter, salt, and sugar, and to see that the silverware, plates, and assorted linen were well stocked. The dining car used real silver and white linen tablecloths that were changed for every passenger.

On the morning of my first trip, before passengers boarded, the chef got me started shelling a 50-pound sack of green peas. A switch engine began to push us backward toward the Oakland Mole, SP's distinctive pier station which served ferry passengers from the Ferry Building in San Francisco.

Both the Mole and the Ferry Building had large crews of black redcap porters. Some came over from San Francisco, pulling handcarts lined with baggage and assisting the passengers right to the railroad cars. Many others worked at the 16th Street depot in Oakland, or the much smaller SP station in San Francisco at Third and Townsend streets, terminus for the *Sunset Limited*, the *Daylight*, the *Lark*, and the *Padre*.



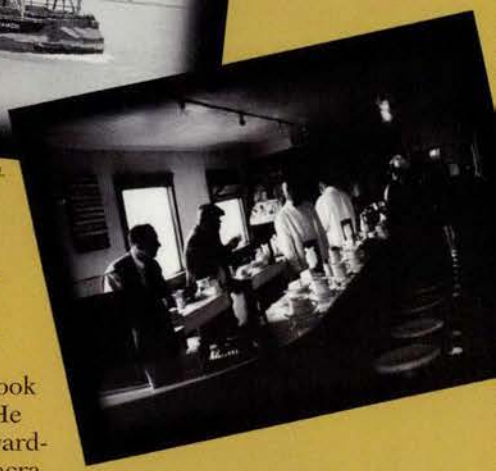
Our train departed promptly at 8 a.m. I felt a thrill as the train really began to roll and a waiter came into the pantry and shouted his first order through the window.

The crew was kept busy as more and more passengers arrived for breakfast. We fried potatoes and eggs any style and kept toast orders going on the grill. Mothers with infants gave their bottles to the waiters; we filled them with milk and heated them up.

At noon we were ready again for the "snakes," as our chef

Ferry duty

ABOVE: A.R. ALTER; RIGHT: DAVE MERRIL



Fleming's first job was as a waiter at the lunch counter aboard the Sacramento Northern carferry *Ramon*, shown crossing the Carquinez Strait.

While attending high school in Chico, Calif., in the 1920's before I joined the Southern Pacific, I used to be awake every night when the last Sacramento Northern train arrived. I would often meet with a waiter on the train, Bill Shorey, a happy-go-lucky guy four or five years older than I. He was the son of Capt. William Shorey, who had commanded a whaling vessel in San Francisco at the turn of the century. He was the first black resident of Oakland to have a street named after him.

Late one night in January 1927, I heard a tapping on the window and Bill's voice calling my name. When I looked out, he asked if I wanted a job as a waiter. "Yes," I answered. He told me to pack a bag and be at the depot at 6:30 in the morning.

The train stopped at the Carquinez Strait, which all trains from the north had to cross on their way to Oakland. I was to work six days a week as a waiter on the SN railroad ferry Ramon. It had a kitchen crew of three black men. My pay would be $60 a month, plus the few tips I could squeeze from passengers.

Our living quarters were a one-room hut on stilts over the water. We went there every night about 8 o'clock after the last train passed through. Amenities were few. There was no place to bathe except in a galvanized tub, for which we had to haul hot water from the ferry.

The hut was home for swarms of marsh mice. Every night when we went to bed, we had to shake the blankets and sheets, and invariably a mouse or two would be thrown out. They scurried back after we turned out the light, and we had to keep knocking them off the bed.

On my second day on the ferry, a tall, distinguished-looking brown-skinned man got off the train and walked into the kitchen. He looked me over and asked, did I think I could stay out there? I realized he was George Dunlap, boss of the food department for the Sacramento Northern. I told him the hut would be all right.

Dunlap had been a cook on an SP business car. He had sought, and was awarded, the contract from Sacramento Northern to operate two dining cars and the lunch counter on the ferries. In later years, when SN ceased hauling passengers, Dunlap converted the upper part of his two-story house in Sacramento into a restaurant.

