



Southern Pacific cab-forward 4-8-8-2 No. 4256 stands with train 59, the overnight Los Angeles–Oakland *West Coast*, during the train's station stop at Glendale in early 1949.

Don Sims

When trains ran late – and telegraphers earned their pay

Sit in with a telegrapher on SP's San Joaquin Division on a typically busy night in the 1950s

By R. David Read

The related story is not an entirely factual, minute-by-minute account of a specific night's proceedings; it is a re-enactment of composite, typical circumstances that might have influenced operations during the course of a night shift on the Fresno Subdivision of Southern Pacific's San Joaquin Division. I trust my readers will appreciate that the passing of some 60 years has a tendency to dull one's memory. So forgive me if my exact recollections may be less than totally accurate. However, I hope to convey the sense of urgency that existed and the ability of dispatchers, train-order operators, and train crews to cope with circumstances that were in a state of constant flux.

Settling in

It was a pleasant evening in late summer in the mid-1950s, the tail end of the steam era on this part of the SP, when I reported for work as the midnight-to-eight telegrapher/train-order operator at Goshen Junction, Calif., 33.6 miles south (east by timetable) of Fresno. The afternoon operator and I exchanged pleasantries; I checked the stack of train orders ("flimsies," so-called for their tissue-thin paper) awaiting delivery to trains passing or originating at "GJ"; examined the "hook" that held Western Union telegrams awaiting transmission; and, satisfied that everything was in order, I signed the "transfer" noting I was assuming responsibility for enacting all future activities. Harold sauntered out the door and I was left to my own devices.

11:58 P.M.: I dug my Hamilton Standard timepiece out of the watch pocket in my trousers and propped it a cradle that some prior, unheralded operator had crafted for the specific purpose of shielding one's watch from an unforeseen accident.

The Western Union wire was chattering in the background as telegraphers up and down the San Joaquin Valley strove to file late-night produce orders for tomorrow's business transactions; both BV (Bakersfield) and FV (Fresno) closed at midnight, and the burden for Western Union traffic now fell to SV (San Francisco).

With most freight agencies now closed for the night, the SP message wire was eerily quiet. GJ had nothing on the hook in the way of telegraph traffic for either Fresno (FN) or Bakersfield (K).

Commencing activities

12:01 A.M.: I plugged my "bug" into the Morse circuit, chose the dispatcher's wire on the plug-box, and tapped out "DS DS DS GJ." The reply from Tim, the night Fresno Sub dispatcher, was a prompt "GA GJ DS" ("Go ahead, Goshen Junction"); with that acknowledgement, I sent "XR OD" (XR was my Morse signature and OD signified "on duty"). Tim came back with an "OK" and added that No. 57, the overnight Los Angeles–Oakland *Owl*, was running 1 hour late. There was no rule about which system — telegraph or telephone — had to be used for communications. However, by using Morse everyone involved was kept at-

tuned to proceedings; it was quick, and expedient, and everyone with an ear to the Morse wire was kept informed of changing circumstances.

Morse was slowly dying on the SP, but the disdain for operators who could not telegraph had not entirely diminished. Western Union traffic from remote stations was still almost completely dependent on Samuel F.B. Morse's invention. Likewise, for the most part, message traffic was still conducted in the tried and true fashion of dots and dashes.

12:03 A.M.: I pondered Tim's announcement that No. 57 was an hour behind schedule. The mere fact that one train was running late would have repercussions across the entire subdivision. It had all the makings of a hectic night.

Rights of trains

The Fresno Sub's 110-mile, single-track, block-signaled main line — with seven First Class trains (passenger/merchandisers), five Third Class trains (freights, often running in multiple sections), and a variable number of extra trains that operated during the midnight-to-eight shift — could quickly become a congested piece of railroad. In this pre-radio era, the only way to communicate with train crews was by means of written train orders authored by the dispatcher, copied by remote station telegraphers, and delivered to passing trains.

