

# BALDWIN, BEAUMONT, AND THE BATTLE TO MOVE IRON ORE



Kaiser Steel's California ore movements may have been short, but they were anything but flat

By Gordon Glattenberg • Photos by the author

**B**ack when the U.S. made significantly more steel than it does today, iron-ore movements often spanned a distance of several hundred miles between mine and mill. Most people might think first of ore movements off the Mesabi or other Upper Midwest ranges. Almost all of these had a relatively short rail haul, followed by a long cruise over the Great Lakes, after which some had another rail haul to reach the steel mills. Out in sunny

southern California, though, there was a short, all-rail haul, by Kaiser Steel, which moved ore just 162 miles from its Eagle Mountain Mine to its mill in Fontana.

Kaiser Steel, incorporated one week before Pearl Harbor, built the Fontana mill early in World War II to provide steel plates for Henry J. Kaiser's West Coast shipyards. The plant, located about 50 miles inland to stay out of range of enemy fire from the Pacific Ocean, began production in August 1943. Initially,

the plant used low-grade ore that came from the Vulcan Mine near Kelso, Calif., on Union Pacific's Salt Lake Route. After the war, Kaiser developed a new open-pit mine and adjacent ore-concentrating plant in Riverside County, Calif.

To move the ore out, Kaiser built the Eagle Mountain Railroad, a 51-mile, non-common carrier line connecting the mine with Southern Pacific's Sunset Route. The first ore trains rolled in August 1948. The interchange, called Fer-

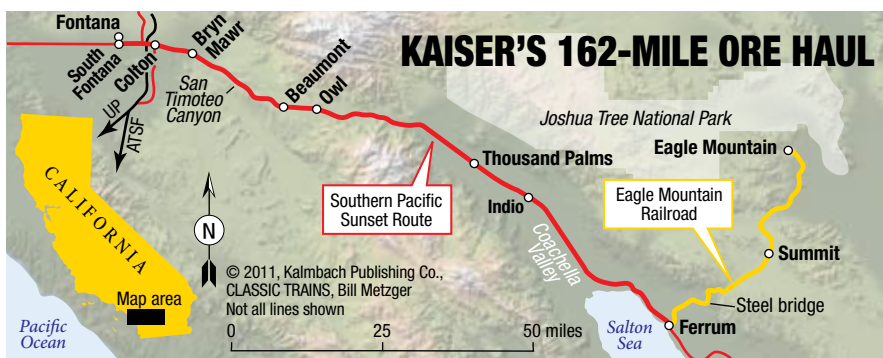


**Four Kaiser Baldwins, one still in the colors of former owner Chesapeake & Ohio, depart the Eagle Mountain mine on April 1, 1960. On the SP (right), three SD9's shove on the rear of a Kaiser ore train cresting the summit of Beaumont Hill on December 6, 1965.**

rum, was along the Salton Sea about 200 feet below sea level. Kaiser also built a company town called Eagle Mountain for its employees and their families.

An integrated steel mill like the one at Fontana needs more than iron ore. Coal came by rail, too, first from Sunnyside, Utah, via the Rio Grande, UP, and Santa Fe, and later from York Canyon, N.Mex., on the Santa Fe. Limestone originated at Cushenbury, Calif., on a Santa Fe branch north of Cajon Pass.





Although the Kaiser ore haul was short, it certainly wasn't flat. Both Eagle Mountain and Fontana are near 1,000-foot elevation, but there was a roller coaster between them. Leaving Eagle Mountain, the loaded trains faced a 1 percent climb to Summit, at 1,700 feet, then a 2 percent drop down to connect with the SP 200 feet below sea level. From there, SP had a steady climb to

Beaumont Pass at 2,600 feet, then a descent through San Timoteo Canyon to Colton and South Fontana, where an industrial spur led into the mill. With 2 percent up and down grades confronting the ore on either side of Beaumont, SP assigned lots of power to the trains.

The town of Eagle Mountain was an interesting starting point for a visitor, as it was adjacent to the mine as well as the



In September 1965, after Kaiser had applied a dark, C&O-like livery to its Eagle Mountain Baldwins, an ore train crosses Salt Creek at milepost 14.5, scenic highlight of the line.

Same place, different time of day: GE U30C's ease an ore train, with caboose up front, down to the steel bridge in November 1969.



Broken drawbars litter the Eagle Mountain right of way at Telephone Pass (MP 45.5) in May 1965. A bit beyond the pass (left), leased SP AS616's 5258 and 5259 bring up the rear of a loaded train in September '65.