The white crew on the Ramon consisted of a captain and four deckhands whose sleeping quarters were on the ferry. They worked for several days, then another crew took their place. All of them had homes in nearby communities such as Pittsburg. It was the home port for a number of commercial fishing boats owned by Italian-Americans, and sometimes they would pull up to the ferry slip and give us a big bass or some other fish—a welcome change in our diets.

I was lonesome most of the time. The monotony was relieved only when the passenger trains crossed over and the crewmen gave us daily papers from Sacramento, Oakland, and San Francisco. The biggest topic of conversation among us exiles was Charles Lindbergh's flight across the Atlantic in May 1927. We talked about it for days.

In June, when I got my day off, I stayed at home two days instead of one. When I came back, George Dunlap was there. He curtly asked, where did I wish to go, to Chico or Oakland? I knew I was fired. I told him Oakland, so he paid me off and I left on the next train, bound for work on SP dining cars.—*Thomas C. Fleming*

called the passengers. We heard a waiter going through the cars calling "First call for lunch!" while beating on chimes. We made hot dishes such as lamb curry—an SP staple—with delicious chunks of lamb cut from the leg only. Sometimes we had corned beef served with cabbage, or a roast of either prime rib or beef. We had to make pies of several varieties every day.

Dinner in Tehachapi

Over several hours our train stopped at small towns all through the San Joaquin Valley. Fresno was an important icing stop for refrigerator cars hauling California perishables, and our stopover was also long—about 20 minutes—as the train took on water for the locomotive, coal for the kitchen range, and chopped ice for the dining car and each passenger car.

At about the halfway point between Fresno and Los Angeles, the bleak countryside appeared deserted of everything but jackrabbits hopping about and tumbleweed rolling across the hot, dry land. The kitchen was like an oven. About 4 o'clock, the cooks went back to the kitchen and began to work in earnest.

The train slowed and crawled through a long yard—Bakersfield. It wasn't long before a hard shake let us know a second locomotive had been added, to help take the train on the climb through Tehachapi Pass.

We began to climb, plunging into the numerous tunnels that marked the Tehachapi line. Smoke poured through the train,

creating an unpleasant odor. We looked out when the train went around curves and saw the two locomotives straining.

The dining car filled up, emptied, and filled up twice more before the work began to slow down. Somewhere east of the town of Tehachapi, we stopped so the helper locomotive could be uncoupled.

Beyond Mojave we moved out across California's high desert toward Lancaster and Palmdale, an area of awesome natural beauty. Occasionally I would see coyotes and badgers, or buzzards slowly circling in the sky. Once I saw a wildcat.

The train sped through the night to Glendale and Burbank, the last stops before Los Angeles. The waiters were anxious to get rid of any loiterers who sat at the tables talking in the comfortable dining room. When the last passenger—or "snake two," as my colleague Fred Turner described it—had departed, the waiters removed the table covers, polished the silverware, and sacked up the linen, including the cooks' clothes.

In a ritual that would be familiar to Fleming, a Milwaukee Road dining-car chef prepares meat in the galley.

HENRY J. MCCORD

The dining cars were spiffy. The kitchen floor had a sheet of copper bolted in place, fitted with wooden slats that covered every square inch. I had to wash and scrub the slats until they were almost white, then stand them on their sides while we mopped the copper flooring. We oiled the stove on top, cleaned the range and charcoal grills, polished the coffee urn, and cleaned and put away the crocks on the steam table, so everything was shining bright.

A night in L.A.

The waiters who had a place to go—either a woman to see, or some nightclub—changed into their street clothes. All the cooks kept their uniforms on. I put on my own hat and jacket. When the train reached the immense Taylor Yard, we slowed down considerably, finally pulling into huge Central Station (replaced in 1939 by today's Los Angeles Union Passenger Terminal). The redcaps swarmed alongside, and we got off as fast as the passengers did.

