

INSIDE THE
SANTA FE

Master of the L.A. Division

Engineer Walter Hodson had a thing about visibility and distance

By Don Richardson



HOW FAR APART do you think those block signals are?" asked my engineer, Walter R. Hodson. The time was the early 1960's, and we were rounding the 80-mph curve near Milepost 17 between Helendale and Hodge, Calif., on the First District of the Santa Fe's Los Angeles Division on train 18, the east-bound *Super Chief*.

I peered ahead into the valley of the Mojave River toward Hodge, where two emerald green block signals twinkled in the night.

"Oh, about a mile apart," I replied.

I knew better, but I'd been asked this

question before and knew what was coming next.

"They're two miles apart; distances sure are deceiving in the clear desert air," Hodson said. He had a thing about visibility and distance.

We had just passed Signal 172 at MP 17.5; the two signals in question were 152 at MP 15.7 and 134 at MP 13.7. A third signal was also in view along this stretch of track, 122 at MP 12.1, which protected the east switch of the eastward siding at Hodge.

The reason for the long spacing between signals was Santa Fe's high-speed operation. Our maximum allow-

able speed was 90 mph. Just a few years before it had been 100 for passenger trains, and the curve at MP 17 was good for 85. During all this time, the top speed for freight trains was 60, with fast intermodal trains allowed 70 beginning in 1962 if their tonnage and dynamic braking were within certain limits.

I was not Hodson's regular fireman, so he apparently had forgotten how many times he'd brought up the subject of those two signals. I would catch him fairly often off the Los Angeles firemen's extra board on trains 18, the *Super Chief-El Capitan*, eastward and 123 (la-



Don't let the blue nose fool you—we're in the cab of F7A 275C on Second 123, the *Grand Canyon*, passing an eastward freight at Helendale, Calif., on September 6, 1960. Walter Hodson is at the throttle, and author Don Richardson, his fireman, is aiming his camera south.



ter 23), the *Grand Canyon*, westward, an assignment I held most of the time between 1959 and 1966. It was a preferred job in Los Angeles because of all the extra passenger work available to it. I had a 1952 date as a fireman, and that was the best job I could hold.

WALTER HODSON hired out on the Los Angeles Division as a fireman on January 2, 1923. He was promoted to engineer on August 24, 1940, and spent most of his career in San Bernardino, division headquarters and home terminal to all pool freight crews. He moved to Los Angeles about 1959 and a year later was able to hold a regular passenger assignment. The first one I caught with him was on March 26, 1960, with engine 339LAB, an A-B-B set of EMD F7's, on trains 70 and 75, the early morning and afternoon *San Diegans* between Los Angeles and their namesake city. (Santa Fe assigned suffix letters to its carbody diesel units: L [for lead] and C to cab units, and A and B to booster units.)

I had worked in freight service before that with him in 1959 on trains 146 and 145, the "Night Harbor" between Los Angeles and Wilmington. This was the opposite of the *Super Chief*, a long,

low-speed freight that worked the Harbor District in the damp, foggy air of the coastal region instead of a fast passenger train rolling through the dry, clear air of the desert.

Sometimes on the Night Harbor we couldn't see 100 feet ahead of us, and the Harbor District was all unsignaled territory. The only thing that kept us from disaster was that we were a second-class regular train, listed in the timetable to depart Redondo Junction at 11 p.m. and arrive at Pier A Yard at 1:15 a.m. Our return trip as No. 145 was scheduled to leave Pier A at 5:40 a.m. and get back to Redondo at 7:45. We were always late, but everybody on the railroad started looking for us at the time we were due at each station and didn't make a move until they saw us go by. There were many stretches of yard limits where engines could pop out at any time and place, but they kept an eagle eye out for us. Of course, there was the time that yard job 350 out of Hobart went to beans on the main line at Western Avenue and got run into by 145, but that was before Hodson's time and it didn't happen again.

