



CUT OFF AND

A young SP fireman bounces around California in search of steady work

By Tom Dill

During fall 1967, I had been working as a fireman on Southern Pacific's Coast Division since hiring out in June. I was still "wet behind the ears" and had spent much of that summer working various hostler helper jobs at either San Francisco's Seventh Street diesel terminal or Bayshore Yard, the site of SP's principal

Bay Area locomotive shop.

The primary chore for the hostler and his helpers at Seventh Street was to gather from five to seven of the big Fairbanks-Morse Train Masters used on the commute trains and turn them on the wye at Potrero Tower, less than a mile away, then spot them for fuel and inspections on the Seventh Street service tracks.



Bay Area-bound Southern Pacific freight 803 coils downgrade at Allard, Calif., about 23 miles west of Tehachapi, on May 14, 1966.

Tom Gildersleeve

LOANED OUT

These locomotives were then ready to haul the afternoon commute trains down the Peninsula to San Jose. Hostling jobs also handled the half dozen switch engines that worked the Third and Townsend passenger depot, local industries, and jobs at Mission Bay yard. In addition, we often made one or two trips to and from Bayshore, just over 5

miles south, to deliver or retrieve commute power that needed repair or major inspections. We also handled freight-train consists that terminated or originated at Mission Bay.

All this gave me a fair amount of experience with locomotives, but very little time out on the road. By the first of November I realized I was going to be “cut

off” the working list any day. I already had been bumped out of the San Francisco area and had to work a swing-shift hostler helper job in San Jose. Even that lasted only a couple of days, and I was out of a place to go on the third.

This was not the first time I’d been cut off, the first time being on July 24 at midnight when the crew caller phoned

me with the unwelcome news. I'd been working less than a month and could hardly believe it! The reason was that SP had recently opened the Palmdale Cutoff in southern California, and many of the trains that had run over the Coast Division now were moving over the San Joaquin Valley line to Colton, avoiding the congested Los Angeles Basin. This resulted in less work for Coast Division men like me.

I was desperate for work and was told to check with the personnel office in SP headquarters at 65 Market Street in San Francisco. That office handled requests for trainmen and enginemen throughout the system who were needed for temporary work. If a certain location was short of men, the division superintendent could ask for "loaners," men furloughed on other districts, to come and work. All expenses such as travel, meals, and lodging were up to the individual employees, but at least it was an opportunity to work. Upon being called back to your "home" division, you had 30 days to report and mark up for assignment.

On August 10 came the good news that Roseville, Calif., needed some loaners, so I and a couple of other young fireman off the Coast headed that way and

were marked up on the fireman's extra board. I stayed there less than a week, renting a room at a nearby boarding house, but I made more road trips in five days than I'd ever made in 1967 on the Coast Division! I was called back to the Coast on the 16th and marked up on the San Francisco extra board the next day.

While being cut off during the height of summer was totally unexpected, being cut off in November was more the norm. Again I checked with the personnel office almost daily, hoping to at least work through the end of the year. I was notified on November 7 that there was an urgent need for firemen at Bakersfield on the San Joaquin Division, and was told I could work there at least through the Christmas season. Having recently been married, and with a baby on the way, I needed to work where and when I could.

I loaded up my '55 Chevy station wagon with food and gear for a prolonged trip away from home. To save expenses, I even put an old mattress and sleeping bag in the back. There was no need to rent a room when I could sleep in my car and shower at the enginemen's doghouse, at least for a while. On November 8, after driving down, I marked up



Two Fairbanks-Morse Train Masters, an EMD GP9, and—mostly hidden—an FM switcher stand at Seventh Street, San Francisco, in 1968.

Alden Armstrong



Diesels of three builders congregate at Bakersfield on March 2, 1965. Third from left is Krauss-Maffei diesel-hydraulic 9004; second from right is C628 4871, a former Alco demonstrator.

Tom Gildersleeve

on the firemen's extra board at Bakersfield that afternoon and asked where a safe place to park would be. Even though I was from a different division, no one asked me to write the Special Instructions for the San Joaquin Division—and I sure didn't volunteer!

The next morning at just after 5, I was awakened with a rap on the Chevy's window. Drowsy from a fitful night's sleep, I got the call: 6:45 a.m. on duty with engineer Walker in helper service east over Tehachapi Loop. This was the third helper I'd ever worked, the previous two being out of Roseville back in August. For power, we had SD40's 8401

and 8412 and SD9 3964. We helped a train up to Mojave, set out the 3964 at the enginehouse there, then returned to Bakersfield light-engine, tying up at 3:50 p.m. There the crew dispatcher informed me that—you guessed it—I was cut off. It was Thursday afternoon, and the extra board was already almost out of men; come the weekend, they would certainly be out. I didn't get it.

