

Creatures of the Canyon

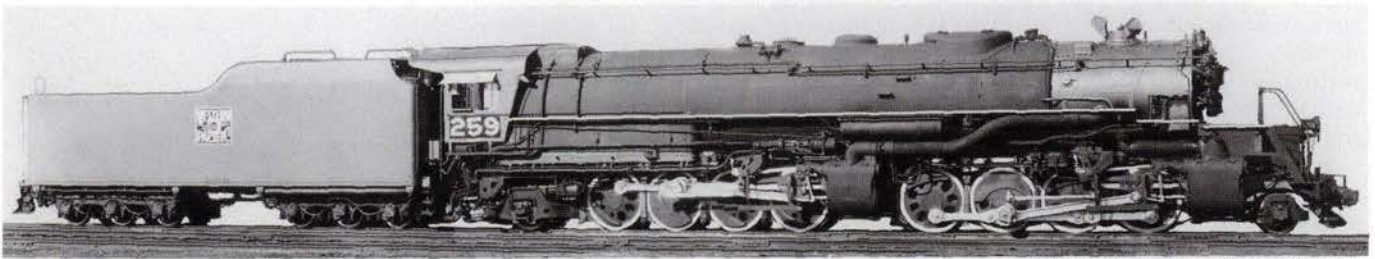
Tracking Western Pacific's elusive 2-8-8-2's
in their spectacular habitat

By Fred Matthews • Photos by the author

IN SUMMER 1947, when my father said, "Let's go photograph trains in some scenic place," I lobbied for Western Pacific's main line up the Feather River Canyon. The canyon was then still—but would not be for long—home to one of the West's largest, most powerful, yet least-known steam locomotive classes, WP's 251-class 2-8-8-2 articulateds that ruled the 116 miles of 1 percent grade between Oroville and Portola, Calif.

Further, the 251's teamed up with older compound 2-6-6-2's on the steeply graded 112-mile High Line from Keddie, Calif., to the Great Northern connection at Bieber. The 251's ventured almost nowhere else, except for occasional runs down the valley to WP's Sacramento shops. So the 10 giant 251's—120 feet long, 150,900 lbs. tractive effort with booster, weighing 500 tons—were strictly