"Synchronize your watches," said Hodson, who had figured out a way to cope with one problem on that foggy line. We had to make setouts and pick-ups along the way. With only the head brakeman on the engine (the rear brakeman stayed on the caboose to flag), it could be a real problem passing signals in the fog. We had a 40-car setout to make at Alcoa, the station just north of Torrance that took its name from a spur constructed in 1942 to reach the aluminum plant built to serve nearby aircraft plants.

Alcoa was also the location of Douglas Aircraft, Mobil Oil, Union Carbide, and Dow Chemical plants, as well as dozens of other industries that contributed to the war effort, so it must

have been high on the list of Japanese targets in that era. This was 1959, but Alcoa was still a vital part of our defense industry and indeed our entire economy.

"I'll drop you off, then pull ahead about 35 car-lengths and stop," said Hodson. "That will give you a little leeway to find the cut car. At exactly [here he told us the exact time in minutes and seconds that was far

"Synchronize your watches." Hodson had figured out a way to "pass signals" in the fog.

enough in the future to be reasonable] I will take slack and give you the pin. At exactly [another time about 5 minutes after the first time] I will start pulling ahead. By this time you will have pulled the pin and closed the angle cock on the rear of the cut car. I will pull ahead very slowly, so if anything goes wrong, you can open the angle cock and stop me at any time. I will pull ahead 10 car-lengths. At exactly [another time] I will start backing very slowly. If I haven't pulled ahead far enough to get over the switch, open the angle cock slowly. After you close it, I will pull ahead a little farther."

This would be a blind shove, but we had already checked the track on which we were going to set out, to make sure there was plenty of room. Hodson concluded by saying, "If you can't line the switch or there's another problem, open the angle cock fast and put us in emergency. I'll then send the fireman back to see what's wrong."

As I said, Walter Hodson had a thing about visibility and distance.

ON SEPTEMBER 5, 1960, I made a trip with Hodson to Barstow with engine 44LABC on Second 18, probably the *El Capitan* section following closely behind First 18, the *Super Chief*, late in the summer season and soon to be combined into one train for the fall. The next morning we were called at 8:35 a.m. for Second 123, the overflow section of the *Grand Canyon*, running more than an hour behind the first section.

After breakfast at Barstow's Casa del Desierto, where we had spent the night, we stepped onto the station platform and took charge of our power fresh from the roundhouse, parked on the engine spur next to Track 1 just west of the depot. Santa Fe's passenger diesels were based at Barstow, and engines were normally changed out on westward trains for servicing. This also made a good corporate impression if movie stars or other VIP's were photographed getting off the train at Pasadena or Los Angeles.

There would be no p.r. photo opportunities for our train, however. In the first place, it went from San Bernardino to Los Angeles over the Third District via Fullerton. In the second place, with the exception of a solitary deadheading high-level *El Cap* coach on that day, it carried, as usual, mostly mail-and-express cars plus a few coaches, a diner, and a lounge—all dusty, Pullman-green heavyweights. In the third place, our



ROBERT LARSON

power was a set of 200-class freight units equipped with ATS, ATC, and steam generators for emergency use in passenger service. Santa Fe was just beginning to deviate from its practice of keeping all its EMD F units in the same matched sets (witness 44LABC, our eastward power). Our westward engine, in contrast, was F7 set 275CBAL, with two extra units, 217C and 221C, cut in the middle to provide extra power for our heavy train, which looked more like a mail train than a passenger train.

Since the two extra units were not equipped with steam lines, the steam generator in 275B was useless and I would have to rely on just the one boiler in 275A to provide steam for the steam-ejection air-conditioning on that long train. I would also have to crawl through the nose doors of those two mid-consist units to get to it, which

In November 1969 on his next-to-last trip before retiring, Walter Hodson (right) posed with fireman Joe Chartrand in front of the *Super Chief*'s lead F7A at the Pasadena (Calif.) station.

would be often because it ran hot in an effort to do the work of two boilers. And of course, Walter wouldn't be making up much time with those freight units, which were limited to 65 mph. Needless to say, neither of us was happy with what we saw on the Barstow depot engine spur that morning. Little did we suspect that even more troubles lay ahead—and I was to learn that Walter had other innovative tricks up his sleeve besides running an engine in the fog by his watch.

