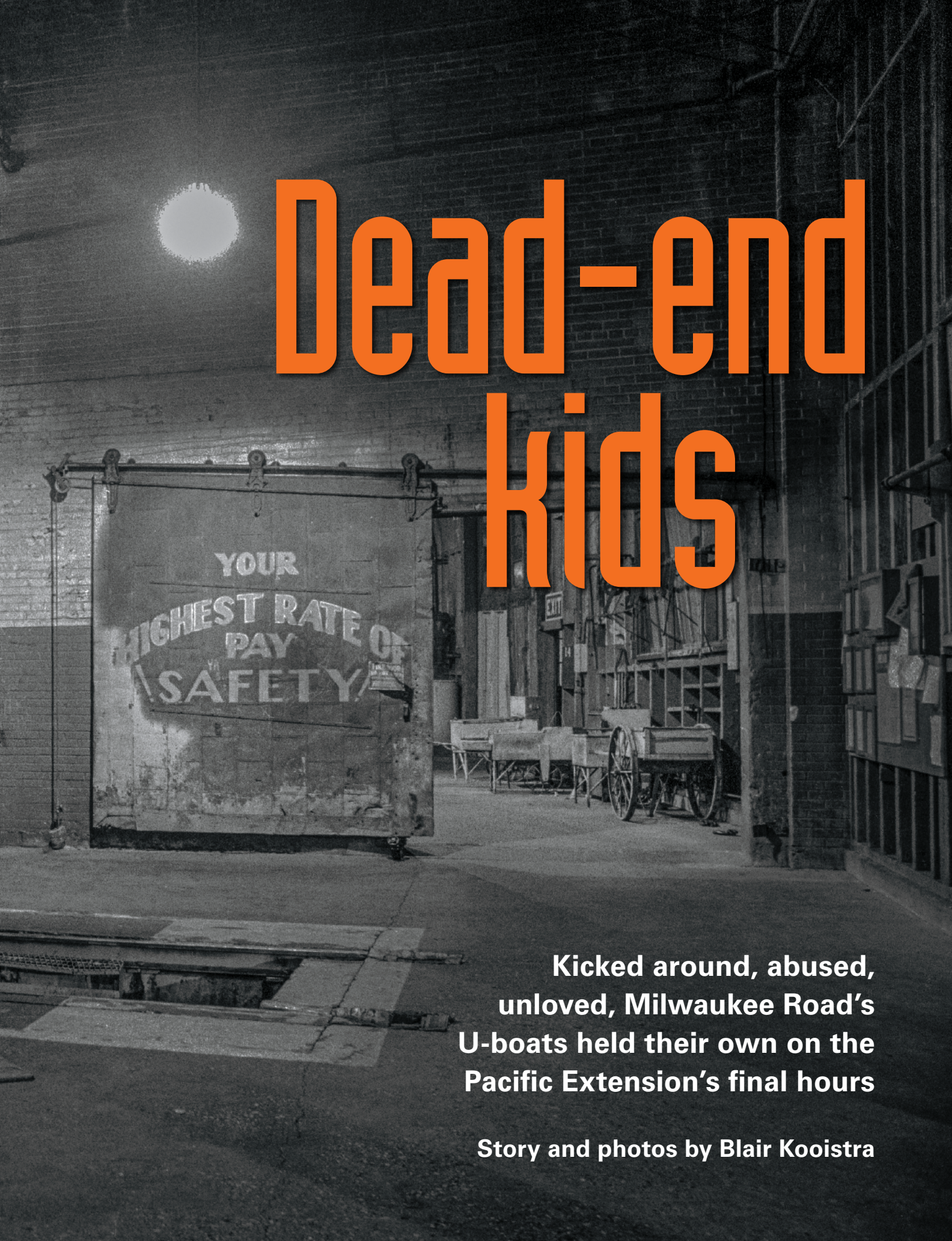




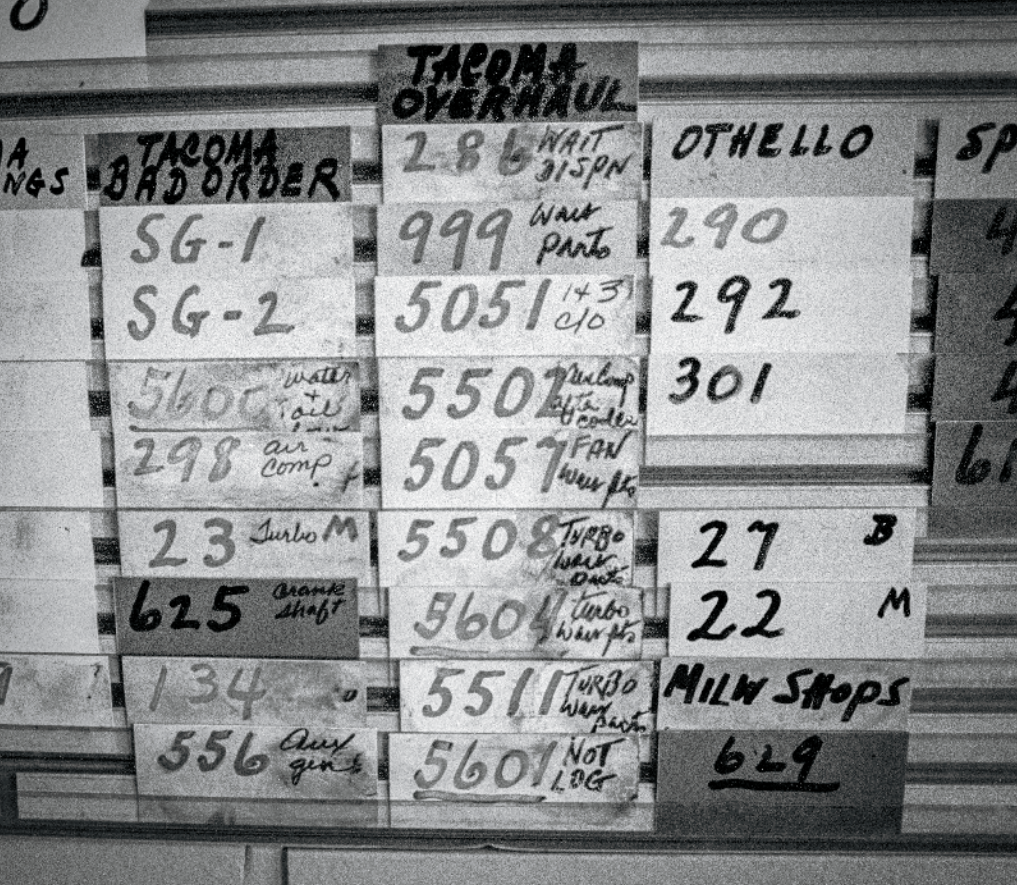
Reassigned to Tacoma, Wash., after dead storage in frozen Milwaukee, U30B 5604 awaits resuscitation in stall 12 of the Tideflats roundhouse on Feb. 17, 1979.



Dead-end kids

**Kicked around, abused,
unloved, Milwaukee Road's
U-boats held their own on the
Pacific Extension's final hours**

Story and photos by Blair Kooistra



Locomotive status board in the Washington Division dispatcher's office in Tacoma shows a heavy workload of four-motor GEs on April 1, 1979.

The Milwaukee Road came to realize its fleet of General Electric "Universal Series" locomotives were more trouble than they were worth. When maintained to factory standards, the combination of the four-cycle FDL-16 prime mover mated with indestructible GE 752 traction motors certainly could compete with comparable products from industry-leader General Motors. But meeting factory standards cost money — the GEs were certainly more complex and demanding of maintenance than the GMs — and on a railroad as perpetually strapped for cash as the Milwaukee Road, maintenance was usually the first thing that suffered. "The GEs are just like us," Coast Division superintendent M. T. Sevedge once told a dispatcher. "You work them 8 hours, then they need 16 hours rest."

