

# Trestles and along the border



Remote and rugged, SP's  
San Diego & Arizona Eastern  
offered some fantastic photo opportunities

By Gordon Glattenberg • Photos by the author

# tunnels



The Goat Canyon trestle, highlight of the Carrizo Gorge line, creaks under the GP9's powering train 452 on April 17, 1966. Lead unit 241 is from SP's Texas & New Orleans subsidiary, while trailing unit 3725 is 1 of 20 SP GP9's built in 1959 with low noses. Tunnel 16 is at right; old tunnel 15's portal is at the bottom of the photo.

With the border gate open to allow its passage, train 452 moves past the SD&AE's San Ysidro, Calif., station and into Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico, on October 24, 1965. For the next 44 miles the train will be on the Tijuana y Tecate before re-entering the U.S. just east of Tecate.

Its border crossing into Mexico complete, train 452 of October 24, 1965, traverses a bridge and tunnel in the short canyon near Matanuca.



**T**HE LINE OF Southern Pacific's San Diego & Arizona Eastern, from San Diego to El Centro, Calif., is legendary, much like Florida East Coast's Key West extension. Both were built by magnates in the early part of the 20th century through challenging geography, and both were eventually devastated by hurricanes. But unlike Henry Flagler's line, the SD&AE may come back to life. The SD&AE has been famed for its scenery, especially in Carrizo Gorge, and it includes a 44-mile dip into the state of Baja California in northern Mexico.

Regular passenger service ended in 1951, but SP continued to run a daily scheduled freight in each direction until 1976. After that, the line's history became a succession of disasters, false starts, and mostly unrealized dreams.

John D. Spreckels, a sugar magnate from San Francisco, adopted San Diego as his hometown after a visit in 1887. He soon chafed at its relative isolation—the only railroad access to the east began by utilizing Santa Fe's line north to Los Angeles. With backing from Union Pacific's E. H. Harriman, Spreckels incorporated the San Diego & Arizona Railroad on December 14, 1906, to connect San Diego with the Southern Pacific at El Centro.

The route was not hospitable. Construction, which started in 1907, took 12 years and required the boring of 21 tunnels. Work was impeded by the Mexican revolution, floods in 1916, the seizure of U.S. railroads by the federal government in World War I, and a 1918 flu epidemic. After spending \$18 million, John Spreckels finally drove the

last spike in Carrizo Gorge on November 15, 1919. In addition to the main line, there were three branches in the San Diego area, to Coronado, Chula Vista, and Lakeside.

San Diego is at sea level, and El Centro, in California's Imperial Valley, is about 30 feet below sea level, but the Tecate Divide, elevation 3600 feet, is between them. To keep the grades to 2.2 percent or less, it was necessary for Spreckels to use a route that swung down into Mexico at Tijuana before re-entering California just east of Tecate. This section, incorporated as the Tijuana y Tecate, included a short, scenic canyon just east of Tijuana and double horseshoe curves at Valle Redondo.

Eastward, the line crossed back into the U.S. inside Tunnel 4. East of Campo, the line crossed a high steel viaduct



The Tijuana y Tecate station at Tecate was built in 1919, when the line was opened. The buildings at left in the photo are part of the Tecate brewery, and the distant hills mark the location of tunnel 4, where the line re-enters the United States.





Westbound train 451 rides the big bridge over California Highway 94 at Clover Flat, about a dozen miles east of Campo. Although the date is June 19, 1965, the middle GP9 still wears the "Black Widow" freight-diesel color scheme which the SP dropped in favor of red-and-gray in 1958.

Also on June 19, 1965, a U.S. Border Patrol officer inspects a boxcar in eastbound train 452 at Campo, first major point after the Mexican border.



at Clover Flat before reaching the Tecate Divide summit at Tierra del Sol. East of there, the grade required finding a way around the wall of mountains guarding the Imperial Valley, the answer to which was a 10-mile jog northward through 2000-foot deep Carrizo Gorge.

This jog provided the route's most spectacular scenery but also required numerous trestles and 17 tunnels. As the line descended into the gorge, the scenery made a gradual transition from brush-covered mountains to rocky desert. The climate changed as much as the scenery as the line headed inland from the coast. San Diego usually has mild temperatures, while the Tecate Divide sees occasional snow in winter. At the other extreme, a train that left San Diego on a 60-degree summer morning might encounter 115-degree heat as it

approached El Centro.

Like many mountain railroads, the SD&AE saw its share of wrecks and other disasters. Floods in the 1920's were followed by the Depression and then, in 1932, by the collapse of tunnel 15 in the gorge. This required a permanent detour through a new, shorter tunnel 15 and over a 180-foot-high curved trestle across a gulch called Goat Canyon. By 1932, the Spreckels heirs wanted out. SP bought the line and appended "Eastern" to its original name.

Traffic gradually declined after World War II, leading to the abandonment of the San Diego-area branches in the early 1960's. In 1970, SP turned the Tijuana y Tecate portion over to the Mexican government.