We departed Barstow at 9:25 a.m., 1 hour and 40 minutes late. Walter did a good job making up time despite the freight power, and we tipped over Cajon



THREE PHOTOS, DON RICHARDSON

Left to right, above: Getting out of Barstow on that Second 123 of September 6, 1960, Hodson and Richardson overtook a quartet of big Alco "Alligator" RSD15's (above). Summit Station at the top of Cajon Pass still had its "classic" look. Going through Blue Cut, the rear of the train was bathed in brakeshoe smoke.

Pass at Summit at 10:30 a.m., 1 hour and 27 minutes late. Approaching Dell on the 3-percent descending grade, our dynamic braking failed. I went back to see what I could do, but the problem was in the controller on the lead unit and changing out cables did no good. Walter said not to worry, this was what George Westinghouse invented the air brake for. Walter did a fine job of bringing that heavy train down Cajon Pass on air alone, first at 30 mph to Cajon, then 40 to Verdemont, and finally 50 to San Bernardino.

At least I thought he did. By Blue Cut, the train was getting pretty hot. Those cast-iron brakeshoes were putting out a lot of smoke and an acrid smell that crept through into the interior of the coaches even though they were closed with the air-conditioning going full blast. At Ono, two sharp blasts on the air communicating whistle told us to stop the train. I looked back to see the train crew walking up to check a

car that had smoke boiling up out of it. Soon we got a highball and were on our way again. I learned later they had found a brakeshoe broken and badly burned and had cut out the brakes on that car.

"What's the matter with those guys?" fumed Walter, looking at his watch and bemoaning that the time he had made up was slipping away. "What did they think we did in steam-engine days? If they don't like my using the train air, I'll show them another way of getting down the mountain!"

Leaving Ono, he used the independent brakes on the engine as a "pneumatic dynamic brake," which—thanks to the six-unit consist—was quite effective. We had to take water at San Bernardino (that one steam generator was getting a workout), and there was a lot of mail to unload, so we were back to 1 hour and 48 minutes late out of Riverside. Out of there, Walter wound the train up to the maximum allowable speed of 65 and again used the engine brakes to control the speed on the steady 1-percent descending grade to

The gates are down on Colorado Boulevard in downtown Pasadena in August 1958 as the west-bound *Super Chief*, having just turned south toward L.A., heads for its Pasadena station stop.



Corona. He continued to do this down through Santa Ana Canyon, and I looked back nervously to see how much smoke the engine brakes were putting out. My only consolation was that it was all uphill out of Fullerton and the engine brakes would have over 30 minutes to cool off before we reached L.A.

