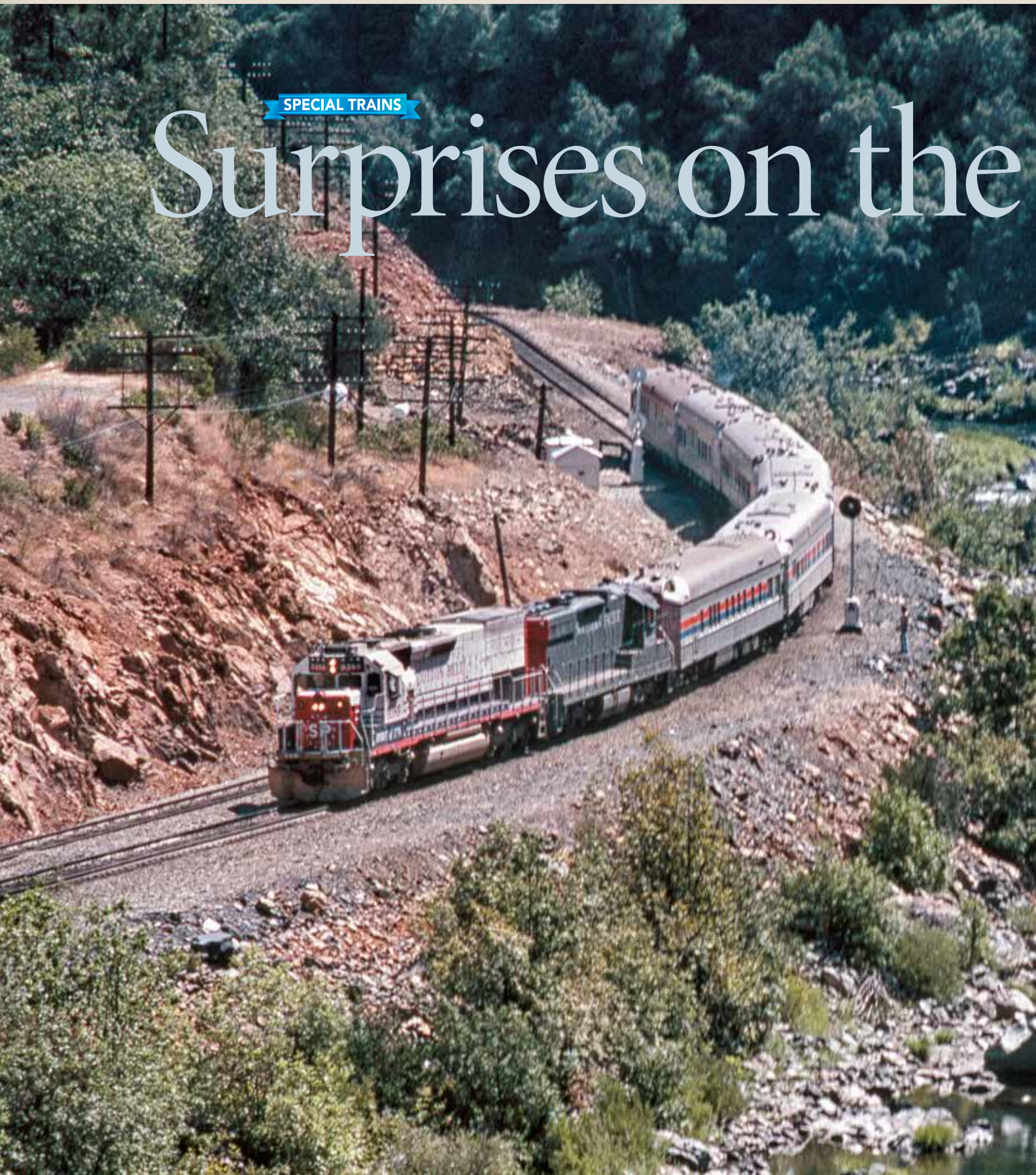


SPECIAL TRAINS

Surprises on the



Siskiyou

Chasing an SP office car special suddenly pays off; I not only meet “the boss” but have a unique encounter with a railroad cop

By Dick Dorn • Photos by the author

My two-plus days of chasing are about over on Thursday, August 12, 1976, as the special, having traversed the Siskiyou Line, rounds a curve on the Shasta Route main line at Gibson, Calif., along the Sacramento River.

