

# A good ride on Keddie's road

**W**ESTERN PACIFIC almost "had it all." It ran passenger and freight trains, in mountain and desert scenery, behind vintage steam engines that survived World War II and hauled excursions, and then colorful diesels, from early green-and-yellow FT's through orange-and-silver F's and Geeps to dark-green second-generation EMD's and GE's. It hosted the award-winning transcontinental luxury train, the *California Zephyr*. In the 1970's, it was led by well-known rail executive A. E. Perlman, and spiffed up its final four F units. It even owned an electric interurban, Sacramento Northern, which stretched 175 miles from San Francisco to Chico. Perhaps WP's only missing element was a commuter service.

Surveyor Arthur W. Keddie had a dream: to build a railroad through Beckwourth Pass, lowest crossing of the Sierra Nevada at 5003 feet, and maintain a maximum 1 percent grade through the canyons of the Feather River and Spanish Creek. He was laughed at by the Big Four (the men who backed the Central Pacific), who stuck with the Donner Pass route, 150 miles shorter but whose summit was 2000 feet higher.

Keddie's dream wouldn't die, however, for on March 3, 1903, a group of investors signed a deed to build what would be the last transcontinental railroad, the Western Pacific, from Salt Lake City to San Francisco, utilizing

the engineering work done by Keddie. George Gould, owner of the Denver & Rio Grande and the Missouri Pacific, was the principal force behind the proposal, for he wanted to own a railroad that extended from coast to coast. He pledged the D&RG as collateral, a move which put both the WP and the Rio Grande into receivership in 1916.

Construction started in Salt Lake City. The line would be all 90-lb. rail and have no curve exceeding 10 degrees. To keep to the 1 percent maximum grade, the full-circle Williams Loop was constructed between Massack and Spring Garden, Calif., and another partial one, Arnold Loop, west of Wendover, Nev.

Work also went from Oakland eastward, and the last spike marking completion was driven on the bridge over Spanish Creek at Keddie, Calif., on November 1, 1909. There was no ceremony. Section foreman Leonardo de Tomasso, age 25, did the honors with a standard steel spike. Arthur Keddie was still around, though. He rode WP's first passenger train, and he spoke from the Plumas County Courthouse steps in Quincy, Calif., on November 21, 1910.

As a young San Francisco railfan in the late 1930's, I saved my money to ride

---

Keddie Wye, Calif., June 22, 1981: Second-generation WP diesels, painted dark green, with a UP run-through unit presaging the future, meet as BN 171 off the Inside Gateway defers to the "Ford Fast."



By Arthur L. Lloyd

almost every weekend at the round-trip fare of \$1.25 from San Francisco to Sacramento (or splurge at \$2.25 to go to Chico). A treat was to take the SN interurban to Sacramento and return on WP 39, the *Exposition Flyer*, as tickets were honored on both lines. No. 39



would come blasting into Sacramento—invariably on time—in the charge of a former Florida East Coast 4-8-2, resplendent with shiny

and white-painted wheel treads. WP was dispatched completely by train orders and timetable; its only block signals were on the paired track between Weso (Winnemucca) and Alazon (Wells) in Nevada, where eastbound WP and Southern Pacific trains used WP, while both roads' westbounds used SP. I would have dinner in No. 39's diner, with bone china, actual silverware, and a finger bowl—a delicious meal for 75 cents.

In summer I would visit relatives in Quincy, deep in Feather River country. My parents would put me on No. 12, the *Feather River Express*, for the overnight trip in a tourist sleeper lower berth, for \$3. At Quincy Junction, Quincy Railroad's 2-8-2T No. 2 would wait for the connection, but I was met by auto. I would get rides on the Quincy, though, in the cab of No. 2 with engineer Solon Luzzadder, who let me work the throttle. (The locomotive, owned by Pacific Locomotive Association, today is kept alongside the former WP main line in Sunol, Calif.). My return to San Francisco was usually by SN bus to Oroville Junction and then SN train 7 home.

World War II changed the complexion of the WP. It became an important carrier on its own right, no longer just taking the leavings of giants Southern Pacific and Santa Fe. The diminutive *Feather River Express*, prior to the war made up of just an RPO, baggage, coach, and sleeper, went to daytime operation to release its two tourist sleeping cars for military use. A 651-series parlor car replaced the sleeper, and you



JOHN S. INGLES; J. DAVID INGLES COLLECTION

could ride in luxury between San Francisco (Oakland Pier) and Portola for \$3 additional.

Trains 39 and 40 retained the name *Exposition Flyer* even though the Golden Gate International Exposition ended its run in 1940 (the train was numbered 39 and 40 for the two years of the Fair). During the war, it often ran in two or more sections. I recall 40 arriving in Salt Lake once behind 4-8-2 176 with 26 cars in tow, and no helper engine.

