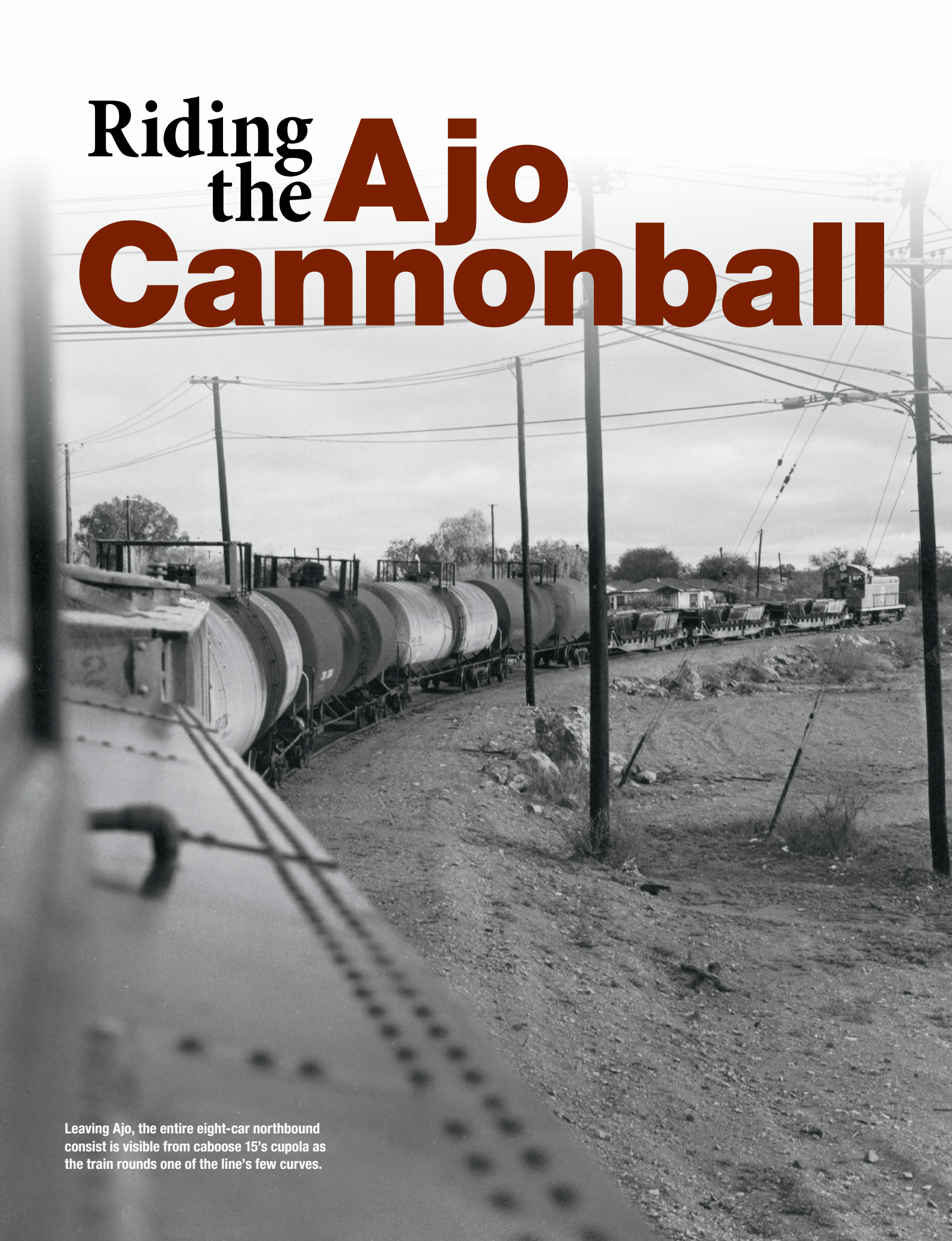


Riding the **Ajo** **Cannonball**



Leaving Ajo, the entire eight-car northbound consist is visible from caboose 15's cupola as the train rounds one of the line's few curves.