I asked the crew dispatcher why I'd been cut off, and he told me some of the home guard had complained to the local firemen's union griever that I, and a couple of other loaners, were taking the good extra-board jobs while the regular men were stuck on hostling jobs at Bakersfield. We loaners had so little experience that we were not qualified to work hostling jobs, which required a minimum of six months actual time worked.

I asked for the griever's phone number and luckily caught him at home. I explained that before I'd left the Bay Area I'd been told I could probably work out of Bakersfield through the end of the year, but now had been cut off after only one trip! The board was already short, I



To save money during his temporary assignment at Bakersfield, Dill loaded his '55 Chevy wagon with food and gear, plus an old mattress and sleeping bag, and slept in the car.

Tom Dill collection

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pointed out, so couldn't I at least work through the next couple of days and possibly longer to pay for my expenses of coming here? The griever said he'd speak to the crew dispatcher, and in short order I was again marked up on the extra board, much to my satisfaction.

I made another helper trip, this time



going only as far as Tehachapi. I sure was nervous cutting out the helper—I didn't want to "big hole" the train by closing or opening the angle cocks too quickly. I was on duty only six hours, tying up at 5:15 a.m.

My next call came on the morning of the 11th at 8:05 for a trip west up the valley to Fresno, this time with engineer Byers and units 6339 and 8204, an A-B set of "covered wagons," as SP crews called F7's. I had not worked on many of these units, as they were no longer common on the Coast Division. We had an uneventful trip to Fresno, but what I still recall is how the engineer used the automatic brake valve as he slowed coming into Fresno yard. He "ping-ponged" the brake valve, making a small, quick reduction and then releasing the brakes, only to come back after it again with the same 6- or 8-pound set, then release. He had those two F's working hard, with the train stretched out tight as he slowed on the main line and then entered the yard with a highball from the herder.

After tying up, we were soon back on duty, but this time to deadhead back to Bakersfield by bus. I hung around all day Sunday, but didn't get called, and then that evening was told by the crew dispatcher that I was again cut off. This time I didn't bother to protest, but simply got in my Chevy and drove back to San Francisco. So much for Bakersfield!

I was able to work a bit more on my home division that winter, being called back the day after Christmas. I spent a couple of weeks on the firemen's extra board working a few yard jobs; hostler helper positions at Seventh Street, Bayshore, and San Jose; a 15½-hour day on the East Pleasanton Turn; and one trip to Watsonville on the night of December 29. The Watsonville trip was cut short at San Jose because of the imminent arrival of my baby daughter. SP was kind in that the crew dispatcher whisked me off the power, took me to the Greyhound depot, and put me on the next bus to San Francisco. In less than 2 hours I was at the hospital, where she was born at 10:30 a.m. on December 30.

On January 5, 1968, I was furloughed from SP again, but I soon got a job at Graybar Electric. Work there was OK,

SD9's on L.A.-bound freight 806 surge out of Tunnel 5 above Bealville on the climb to Tehachapi in 1966. The F7-GP9-GP9-F7 helper set was cut into the train at Bakersfield.

Three photos, Tom Gildersleeve



GE U30C's arrived on the SP during author Dill's time at Bakersfield. Brand-new No. 7902 looks sharp here, but Tehachapi's many tunnels ensured that units did not stay clean for long.

Tom Dill

but I sure missed the railroad and would check about once a week with the personnel office to see if firemen were needed elsewhere on the SP. Finally in mid-May I was told that Bakersfield again had a call out for firemen. I was told to report as soon as possible and that I would not be cut off after a few days or a week.

So, after quitting my job at Graybar, I once again drove down the San Joaquin Valley, this time with a bit more trepidation. Upon reporting to the superintendent's office, I was told I would first have to take an open-book test on the division special instructions. This was the norm—I still don't know how I got out of doing it the other two times I was loaned out. Upon completing the test, I marked up on the Bakersfield extra board.

This time I took a room at a nearby hotel, the Rankin. It was typical of old hotels near the railroad: a small room with a creaky, swayback bed; a sink; a small desk; a bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling with peeled paint; and a bathroom down the hall. I could look out the back window and see the roundhouse area, so was an easy walk to work. My first call came on May 15 at 10 a.m.—a good daylight helper trip with engineer J. Bolt. We had brand-new General Electric U30C's 7917 and 7903. They were so clean you could almost smell the fresh paint, unlike most of the hill power around Bakersfield!

Over the next six weeks I worked steadily, being called primarily for helpers and pool trips to Fresno and back. I

did work a couple of days on one of the west end yard goats, which was a nice break after working some long nights.

A few trips stand out. On June 1, I was called for an extra west to Fresno with engineer C. M. Beasley, on duty at 2:35 a.m. We had a couple of Geeps and Krauss-Maffei diesel-hydraulic No. 9107. We were both thankful the K-M was the trailing unit, as they had reputation for failing en route. This turned out to be the only time I ever worked on one, and I was totally unfamiliar with the resets and protection devices and where they were located. Sure enough, about two hours into our trip, alarm bells began to go off.