In August 1976 I was on a trip from my northern California home to the Pacific Northwest that began with photographing the newly arrived motive power on the Oregon, California & Eastern, powering the log train out of Klamath Falls, Ore., to Sycan. Next up was a side trip to the Columbia River Gorge to shoot Burlington Northern in the Wishram, Wash., area. After a few days there, I was off to look at Southern Pacific branches in Oregon’s Willamette River valley, where power was all Geeps and SD9 “Cadillacs.”

During this time my friend Rod Loder tipped me off that SP would be running an office car special out of Portland on Tuesday, August 10, down the Siskiyou Line out of Eugene, Ore., and eventually to Oakland.

Named for the small coastal mountain range, popularly “the Siskiyous,” that straddles the California–Oregon border, the 295-mile line linking Black Butte, Calif., and Springfield Junction (Eugene), Ore., opened in late 1887. It topped the Siskiyous at 4,133 feet elevation with a 3,108-foot-long tunnel.

The Siskiyou became a secondary SP route through the mountains upon the 1926 opening of the shorter 270-mile Cascade Line (a.k.a. “Shasta Route” or “Natron Cut-off”) to the east. Linking Black Butte with Natron (Eugene) via Klamath Falls, Chemult, and Oakridge, Ore., it has lighter grades and less curvature than the Siskiyou. In recent times the Siskiyou became noted for its lower-quadrant-semaphores, many of which survived after SP sold the line to the Central Oregon & Pacific at the end of 1994.

It would be impossible to chase this office car special from Portland to Eugene, so I decided to try for just one shot, at the Willamette River bridge near Junction City, then head for Eugene. After some photos of the train there, split up and parked for the night on two depot spurs, I left for the lower reaches of the Cascade Line below Oakridge.

That night, I ended up sleeping out near Dexter. In the morning, my sleeping bag was covered with dew, so I just threw it into my vehicle — a 1971 Volkswagen microbus — and headed west to choose my first photo spot for the special. This turned out to be just onto the Siskiyou Line out of Springfield Junction in suburban Eugene.

I found a few nice places on the run to



South of Cottage Grove about 35 miles onto the Siskiyou Line, we're out of the valley on Wednesday the 11th, my first full day of chasing, at Drain, Ore. The lead unit has both SSW and SP identification, the SD9 has a steam generator, and half the business cars wear Amtrak stripes.

Dillard, just beyond Roseburg, where the train stopped for lunch to host executives from Roseburg Lumber, one of SP's largest shippers in the area.

At Dillard, across the road from where the train was parked, were several large settling ponds for dirty water from the lumber mill. I pulled up on one of the levees directly across from the train to eat and dry out my sleeping bag, which I put on the van's roof. I was admiring the special, which as power had new and specially painted Bicentennial SD45T-2 9389, lettered for subsidiary Cotton Belt on its flanks but with "SP" on the nose, and SD9 4450 with a steam boiler to provide heat for the cars. The six-car consist was SP business cars 106 *Oregon*, 141 *Oakland*, 100 *Airslie*,



140 *Stanford*, 107 *Del Monte*, and 150 *Sunset*, which was built by Pullman-Standard in 1956 for the use of SP's president. In 1976 this post was held by Benjamin F. Biaggini. Three cars wore Amtrak red-white-and-blue striping, as the passenger railroad for a few years required of cars carried in its trains, and three were "pure Southern Pacific" (silver with red letterboards). SP ran a second section, following, with its other steam-equipped SD9, 4451, pulling three 1950 Budd passenger cars assigned to "special service" (*i.e.*, business trains): dining car 290, lounge 291, and 10-room-ette 6-double-bedroom sleeping car 292, which provided more seating for shippers, who were wined and dined at Dillard.

