

50 years since
STEAM



SP's FLEET

by the Bay



California's last big steam show took place on the San Francisco Peninsula

By Tom Dill

By late summer 1956, Southern Pacific's use of steam locomotives had come to a close throughout much of the system. In August, the corporate office at No. 65 Market Street in San Francisco had put out the decree that steam was to be used only if there was no diesel locomotive available. The spring and summer perishable rush was about over, and what steam was still in service tended to be concentrated around the San Francisco Bay Area and a few locations in the San Joaquin Valley, such as Tracy and Fresno.

The one bright spot for steam fans was SP's Peninsula commute service between San Francisco and San Jose. Here, steam still ruled supreme. The low equipment utilization inherent in such operations had made the commute

pool an ideal assignment for power that was fully amortized and had been bumped off premier runs by diesels.

SP had recently tried to dieselize this service with 16 Fairbanks-Morse H24-66 Train Masters brought west from New Mexico, where they had worked road freights. But teething problems occurred when the FM's were subjected to the demands of quick starts and stops and the high speeds dictated in commute service. Most had then been temporarily assigned to freight duty on the Coast Division until they could be reworked, one or two at a time, at SP's Los Angeles Shops and at Bayshore Yard outside San Francisco.

The Train Masters were not the first diesels to be tried in commute service. In late 1953 and '54 the road tested a couple of Electro-Motive SD7's, but they too came up short—they couldn't accel-

The afternoon commute rush is under way at SP's San Francisco terminal on March 29, 1956. The mostly steam-powered service posted a near-perfect on-time record, so the 4300-series 4-8-2 pulling out with train 136 leaves little doubt that the time is 5:23 p.m.



Bob Trennert

erate fast enough on rush hour trains and were soon relegated to shorter off-peak consists. In addition, six GP9's had been assigned to the commute pool in 1955; they held down some off-peak runs, rush hour commute trains 121 and 130, and trains 77 and 78, the San Francisco–Monterey *Del Monte*.

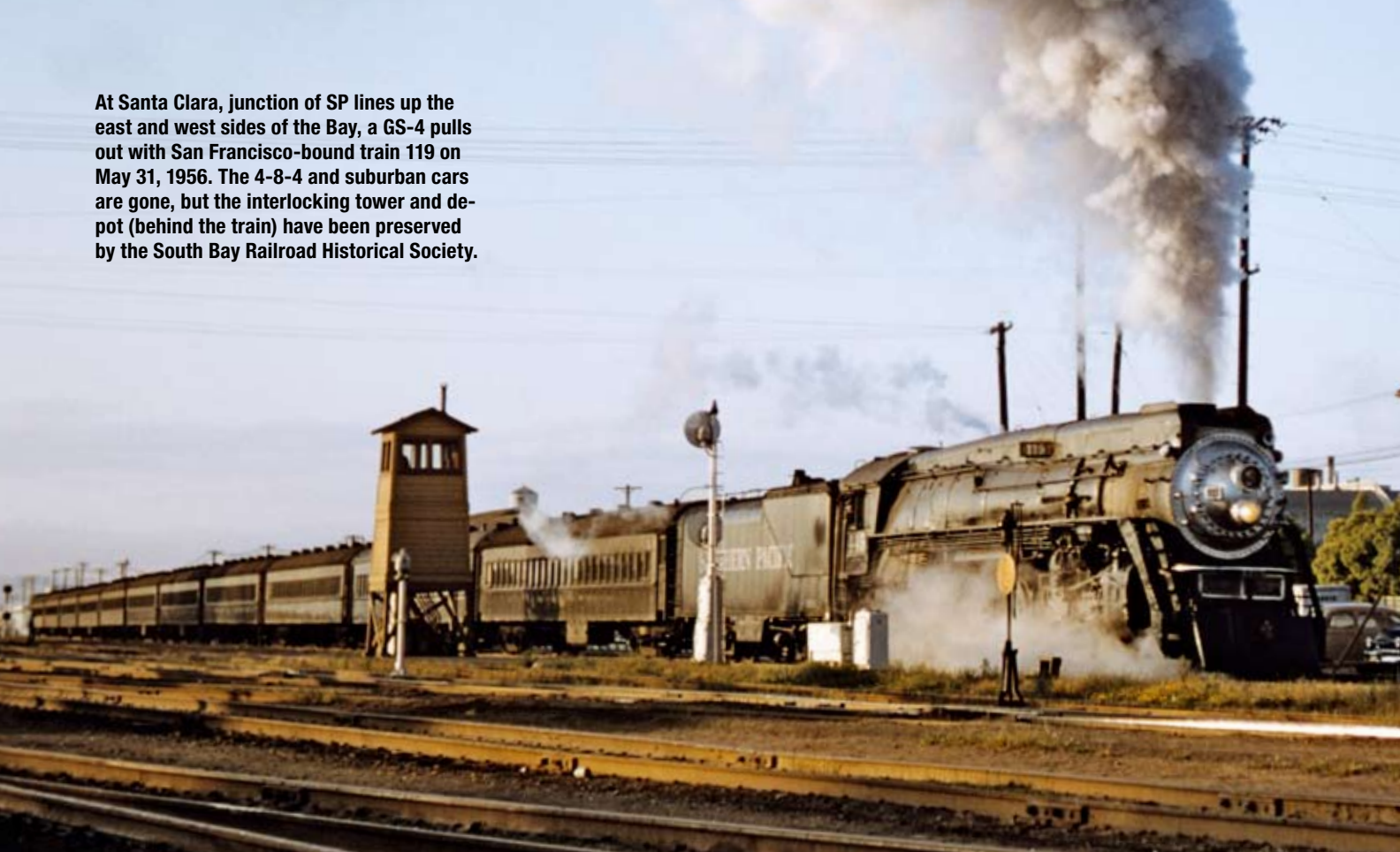
Raillfans flocked to the Peninsula to record and witness what was to be the last great show of big steam on the SP. On any given weekday during August and September 1956, no fewer than 35 to 40 commute trains, out of a total of 54, were still steam-powered. Twenty-six engines were in the commute pool at the start of fall 1956: 6 Pacifics, 13 Mountains, and 7 of the famous GS-class Northern. In addition, a handful of 0-6-0 switchers could usually be found working around the San