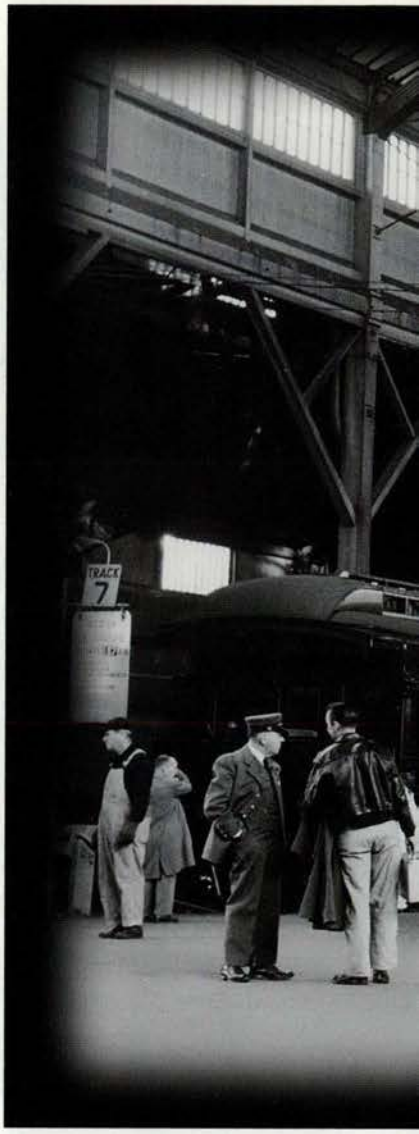
SP had a contract with a black man who operated a fleabag hotel on Alameda Avenue, across the street from the depot. It catered exclusively to blacks—mainly to rail workers. The ground floor had a pool hall, a fast-food place, and a recreation center. The three upper floors were all bedrooms. The owner had some prostitutes working the upstairs floors, and supplied bad booze for those who suffered from a great thirst; this was during Prohibition.

Some pool sharks made the hotel their headquarters, to take advantage of the train crews. I watched the hustlers and their prey work out with their cues.

The railroad paid for the room, which I shared with another dining-car cook. The sheets were clean, but the building had a woebegone appearance, and a musty smell pervaded the whole structure.

At 6 a.m. we heard a loud knock on our door: the hotel clerk did this for all the crew members. We struggled out of bed, walked downstairs, and crossed the street to the station, where our train was already positioned for our return trip. Departure time was 8 a.m.

The stewards stayed at a hotel that catered to whites. I think that's the way they wanted it; they didn't mingle. Some of the stewards were popular, some weren't, but they seemed to look down on the blacks as being beneath them, even though most of them had no more education than the black men they supervised.



If any of us had a friend among the passengers, we'd tell the steward, and he would allow the person to get a meal free after all the paying guests had left. Once I had two friends who let me know the day before they were traveling, and I used my prerogative. They were provided with a waiter who attended them like paying guests.

My colleague Fred Turner was a former professional boxer who said little to anyone. He was one of three brothers from Salt Lake City who came to San Francisco and now worked for the railroad. All three were prizefighters when they were young.

Joe, the eldest brother, became a local star in the featherweight class. He had a fearsome punch and knocked out opponents larger than himself, which caused most fighters in his

FRED H. MATTHEWS JR.

Fleming frequently worked trains out of the Oakland Mole. On February 3, 1952, two decades after his time on the SP, the *City of San Francisco* is ready to depart on track 9.

weight class to avoid him. He often had to fight men as big as middleweights. The story was told that when Joe was just a third cook, the SP commissary superintendent became so excited during a fight that he shouted from ringside, "Knock the bum out, and I'll make you a chef tomorrow!" Joe knocked him cold. Evidently the superintendent kept his promise, for Joe was jumped over the second cook and promoted to chef.

Fred followed Joe into the ring, but eventually went to work for SP, where he rose from fourth cook to chef. Fred never did think his brother was much of a cook, but Joe kept his job until he retired in the 1940's.

The food was always fresh

The chefs were very professional and had a lot of imagination. Our menus were varied, and the food was always fresh—nothing canned. The hamburger was made with a hand-operated meat grinder. If the main dish was roast pork, I had to peel the apples and make stewed applesauce as a condiment. When chickens were boiled for chicken salad or fricassee, the stock was placed in gallon cans and saved for sauces and gravy. We made lamb casserole with carrots and baby white onions, and placed each order in the oven in a separate glazed clay casserole dish with a lid. Before serving, we spooned peas on top with a bit of chopped parsley.