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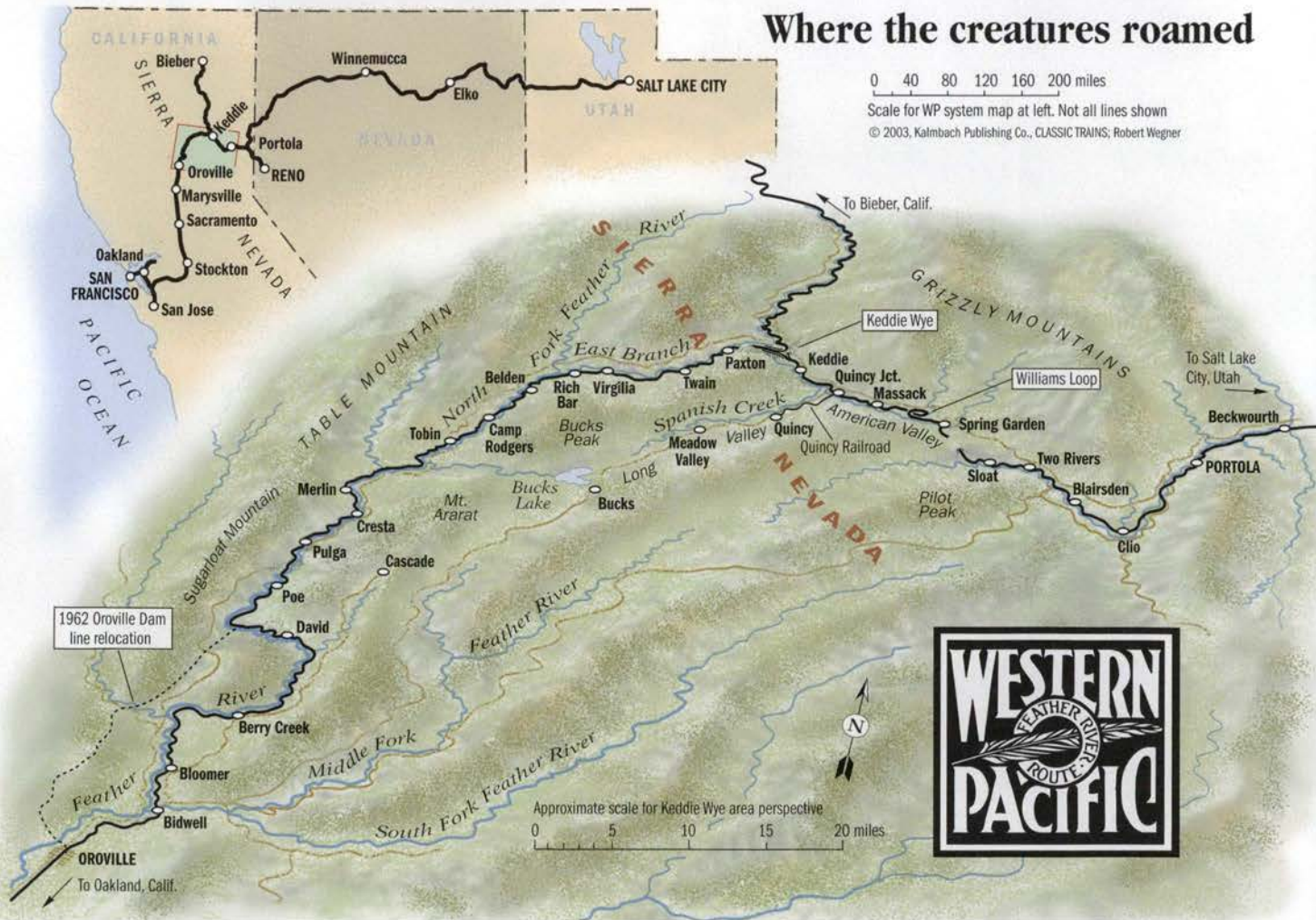
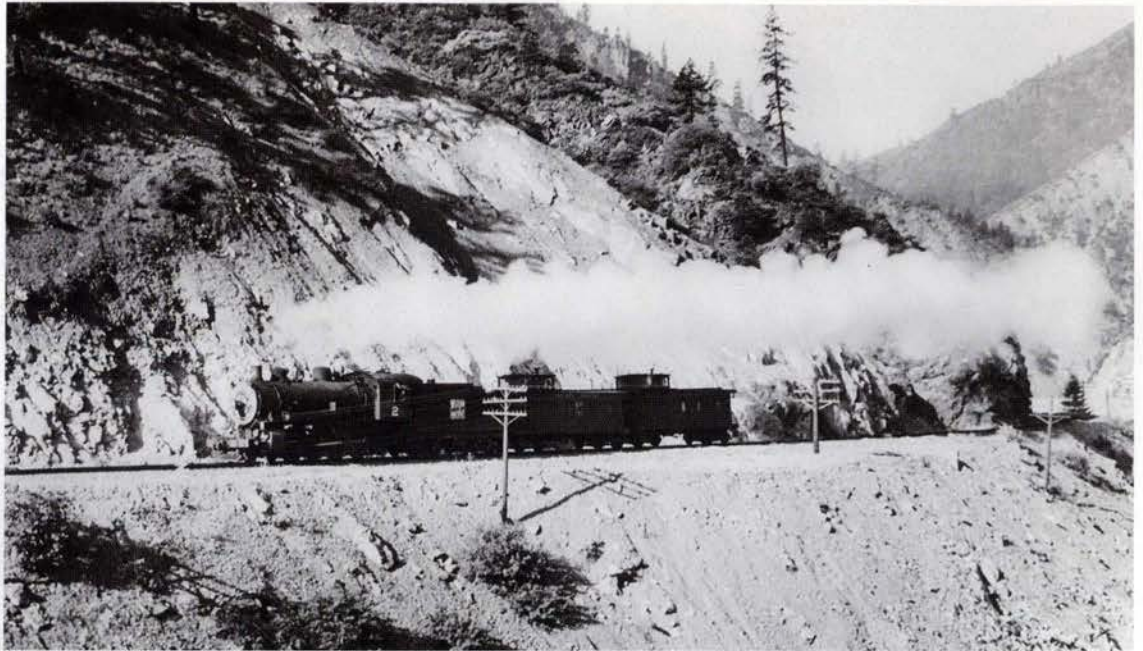


BALDWIN; H. L. BROADBELT COLLECTION

WP's 2-8-8-2's came from Baldwin in two batches: Nos. 251-256 were built in 1931, while 257-260 followed in '38. Heavier and more powerful than Southern Pacific's famous cab-forwards, they were doomed to obscurity by their small quantity and limited territory. No. 254 (opposite) was dead at Oroville in 1951.