For workers at Tacoma's Tideflats shops, where most of the GEs were assigned for much of their relatively short careers, each scraped knuckle from changing out a power assembly or profanity uttered fishing a dropped bolt from the bottom of a deep oil sump reminded them that the initials G.E. really stood for "guaranteed employment."

As the railroad succumbed to bankruptcy and ultimately abandonment out West, the GEs remained behind as management reassigned newer, more reliable locomotives back East to what it deemed the profitable "core" of the railroad. The handful of GEs still operating as the railroad shut down in March 1980 had

survived Midwest winters and mechanical indifference. Walkways slick with oil, paint blistered and rusted, radiator intakes clogged with leaves, they were a metaphor for the west end of the railroad. The fact that they still ran, and answered the call on the final trains out of Tacoma, was a testimony to the workers at Tideflats.

Milwaukee Road's fleet of four-axle GEs — 12 U25Bs, 17 U28Bs, and 5 U30Bs acquired between 1965 and 1968 — was purchased to compete against comparable EMD GP30, GP35, and GP40 models assigned to demanding transcontinental freight schedules in the early years of the "speed wars" then in vogue. No match for the GMs in the mountains, they didn't last long before being reassigned to the Midwest. Four mammoth U33Cs delivered in 1968 to match up against the SD45 remained behind for service south of Tacoma on the hilly line to Morton and the branch to the Canadian border from Bellingham, where their 192-ton weight did no favors to the original turn-of-the-century 65-pound rail.

The 1970 Burlington Northern merger opened several gateways for Milwaukee, including interchange with Southern Pacific at Portland, Ore. Traffic boomed, and now four and occasionally five trains a day operated on the transcontinental main line. This traffic growth and the retirement of the seemingly indestructible 1915-built box-motor electrics — Milwaukee Road's



Assisted by a GP35 and GP9, U30Bs 5601, 5609, and U25B 5056 lead Portland-bound train up the 3.5-percent Tacoma Hill on Feb. 17, 1979.

original General Electric locomotives — brought the GEs back to Tacoma.

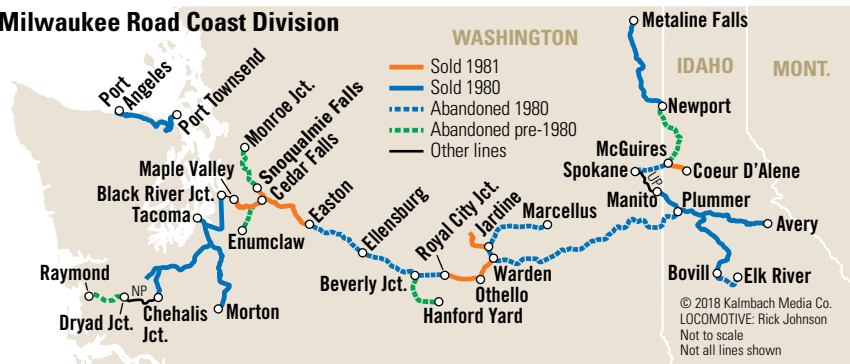
Gary Pember, hired in 1970 as an apprentice machinist alongside his father Claude at Milwaukee's Tideflats shops in Tacoma, had already heard about GE locomotives from his coworkers when word came down that the GEs would be returning. "When The U-boats came back to the



Coast Division, some of us had not seen them before,” Pember recalls. “The old heads would only say, ‘Boy you’re going to love these, let me tell you!’ But these guys had worked on them when they were new for a short time and their attitude was affected. As they trickled in we soon discovered they were a mechanical mess, with lots of oil leaks, water leaks, and flapping engineer room doors, so it was apparent that they were not on the top of the major repair list at the Milwaukee shops back east.”