Bob Trennert

Switcher 1270 blocks 4th Street as she spots baggage cars at the San Francisco terminal on September 10, 1956; until recently, the 0-6-0 wore a fancy livery for passenger-depot duty.

At Santa Clara, junction of SP lines up the east and west sides of the Bay, a GS-4 pulls out with San Francisco-bound train 119 on May 31, 1956. The 4-8-4 and suburban cars are gone, but the interlocking tower and depot (behind the train) have been preserved by the South Bay Railroad Historical Society.



Bob Trenner

GS-1 4-8-4 No. 4402 (Baldwin, 1930) rests at Mission Bay roundhouse in September 1956.



Bob Searle

Well-kept Pacific 2489 rolls into Mountain View with off-peak local 153 on August 31, 1956.

Francisco passenger terminal at Third and Townsend streets. Although less predictable than the commutes, some freights around the Bay Area and east to Roseville and Fresno were still pulled by steam engines, including a number of SP's unique cab-forwards.

SP called its morning and evening commutes the "Fleet." In later years there was even a repeater button on the interlocking machine at Bayshore Tower (later installed in Fourth Street Tower in San Francisco) labeled "Fleeting," which automatically set the switches and signals at the passenger terminal so each train did not have to be cleared separately. Freight trains and maintenance gangs had to be well in the clear of the main line when the Fleet began to flow each morning and afternoon. Delays of even a few minutes were crucial to the schedule and would have to be answered for in person by the offending conductor or foreman.

In the afternoon, the best location to view the action was near the Third and Townsend station. Each weekday between 4 and 6 p.m., 15 commute trains departed for the 47-mile run down the double track to San Jose. The real action began with train 130, due out at 5:14; from then until No. 144 at 5:35, trains left on three-minute headways. Authorized to run at up to 70 mph, each train made limited stops. The first, No.



John E. Shaw

130, had no scheduled stops until California Avenue at Palo Alto, almost 32 miles from San Francisco, a distance it covered in 38 minutes. The following train's first stop was at the next-closest intermediate station, and so forth, so that most commuters got home by 6 p.m., regardless of destination. This also kept the trains from crowding each other and thus having to run on restricted signal indications. It was imperative that the trains run on schedule, as one delay would affect all the following trains. Late trains were uncommon, to say the least: On-time performance for the Fleet was 98 percent. On the rare occasions when trains ran late, their riders were told why. The next day, employees placed small cards on the seats explaining what had been the cause of any delay.

The morning rush out of San Jose was about the same, only in reverse. Peak departure times were from 6:03 a.m. for train 111 to 7:26 for train 135. This was the busiest line on the entire SP—and in fact anywhere west of Chicago—with a total of 69 First Class passenger and freight trains, plus numerous lesser freights and locals plying the



John E. Shaw

Train 130 of August 31, 1956—GP9's 5600 and 5602 with 10 gallery cars—passes a 4-8-4 that has just left Mission Bay roundhouse and is backing to the Third and Townsend terminal.

rails each weekday. And into fall 1956, much of this traffic was still entrusted to steam locomotives.

