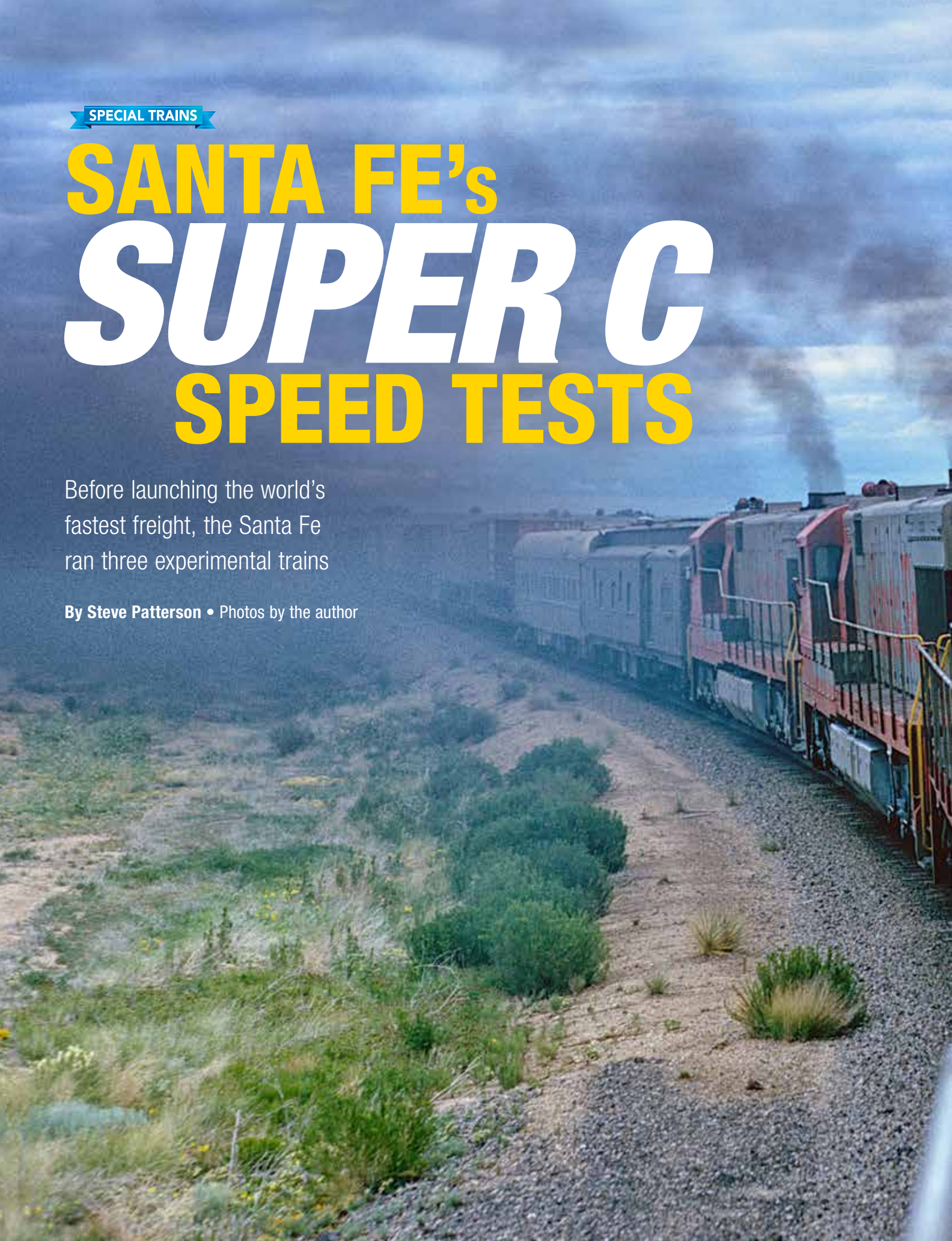


SPECIAL TRAINS

SANTA FE's *SUPER C* SPEED TESTS

Before launching the world's fastest freight, the Santa Fe ran three experimental trains

By Steve Patterson • Photos by the author





A pleasing sight to railroad enthusiasts (and shippers) in the second half of the 20th century was the growing appearance of highway trailers riding on flatcars. That was supposed to mean fewer trucks on our Interstate highways and more revenue for railroads when jet airliners and automobiles were taking passengers away.

In the first half of the century, Colorado Federal Judge J. Foster Symes said that “freight traffic will gravitate to the fastest schedule as quickly as water seeks its own level.” Among other carriers in the 1960s, two major railroads — New York Central and Santa Fe — were particularly cognizant of that axiom. They explored offering a premium freight service from coast to coast on the fastest schedule in history.

