

By train to



Kaiser Steel's Eagle Mountain Railroad at its zenith in the mid 1970s: bright red U30Cs built to SP specifications leading an endless string of iron ore cars in the Southern California desert.



BY ELROND LAWRENCE

// Photos by Richard Steinheimer, Center for Railroad Photography & Art collection

Eagle Mountain

RICHARD STEINHEIMER PHOTOGRAPHED

KAISER STEEL'S MINE AND RAILROAD

You don't normally think of Kaiser Steel when you hear the name Richard Steinheimer, but a recent discovery within his collection at the Center for Railroad Photography & Art revealed a rare treasure: "Stein's" pictures from his ride on a 1950 railfan excursion to Kaiser's Eagle Mountain iron ore mine in the Southern California desert. Stein was a fresh-faced 21-year-old when he rode the two-day excursion, and his photos cover every aspect of the train ride and mine tour with his signature style.

In 1950, The Kaiser Co. Inc., Iron and Steel Division (renamed Kaiser Steel Industries in 1956) was well on its way to forging its legend in Southern California. Eight years earlier, the company completed construction of the only steel manufacturing facility on the West Coast, near the sleepy town of Fontana. Visionary industrialist Henry J. Kaiser recognized a need to serve the booming markets of Southern California and the West Coast and established the company in late 1941. The attacks on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, and America's entrance into World War II accelerated construction of the \$40 million steel mill, built on the site of a hog breeding farm.

The national war effort had swung into high gear, and Henry Kaiser's shipbuilding facilities on the West Coast needed a mill far closer than the steel centers thousands of miles away. Fontana was chosen as a strategic distribution point. It was 50 miles inland from Los Angeles, out of range of enemy attacks. But more impor-



Aboard the 1950 excursion: While most fans trained their cameras on the Baldwins, Stein also photographed passengers enjoying the ride.



Stein's creative eye framed Railway Club railfans at the Eagle Mountain mine's ore conveyor belt (obviously not operating) on Oct. 22, 1950.



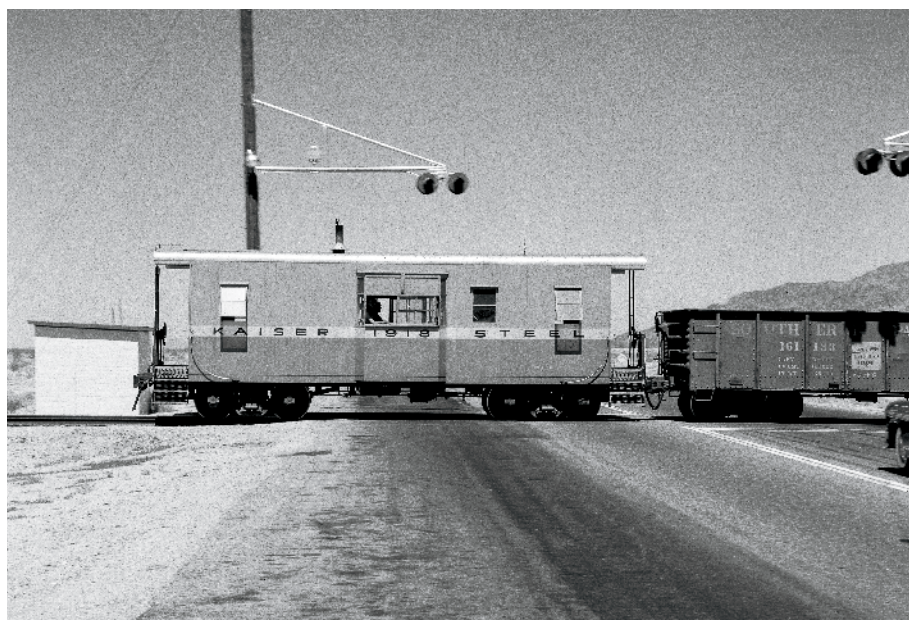
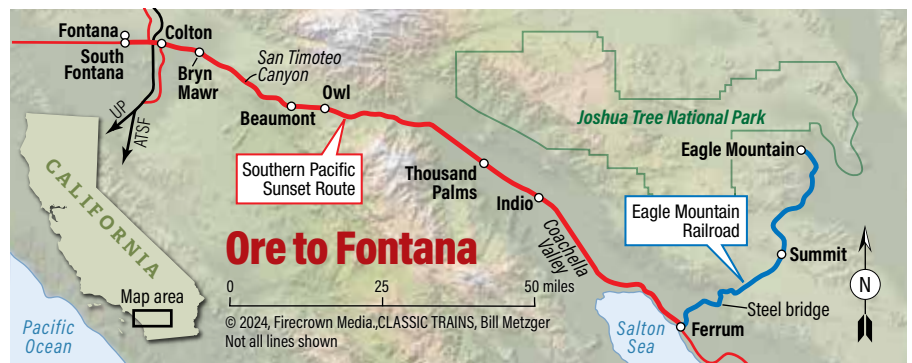
"Big Baldwin road-switchers of the Eagle Mountain Railroad working their way to the summit of the Chuckwalla Mountains near Desert Center," wrote Steinheimer about his June 1958 "portrait of a modern mining train" in the Colorado River desert.

tantly the site had immediate access to service from the region's "big three" railroads: Santa Fe, Southern Pacific, and Union Pacific.