On a section of track as described above, where operations were governed by timetable and train orders, the prevailing authority was the employee timetable,



The “1-780” in the train indicator boards flanking the smokestack of SP 2-10-2 No. 3744 show that this is the first section of eastbound freight train 780, pictured near Traver, Calif., on September 5, 1953. If this were a nonscheduled “extra” train, the indicators would display “X3744.”

Jack Whitmeyer, courtesy John R. Signor

which was subject to modification by train orders as conditions necessitated, as they often did. According to the rule-book, First Class trains had rights over subordinate movements, and Third Class trains had rights over extras; eastbound trains had rights (unless otherwise noted) over westbounds. The timetable indicated where scheduled meets between opposing trains would take place.

A bold time at any station was an indication that the affected train was scheduled to meet another train; the opposing train would also be listed in bold time at the meet point. For example: No. 57 is shown as having scheduled meets at Tulare (12:59 A.M. with No. 60, the Sacramento–Los Angeles *West Coast*) and at Goshen Junction (1:22 A.M. with No. 780, a Fresno–Bakersfield freight).

With No. 57 running an hour late, the meet with No. 60 at Tulare would have to be modified, as would the scheduled meet with No. 780 at Goshen Junction. Without further direction, both 60 and 780 would, by timetable directive, have

no choice but to await the arrival of 57 before departing the designated stations. Hence, they in turn would each be delayed by at least 1 hour. Considering that 60 and 780 also had additional scheduled meets with other trains, and those trains had scheduled meets beyond the ones thus far enumerated, it can be seen that chaos and gridlock would shortly be created. To maintain any semblance of liquidity it was imperative that opposing trains be advanced in the face of unforeseen delays to their counterparts.

In a utopian world, where all trains ran on time, there would have been no need for dispatchers, train-order operators, or quick-witted train crews. That, of course, was not the case and any number of unforeseen incidents could quickly gum up the works.

(For simplicity, I have avoided mention of any “slow orders,” which imposed speed restrictions that the train crews would have to take into account while mentally calculating their respective running times.)

Coping with the situation

12:12 A.M.: No. 60 had been OS’d (reported “out of station”) by Calwa Tower at 12:09 A.M. and was steaming toward Goshen Junction. The dispatcher’s phone rang at Goshen Junction. I slammed the headset on my ear, trod down on the foot pedal, and announced, “Goshen Junction here”; Tim (the DS in Bakersfield), the operator at Famoso, and I were on the line together.

Tim barked, “Copy three.” He wanted each of us operators to make three copies of the order he was about to dictate.

I stuffed three flimsies into the typewriter and awaited instructions. The order, addressed to the conductor and engineer of each train, was shortly forthcoming:

To:
 C&E No. 57 at Famoso,
 C&E No. 60 at Goshen Jct.
 No. 60 Engine 4459 meet No. 57 Engine
 4237 at Delano;
 No. 60 take siding.

(Train orders were typed in all capital letters and without punctuation; lower-case letters and punctuation are included here for clarity.)

This was a “good” meet. No. 60 was due at Delano at 1:32, and delayed No. 57 could be expected into Delano at 1:25. Delano was stipulated to be a conditional (flag) stop for No. 60. By letting 57 hold the main and putting 60 into the siding, the crew of 57 could align the siding switches for 60 to avoid delay. If 60 had passengers or mail and express to load/unload at Delano, the passenger platform set midway between the main and the siding would allow the train to be worked promptly and without safety concerns. Tim was thinking. An instructional message to the operator at Delano advised: “No. 60 will take siding at Delano to meet No. 57; take necessary precautions.”

The delay to No. 60 would be negligible, and its scheduled meet (at 1:49) with its westbound counterpart No. 59 at Famoso had been maintained. No. 60 would steam into Bakersfield on time. Without further incident, 59 was properly positioned to meet 58 (the Oakland–L.A. *West Coast*) at 3:19 at Kingsburg per the schedule. I placed the orders for delivery to No. 60 on the desk, and waited for the next turn of events.

