Ferrocarriles Nacionales de México No. 6406, wearing original paint, rests in the sun during September 1956. NdeM operated its Centipedes individually or with power from other builders. It was the last railroad to operate them, into the early 1970s. J. R. Williams, Krambles-Peterson Archive

Baldwin Centipede locomotives — Diesels That Didn't

Baldwin Centipede locomotives were an oddity of mid-century railroading that just couldn't compete with more mundane offerings from rivals Alco or Electro-Motive.

Officially, this gargantuan diesel is the Baldwin DR12-8-1500/2. That's a mouthful. Broken down, it stood for Diesel Road, 12 axles, eight of which were connected to traction motors, with two engines, each producing 1,500 horsepower. The 2 stood for their original design philosophy of having two of them semi-permanently connected back-to-back to form a 6,000 hp package. Whew!

No wonder it was usually referred to as the Centipede. Baldwin engineers conceptualized the unit in the mid-1940s, and 56 of them were built between 1945 and 1948 for just three railroads in the U.S. and Mexico.

Designed as high-speed passenger motive power, their debut was met by a ho-hum response from the railroads, especially when compared to offerings from competing manufacturers, such as multiple-unit sets of EMD Es or Alco PA cab units.

Railroads that brought them into their rosters included Pennsylvania Railroad, with 24 units with a final numbering of 5811-5834; Seaboard Air Line, with 14 numbered 4500-4512; and Ferrocarriles Nacionales de México, with another 14 in the 6400-6413 slot. A pair of demonstrators, originally intended for the Union Pacific and ultimately canceled before delivery rounded out production.

Centipede locomotive No. 5811 and mate rest at Altoona, Pa., in October 1959. Pennsy opted to run its units in pairs between Harrisburg and Pittsburgh. William D. Volkmer, Krambles-Peterson Archive

Seaboard Air Line 4504 shows the tapered rear of the Centipede units at Wildwood, Fla., in 1949. W. B. Cox, Krambles-Peterson Archive

Initially the Mexican and Pennsylvania units were powering passenger trains as intended, but the railroads were frustrated with their mechanical reliability and rather quickly reassigned them to other duties. Mexico had the builder rebuild theirs with upgraded components to achieve a better operating ratio, while the Pennsy put its unit in freight service and helper duty in Pennsylvania. Seaboard Air Line predominately assigned them to freight trains.

The problem? Baldwin was assembling diesels in the same fashion as it did steam locomotives: one at a time. This resulted in none of them being exact mechanical copies of each other, with wiring and other details varying widely from unit to unit. Confounding to field mechanics, the units were rewired to be in mechanical harmony with each other as they came due for heavy overhauls. Some railroads had their pneumatic throttles, which kept them from being mated with units of other manufacturers, replaced with more universal electric designs so the railroads could create mix-and-match motive power consists at will.

But by that time, Baldwin's reputation was tarnished in the eyes of many who were used to comparative cookie-cutter units delivered by competing builders. When a mechanic had to tune up or fix an EMD F3, for example, he knew what to expect. With a Baldwin Centipede? Good luck.

In and out of storage due to fluctuating carloadings, the last of Seaboard's units were unloaded by 1960. The Pennsylvania held on to its a few more years but mostly had them gracing storage lines.

Longest lasting were the NdeM's, which had been reworked by the builder and railroad shop forces and managed to hang on until the early 1970s, predominately in freight service.

Whatever their shortcomings, however, Baldwin Centipede locomotives must have made an impressive sight working a train. — *David Lustig*