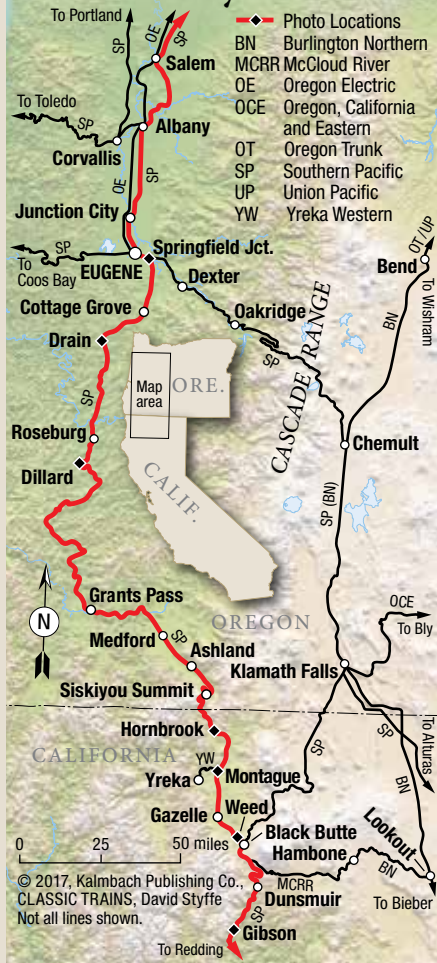
Author Dorn admits to having the "hippie look" in the 1970s.

Steve Patterson

As I sat by my van eating lunch, an unmarked white car drove up, and out stepped an SP police officer. "Oh no," I thought, "what have I done?" He strolled over and asked me what I was doing, so I explained that I was just following the train and taking photos. He then politely told me that it didn't "look all that great" with me parked directly across from the train and my sleeping bag lying on top of the van. To him, I looked like the stereotypical 1960s hippie, with hair down to my shoulders and driving a Volkswagen microbus to boot!

It was hard to argue his point. As I was packing up, I saw a gentleman get off the train and start to walk toward us. He crossed the road, came up, and stuck out his hand, saying, "Hi, I'm Ben Biaggini." I hardly knew what to say. He said he'd seen me earlier and was curious as to what I was doing. So I just told him the truth, that I was very interested in the train and was following it to take photos. He thought that was "neat," and

SP special down the Siskiyou Line



The special rolls through a deep cut between Roseburg and Dillard, where the train will park for lunch and allow a second section to catch up, and where SP's boss will introduce himself.

after we talked a few more minutes, the president of the Southern Pacific Transportation Co. returned to the train. I was having a hard time believing what had just happened. After witnessing the reaction of "the boss," the SP policeman said to me, "Well, I guess there is no need for you to move your car now."

The officer stayed around for a while, so I began asking him questions about how to get into some of spots along the line farther south. I'd never seen much of the Siskiyou Line, which is remote in many places, and the track is hard to follow without a good map, which I didn't have. He ended up becoming very helpful, leading me into great places such as Cow Creek Canyon, which at that time meant 30 miles of dirt road. Then he guided me over the hill south of Glendale on a barely navigable dirt road and then to Graves Creek Bridge and Leland. I would have never found my way to all those places, and since his duty was to follow the train, he was happy to escort



As the special climbs out of Weed, Calif., on August 12, SP President Ben Biaggini waves to me from the *Sunset's* platform. The other man is Denman K. McNear, who soon succeeded him.



Having surmounted Siskiyou Summit, Extra 9389 West splits the semaphores at Hornbrook, just inside California, on August 12. The Siskiyou's "blades" drew photographers from afar.

me. Of course, this turned out to be one of the most astonishing encounters I've ever had with a railroad police officer.

The odyssey was not without a negative. Later that afternoon at Gold Hill, west of Medford, the track crossed the Rogue River on an impressive bridge. As I was heading to my photo spot, I stepped over some barbed wire and landed on a round rock, severely spraining my left ankle. I could barely walk; the pain was excruciating. I did take my shot and barely made it back to my van. Driving was painful, as with the van's stick shift, pushing in the clutch to shift gears wasn't pleasant.

I was still 250 miles from home, and the train would be overnighing in Medford. I was not going to give up at this point, though, and decided to live with the pain. After a sleepless night I got up and resumed the chase. I was able to hobble to several trackside spots for more photos. Driving was as painful as walking, and climbing or hiking to more interesting spots was out of the question. The Siskiyou's rather slow track speeds helped a great deal. The Siskiyou rejoins the Shasta Line at Black Butte, and short-



We're just onto the Siskiyou Line out of Eugene on Wednesday the 11th, my first full day of chasing, and the valley affords a rare full broadside view of the special.

ly after leaving the junction, the special had to stop at Mott, at the top of the steep climb for eastbounds out of the Sacramento River Canyon above Dunsuir, because a freight ahead had encountered problems during the ascent.