A short siding comes into play

12:15 A.M.: The next order of business was to resolve the aborted meet between No. 57 and the first section of No. 780 (yes, there would be a Second 780). In order to keep 1-780 moving in the face of delayed No. 57, the best choice would be to schedule a meet between the two at Octol; 1-780, per the schedule, would arrive Octol at 1:47 A.M. and the delayed No. 57 would appear about 1:50. Three factors came into consideration: (1) per the rules, inferior trains had to clear the main line with 5 minutes to spare when facing superior movements; (2) Octol had a siding capacity of only 60 cars — too short for 1-780, which as the inferior train would normally take the siding to meet 57; and (3) Tipton, 4.6 miles to the east, had a 165-car siding — more than long enough for 1-780. A seemingly more prudent move would be to reset the meet at Tipton, but this would delay 1-780 by about 30 minutes. Octol was the better place for the meet, and by specifying another deviation from the timetable, that’s what dispatcher Tim called for.

12:24 A.M.: Again, the dispatcher’s phone rang at Kingsburg and Delano,



The station at Goshen Junction hadn’t changed much between author Read’s time there as a telegrapher in the mid-’50s and April 19, 1962, when this southward-facing photo was made.

Jay Mika, courtesy John R. Signor

and Tim issued another train order:

To:
C&E No. 57 at Delano,
C&E 1-780 at Kingsburg.
No. 57 Engine 4237 meet 1-780 Engine
3712 at Octol;
No. 57 take siding.

By directing that No. 57 take siding, the fact that 1-780 was too long for the siding was no longer an issue. Train 1-780 would arrive at Octol before 57 and would hold the main, and its crew would be expected to line the switches for the westbound passenger train to minimize delay. Not the best meet in the world, but under the circumstances, about the best that could be executed.

From my perspective, this meant that 1-780 would not be taking one of the three available sidings at Goshen Junction, and I could expect to see it go barreling through on the main track. I made a mental note to that effect; in case I received additional orders for 1-780, I could position myself accordingly.

Some operators were content to sit back and respond to instructions; others, like me, kept a constant surveillance of conditions that might impact future activities.

12:27 A.M.: The dispatcher’s Morse wire chattered: “DS KN OS 60 12:27 AM.” No. 60 was headed my way.

12:32 A.M.: The annunciator at Goshen Junction sounded, announcing the imminent arrival of an eastbound. I trod down on the foot-pedal to activate the dispatcher’s phone circuit, and an-

nounced I had an eastbound coming, “Goshen Junction; coming east.” Tim responded, “That’s No. 60; clear it.” I read back the orders listed on the clearance form and received an acknowledgement. Goshen Junction was not a station stop for 60, so I would be handing up the orders to the engine and train crews with slender bamboo order “hoops” as they passed. I bundled up the orders and a clearance card, tied them to the hoops, and awaited the appearance of No. 60.

I could hear 60’s 4-8-4 pulling hard out of the Kings River valley. When the engine’s headlight appeared, I “dipped the board” (lowered the train-order semaphore) to signify that I had orders for the train, and raced trackside to deliver my messages. No. 60 never broke stride, pounding past at better than 40 mph. It took a fair amount of courage and intestinal fortitude to face an oncoming locomotive armed with nothing more than a lantern and a short bamboo wand. It was not uncommon for this task to cause would-be train-order operators to abandon their career pursuit for a less frightening occupation. By the same token, crews placed their lives and limbs at risk to lean out of a locomotive cab, passenger-car vestibule, or caboos platform to grab orders on the fly.

12:41 A.M.: I opened the shunt on my bug and sent: “DS GJ OS NO 60 12:40 AM.”