**An E7 arrives at Indio with SP's Los Angeles–Chicago *Golden State* in May 1957. The big wooden station building featured wide roof overhangs in deference to the desert heat.**

railroad's headquarters. The local cafe there did not list bread with the meals—instead, in a clever nod to the entity responsible for the town's existence, they were served with kaiser rolls. The isolated town seemed like the end of the world to an outsider from Los Angeles, but the residents liked it. Conversation with Kaiser railroaders about possible closure of the line revealed that, although they might be eligible to transfer

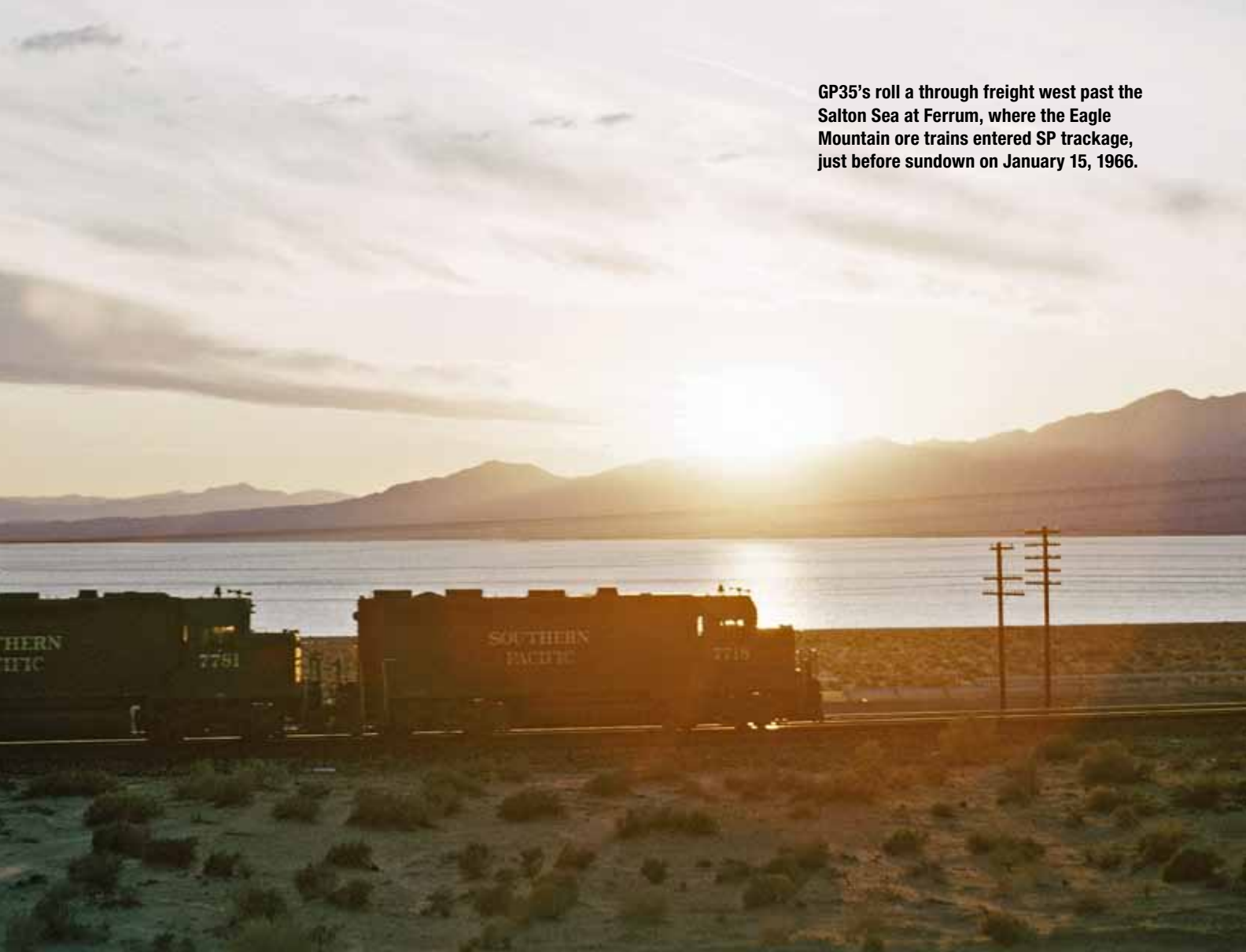
to the plant railroad at the steel mill, they dreaded the thought of moving into Fontana, near the big city.