Generally kept off the hot schedules,

Milwaukee Road Coast Division



the GEs often worked secondary trains over the Cascades to Othello or the west end of the Rocky Mountain division electrification at Avery, Idaho, where they'd be replaced by Little Joe electrics and turned back west. The GEs also took over many Coast Division branch operations, and in 1972 four new U36Cs joined the U33Cs on the Bellingham trains and the two-a-day Tacoma-Portland trains. Two new traction-booster slugs were mated to U30Bs working log trains on the branch to Morton. A handful of U23Bs joined the fleet in 1973, and often found work with other GEs on locals out of Spokane and St. Maries, Idaho.

On Dec. 5, 1979, a U30B, U25B, and U28B make a racket as they cross BN's Wilburn trestle at Bellevue, Wash., with train 904's mostly empty 61 cars.

(Milwaukee's final GE purchases, eight U30Cs built in 1974, operated a Powder River coal contract with BN and never ventured to the West Coast).

Dead-end kids

The heyday for Milwaukee's GE fleet out West lasted maybe seven years. The end of electrification in Montana in summer 1974 and orders of new SD40-2s largely eliminated the need for GEs to work east to Avery. And those four-a-day transcontinental trains shrunk to two most days after aggressive marketing by Burlington Northern took back most of the traffic lost after the merger. It certainly didn't help that deferred track maintenance destroyed schedules and long-haul customers took their business elsewhere.

With all the new SD40-2s, GP38-2s, and MP15s on the property, the west end of the railroad was flush with locomotives while retirements of much of the Fairbanks-Morse fleet, as well as Alco and Baldwin

road-switchers, left the east end power short. In fall 1977, to improve utilization of the GE fleet, they were reassigned to Milwaukee shops. GP9s took their place on the branch lines, and SD40-2s now began operating to Portland. Pember and his coworkers were pretty sure they'd seen the last of those dirty old GEs.

Then came winter 1977-78, perhaps the worst of times for the Milwaukee Road. The railroad declared its third, and as it turned out, final bankruptcy on Dec. 19, 1977. By then, the Milwaukee was already two to three years behind in scheduled locomotive overhauls, and the bad-order ratio of road locomotives ballooned from 21 percent that fall to 51 percent by February 1978. TRAINS magazine's annual motive power survey in the November 1979 issue focused on the Milwaukee Road's locomotive woes, compounded by a brutal Midwest winter that forced the railroad to scour the market for leased locomotives. Hardest hit were the General Electrics just recalled from Tacoma, whose bad-order ratio hit 67 percent by May 1978. The GEs, TRAINS surmised, had suffered from deferred maintenance, and they did not adapt to Wisconsin's climate.



“They’d been in warm country,” said VP of operations Paul Cruickshank, “and they had survived.” TRAINS called the GE fleet the “most visible casualties of the winter problems as they have sat in deadlines at Milwaukee. At one point, virtually no GEs were in service except for the U23Bs and U30Cs.” It was a slow recovery by summer, and then winter hit again. It was decided to return the GEs to the warm, loving environment of Tacoma.

Gary Pember called it the “return of the scrap heap.” Engineer Rick Jones was amazed at the sight of ice-encrusted GEs heading west, so heavily coated in ice they appeared to be “covered in plastic.” Sixteen GEs — not all of them in operating condition, but including those deemed the most likely to be returned to service — were reassigned to Tacoma in early 1979. Those that didn’t make the trip west never operated again.

“There was lots of work just getting the dead-end kids running,” Pember recalled. “There were pipes and radiators that had been frozen because water had been allowed to stay in the units after they died ... unlike today’s locomotives they did not have automatic drains when the cooling

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Posing beside his ragtag GEs on Dec. 11, 1979, Mel Sierman hired out on the Milwaukee Road as a fireman in 1947 and got his engineer’s date a decade later.