Problems escalate

The next problem involving the delayed No. 57 was to resolve the conflict

Southern Pacific San Joaquin Division, Timetable 188, Sept. 28, 1958

EASTWARD (read down)							WESTWARD (read up)										
THIRD CLASS				FIRST CLASS			Mile-post	STATIONS	Siding capacity (cars)	FIRST CLASS				THIRD CLASS			
786 Freight	784 Freight	782 Freight	780 Freight	52 San Joaquin Daylight	58 Owl	60 West Coast				59 West Coast	375 Merchandise	51 San Joaquin Daylight	57 Owl	781 Freight	783 Freight	785 Freight	787 Freight
Daily	Daily	Daily	Daily	Daily	Daily	Daily				Daily	Tu-W-Th	Daily	Daily	Daily	Daily	Daily	Daily
PM	PM	AM	AM	AM	AM	AM	AM	AM	PM	AM	AM	AM	AM	PM			
8:00	2:00	8:00	12:01	-	-	-	201.8	FRESNO YARD	-	-	5:30	-	-	2:55	8:45	2:50	8:45
8:20	2:20	8:20	12:20	11:59	2:50	12:01	205.8	FRESNO	-	3:50	5:10	1:50	2:10	2:36	8:26	2:30	8:26
8:30	2:30	8:30	12:30	12:06	2:58	12:09	209.1	CALWA TOWER	-	3:41	5:04	1:43	2:02	2:26	8:16	2:20	8:16
8:40	2:40	8:40	12:40	12:12	3:05	12:16	215.1	FOWLER	115	3:34	4:57	1:37	1:54	2:19	8:09	2:13	8:09
8:48	2:48	8:48	12:50	12:17	3:11	12:22	220.7	SELMA	121	3:26	4:50	1:31	1:46	2:12	8:02	2:06	8:02
8:55	2:55	8:55	12:59	12:22	3:19	12:27	225.6	KINGSBURG	98	3:19	4:44	1:25	1:38	2:06	7:56	2:00	7:56
9:02	3:02	9:02	1:08	12:27	3:25	12:33	231.3	TRAVER	104	3:10	4:38	1:19	1:30	2:00	7:50	1:54	7:50
9:05	3:05	9:05	1:12	12:29	3:27	12:35	233.7	CROSS	62	3:07	4:35	1:17	1:28	1:57	7:47	1:51	7:47
9:12	3:12	9:12	1:22	12:34	3:32	12:40	239.1	GOSHEN JCT:	85, 85, 62	3:01	4:28	1:12	1:22	1:51	7:41	1:45	7:41
9:20	3:20	9:20	1:30	12:40	3:38	12:46	245.6	TAGUS	60	2:55	-	1:06	1:14	1:44	7:34	1:38	7:34
9:24	3:24	9:24	1:34	12:45	3:41	12:49	248.9	WEST TULARE	128	2:52	4:18	1:03	1:10	1:40	7:30	1:34	7:30
9:27	3:27	9:27	1:37	12:54	3:50	12:59	250.0	TULARE	85	2:48	4:15	12:54	12:59	1:37	7:27	1:31	7:27
9:35	3:35	9:35	1:47	1:02	3:57	1:07	255.8	OCTOL	60	2:29	4:07	12:47	12:50	1:29	7:19	1:23	7:19
9:40	3:40	9:40	1:54	1:06	4:02	1:11	260.4	TIPTON	166	2:23	4:02	12:43	12:46	1:24	7:14	1:18	7:14
9:47	3:47	9:47	2:03	1:11	4:10	1:17	266.8	PIXLEY	93	2:17	3:55	12:38	12:40	1:17	7:07	1:11	7:07
9:53	3:53	9:53	2:11	1:16	4:16	1:22	272.4	EARLIMART	79	2:11	-	12:33	12:35	1:01	7:01	1:01	7:01
9:58	3:58	9:58	2:17	1:20	4:20	1:26	276.5	RADNOR	129	2:05	3:45	12:29	12:31	12:57	6:57	12:57	6:57
10:05	4:05	10:05	2:24	1:26	4:28	1:32	280.7	DELANO	81	1:59	3:39	12:23	12:25	12:51	6:51	12:51	6:51
10:15	4:15	10:15	2:34	1:32	4:36	1:40	287.0	MCFARLAND	55	-	-	-	-	12:44	6:44	12:44	6:44
10:30	4:30	10:30	2:46	1:38	4:42	1:46	292.6	FAMOSO	78, 131	1:46	3:26	12:13	12:14	12:38	6:38	12:38	6:38
10:35	4:35	10:35	2:52	1:41	4:45	1:50	295.9	SLATER	59	1:38	3:22	12:10	12:11	12:34	6:34	12:34	6:34
10:40	4:40	10:40	2:58	1:45	4:49	1:54	300.5	LERDO	81	1:33	-	12:06	12:07	12:29	6:29	12:29	6:29
10:44	4:44	10:44	3:03	-	-	-	303.0	PROSPERO	89	1:30	3:15	12:04	12:04	12:26	6:26	12:26	6:26
10:47	4:47	10:47	3:12	1:50	4:54	1:59	305.8	SACO	132	1:27	3:12	12:01	12:01	12:01	12:23	6:23	12:23
10:50	4:50	10:50	3:17	-	-	-	308.6	OIL JCT:	77	-	-	-	-	12:20	6:20	12:20	6:20
11:10	5:10	11:10	3:35	2:01	5:05	2:10	312.9	BAKERSFIELD	-	1:15	3:00	11:50	11:50	12:01	6:00	12:01	6:00
PM	PM	AM	AM	PM	AM	AM	AM	AM	AM	AM	AM	AM	PM	AM	AM	AM	PM