Santa Fe President John Reed and his marketing department believed there was sufficient truck traffic moving cross-country to warrant expedited rail freight service at a premium rate. NYC President Al Perlman wasn't so sure, as freight forwarders who existed on low rates were trying to dissuade him because such service would be a threat to them.

In those pre-double-stack days, when the term “intermodal” was barely entering the lexicon, most rail-truck coordination was in the form of trailer-on-flatcar (TOFC, or “piggyback”) service. A relatively small amount of freight moved in container-on-flatcar (COFC) service.

The two railroads jointly conducted wind-resistance tests with TOFC and COFC equipment on a 15-mile stretch of the Santa Fe 60 miles southwest of Chicago. Each train weighed nearly the same. Even with five 6-axle passenger-g geared diesels up front, the maximum desired speed of 90 mph could not be attained on a slightly ascending grade without reducing tonnage. This was true for the piggyback train as well as the container train, which used NYC's low-profile Flexi-Van equipment.

Next came a series of three long-distance tests. Test Run 1, as it came to be known, left Santa Fe's Corwith Yard in Chicago at 10 a.m. on May 26, 1967, with four new GE U28CG passenger diesels pulling a dynamometer car, a business

In a view back from the cab of the lead unit, Santa Fe's third pre-*Super C* test train accelerates out of a curve near Model, Colo., about 20 miles east of Trinidad, on July 11, 1967.



Test Run 3 departs Argentine Yard, Kansas City, just before 11 a.m. on July 11, 1967. Behind the four U28CG passenger diesels is dynamometer car 5015 and business car 36, assigned to Eastern Lines General Manager L. M. Olson, for whom author Patterson worked at the time.

car, 20 flatcars carrying 40 trailers, and a caboose for a total trailing weight of 1,744 tons. Operating over the road's principal freight route via Amarillo, Texas (today, BNSF's "Transcon"), the train reached Hobart Yard in Los Angeles in 37 hours 33 minutes — a truly blistering pace. The test run proved the concept feasible, and Santa Fe soon announced it would launch a regular Chicago–L.A. freight train on a 40-hour schedule.

The second test run, 13 days after the first, was a true transcontinental train, beginning at NYC's 40th Street Yard in Manhattan on June 8. Despite a star-crossed run to Chicago, Test Run 2 smashed all records, posting a 34-hour 46-minute time between Chicago and L.A., breaking the *Super Chief's* record dash of 36 hours 49 minutes in May 1937. The test special's total journey time of 54 hours 21 minutes bested the previous coast-to-coast record, set by Union

Pacific's M-10001 streamliner in 1934. Like the first test run, the second train took the route used by most of Santa Fe's Chicago–California freight traffic.

But what about the road's northern main line? Running across Kansas and via La Junta, Colo., and Albuquerque, N.Mex., this was the principal route for Santa Fe's Chicago–California passenger trains. Though only 20 miles shorter than the Amarillo route, and spiked with severe grades on two mountain passes, it included 500 miles of 90-mph track and had many fewer interfering trains. Per-

haps it would be a better route for the new hotshot. A third test special was planned. Since its principal aim was to evaluate the northern route, it would run Kansas City–Winslow, Ariz., only.

On July 11, 1967, 20 flatcars with 40 trailers were assembled as Test Run 3 at Santa Fe's Argentine Yard in Kansas City, Kans. Up front, behind four U28CGs, were dynamometer car 5015

and business car 36; bringing up the rear of the 1,745-ton train was a caboose. Eastern Lines General Manager L. M. Olson and I, his secretary, climbed aboard. We departed at 10:53 a.m., hell bent for Winslow. Out of Argentine we ran as the second section of No. 7, the *Fast Mail Express*, which had a 1-hour 45-minute head start on us. After about 550 miles we caught up to it, at La Junta, and exchanged flags (we got the green ones), our test special becoming First No. 7. We crested the highest point on the Santa Fe, Raton Pass Tunnel, a few minutes before 8 p.m. and stopped at Albuquerque at 1:02 a.m. This being the end of Olson's territory, his car was quickly cut out there. The test continued to Winslow, where the TOFC cars were picked up by the next westbound piggyback train.