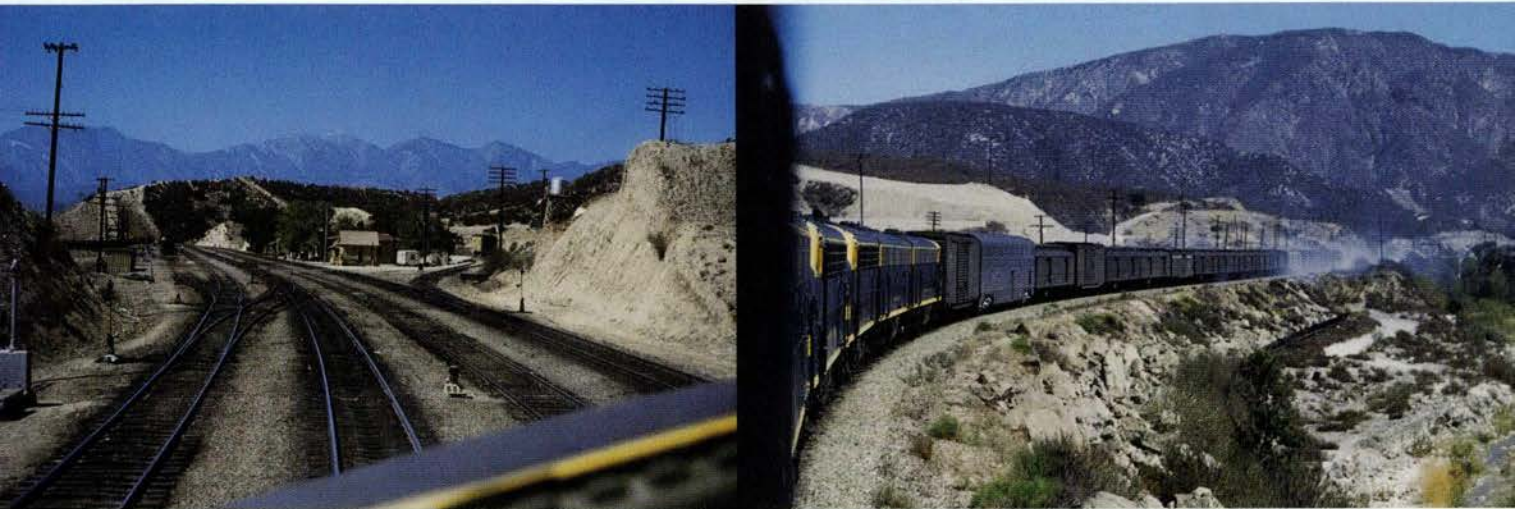
Walter made up a lot of that lost time, and we arrived at Los Angeles Union Station at 1:35 p.m., 1 hour and 25 minutes late. As I walked past the engine on the way to the depot, I looked

at those brakeshoes closely, half expecting to see them burned off. They looked great to me. Walter didn't even look.

SEVERAL YEARS LATER and back at that curve approaching Hodge, we were on the eastbound *Super Chief*. We had sailed by Signal 172 displaying green and were rounding the 80-mph curve near Milepost 17. Far ahead were those two automatic block signals, 152 and 134. The first one was yellow, and the second was red.

This was the first time I realized Signal 172 was incapable of displaying the double yellow (later also flashing yellow) "Advance Approach" aspect instituted by Santa Fe to provide extra warning and stopping distance in high-speed territory. There were still some of those "surprise" signals out in the desert, as I was to discover years later as the engineer on Amtrak's *Southwest Chief* between Los Angeles and Kingman, Ariz.

Walter set so much air so quickly



GORDON GLATTENBERG



At Barstow in the late-evening hours of August 24, 1968, are No. 1, the *San Francisco Chief* (at left), due in at 11:35, and Second 18, the *El Capitan*, running separately from the *Super Chief*, whose stop was scheduled for 11:10-11:20.

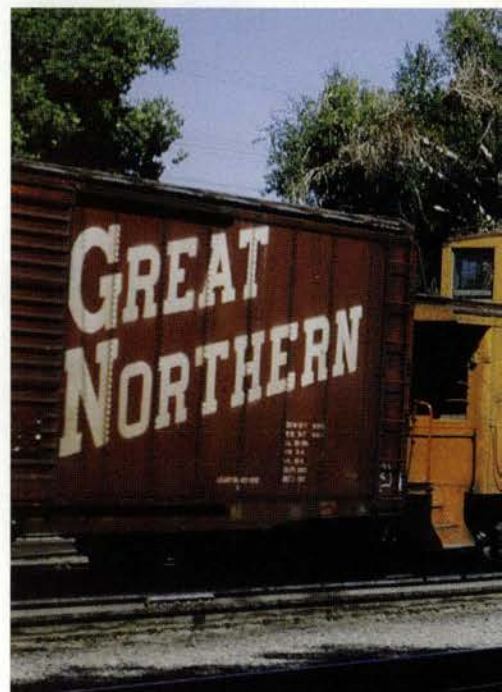
that our flagman thought we were in emergency and began throwing out fuses. I guess Walter forgot those signals were two miles apart. After we had burned off a good amount of brake-shoes, and long before we reached the first signal, both of them went green as the freight train ahead of us cleared into the siding at Hodge and lined the switch back. Walter released the train brakes and quickly got back up to speed. I learned later that the *El Capitan*, running closely behind us (“on block,” as they called it), came up on our fuses, which were still lit.