The last years of steam coincided with the postwar suburban building boom. This was no more evident than in the narrow stretch of densely populated land south of San Francisco that lies between the Coast Range on the west and San Francisco Bay on the east. The area provided a more relaxed, suburban lifestyle than living in the "City" (as San Franciscans call their town), and the SP provided the means to travel easily to downtown workplaces from many points along the Peninsula. To handle all the riders, the railroad provided 75 heavyweight suburban coaches, 156 older steel cars from the early-1900s Harriman era, and 10 new gallery-type bi-level cars. The 96-seat suburban coaches were built between 1923 and '27 and were the first all-steel cars designed specifically for this service. As streamlined equipment replaced older cars on SP's long-haul trains, the Harriman chair cars were reassigned to commute service.

The Peninsula's booming residential development increased demand for SP's commute service. The road added cars to the trains, but some were becoming too long for the station platforms. Seeking a way to move more people without adding cars, SP borrowed one of the Burlington Route's suburban bi-levels in January 1954 so Peninsula commuters could test it out and make suggestions on what they might want in cars the SP ordered. A number of the suggestions were incorporated into the 10 new cars built by Pullman-Standard and delivered for service beginning on June 16, 1955. SP ordered 15 more bi-

levels in 1956; these were constructed by American Car & Foundry and delivered in spring 1957.

To keep all this equipment in top shape required a small army of carmen, coach cleaners, electricians, mechanics, and other service personnel. The cars were cleaned and supplied each day at both San Jose and San Francisco and the exteriors washed at regular intervals at the City coach yard. SP's commute service was recognized as the finest in the country at the time.

Train length varied from 1 to 16 cars, depending on the time of day, day of the week, and train direction. Most rush hour trains consisted of from 8 to 16 cars, while midday and late-night trains were usually 1 to 6 cars long. Trains were usually made up of all 60-foot Harriman cars, 72-foot "Suburbans," or the 85-foot gallery cars, although some mixing did occur on off-peak trains. A few off-peak runs carried RPO and baggage cars for mail and express shipments.

Times over the 47-mile district varied from 66 minutes for speedster 130, which made only four stops, to just shy of 2 hours for train 147, which set out mail, baggage, and express at Palo Alto and San Mateo and made nearly all station stops between San Jose and San Francisco.

Right up until the end of steam operations, the SP kept its locomotives assigned to the commute pool in top condition, both mechanically and cosmetically. Engines had a regular maintenance schedule, and any small problem reported by a crew or inspector was immediately repaired or the engine was taken out of service until proper repairs could be made. The

More on our Web site

Watch video clips of Southern Pacific steam in action, as well as locomotives from other roads in this issue, at www.ClassicTrainsMag.com



Eugene Van Dusen

With the Bay Bridge towers in the distance, 4-8-2 4307 rolls train 122's Harriman coaches into the big curve just south of Third and Townsend.



Alden Armstrong

Mountain types 4307 (left) and 4376 are ready to depart San Francisco with trains 124 and 126; the 4307 (Schenectady, 1923) was SP's eighth 4-8-2, while 4376 (SP, 1930) was its last.

locomotives were carefully groomed and maintained at Mission Bay roundhouse, just to the south of the Third and Townsend depot in San Francisco, and at San Jose's Lenzen Avenue roundhouse. The engines were also painted and washed periodically, which was definitely the exception to what was

taking place in the ranks of the rest of the remaining steam power on the SP and most other roads. These steam locomotives were the pride of the fleet right up until the end of their use.

In addition, the passenger cars assigned to the commute fleet were thoroughly cleaned and washed on a regu-

lar basis. While the SP still held all its passenger trains in high regard, there was an added reason for the commute equipment's spic-and-span condition. Most of SP's top executives lived on the Peninsula and rode the commutes daily to and from work in San Francisco. They wanted the equipment to be in very presentable condition, especially since many of their fellow passengers were executives with other firms, and would comment to them about the condition of the trains.