On December 29, 1943, I was headed for basic training in Fort Benning, Ga. From the Presidio of Monterey, most military travel centered on SP, but I talked the transportation clerk (rail historian and author Guy Dunscomb) into routing me WP. I rode SP's *Del Monte* to San Francisco, then the second of five sections of the *Exposition Flyer* to Chicago. From there I rode Illinois Central's *Seminole* to Columbus, Ga. (Central of Georgia beyond Birmingham, actually). By this time the War Production Board had allowed WP to install Centralized Traffic Control between Oroville and Portola. After the war, WP installed CTC on all of its 924-mile main line except for the paired track in Nevada.

On March 20, 1949, WP passenger service leaped forward with the new Vista-Dome *California Zephyr*, operated with Burlington and Rio Grande. Many an influential traffic manager rode the CZ, and these men were impressed with

The eastbound *California Zephyr* is headed for Feather River Canyon as it meets a WP freight led by four F units in fall 1966, as seen from a dome front window on the CZ's observation-lounge car.

the service offered by the three railroads. In 1951 WP landed a big Ford Motor assembly plant in Milpitas, Calif., on the San Jose line.

I completed my education at UC-Berkeley in 1948, thanks to the GI bill, and continued with the small bus company that three other railfans and I had established. Meanwhile, neighbor and fellow rail historian Gilbert Kneiss had joined the new WP management, and I talked with him about joining my favorite railroad. Fred Whitman was the new president, and help was needed in the passenger department. I became a reservation clerk on September 1, 1949, but the job was short-lived as the *Royal Gorge* lost its sleeping cars. Gil came to my rescue, as he needed help in the public relations department. Luckily I had learned to type in high school, so I became his clerk.

I spent a happy 12 years as Gil's assistant, and as assistant editor of WP's employee magazine, *Mileposts*. We rectified the lack of a "last spike" ceremony for WP's completion by organizing the "Ruby Jubilee" at Keddie on November 1, 1949. Leonardo de Tomasso himself, by then age 65, again did the honors, using a ruby spike. The westbound CZ

paused behind him, while Virginia & Truckee locomotive 12 *Genoa*, loaned to WP by the Pacific Coast Chapter of the Railway & Locomotive Historical Society, stood on the wye leading to Bieber and blew its whistle.

Our department also marked the 20-year anniversary of completion of the 112-mile Keddie-Bieber "Inside Gateway," and then overhauled 4-6-0 No. 94 (despite some strenuous operating department objections, overridden by President Whitman) for WP's 50th anniversary on March 3, 1953, re-enacting WP's first passenger train of August 21-22, 1910, which 94 itself had pulled between Portola and Oroville.

The public relations department handled all WP special passenger trains, other than military. This was mainly because both Gil and I were fans, and we encouraged R&LHS, and others, to sponsor specials. We took Budd's demonstrator RDC1 over WP and its two subsidiaries, SN and Tidewater Southern. We operated doubleheaded steam with 94 and 2-8-2 334, and we had some steel gondolas equipped with ladders for a trip on the Feather River Rail-

---

One of the author's R&LHS excursions, the "Butte-Plumas Express" of June 15, 1957, with 4-6-0 94 and 2-8-2 334 doubleheading, stages a photo run for the 340 passengers near Sunol, Calif.



ARTHUR L. LLOYD

way. WP management was sympathetic to our cause, and WP ran several successful trips.

Although WP was a great railroad to follow and to work for, clouds were on the horizon. The CZ still ran full in peak periods, but was virtually empty east of Portola in winter. There were dark words about whether WP needed a public relations department. I left WP in 1961; Gil Kneiss died in 1965; and the CZ made its last run on March 22, 1970. My tenure at WP had increased my railroad education, but the experience gave me the background for my 10 years as a travel agency owner, specializing in rail tours, and setting up the final 20 years of my career, spent with Amtrak.

Western Pacific stayed independent until acquired by Union Pacific in 1982, but it still lives. We still say "ex-WP" when referring, for instance, to an Amtrak *San Joaquin* running between Sacramento and Stockton on the UP track that is not former Southern Pacific. The Feather River Railroad Museum, headquartered in the former WP diesel shop in the old WP railroad town of Portola, perpetuates WP history. Its large diesel collection has several WP examples. WP steam locomotives 94 and 334 are both at the Western Railway Museum near Rio Vista, Calif., which also operates interurbans on a restored segment of the Sacramento Northern.

I am but one among many Westerners who will never forget the Western Pacific as an integral part of my life. ■

### Western Pacific fact file

(comparative figures are for 1929 and 1981)

**Route-miles:** 1055; 1436 (includes Sacramento Northern and Tidewater Southern)

**Locomotives:** 169; 144

**Passenger cars:** 86; 0

**Freight cars:** 9470; 6077

**Headquarters city:** San Francisco, Calif.

**Notable postwar passenger train:** *California Zephyr*

**Special interest group:** Western Pacific Railroad Historical Society, P.O. Box 608, Portola, CA 96122; [www.wprrhs.org](http://www.wprrhs.org)

**Sources:** *The Historical Guide to North American Railroads* (Kalmbach, 1999); *Portrait of a Silver Lady* (Pruett, 1977); *Western Pacific's Diesel Years* (Overland Models, 1980).