We were clipping along at 55 or 60 mph, and the engineer wanted me to go back and see what the problem was. I was still a dumb kid and didn't ask him to slow down—just grabbed my gloves and flashlight and headed out the back door. It was a bit nerve-wracking to balance along the running board and pass between the units at that speed. After

I hung around all day but didn't get called. Then that evening the crew dispatcher told me that I was again cut off.

struggling to open the cab door on the second unit, I bounded inside with the door slamming behind me, shattering the window glass. All was fine with the second unit, so the problem was with the 9107. When I got back there I found that one of its two engines had shut down. I isolated that engine and didn't bother trying to restart it, as the K-M's remaining engine and the two Geeps were handling the load pretty well. I then waited until we slowed for a meet before venturing out and working my way back to the lead unit to report the problem. I vowed then and there that I would not go back between the units if we were making more than 40 mph!

On another occasion I was called to fire on a helper. The hoghead barely acknowledged my existence, speaking less than a dozen words to me the whole trip. As usual, we cut off at Tehachapi, but this time we were instructed to set out the power on the house track. As I was tying down the locomotives, the engineer took off. I looked all over the town's watering holes but was unable to find him. Finally I went back over to the power and figured I'd wait for him to show up. In the meantime, an eastbound Santa Fe train came along. He had a helper, which was cut out at the summit just east of town, so I gathered my stuff and a red flag and waited for the helper to return. I flagged him down, got on, explained my predicament, and hitched a ride back down the hill to Bakersfield.

A few days later, I saw the engineer, and he asked what had happened. I told him my story, adding that if he had only given me some information I might have known what was going on. He said he'd called the dispatcher and told him not to send a ride for us as his wife was going to pick us up! I did not know any of this!

One engineer I'll never forget is D. A. McCutchen. I first worked with him on a return trip from Fresno to Bakersfield. I'd already been warned to watch out for him as he loved to play practical jokes, especially on new guys. We were on the

The little switcher was jumping up and down and hunting from side to side. I couldn't begin to sit on the seatbox.

Diesel-hydraulic 9102 and a GP9, having helped up the hill from Bakersfield, are cut out of their train at Summit Switch, just east of Techachapi, on February 22, 1966.

Tom Gildersleeve

6343, an old F7 where the brakeman sat in a center seat, which was somewhat higher than the two seats on each side. We were stopped in the hole for a meet and I was relaxing when suddenly the brakeman let out a yell, followed by a bunch of expletives. He'd been reading a newspaper when D.A. casually reached over and lit the bottom of the paper with a match! No harm was done as the paper was quickly extinguished, but I thought to myself that I better watch out.

Sure enough, I had the misfortune to work with D.A. a few days later on a helper. I hardly let him out of my sight, but as we struggled up through the many tunnels, the alarm bells went off and our speed began to drop. I knew we had probably lost a unit owing to overheating, so I went back to check the problem. Upon returning to the lead unit I found the rear cab door was locked! D.A. just turned in his seat, took another bite of my Hostess cupcake and smiled! There was nothing I could do, so I went back to the next unit and made myself comfortable. As we approached the summit I returned to the lead unit. By this time D.A. had unlocked the door, and he then told me how much he enjoyed my cupcakes.

By mid-June 1968 I had still not been called back to the Coast Division and was getting discouraged. On the 18th I was called for a light-engine move with engineer Duffy. We were to take the 1205, an Alco S6 switcher, to Porterville and trade it for one that had been damaged in a grade-crossing accident. We ran up the main 20 miles, then turned onto the Exeter Branch at Famoso. I don't recall what the posted speed was, but we were *moving*! That little switcher was jumping up and down and hunting from side to side. I couldn't begin to sit on the seatbox, but had to stand in the center of the cab and brace myself.

It was the same thing on the return from Porterville. The only damage to the engine was the steps and footboards on one end, so we "flew" back to Bakersfield. At one point the water jug came unhooked and popped out of its mount, spraying water around the cab. Our total time on duty was less than 6 hours—that hoghead must have had a hot date! It was



also advantageous to me, though, as I was notified that I had been called back to the Coast Division that afternoon. I didn't wait for the next morning to head home, but packed my stuff, paid my hotel bill, and hit the highway for San Francisco, marking up the next day.

These were not to be the last times I was loaned out. In spring 1969 I was again cut off and went down to the Los Angeles Division for just over a month. I even worked for the San Francisco Belt Railway for a short time in early 1970 before trading to the Oregon Division in March. I was never furloughed thereafter, but did volunteer to go to work on the Tucson and Salt Lake divisions as an engineer when the company was short of men down there. I guess there must have been a touch of the old railroad boomer in me! ■

Alco S6 switchers, like No 1204 at Bakersfield, were rough riders at speed, as Dill learned the hard way on a light-engine move.

Alden Armstrong