The major blow to the line came in September 1976, when Hurricane Kath-

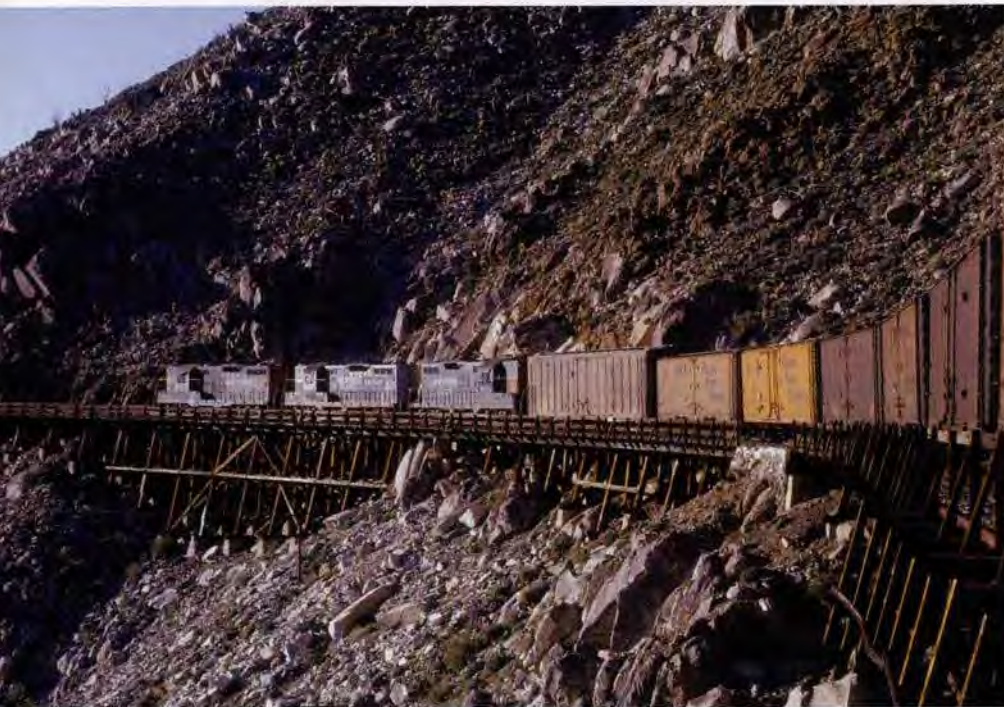
leen washed out miles of track in Carrizo Gorge and the adjacent desert. This prompted SP to, at long last, file for abandonment. However, San Diego County's Metropolitan Transit Development Board (MTDB) stepped into the picture, purchasing the line west of Plaster City in 1978; SP agreed to rebuild the flooded section as part of the deal. Freight operations resumed with shortline conglomerate Kyle Railways as operator, using the SD&AE name, but within two years, tunnel fires in the gorge shut down the east end once again, and it has yet to reopen.

Meantime, the extreme west end from San Diego to San Ysidro, on the border opposite Tijuana, was rebuilt into the very successful San Diego Trolley. Since 1984, RailTex and successor RailAmerica have provided local freight

In a telephoto shot from tunnel 15 that captures the feel of the SD&AE's vast, dry territory, train 451 of January 8, 1966, snakes through the gorge. Though most maps call the canyon Carrizo Gorge, the railroad's siding there was spelled Carriso.

The remains of freight cars and truck trailers (lower right) mark the aftermath of a derailment in the gorge. The trailers' cargo of beer became a magnet for local adventurers, who had to walk miles through tough country to claim their booty.

Late afternoon sun on January 8, 1966, catches train 452 crossing hillside trestles about 2 miles east (north, by compass) of tunnel 15. The train is near the end of its trip through Carrizo Gorge.



service from San Diego to Tecate (running only at night over the trolley line) under the name San Diego & Imperial Valley, although service to Tecate was interrupted for a time in the early 1990's by flood damage east of Tijuana. There is another significant operation on the line, out of Campo, by the San Diego Railroad Museum, which has run numerous excursions both east and west of there using steam and diesel power.

Steam—4-6-0's and 2-8-0's lettered for both SP and SD&AE—handled the line's traffic until the early 1950's. By the 1960's, when I first saw the line, diesel switchers ran locals in the San Diego area and on the east end out of El Centro to the wallboard plant at Plaster City. The line's only through trains were Nos. 451 and 452, fairly short freights scheduled to meet at Dos Cabezas, just

east of Carrizo Gorge, at 12:25 p.m., which made them usually reliable photo subjects. Border Patrol inspectors would await eastbound trains at Campo and westbound trains at San Ysidro.

While the employee's timetable still carried the SD&AE name, by then everything else said SP, although the Tijuana y Tecate published its own timetables until 1962. Four-axle SP power was the rule, owing to the light rail and tight curves. Tecate's brewery and Plaster City's wallboard plant were the only significant sources of on-line traffic.

The line may have a future as a through route, thanks to the North American Free Trade Agreement. A new Toyota truck plant at El Gandoul, near Ensenada, plus plans to turn Ensenada into a container port, require a railroad link north to Tecate, then a routing east

on SD&AE and UP to connect with the U.S. Midwest and northeastern Mexico. The Carrizo Gorge Railway (CZRY), which has been using trackage rights on the SD&IV mainly for hauling sand to San Diego and running excursion trains to Tecate for the Campo museum, has obtained the operating concession for the Mexican trackage for its subsidiary Ferrocarriles Peninsulares del Noroeste. CZRY has begun restoration of the line in the gorge, and work trains have been in action there since late 2002.

The government of Baja California is taking an interest in the Mexican portion of the line and is planning transit service there. Longer-term plans include lowering tunnel floors to allow double-stack container traffic, and restoring part of the Coronado Branch to give 24-hour freight access to San Diego. ■