As 1956 came to a close there were still about 15 steam locomotives in use, but almost weekly another one would be relegated to "stored serviceable" status as the FM Train Masters came online. On January 22, 1957, 4-8-4 No. 4430 worked train 146 from San Francisco to San Jose in what turned out to be the last steam-hauled commute and the final use of regular mainline steam on the SP. The road kept a number of locomotives hot with a spot fire at both Mission Bay and San Jose in case one of the commute diesels would fail, but this lasted only for a day or two before the engines were taken off standby sta-



Bob Trennert

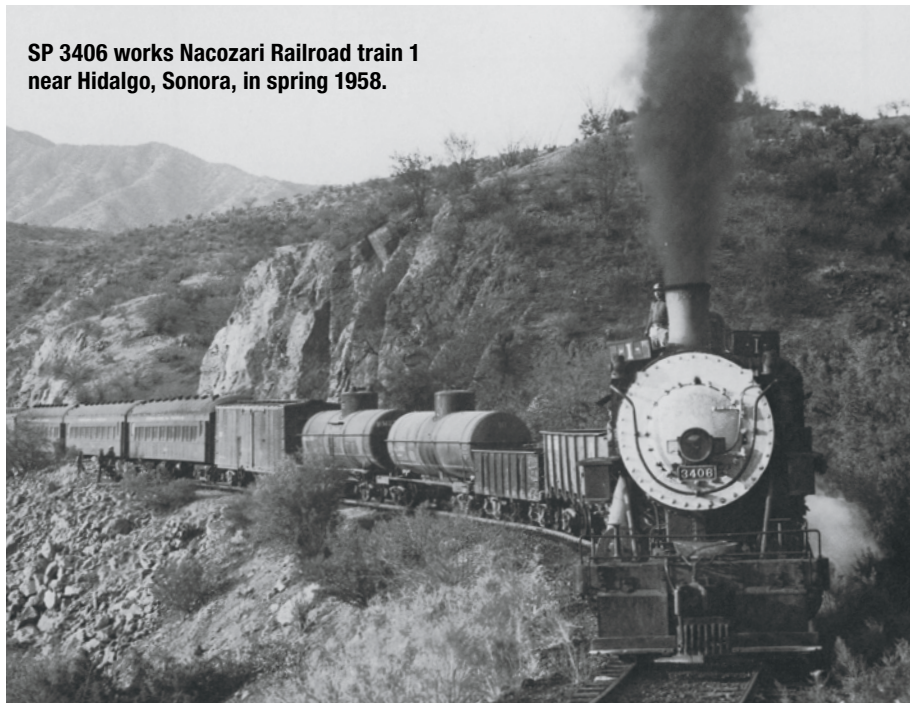
The immaculate condition in which SP kept its commute equipment is evident in Mt-3 4-8-2 4342, backing toward Third and Townsend on September 13, 1956. Bumped from top passenger runs, the free-steaming, 73-inch-drivered Mt's proved to be ideal engines for commute service.

tus. Complete dieselization of the commutes came a lot sooner than expected. Even the railroad figured it would use steam on an intermittent basis for possibly another two years, especially during the summer perishable rush.

By the following spring, when business normally picked up, the call for additional power didn't materialize, for a number of new GP9's had arrived from EMD and the country was in a recession. One by one over the next three years, the remaining steam locomotives that had worked the Peninsula trains were unceremoniously sent to the scrappers. The year 1956 would prove to be the high point of patronage on the commutes under SP's management. This result was of course not because of the loss of steam, but rather the trend toward the use of the private automobile and the opening of the new four-lane Bayshore Freeway, connecting San Jose and San Francisco.

In July 1980 the SP and California's Department of Transportation (Caltrans) reached an agreement whereby the state would underwrite the Peninsula commute operation. Five years later the SP bowed out entirely and Caltrans took over, operating the commutes under the "Caltrain" brand. Ridership and the number of trains has been on the increase since, but nothing will ever compare to the action that took place in the last months of 1956, when steam still dominated Southern Pacific's "Fleet by the Bay!" 📌

SP 3406 works Nacozari Railroad train 1 near Hidalgo, Sonora, in spring 1958.



Donald Duke

NACOZARI AND NARROW-GAUGE

The January 22, 1957, run of GS-4 4430 on train 146 wasn't quite the end of regular-service steam on the SP system. Two Consolidations continued to work on subsidiary Nacozari Railroad between Douglas, Ariz., and Nacozari, Sonora, Mexico, until January 19, 1959. Ten days after that, 2-8-0 3406 ran light from Douglas to El Paso, marking the last regular-service steam movement on SP's standard-gauge lines. The absolute end came on August 29, 1959, when Ten-Wheeler No. 9 made its last run on SP's Laws-Keeler, Calif., 3-foot-gauge line, which itself was abandoned in April 1960.—Robert S. McGonigal