A unique Western railroad adventure in 1976

By Barry Anderson • Photos by the author

In 1976 the Tucson, Cornelia & Gila Bend was unique among Western railroads, for it was the last one operating a regularly scheduled mixed train. TC&GB was the common-carrier property of Phelps-Dodge Copper Co. It existed to move copper products from the large smelter at Ajo, Ariz., north 43 miles across the desert to a connection with Southern Pacific's freight main line at Gila Bend, about 40 miles southwest of Phoenix.

The mixed ran five days a week. On the rare occasions when any passengers showed up, they were accommodated in the venerable outside-frame wooden caboose, painted dark green. Round-trip fare for the 4-hour journey was \$1.94.

At the time, I was working as a freelance travel writer and had secured an assignment to do a magazine story on the railroad. Ajo—pronounced AH-ho, Spanish for garlic—was strictly a company town with only rudimentary over-

night accommodations. Since my wife was with me, that definitely would not do. A quality motel in Tucson was the answer, but the penalty was arising at 4 a.m. to make the 136-mile drive across the nearly deserted Papago Indian Reservation for the train's 7 a.m. departure.

Conductor Tom Wiley welcomed us aboard his caboose domain, gave engineer Ray Phillips a highball, and we were off on our adventure. Leaving Ajo, he popped out on the rear platform and said, "Excuse me; I have to wave at my grandbaby." Railfans had nicknamed this train the "Ajo Cannonball" for its blazing speed, never to exceed 35 mph over the 70-lb. rail. Another popular sobriquet for the railroad as a whole was "Terribly Creaky and Groaning Bottom."

Wiley proved to be a loquacious host, regaling us with true stories and tall tales as we ambled across the desert. Hollywood had filmed *The Man Who Loved Cat Dancing* on the TC&GB sev-

eral months earlier and, judging by his stories, Wiley had become one star-struck conductor. "You know," he said, "that Lee Marvin is one regular guy. Just like you and me, not stuck up at all. We became regular buddies."

We perched in the cupola for a bird's-eye view as we headed north on the table-flat line, which crossed a dramatic desert landscape studded with mesquite, the giant Saguaro cactus, palo verde, ocotillo, and a dozen other interesting plant species, all with a backdrop of jagged mountains. All this would be ablaze with blossom color in the spring, putting the lie to the impression that the desert is desolate. Our train was a modest eight cars: three flats of bright, shiny copper anodes followed by four chemical tank cars and a covered hopper. Power was EMD NW2 52, the only unit lettered for TC&GB, which was painted in Phelps-Dodge's solid gray with the road name on the cab and the engine number in large red numerals in a yellow circle on its flanks. A P-D unit from the open-pit Cornelia Mine, which fed the smelter at Ajo, would pinch-hit when necessary.

Noticing a box of cherry bombs (large firecrackers) on Tom's desk, I asked him what they were for. "Well," he said, "this is all open range out here—no fences. Cattle like to walk along between the rails. You can blast the whistle until you're blue in the face—they won't move any faster and won't get off the track. So, me and the brakeman get on the front of the engine and toss cherry bombs at 'em. That usually works."

We dropped our cars at the SP interchange at Gila Bend, walked across the highway, and joined the crew for a leisurely breakfast. On board an hour later, we picked up a string of empties SP had left and headed back for Ajo. All too soon we arrived at the old mission-style depot, ending our adventure right on the printed schedule time of 11 a.m.

Alas, the Cannonball is long gone. Phelps-Dodge closed Cornelia Mine and the Ajo smelter in 1985, and the railroad stopped running. Reactivated during 1995–98 when P-D dismantled the smelter, the line then shut down again. Remarkably, though, the railroad is still there. The rails are rusty, and an occasional mesquite bush grows between the ties, but otherwise it looks intact, as does the Ajo depot. Arizona Route 85 parallels the railroad nearly the entire way. **1**



Preparing for the southbound departure from Gila Bend, engineer Ray Phillips mounts the steps of NW2 52 (above right) and poses in the cab (above), whose flank is filled by the railroad's long name. At the Southern Pacific interchange (right), the author's wife, Hilda, climbs aboard green caboose 15 for the ride back to Ajo.