A spectacular end to a rare crystal-clear Puget Sound winter's day, train 980, the Chehalis-Tacoma "Weyerhaeuser and Milwaukee Logger" comes off the steep grade of Tacoma Hill and onto the S-curved wooden trestle with U28Bs 5502 and 5505 spliced by GP35 1503 and 71 loads of export logs on the head end on Jan. 19, 1980.

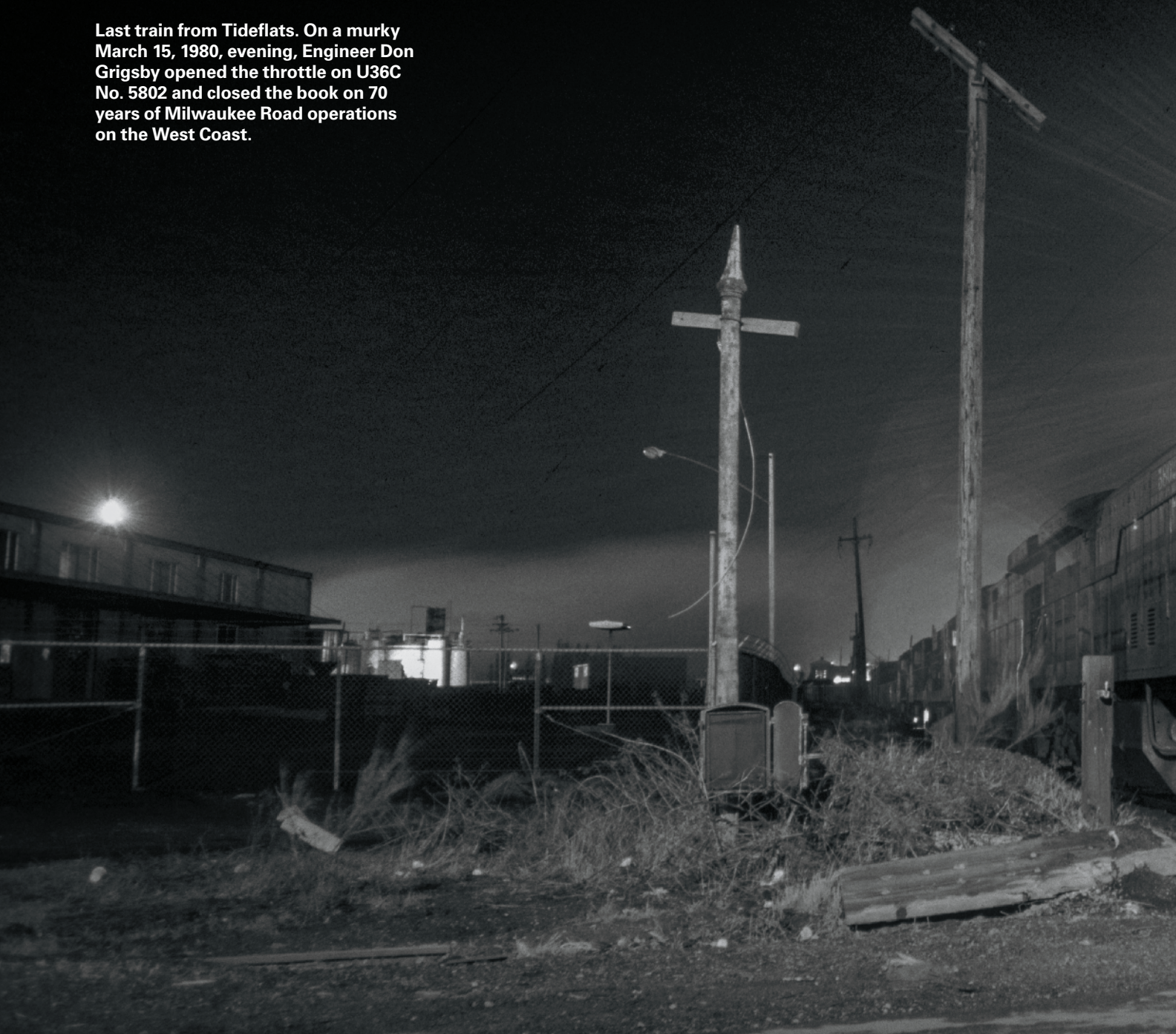


MICHELIN

5502 5502

SOUND BUILT
PLYWOOD SALES
363
3787

Last train from Tideflats. On a murky March 15, 1980, evening, Engineer Don Grigsby opened the throttle on U36C No. 5802 and closed the book on 70 years of Milwaukee Road operations on the West Coast.



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water gets at a certain temperature. It was a mess; even the GEs that were halfway decent when they left Tacoma for Milwaukee a year earlier were in bad shape when they came back.”

Tideflats resurrected 13 of the group. Soon afterward, the sole U33C in service, 5700, was damaged in a low-speed collision near Portland and retired. It was these 12 — three U25Bs, four U28Bs, three U30Bs, and a pair of U36Cs — that played a substantial role in the last year of operations on the West Coast. This was especially true after the railroad reassigned the SD40-2s that held down

transcontinental assignments in September 1979, replacing them with GP40s and the two U36Cs. Tacoma supplanted consists with the little GEs and whatever else could be spared, frequently GP35s, GP9s, and SD10s. But it was unusual for the four-motor GEs to work the main line, at least until the trustee’s ill-fated attempt of a shutdown in late October 1979. When the courts overturned the short-lived embargo, the west end of the Milwaukee Road was stuck operating largely with GEs and GP9s for several weeks.

The courts ultimately approved the trustee’s reorganization plan, clearing the