We found scant action on our drive east from Oroville on August 30, 1947. Consolidation 2, which had helped open the WP back in 1909 and would soon be scrapped, trotted east with a pair of cabooses west of Keddie. Later in the day (opposite page), a sister 2-8-0 on a local switched cars on the main line at the big Keddie trestle.







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creatures of the canyon, an extreme case of the specialization that came to steam locomotives after 1900. WP used heavy 2-8-2's from Oroville to Oakland, and the big Mikes shared the Nevada and Utah deserts with another small class of articulateds, 4-6-6-4's that could tackle the several short grades while running fast on the flatlands.

We needed to hurry, because the 251's days were numbered, even though the newest were only a decade old. WP was a small company, having just 167 steam locomotives in 1939, many dating from the road's opening in 1909. It had begun buying small batches of road diesels in 1941. Virgil Staff's book, *Day on the Western Pacific*, shows that WP management realized early that the universal availability of diesels, in contrast to steam's specialization, was crucial to a cash-strapped road like theirs.

By August 30, 1947, when my dad and I drove across the valley to Oroville

with our Kodak Vigilant cameras, diesels alternated with steam on the three through time freights, and more diesel sets were on order. So we watched eagerly for activity east of Oroville, where the twisting old highway paced the WP route that now lies far beneath Lake Oroville. Alas, we found an empty railroad, except for an eastbound caboos hop behind 2-8-0 No. 2. Another 2-8-0 switched a local freight out onto the Keddie Wye bridge. But otherwise there was nothing. WP was not like Southern Pacific in the Bay Area, where a half-hour at trackside was likely to generate at least a train or two.

Driving on east, we detoured to Quincy Junction, site of a solid wooden depot from where the little Quincy Railroad descended a steep grade before traversing meadows to reach the mills of its namesake town. At the junction, the friendly WP agent had good news: one of the 251's, running light

This is what we came for: At 8:30 a.m. on August 31, 2-8-8-2 259 (opposite page) struggled upgrade toward Williams Loop after having taken siding at Massack to meet the westbound *Feather River Express*, which we saw a short time earlier at the loop itself.





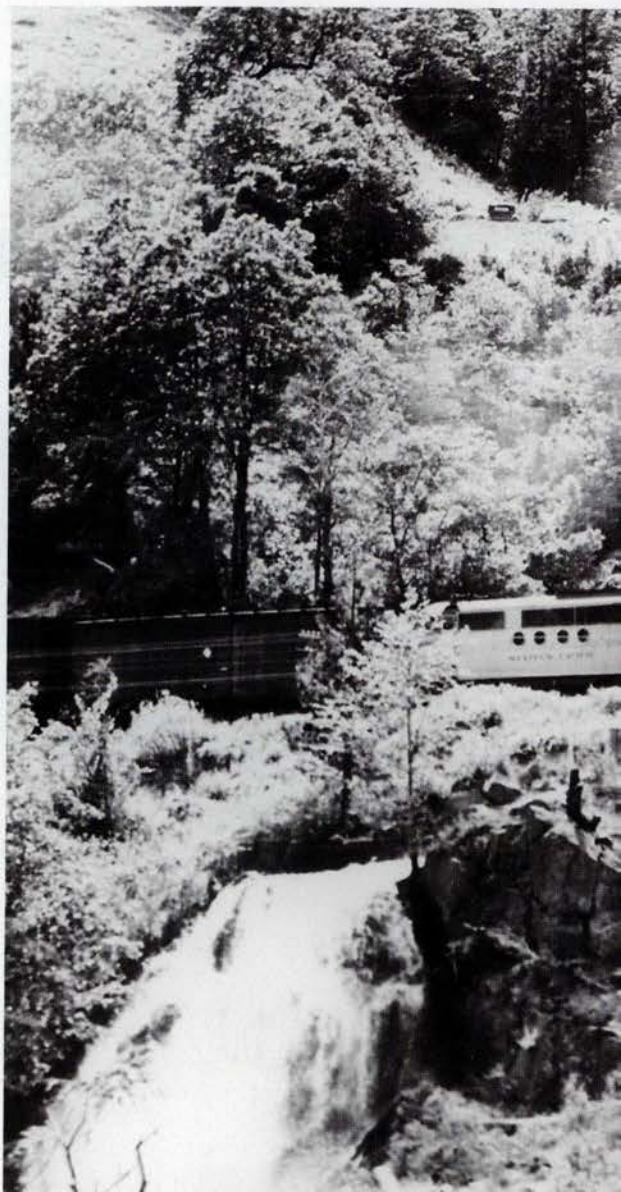
Subsequent canyon visits were dominated by diesels. In June 1948, F3's led the westbound *Exposition Flyer* west of Keddie. Anticipating the launch of its successor, the *California Zephyr*, the *Flyer* had been rescheduled to traverse the canyon in daylight, and it carried two *CZ* dome cars.

