

PIGGYBACK



CHAMP



SP operates trains, trucks, and pipelines. The road's aim to provide a total transportation service is exemplified by its piggyback traffic—the biggest in the land

BY WILLIAM D. MIDDLETON

“We’re in the transportation business, and we’re in business to make money.” Southern Pacific President Donald J. Russell was talking about SP’s new \$34 million, 800-mile Los Angeles–El Paso petroleum products pipeline when he said that recently, but he could just as well have been talking about another of SP’s new tools for freight transportation—piggyback.

Free-wheeling Southern Pacific has long considered its legitimate province to be transportation—to be accomplished by rail or by any other tool that could do the job better. In its century-long existence, the self-proclaimed “West’s Greatest Transportation System” has included such diverse properties as stagecoaches, restaurants, hotels, trolleys, buses, ferries, and steamships. Early this year, when the new pipeline went into operation, SP was first among railroads in still another field of freight transportation. President Russell puts it this way: “To us, transportation has always meant a lot more than just tracks. We take a broader view.”

In line with such thinking, SP was among the first railroads to venture into large-scale truck operation. In trucks the railroad found a transportation tool that could do many freight-hauling jobs better. As Russell recently stated it, “Trucks do a good job—they’re

An SP piggyback train of modified conventional flatcars with company trailers negotiates Cuesta Grade above San Luis Obispo, Calif., in June 1957. Robert Hale



Three F units lead a Los Angeles-bound piggyback running as Extra 6368 East past Portrero Tower in San Francisco. SP

PIGGYBACK SERVICE, 1956



- SP piggyback service
- Through service via connecting lines
- RENO Ramp locations
- Wells Other points



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more flexible than railroads in many cases. That's why SP got into the trucking business early, to provide better service."

SP has offered coordinated rail-truck service since 1929, and today its trucking subsidiaries, Pacific Motor Trucking Co. and (in Texas and Louisiana) Southern Pacific Transport Co., operate 22 percent more route-miles than SP does rail miles. PMT is numbered among the nation's half dozen largest highway carriers.

The wedding of the nation's second-longest railroad (12,441 route-miles, vs. Santa Fe's 13,073) with its truck subsidiaries to form one of the nation's largest piggyback operations was a natural combination.

SP got into piggyback operation in May 1953, first among western railroads. Once the potential of combined truck and rail operation had been demonstrated, the road wasted no more time. In the more than three years since the first trailer-on-flatcar hit the rails, SP has enthusiastically tied up well over \$4 million in plant and equipment for its mushrooming piggyback traffic.

By January 1, 1956, trailer-on-flatcar service covered 7,528 miles of the system, serving every major terminal from Portland to Ogden and New Orleans. By means of equipment interchange connections, SP piggyback service reached points north and east of Portland in Oregon, Washington, and Idaho over Northern Pacific, Union Pacific, Great Northern, and Spokane International; points in eastern Oregon, Idaho, Utah, and western Wyoming via connections with Union Pacific at Wells, Nev., and Ogden; and to St. Louis and points north and east of that city over the affiliated Cotton Belt and its connecting lines.

At the end of 1955, Southern Pacific was moving an average of 275 loaded trailers a day to become the piggyback champion of U.S. railroading. The road moved a total of 61,575 loaded trailers in 1955, all of them owned by its subsidiaries. Currently, piggyback traffic is nearing an average of 300 loaded trailers each day.

Unlike the major eastern piggybackers, which carry trailers for common-carrier truckers, SP carries only the trailers of its own trucking subsidiaries. It uses piggyback in two ways: to handle large-lot less-than-carload (LCL) shipments, and to move truck-load traffic on rail billing at truck-competitive rates. In both cases the results have been impressive.