Much of the Eagle Mountain Railroad was accessible by car, and the first few miles south of the town were on good paved roads. However, from Interstate 10 down to Ferrum, which was along California Highway 111, the roads were dirt, subject to flash flooding in the summer.

The scenic highlight of the railroad



GP35's roll a through freight west past the Salton Sea at Ferrum, where the Eagle Mountain ore trains entered SP trackage, just before sundown on January 15, 1966.



At Thousand Palms, start of the steepest part of Beaumont Hill, a lucky 13 units—11 SD9's and 2 GP9's—roar west with Kaiser ore in September 1965. Unusually, there are two sets of power on the rear bracketing the caboose, not the customary one ahead of it.



**Coming and going photos at Owl in January 1970 show the unusual situation of an ore train overtaking another train on the hill.**

was the steel bridge at milepost 14.5 (from Ferrum). As the loaded ore trains usually came through there just after dawn, I camped overnight several times at that spot to photograph them. The drive in from Highway 111 was interesting, as the route included a few miles along the edge of the Coachella Canal, which brings Colorado River water to the Coachella Valley, mainly for agriculture. This water source attracted many animals from the hot desert, and I recall seeing a snake and a hawk there, and, amazingly, a porcupine and a deer!

The Eagle Mountain typically ran four units on the point of the ore trains and two on the rear. In the early 1960s, the locomotives were six-motor Baldwins: five Kaiser-owned DRS-6-6-15's and AS616's, plus two AS616's leased from the SP. In 1968, Kaiser replaced the Baldwins with five bright red General Electric U30C's. A typical day would



have one loaded ore train and one train of returning empties.

Once on the SP, the ore moved quickly over the relatively flat 30 miles to Indio, with a slight climb back to sea level. Indio was a passenger-train stop and freight crew-change point. Its large 1880s-era wooden depot was the oldest building in the Coachella Valley (unfortunately, fire destroyed it in the 1970s).

Indio was where the real grades started. To surmount hills more than twice as steep as those on the Eagle Mountain Railroad, the ore trains always had several big units on the point, a multi-unit set in the middle of the train, and another set ahead of the caboose.

Most of the line up to Beaumont and down San Timoteo Canyon was near paved roads, and SP ran lots of other



A brief Beaumont oddity was the “Niland stub,” seen westbound with E9 6051 west of the summit on May 17, 1964. When SP combined the *Sunset* and *Golden State* west of El Paso, it neglected to get permission from California, which forced SP to run a train for a month on the abandoned schedules of Nos. 1 and 4 between L.A. and Niland, the last station before Arizona.



U50 No. 8502 curves past Bryn Mawr with a westbound freight on March 28, 1965. GE built 26 of the distinctive diesels (3 for SP, 23 for UP) in 1963–65; wheel arrangement was B-B+B-B.

freight traffic, along with passenger trains to Chicago and New Orleans. The line was single track with CTC in the early 1960s, but San Timoteo Canyon was double-tracked during that decade. The ore, upon arrival at South Fontana on SP, was moved directly into the plant, where Kaiser had several diesel switchers.

Kaiser modernized the Fontana mill, but steel-industry economics and environmental concerns worked against it. A 23-story, \$287 million addition was shut down after only three years of operation, then dismantled and shipped to China. The mill and mine closed in 1983, although the Eagle Mountain Railroad stayed active shipping out a stockpile of processed ore for other customers until it, too, quit in 1986. Since its closure, the Fontana site has seen new uses, including an auto racetrack called the California Speedway, and a relatively small steel-finishing operation named California Steel Industries, employing about 1,000 people, very few compared with Kaiser’s operation at its peak.

The Eagle Mountain Railroad is still in place, although sections have been damaged by flooding. There have been proposals over the years to turn the open pit mine into a landfill, with trash trains operating over the railroad, but they have met opposition because of the pit’s proximity to Joshua Tree National Park. The town of Eagle Mountain, a pleasant, self-sufficient community of single-family homes in the 1960s, today is a ghost town, inaccessible to the public.

Union Pacific took over Southern Pacific in 1996, and most of the line between Los Angeles and El Paso is now double track. The line over Beaumont Hill is busier than ever, even though the ore trains are just a memory. 📌

Ten miles shy of the mill at Fontana, Kaiser iron ore rumbles under Waterman Avenue in Colton. Five mid-train SD9’s keep the heavy stuff moving in this December 1965 scene.