Test Run 3 was a disappointment. Across the flats of Kansas, the train averaged just 69.1 mph. Between Garden City, Kans., and Lamar, Colo., where our passenger trains took the bridle off to gallop at 90 mph, we averaged only 73.2 mph. The prevailing Kansas headwinds are not a friend of westward truck trailers sitting high off their flatcars. Between the end points of Argentine and Winslow, Test

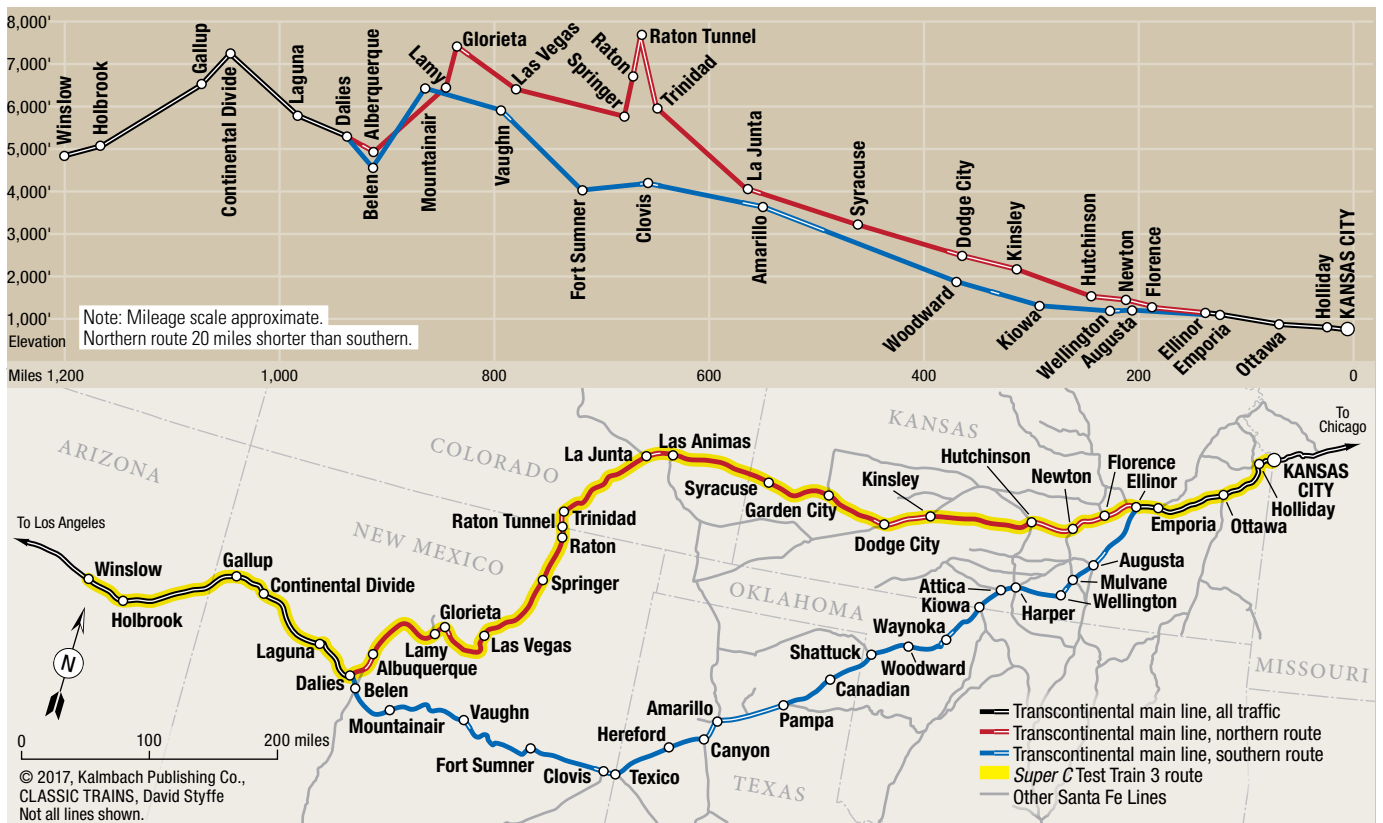


A speedometer in one of Test Run 3's U28s reads 84 mph. By special order, the train could run up to 90.



A rearward view from the business car shows Test Run 3's 20 loaded piggyback cars curving out of Argentine Yard. Previous tests ran Chicago-L.A. via Amarillo, but this one originated at K.C. and terminated at Winslow, Ariz., to evaluate performance on the northern main line.

Santa Fe's two routes west



Run 1 beat us by an hour and 12 minutes.

Planners decided to run the new service via the southern route. Its name, *Super C*, was a nod to our top passenger train, the legendary *Super Chief*. The New York Central elected not to participate, so it was a strictly Santa Fe operation.