We generally had about three different vegetables for lunch and dinner, plus mashed potatoes, rice, and sometimes candied yams. We prepared all the desserts on the train except the pound cake. The chefs made real cooks out of us; after some time on the SP, we were capable of working in any fine restaurant. But most fine restaurants didn't hire black chefs.

The railroad had two black supervisors who made periodic inspections of dining-car crews: Henderson Davis, the traveling chef, and Max Hall, the traveling headwaiter. They traveled the system checking kitchens, dining rooms, and pantries.

Over a long career at SP, Davis had worked his way up to chef. As inspector, he remained in the kitchen during mealtime, watching closely to see how the food was cooked. Hall had performed equally well as a waiter, and both men could analyze whether someone who was not performing according to company rules could keep his job.

Thomas Fleming, railroad man

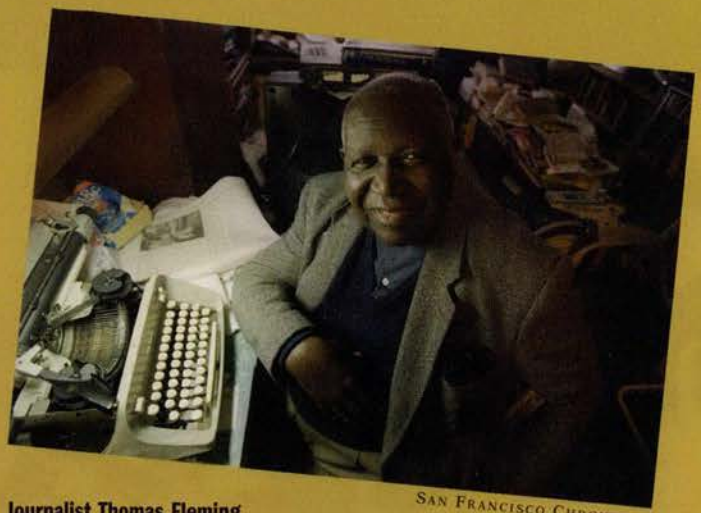
THOMAS C. FLEMING, 94, is the West Coast's oldest and longest-tenured black journalist. A co-founder in 1944 of the *Sun-Reporter*, San Francisco's leading African-American newspaper, he continues to write for the paper each week from his home.

Born in Jacksonville, Fla., Fleming was initially raised by his grandmother, whom he believes was a former slave. In 1919, at age 11, he moved to the small town of Chico in California's Sacramento Valley. In 1927, a year after graduating from Chico High School and his short stint on a Sacramento Northern carferry, Fleming was hired by Southern Pacific, where he spent almost five years as a cook.

In February 1996, he saw the public TV program "Crossroads: A Story of West Oakland," which told of the city's railroad history. This inspired Fleming to write his own railroad memoirs, which ran as a series in the *Sun-Reporter*.

Those columns form the backbone for this article. To flesh it out, I spent many hours at Fleming's home with a tape recorder, drawing new details from him and later merging his written and spoken words. Then I went over the text with him line by line, and made his requested changes.

Fleming welcomes e-mail at tflemingsf@aol.com. His railroad stories are part of a book-length project on black history, still in progress. For more of his railroad writings, check out his web site at: www.freepress.org/fleming/fleming.html.—*Max Millard*



SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

Journalist Thomas Fleming at work in his home office in San Francisco.

The inspectors did not want anyone to know when they were going to be aboard, but when we passed a train coming toward us, one of us would signal if the inspectors were waiting at the oncoming train's next stop. Thus would begin a frenzy to get things in order. We never had much to straighten up, though, because our chef and our pantryman saw to it that everything on our train was clean all the time.

Allan Pollak, general manager of SP's dining-car service, frequently left his San Francisco office and traveled on inspection. I recall one time when Pollak was on the car at the same time as Davis and Hall. The two black men did what we called a great Uncle Tom act, and were very caustic in their comments to the crew. We knew they were just trying to impress their boss.

I served as fourth cook for only two or three trips, then was moved up to third cook and even made a couple of trips as second cook. I was lucky that first year: I survived the customary layoffs after the heavy tourist trade in late August.

Black on a white railroad

We worked for "Aunt Mary": that was the nickname the black workers gave to the Southern Pacific. The railroad was a giant in California—the biggest property owner in the state.