NOTE: Times in **bold** type indicate meeting points.

between 57's departure from Bakersfield and the release of westbound freight No. 781. Under normal circumstances, 57 would have departed Bakersfield at 11:50 P.M. and be followed by 781 at 12:01 A.M. With the revised estimated time of departure for 57 being 12:50 A.M., a decision was called for. Should the plodding 781 be released per the timetable, or should it be held until after the fast-stepping 57 had passed?

To further complicate the situation, another westbound passenger train, No. 59, was scheduled to depart Bakersfield at 1:15 A.M.; by delaying the release of 781 to accommodate 57, the problem would be merely to "kick the can" and transfer the dilemma to a 59-versus-781 conflict. And if enacted, 781's meet with 1-780 at Tulare and its scheduled meet with 60 at Pixley would require modification.

Other mitigating factors would be consideration that 781's crew would have been called in anticipation of a Bakersfield departure at 12:01 A.M. — a delay in release would crowd the Hours of Service Act's maximum of 16 hours on duty.

Perhaps in defiance of logic, the decision was made: freight 781 would be released ahead of No. 57. Orders were issued accordingly, No. 781 was cleared at Oil Junction, and headed for Fresno.

12:15 A.M.: There was still the matter of resetting the meet points for Nos. 57 and 58. Ordinarily, 58 was scheduled to depart Fresno at 2:50 A.M., and delayed 57 would now be into Fresno at 3:10. Inasmuch as the 7.3 miles between Fresno and Calwa Tower was double track, and within yard limits, the thinking was to let 58 depart on time and proceed to Calwa Tower, where it could be held at the end of double track to await 57's arrival. This would result in a not-too-onerous 4-minute delay to 58. No orders were issued at the time, since it remained to be seen if 57 would either make up time or fall further behind. We had an hour or so to monitor the situation.

Stirring the pot

12:50 A.M.: I leaned back in my chair. The station doors were propped half-open, and I could hear the soft

panting of a vintage Mogul on the water-tank spur under the care of the engine watchman. Engine 1705 and its string of pre-cooled refrigerator cars would lead the parade of branch locals in the morning to service produce shippers on the Coalinga Branch. Likewise, an elderly Consolidation was poised to take the branch local to Visalia and Exeter.