way for embargo of the lines west of Miles City, Mont., after Feb. 28, 1980. Every few days, a train of company materials, salvaged freight cars strapped to flatcars, and bad-ordered locomotives would head east from Tacoma. Seven of these cleanup trains operated from March 4, with the last departing the evening of March 15. GEs led three of the final trains east. The third-to-last train, on March 13, was a scene from right out of 1968, with U28B 5502 leading two sister U28Bs, a pair of U25Bs, and a GP35 doubling in heavy snow to Snoqualmie Pass. It took three crews to get the train to Othello. Engineer Gene Lawson



was philosophical as he awaited his relief to arrive at Cle Elum: “All in all, a pretty good day; none of the GEs died on us!”

For much of its history, General Electric locomotives were closely associated with the Milwaukee Road’s Pacific Extension through the timeless box-cabs that survived nearly 60 years of service. So it seemed fitting that on a murky March 15 evening, engineer Don Grigsby opened the throttle on five ancestors from that factory in Erie, Pa. — U36Cs 5802 and 5803, U25B 5052, and U28Bs 5511 and 5507 — to take the final train out of a darkened Tideflats yard, ending 70 years of service by the

Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul & Pacific Railroad to the Pacific Northwest.

The dead-end kids were leaving town.

Epilogue

The dead-end kids joined their already dead sisters in storage, never to operate again for Milwaukee Road. Only 10 of the railroad’s GEs faced any sort of future. Two of the U25Bs were preserved: No. 5056, acquired by Illinois Railway Museum; and No. 5057, originally donated to Webster Technical College in Nebraska to train diesel mechanics, and acquired in 2013 by Cascade Rail Foundation from California’s

Feather River Rail Society. It is undergoing cosmetic restoration for display in front of the preserved substation and depot at Cle Elum. And the 5802, which led the last eastbound out of Tacoma? Amazingly, it was among eight Milwaukee Road locomotives, seven of them U30Cs, purchased by GE for use as cores for rebuilding into “Super 7-30Cs” for GE’s lease fleet. Eventually they were sold to MRS Logistica in Brazil. So, somewhat improbably, the 5802, which became MRSL 3508, may well be in service today — at least its frame and trucks, anyway — hauling freight in the jungles of Brazil. **I**