It seemed that most blacks in California came from Texas or Louisiana, because those states were on the SP main line. New Orleans was the easternmost point for the railroad. I heard that the company recruited black workers in the South so they could pay them lower wages, and brought them to the West Coast to work on the dining cars and in the railroad's shops.

I soon found that the well-heeled white passengers did not attempt to learn the names of the porters or waiters, but addressed them all simply as "George," after George M. Pullman, the titan behind the sleeping car and the Pullman Company. This senseless "George" tradition seemed to rile some black employees, especially the chefs. Most chefs mocked the waiters and porters by calling them George in the most disdainful manner.

In fall 1928, after working for the SP for more than a year, I encountered the seniority system, one of the many benefits that the trade-union movement has bestowed on American industry. When I went to the commissary to sign up on the timecards, I discovered I had been scratched by a third cook with more seniority. So I had to leave the crew that I had been with since the beginning. I soon got a place on another dining car.

For most of my first two years, I worked on the *San Joaquin* between Oakland and Los Angeles, about 400 miles. It left each terminal at 8 a.m. and arrived at 11:30 p.m. It was put into service because of the success of the *Daylight*, the popular day train that used SP's scenic Coast Line. The *Daylight*—with its 100-plus miles of coastline running, its observation car, and its glamorous image—consistently hauled more passengers than the *San Joaquin*.

Encounters in black and white

I never learned the names of the white train crews. Why should I? They didn't know my name. I was back in the dining car and didn't come into contact with them. The conductor and the brakemen were kept busy throughout the train, and the engineer and fireman had to plenty to do to operate the locomotive.

There were only two occasions I remember spending time

with the white crew. Once was on a special train hired by a movie company for some outdoor scenes. The actors and technical people were away from the train, and I got to talk to some of the operating crew because they wanted coffee and sandwiches from the dining car.

The other time was when Japanese Emperor Hirohito's younger brother, Prince Takamatsu, traveled to Yosemite National Park by train while he was on a tour of the United States. SP gave him and his entourage one dining car with a crew of two cooks and two waiters, an observation car, and a baggage car. I was one of the cooks, along with a white chef. We cooked steaks: that's all they wanted.

I never saw a white waiter, but I did work with one white chef. He was a hell of a nice old man, and a very good cook. I don't think color made any difference to Southern Pacific in hiring kitchen crews; if they needed you for a job and you were qualified, they'd hire you.

With the stock market crash of 1929, few thought that the nation and the world were on the verge of the Great Depression. But I could put together what was happening. I began to see people riding freights going up and down California. Newspapers spread stories about factories and coal mines closing up. Trade unions fought hard to survive as more and more workers were laid off.

I began to realize just how big the Depression was during my first trip to Chicago, in 1930. Every freight train we passed was full of people—men and women, blacks and whites, even entire families with babies in their arms, wandering in search of jobs that did not exist.

People were on the move all over the nation. More were riding the freights than the passenger trains, it seemed. Arrayed against them were the railroad police—people called them railroad bulls—who would throw off all freeloaders, even in the most desolate country.

Meanwhile, the passenger business declined, so the railroads began taking off cars and reducing the work force. Some Pullman sleeping cars were replaced with chair cars. And some trains were canceled, which meant fewer crews in all categories. If your seniority was less than 10 years, your chances of working every day were not very good.