1:10 A.M.: My brief interlude ended when I was called to copy orders that directed engine 2863, a 2-8-0 recently transferred from the Cotton Belt, to run extra from Calwa Tower to Goshen Junction. Extra 2863 East would be delivering iced reefers at Goshen Junction for the Coalinga and Exeter locals. Both locals would be called at 5:30 A.M., and their expedient departures were reliant on the prompt delivery of pre-iced reefers for on-line produce shippers. Extra 2863 East was (by supplementary instructions) expected to switch various industries at Fowler and Kingsburg. With no authority over opposing trains, X2863E was totally dependent on the timetable and whatever train orders



Cab-forward 4213 pulls out of Los Angeles Union Station with train 57, the *Owl*, bound for Oakland via Tehachapi Pass and the San Joaquin Valley, in June 1947. SP's long, heavy overnight trains between L.A. and Oakland rated one and sometimes two of the big 4-8-8-2s.

CLASSIC TRAINS collection

might affect its progress.

1:25 A.M.: With no orders for 1-780, I advised the dispatcher that it was coming east; his response was to let her go. I cleared the order board and stepped outside to roll her by; seeing no mechanical malfunctions, I tossed a lantern wave to the caboose crew.

1:32 A.M.: I activated my bug and OS'd 1-780 through Goshen Junction at 1:30.

1:35 A.M.: By eavesdropping on the DS phone circuit I learned that a second section of No. 780 would be established from Fresno to Bakersfield. Orders were forthcoming:

To:
 C&E Engine 2835 at Fresno Yard,
 C&E [All other applicable westbound trains
 at the points prevailing]
 Engine No. 2835 display signals and run as
 Second 780 Fresno to Bakersfield;
 Second 780 run one hour late.

We had one more train added to the mix. By stipulating that 2-780 run 1 hour late (*i.e.*, 1 hour behind 780's schedule), opposing trains could quickly calculate the departure times of this newly added second section. If all had gone as planned, 2-780 would have cleared Calwa Tower at 1:30 A.M. Alas, the best laid plans of mice and men often go astray, and Fresno Yard soon advised that engine 2835 had a faulty eccentric and the locomotive would have to be replaced (with 2-10-2 No. 3703, as it developed). It was estimated that the power swap

would consume about an hour.

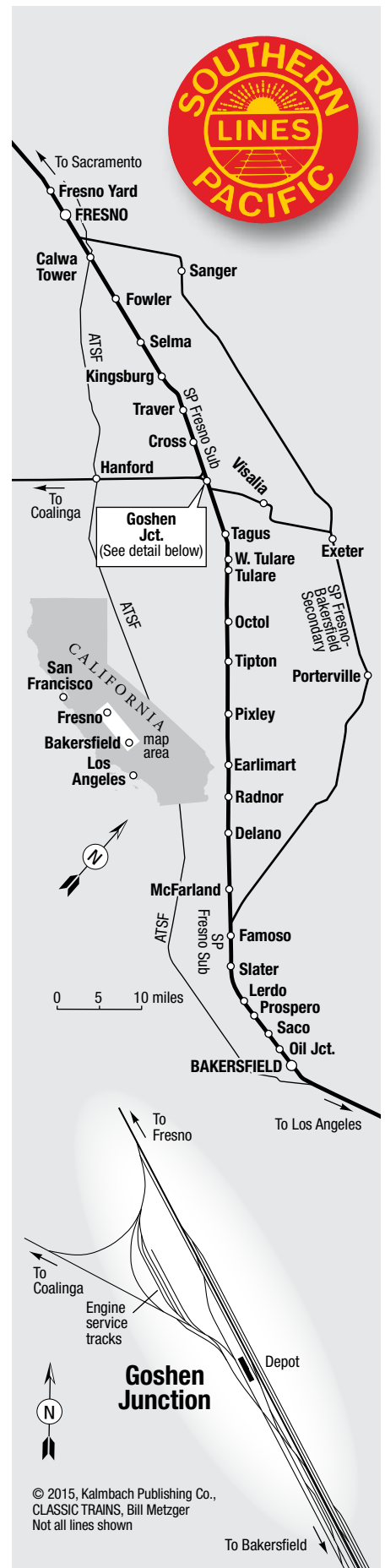
The previous order establishing 2-780 would have to be annulled and new orders issued to reflect the change of engine and an adjustment of the departure time. It was therefore stipulated that 2-780 would run 2 hours 30 minutes late. All affected westbound trains would have to be so advised.