Six months later, on January 17, 1968, L. M. Olson and I were on board the *Super C*'s first run as it broke through a "World's Fastest Freight Train" banner stretched across its departure track in Corwith Yard at 2:10 p.m. Being probably the lowest ranking employee on the history-making train, I mostly stayed out of sight in the dynamometer car, the first car behind the two brand-new EMD FP45s (and where I talked a lot of shop with TRAINS Editor David P. Morgan), but I did roam around

enough to make it to the lead unit's cab before darkness. The train weighed only 867 tons, consisting of just 12 cars including the dynamometer car, two business cars, a lounge car, and a caboose.

Numerous officials and invited guests had ridden a three-car special from Chicago's Dearborn Station down to the ceremony, including NYC's Jim McClellan, who had worked so hard, but in vain, for a 60-hour transcontinental premium train from New York to Los Angeles. He had ridden Test Train 2 all the way to California the previous June. Representatives of several shippers including Ford, Chrysler, Quaker Oats, IBM, Western Electric, and Zenith were on hand for the inaugural as well. Some were on tall ladders proudly affixing large paper banners to their trailers. General Manager Olson apparently had had a conversa-

tion with his bosses, Assistant Vice President Larry Cena and President Reed, about those banners attached to trailers about to set off on a high-speed run.

Not long after we departed, Olson dictated a telegram to me. Being experienced on how to coil a piece of paper to throw to a watchful station agent, I was pondering the likely next open agency. Streator (83 miles out from Corwith) was my best bet. But before reaching there, Olson had a change of heart and told me to tear up the wire. It had read, "To Cena. Banner joined the birds at milepost seven and two-thirds. Olson."

During the train's one-minute stop for a crew change at Emporia, Kans., at 10:40 p.m., Olson and I stepped off the hotshot and I drove us home to Topeka.

The train reached Los Angeles in 34 hours 35 minutes 40 seconds, besting by 10 minutes the previous record, set by Test Run 2.

Super C's life was tenuous and didn't come close to Reed and McClellan's vision, mainly because NYC didn't get in the game and bring East Coast premium goods to the train. The Santa Fe was hav-

Test Run 3 ran as Second No. 7, the *Fast Mail Express*, as far as La Junta, Colo., where it caught up to the first section, led by PA No. 70. Here the trains exchanged green flags (seen lying on the platform by engine No. 352's pilot), and the U28CGs led the way west as First 7.



ing its own friction with freight forwarders. Even with a tariff of \$1,400 per trailer, about \$500 more than the usual fee, the forwarders opposed the new intermodal service. Too many times in its first year, the train ran with only one, two, or three trailers; several eastbound versions didn't operate at all.

On the expense side, crew payrolls were a major factor — from Corwith to L.A. the train had 18 changes of crews of five men each. Where *Super C* runs could be advertised and bulletined as assigned jobs, you can believe the senior men on that division bid them in. How sweet it was for a crew to regularly step on at San Bernardino and zap 65 miles over to Hobart, jump on an eastbound

hotshot, and be back home in 4 hours, collecting two days' pay for their efforts.

Santa Fe kept pounding the pavement for new *Super C* customers. A one-time lark in May 1968 was 189 trailers of strawberries from California. In April 1969 the U.S. Post Office signed up, albeit only for an eight-week experiment. This led to a long-term contract, though, which kept *Super C* flying. But in early 1976 the Postal Service (as it had become) opened for new bids its parcel post haulage between Chicago and Los Angeles and San Francisco. Despite offering a faster schedule to both California cities, Santa Fe lost the business to the partnership of Chicago & North Western, Union Pacific, and Southern Pacific.

Without the mail, *Super C* was no longer a viable operation, and during the first two weeks of May 1976, the service sputtered to an end, ceasing its eight-year life as our country's fastest and most famous freight train. Has it been missed? No, because it showed all other hot trains on the Santa Fe what to do: stay out of yards! That's the legacy of those test specials and *Super C*. ■

STEVE PATTERSON retired from a 42-year career with Santa Fe and BNSF in 2007. He has been contributing to *TRAINS* since 1960 and to *CLASSIC TRAINS* since 2000. Some of the particulars about Test Runs 1 and 2 are from "Super C," by Fred Frailey, in May 1986 *TRAINS*.



In 90-mph territory 600 miles out of Kansas City, a clear signal at the west end of Thatcher (Colo.) siding beckons Test Run 3 onward at about 6 p.m. on July 11.



Test Run 3 is just out of Trinidad, Colo., as it hits the base of Raton Pass, whose 30-mph passenger limit was more than the train could manage. Nightfall precluded any photos west of here. Grades and wind helped nix this route for the *Super C*.