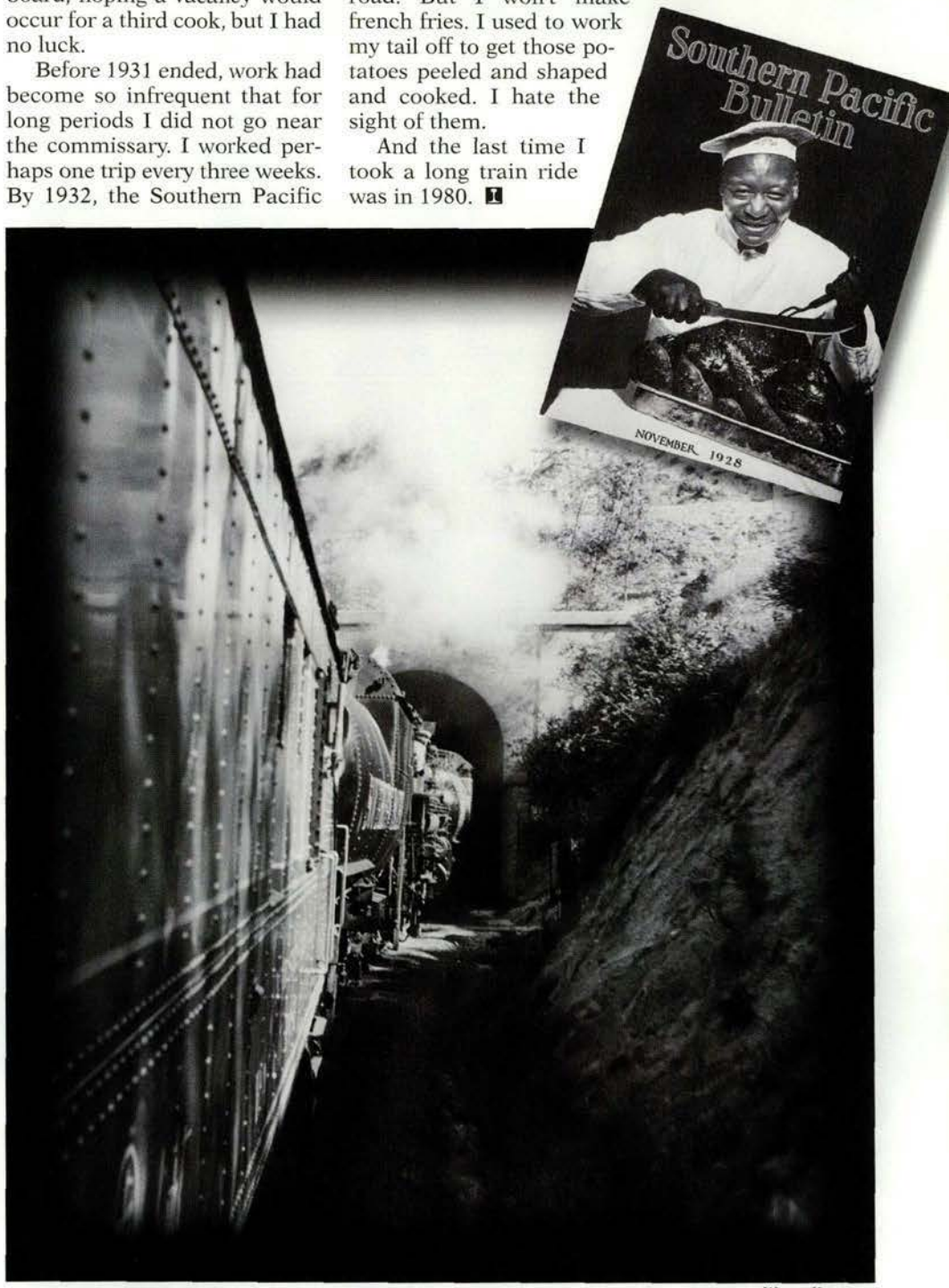
I was bumped around from one dining car to another and began to suffer my first apprehensions about life. I would spend the day down at the board, hoping a vacancy would occur for a third cook, but I had no luck.

Before 1931 ended, work had become so infrequent that for long periods I did not go near the commissary. I worked perhaps one trip every three weeks. By 1932, the Southern Pacific no longer had a place for me. I was still technically employed, but I was bringing nothing in. I didn't quit my job; I just stopped going down there.

If the Depression had not interfered, I might have remained a railroad worker. No doubt I would have become a chef, since I was next in line to be promoted to second cook when I left. Today, I still do all my own cooking, and almost everything I cook, I learned on the railroad. But I won't make french fries. I used to work my tail off to get those potatoes peeled and shaped and cooked. I hate the sight of them.

And the last time I took a long train ride was in 1980. ■

Fleming recalls how the Tehachapi tunnels —such as San Fernando Tunnel, shown here behind doubleheaded SP steam—sent smoke wafting through the train's interior. SP's November 1928 *Bulletin* featured a chef.



WARD KIMBALL