The result of this was that 2-780 would have to meet No. 59 somewhere between Calwa Tower and Kingsburg. Since 59 already had a scheduled meet at Kingsburg with 58, and X2863E was switching in the vicinity of Fowler, that made Selma the only available meeting point. No. 59 would have received the order at Tulare annulling the previous scheduled 2-780 and the establishment of the new 2-780. Likewise, X2863E would have been advised of the change in circumstances.

1:55 A.M.: The dispatcher's phone rang again at Goshen Junction and Calwa Tower; Tim dictated the new orders:

To:
 C&E No. 59 engine 4450 at Goshen Jct.
 C&E No. 2-780 engine 3703 at Calwa Tower
 No. 59 meet 2-780 at Selma.

Extra 2863 East had been OS'd by Calwa Tower at 1:15; given the normal running time between Calwa Tower and Fowler, it could be expected to have arrived in Fowler around 1:35. Like a good chess player, the dispatcher had anticipated a conflict in the making. Without further instructions, would the crew of





SP relied heavily on 117 63-inch-drivered 2-10-2s of classes F-3, F-4, and F-5 built by Baldwin during 1921–24. The “F” was derived from “Freight”; crews called the 10-coupled engines “Decks” (from “Decapods”). F-4 No. 3709 departs Fresno with First 780 in February 1952.

Walt Paschelke, Tom Dill collection

X2863E (having noted the passing of 2-780) be inclined to follow 2-780 out of Fowler and make the 5-mile dash to Selma to clear No. 59, only to find the siding at Selma blocked by 2-780? Way too much of an assumption to leave matters to chance. The operator at Fowler was told to hold the board against X2863E.

Southern Pacific did not follow the pattern of issuing distinctive Form 19 and 31 orders; instead, SP referred to such orders as “restrictive.” Whatever the term used, a restrictive order necessitated that a crew receiving orders at the point of delivery that affected further movements would have to stop, go into the telegraph office, and sign for receipt. This practice was frowned upon by officials, but under the circumstances it offered the only way out of an impending and embarrassing circumstance. Again came the order:

To:
C&E X2863E Engine 2863 at Fowler,
C&E No. 59 Engine 4450 at Goshen Jct.
X2863E wait at Fowler until 3:35AM for No. 59.

I added the order to my growing stack of messages addressed to No. 59 and waited to see what would happen next.

More changes

Meanwhile, how was No. 781, released from Bakersfield ahead of 57 and 59, do-

ing? We soon found out.

No. 781 had drawn a poorly steaming locomotive, an all-too-common occurrence as maintenance flagged during the waning days of steam. The train was OS'd by Oil Junction at 12:45 A.M. and Famoso at 1:10 A.M., indicating that it was running 25 to 30 minutes off schedule and faltering badly. The scheduled meets with No. 60 at Pixley (1:17 A.M.) and 1-780 at Tulare (1:37) were in jeopardy. Also, 781 was running perilously close to being on No. 59's time. Would 781 duck in the clear at McFarland or doggedly plow toward Delano? As you might recall from the prior sequence of events, Delano would be clogged with a meet between Nos. 57 and 60. An interesting dilemma. The opportunity to advance 60 and 1-780 against a faltering 781 was lost.

As expected, 781 chose to stop and lick its wounds and stayed ensconced in its safe haven at McFarland awaiting the passing of Nos. 59, 60, and 1-780. Limping into Delano and short on water, 781's engine cut loose from its train and headed for the water spout.