eastbound to pick up freight at Portola, would soon show. He signaled the engineer to slow down for our pictures, a kindness typical of WP men. Reassured, we drove on and camped trackside near Spring Garden, where a long tunnel takes the rails from the North to the Middle Fork of the Feather River.

No trains woke us until dawn, when we glimpsed a 251 moving freight west in the half-light, leaving an inky, semi-abstract photo. Another 251 came out of the tunnel a half-hour later, with sufficient light for a photo, although the right of way and train were still bathed in shadow. But these were downgrade trains. Would we ever see one of the canyon's creatures in full action?

Knowing the westbound passenger local was due, we drove the short distance west to Williams Loop, where the line crosses itself to maintain a steady 1 percent grade. A bonus came as the 2-spot went by on a westbound work train, followed by yet another 2-8-0 with the four-car *Feather River Express*. Then came uncertainty. Was it worth waiting? We had heard vague noises to the west, but it didn't seem likely that a heavy, upgrade manifest would have been sidetracked anywhere nearby for this tiny local train.

Luckily, we did wait. After a couple of minutes, a loud exhaust echoed up the line, followed by a pause, then continuous, if cautious, exhaust as the train was walked out of Massack siding. A plume of black smoke rose above the trees, then big, black 259 came



around the curve, the smoke cloud expanding as she accelerated. This was what we had come for, a scene out of a Lucius Beebe book—the vast pillar of “sooty pie against the ether” as 259 gained speed around the loop as it headed for Spring Garden tunnel, where the cab’s oxygen masks would be in heavy use. After snapping photos, we watched in awe as the giant noise and cloud of smoke gradually diminished.

The rest of the day was almost equally rewarding. Another 2-8-8-2, helped by a pair of 2-6-6-2’s, took a freight out of Keddie for Bieber, blasting up the canyon’s opposite side on the 2.2 percent grade. After a couple of hit-or-miss photos determined by our ability to pull off the narrow road, we were out of film, and exhausted.

We were just in time. When we returned in late spring 1948, all the main-line freights had diesels, although the transcontinental *Exposition Flyer* now

descended the canyon by day, with a couple of brand-new *California Zephyr* cars in the consist, no less. The giant 251’s remained in active reserve, and made some runs as traffic increased. My last sight of an active “Canyon Creature,” from a *CZ* dome in 1950, was of old friend 259 running light. At Oroville in April 1951 we admired a stone-cold lineup of 251’s, then found a 2-8-0 still alive in the canyon.

Mikados worked Central Valley freights for another two years, but all WP steam was gone by late 1953. WP preserved two steam locomotives, a heavy Mikado and handsome 4-6-0 No. 94, which had hauled the railroad’s first passenger train. The giant 2-8-8-2’s were valuable as scrap. We were among the few railfans who had ever seen them. I’m still grateful to my father, and to the Western Pacific, for giving me an awesome experience of steam at its greatest. ■

Orange-and-silver FT’s shepherd a westbound freight downgrade near Tobin in 1948. Majestic as they were, WP’s 2-8-8-2’s were no match for Electro-Motive’s pioneering freight diesel and its descendants.