Mr. Biaggini was out on the rear platform as I drove up and limped out of the van. He got off the *Sunset* and came over to talk to me again. He was concerned about me and wanted to know what had happened, so I told him. I also mentioned the article I had done on SP's Donner Pass snow-fighting equipment, which had appeared in the March 1976 *TRAINS* magazine. He replied that he had seen the article and enjoyed it. He also gave me a nice keychain with an SP emblem on it. We talked for about 10 minutes until the freight was approaching.

Before he left, I told him I would send him some black-and-white prints of the trip, and he said he would very much like that. Again my SP policeman friend was present, and after the president had re-boarded the *Sunset*, he came over and said that I must have some kind of special karma, as he had never seen Mr. Biaggini do anything like that before. I just shook my head and said I didn't under-



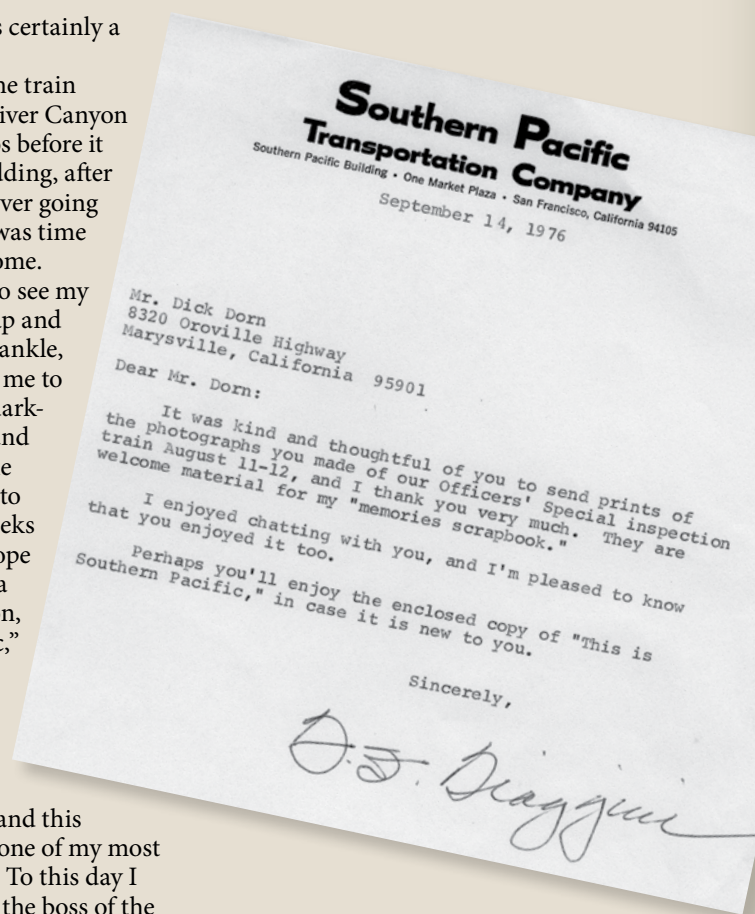
The agent at Montague, Calif., highballs the special as it kicks up dust making track speed on Thursday, August 12. By this time this was the only open station between Medford and Weed.

stand it either, but it was certainly a unique experience.

I was able to follow the train down the Sacramento River Canyon and get more nice photos before it entered the valley at Redding, after which a VW van was never going to keep up with it, so it was time for me to highball for home.

The next day I went to see my doctor to get a good wrap and some pain meds for the ankle, which made it easier for me to stand in my makeshift darkroom and process film and make prints. I mailed the prints off in short order to San Francisco. A few weeks later I received an envelope from SP that contained a copy of a nice publication, "This is Southern Pacific," and a letter (right) from Mr. Biaggini.

This now was four decades ago. I've been photographing railroads for over 50 years, and this chase still stands out as one of my most memorable experiences. To this day I cannot understand why the boss of the SP came over to talk to me. I did not speak with anyone else on the train during the trip. Further, my experience with the friendly SP policeman, whose name I, alas, did not write down but who became my personal guide, was amazing. It was truly an unforgettable few days. 📷



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