2:00 A.M.: I listened in as the trials and tribulations played out on the southern portion of the Fresno Sub. Actually, by getting in the clear at McFarland, 781's actions had enhanced conditions: Nos. 57, 59, and 60 had been spared the intrusion of 781 and could, therefore, assume their somewhat modified sched-

ules. However, the meet between 2-780 and 781 still had to be set. Also, it was time to start thinking about westbound First Class merchandiser No. 375.

2:10 A.M.: Of course, it was up to the dispatcher to develop a plan for all this. So I took a breather, opened my lunch bucket, poured myself a cup of lukewarm coffee, gulped down a tuna fish sandwich, and awaited the arrival of No. 59.

Over on the Fresno–Bakersfield Secondary, a 70-car train of oil-field pipe had been established as Extra 4143 East. This would normally not have affected operations on the Fresno–Bakersfield main line, except for the 20 miles between Famoso and Bakersfield common to the two routes, but it was a distraction for Tim, whose dispatching authority also held sway on the secondary. With open offices at only Sanger and Porterville on a 90-mile stretch of unsignaled territory, it was a “guess and by-gosh” form of dispatching. SP, Visalia Electric, and Santa Fe locals would start prowling this neighborhood around dawn.

2:57 A.M.: The westbound annunciator sounded. I tapped out “GJ coming west” on the wire. Tim responded, “No. 59; clear her.” I enumerated the various order numbers I was holding for 59 and received an OK. I dipped the board and raced out, order hoops in hand, to confront No. 59's onrushing 4-8-8-2.

3:02 A.M.: Back inside, with the *West*

Coast on its way to Fresno, my Morse bug again came into play: "GJ OS No. 59 3:01AM."

And so it went . . . The Coalinga and Visalia/Exeter locals remained to be authorized. Extra 2863 East, upon arrival at Goshen Junction, would have to sort out the cars it picked up en route, classify the iced reefers for pickup by the locals, turn on the wye, and be reauthorized to return to Fresno. The meet between Nos. 781 and 2-780 still needed to be resolved. My coffee was getting cold . . .

Split-second decisions

The reader will note that some of these meets were set up with less than 5 minutes of elapsed time. This required constant vigilance on the part of the dispatcher and a conditioning by him and the operators to respond to changing circumstances on a moment's notice. With 13 full-time telegraph offices between Fresno and Bakersfield, his options were enhanced, and the liquidity of the operations could be reasonably maintained.

Much was demanded of train crews, as well. Many steam locomotives were not equipped with speedometers; hence, progress had to be calculated on the basis of observing milepost numbers, reference to individual watches, and mental calculations. Every train crew had an ingrained appreciation of the normal running time between various points. Assigned to a "poor steamer," it was only through experience that the crew could adjust their calculations in accordance with the mechanical shortcomings of their motive power. Listening to the "stack talk" was essential to their well-being. And reading train orders in a dimly lit locomotive cab or a rollicking caboose was no simple matter.

All of these mental gymnastics on the part of the dispatcher and the train crews were performed without the aid of computers or similar modern contrivances. To a greater extent than their counterparts of today, railroaders in the 1950s had to be responsive to rapidly changing circumstances. The tools of their trade — steam locomotives, train orders, timetables, telegraphy — seem primitive by modern standards.

Is today's technology superior to that of 60 years ago? Undoubtedly, the answer is yes. But with modern tools and operating practices has come a decreased emphasis on individual initiative and a greater dependence on machines to accomplish what once required human muscle and brain power. 📌



Engines for San Joaquin Division local trains await their morning runs at Fresno in mid-1956. Considered big power when they were built in the first decade of the 20th century, Consolidation 2563 and Moguls 1726, 1774, and 1727 remain useful for light work five decades later.

D. S. Richter



Hopping up orders wasn't for the faint of heart, and caused more than one would-be operator to seek other work. Here, Santa Fe's Chard Walker does the honors at Summit, Calif., in 1950.

Robert Hale