Wherever it has been used, piggyback has helped lick two of the biggest problems in LCL traffic: high handling costs and expensive loss and damage. SP saves an estimated \$3 to \$4 per ton in handling charges when shipments can be handled in trailers. In common with other railroads operating piggyback services, SP has found that loss and damage of shipments have been reduced to what one



Trailers are loaded and unloaded "circus style" by means of a ramp at the end of track and retractable bridge plates between the flatcars. Once in place, the trailers are secured with cable tie-downs. Top, SP; others, Robert Hale



After 0-6-0 No. 1211 made up the train, two GP9's ease *Advance Overnight 372* out of SP's freight terminal at 4th and Berry streets in San Francisco. The piggybacker will follow the *Del Monte* down the Peninsula on the first leg of its run to L.A. William D. Middleton

road termed "spectacularly low" levels.

But by far the most significant result of SP's trailer-on-flatcar service has been the recapture of freight business from highway carriers. Of its trailer-on-flatcar traffic SP says, "Most of this is new traffic which otherwise would have moved over the highways."

The Southern Pacific formula for attracting traffic for its piggyback services is a simple one—equal or better service at truck-competitive rates. To provide equal or better door-to-door delivery time, SP boasts that most of its piggyback traffic moves at passenger-train speeds. On the road's Pacific Lines,

trailers are handled principally in fast merchandise or solid trains; on lines in Texas and Louisiana, trailers are handled on regular manifest trains. The greater dependability of rail hauling also helps SP provide "equal or better" service.

Talk of "passenger-train speeds" is not an idle boast. Along such routes as the Coast Line between Los Angeles and San Francisco, piggyback traffic is handled in *Overnight* merchandise trains and in solid piggyback *Advance Overnights*, which are highballed over the 470-mile run on schedules that are only a few minutes slower than the crack

overnight, all-Pullman *Lark*.

SP's first regular piggyback operation was inaugurated between Houston, Texas, and Lake Charles, La., on May 4, 1953, on the Texas and Louisiana lines. A week later the Pacific Lines began its first service between Los Angeles and San Francisco, one of SP's fiercest battlegrounds with the truckers.

Coast Line piggyback caught on immediately. At first the service consisted of trailers on flatcars cut into regular *Overnight* merchandise trains, but by the end of the year, traffic warranted the all-piggyback *Advance Overnight*, which runs four nights a week.

Early in 1955, SP launched another high-speed piggyback train. Named the *Pacific Coast Expediter*, it operates between Oakland and Portland on a 23-hour schedule, providing second-morning delivery at Portland and points north including Seattle and Tacoma, and third-morning delivery at Spokane when moving from the San Francisco Bay area. Third- and fourth-morning delivery, respectively, is provided for traffic from the Los Angeles basin. Southbound, trailers from Portland and the Seattle-Tacoma area, as well as Spokane, are delivered on the second- and third-mornings, respectively, in the San Francisco Bay area, with third- and fourth-morning delivery in the Los Angeles basin.

Let's take a closer look at one end of the hottest piggyback route, the Los Angeles-San Francisco Coast Line. Headquarters for the San Francisco loading operation are located at 4th and Berry streets, between freight sheds A and F, a short block away from SP's Third and Townsend passenger terminal. Despite its heavy piggyback traffic, the road thus far hasn't found it necessary to provide elaborate special facilities and equipment for loading, and the layout at Shed A is a modest one. A pair of loading ramps, with floodlights for night operation, and a phone-booth-size office for the loading foreman constitute the plant.

Running the loading operation at Shed A is Pacific Motor Trucking's loading foreman, a lanky, good-natured redhead named Charlie Myrick. Working under Myrick are loader Gill Hyder, who jockeys the loaded trailers aboard the string of flats with the aid of an oversized rear-view mirror on his tractor, and a team of men who block the trailer wheels and secure the tie-downs. The only SP employee in sight is a bill clerk.


By early afternoon on the chill, overcast Monday I spent taking in the trailer loading operation at the Shed A ramp, Myrick and his gang already had two strings of flats loaded and were well along on the third. We watched Hyder deftly back several trailers of L.A.-bound beer down the string, while Myrick fretted over a missing trailer of hot cargo from Oakland.