Several years after that, I was the en-

gineer on a work train at Hodge. We had exclusive right on the eastward main track in a rail- and tie-relaying project, with all other traffic using the westward main track in both directions under train-order authority. Some time during the day, the roadmaster decided he needed to get a car of ballast, which was spotted on the westward siding and asked us to cross over and get it.

“We’ll need to put out flag protection in both directions first,” said my conductor, K. D. Smith. I was glad I had him, because he was an old head with lots of experience. In those days, contact was made with the train dispatcher directly by train crews only in emergency, and besides, we were the most important train out there, so we had plenty of authority to make the move. The only criterion was to make it safely.

“How far out do they have to go?”





GORDON GLATTENBERG

asked the roadmaster:

"We have block-signal protection against westward trains, so we only have to run the flagman out about a mile to the east, but to the west we need to run him out about five miles to put down torpedoes, then bring him back about halfway to station himself with fuseses," replied Conductor Smith.

The roadmaster gulped, thinking of all the time this was going to take, but he dutifully complied. A considerable time later, he came back in his truck to notify us that flag protection had been provided. The mainline switch was then opened to set the westward signals to red, and we began our 5-minute wait required under the rules before making our move.

Soon we heard two torpedoes explode in the distance, quickly followed by two blasts on the horn of the eastward train which had just hit them. Peering to the west, we saw a headlight appear around the curve near Milepost 17 and our flagman near Milepost 15 light his first fusee. It was a Union Pacific freight train making 70 mph; I guess the engineer never heard of the 49-mph speed limit in non-block-signal territory. (UP has trackage rights from Riverside over Cajon Pass and through Barstow to Daggett.)

When he got stopped, I felt I could almost shake the engineer's hand. K. D. Smith and I both had the same thought, although mine had an ironic twist: "Now I know what that freight conductor heading in at Hodge that

The roadmaster gulped, thinking of all the time it would take, but he dutifully complied.

night years ago was thinking when he saw the headlight of No. 18 rounding the curve behind him: 'I'll hear about this when I get in!'"

IN NOVEMBER 1969, Walter Hodson was getting ready to retire. He was working trains 24 and 17. No. 24 was the unnamed remnant of the *Grand Canyon*, reduced two years before, with the loss of the mail contract, to just three or four cars. No. 17, however, was still the *Super Chief-El Capitan*, for Santa Fe ran a class act right up until the end when Amtrak took over in 1971.

"You'll need to call an extra engineer to take No. 17 from San Bernardino to Los Angeles on [here he supplied the exact date, of which I have no exact record]," said Hodson to Los Angeles Division Superintendent A. K. Johnson.

"What do you mean?" exploded Johnson, adding, "San Bernardino is not a terminal for passenger crews."

"I'll be retiring that day and want to get off my engine in the terminal I hired out in and worked most of my life," replied Hodson, adding, "I just wanted to give you fair warning."

"The Super" knew when he was licked. After all, what can you do to a man on his last day as an employee? ■

Carrying the requisite green flags indicating a following section, Santa Fe's First 23, the *Grand Canyon*, eases past a waiting westward Union Pacific freight at Victorville, Calif., on July 5, 1962. "Gallery" turbine 70 had coupled to its train's caoose in order to set out a defective freight car.

STAN KISTLER