Every afternoon, the yard crew pulls the last string of loaded flats at 3:30 p.m. for the *Advance Overnight's* 4:01 departure. Everything loaded after that waits for the 7:35 p.m. departure of the regular *Coast Overnight*.

Myrick held off the impatient crew while he waited for the missing trailer. Then a last-minute phone call informed him that there'd be no trailer that day, and he let the switcher take the last string.

At 3:45, a pair of Geeps backed down from the Mission Bay roundhouse to lock couplers with the 20 flatcars carrying 29 silver-sided trailers and a caboose that made up that day's version of train 372, the *Advance C.M.E.* (short for *Coast Merchandise*

SP PIGGYBACK AT A GLANCE . . .



<p>Year service began: 1953 System piggyback mileage: 7,528 Piggyback investment: More than \$4 million Daily traffic: 275 to 300 trailers Annual traffic: 61,575 trailers in 1955</p>	<p>Piggyback flatcars in service: 313 Piggyback flatcars on order: 250 Piggyback trailers: More than 1,000 Method: Rail-owned trailers and flatcars Common-carrier piggyback: Under consideration</p>
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Richard Steinheimer

East). It was a small piggyback train by Coast Line standards. Frequently the *Advance* runs several times this size.

A few minutes before 4 p.m., the diesels eased the *Advance Overnight* down the lead track to Portrero Tower. Precisely at 4, the Monterey-bound *Del Monte* passenger train accelerated out of Third and Townsend, and minutes later cleared Portrero Tower. Switch points moved, the block cleared, and 32 cylinders boomed as 3,500 diesel horsepower headed onto the main line with *Advance C.M.E.* and its freight that a few years before might have been occupying the outside lane on the southbound Bayshore Highway.

In terms of equipment, SP has played the piggyback game cautiously. Rolling stock thus far has been confined to standard flatcars modified for piggyback service. Modifications include tie-downs for trailers and bridge plates at each end of the cars that fold up when not in use. By late 1955, SP had a total of 313 flats assigned to piggyback service: 223 on Pacific Lines and 90 on the Texas and Louisiana lines. More than 1,000 trailers were assigned to piggyback service on the system.

By year's end SP had joined the trend to special piggyback equipment with an order for 250 specially designed 80-foot lightweight flatcars. With its own system virtually blanketed by piggyback routes, the road is currently expanding its already extensive interchange piggyback business. A tariff is now being prepared with the Frisco to cover rates on truckload shipments moving by piggyback between Kansas City, St. Louis, Oklahoma City, and Tulsa, and points in Texas and Louisiana.

Piggyback service in connection with

Cotton Belt and its connecting carriers north and east of St. Louis may soon be expanded to and from points in territory ranging from Chicago and St. Louis to the East Coast.

What about common-carrier piggyback on SP? Although it is the biggest of all piggyback carriers, the road does not haul trailers for competing truck operators on a common-carrier basis.

Such major eastern piggybackers as Pennsylvania Railroad and the New Haven have done handsomely operating their own trailer-on-flatcar services side by side with a common-carrier trailer-on-flatcar service, claiming that the services are not incompatible and both can be operated profitably.

In the past Southern Pacific has maintained that to haul the trailers of its highway competitors merely would reduce their costs of operation, placing them in a better position to compete. But more recently SP reports it hasn't closed the door on the subject. Says President Russell, "Southern Pacific has been studying this subject to explore the problems involved in handling such additional piggyback traffic, as well as the benefits which might be derived."

In the meantime, the "West's Greatest Transportation System" continues to expand the aggressive type of piggyback operation that has won for Southern Pacific the title of Piggyback Champion of U.S. railroading. ■

WILLIAM D. MIDDLETON had more than 80 articles and hundreds of photo credits, including 20 covers, in TRAINS magazine, beginning in the late 1940s. He wrote or cowrote 23 railroad books, many of them standards in their field. A civil engineer by profession, he served 30 years in the U.S. Navy. Middleton died in 2011.