When Kaiser's first blast furnace — affectionately named "The Bess," after Henry Kaiser's wife — roared to life on Dec. 30, 1942, iron ore was supplied from the Vulcan Mine near Kelso, Calif., on UP's Salt Lake Route. By summer 1943 the integrated steel mill was fully operational, and the coal to feed it came from Sunnyside, Utah, via the Rio Grande, UP, and Santa Fe, the last of which reached the Fontana plant using its Second District main line between San Bernardino and Pasadena. Limestone was carried by train over a Santa Fe branch from Cushenbury, Calif., just east of Cajon Pass.

In 1944, Kaiser purchased Eagle Mountain in Riverside County, in the southeastern corner of the Mojave Desert, and developed a new open-pit mine and ore concentrating plant near a remote community called Desert Center. Kaiser established a self-sustained company town (which was also named Eagle Mountain) near the mine and launched its own standard gauge railroad in 1948 to carry iron ore 51 miles to a connection with Southern Pacific's Sunset Route at Ferrum, beside the Salton Sea; SP would then haul the ore trains more than 100 miles past Palm Springs, over Beaumont Hill, and through Colton and South Fontana to reach the plant.

The excursion, operated by The



Kaiser Steel caboose 1918 brings up the rear of the Eagle Mountain mine train, seen near Desert Center in 1958. Sister 1905 survives at the Pacific Southwest Railway Museum at Campo, Calif.



As guests of Henry J. Kaiser, the rare Eagle Mountain tour allowed fans to stroll past Baldwins at work loading iron ore trains.



A high view from within the Eagle Mountain mine looking out toward the entrance. The Railway Club of Southern California excursion train is visible at distant right.

Railway Club of Southern California, was nearly as fascinating as the destination. Passengers boarded a nighttime train at Los Angeles Union Station (then Los Angeles Union Passenger Terminal, or LAUPT) on the evening of Oct. 21, 1950, with a 10:15 p.m. departure. Power for the run from Los Angeles to Ferrum was black SP 4-8-4 No. 4444. Stein's pictures show the nighttime boarding and even passing a westbound led by Black Widow-painted F units; his notes state that stops were made at the towns of Alhambra, Pomona, Ontario, and Colton.

On the morning of Oct. 22, a Kaiser Steel excursion train of five SP Pullman coaches and a gondola car was hauled by two of Kaiser Steel's Baldwin AS616s up the steep grade to the Eagle Mountain mine, where fans were allowed to photograph the facility. Stein noted that fans were considered "guests of Henry J. Kaiser." His photos show fans enjoying a photo runby on the line and exploring an ore conveyor belt (not operating!).

Many great photographers have covered the Eagle Mountain operations, especially the late William "Hank" Mills and Gordon Glattenberg (see "Baldwins,



The massive Kaiser Steel complex in Fontana, Calif., was served by Santa Fe and Southern Pacific trackage. Here a row of AT&SF steam locomotives rest beside the mill's blast furnaces in 1952. Kaiser would occasionally rent or lease Santa Fe locomotives for static steam generation at its in-plant power house. Upon retirement, several locomotives were also scrapped on site at the steel mill. USC Digital Library, Los Angeles

Examiner Photographs Collection

Beaumont, and the Battle to Move Iron Ore,” Winter 2011), who has promised his color slide collection to the Center — as well as other fans who documented the later operations in the 1970s and early 1980s after Kaiser replaced its Baldwin fleet in 1968 with five bright red U30Cs, built to SP specifications.

But this fantrip had been relegated to history and largely unknown until I learned of it while visiting western photographer Stan Kistler in summer 2022, months before his passing. Stan also rode and photographed the excursion train, which was eye-popping to this writer who grew up in Fontana and has developed a healthy obsession with the railroads of Kaiser Steel. Since that time, we at the Center have slowly uncovered Stein’s photos of this extremely rare excursion, with additional scans located by Stein’s wife and fellow photographer Shirley Burman.

Steinheimer returned to photograph the Eagle Mountain operation again in 1958 and a third time in the mid-1970s, when he made splendid action photo-

graphs of the mine train powered by the beefy red U30Cs wearing the iconic Kaiser Steel logo on their long hoods. His panoramic scene of a loaded iron ore train departing the mine, winding through a perfect S-curve as it approaches the company town of Eagle Mountain, is classic Steinheimer and captures the story of this remote operation in a single frame.

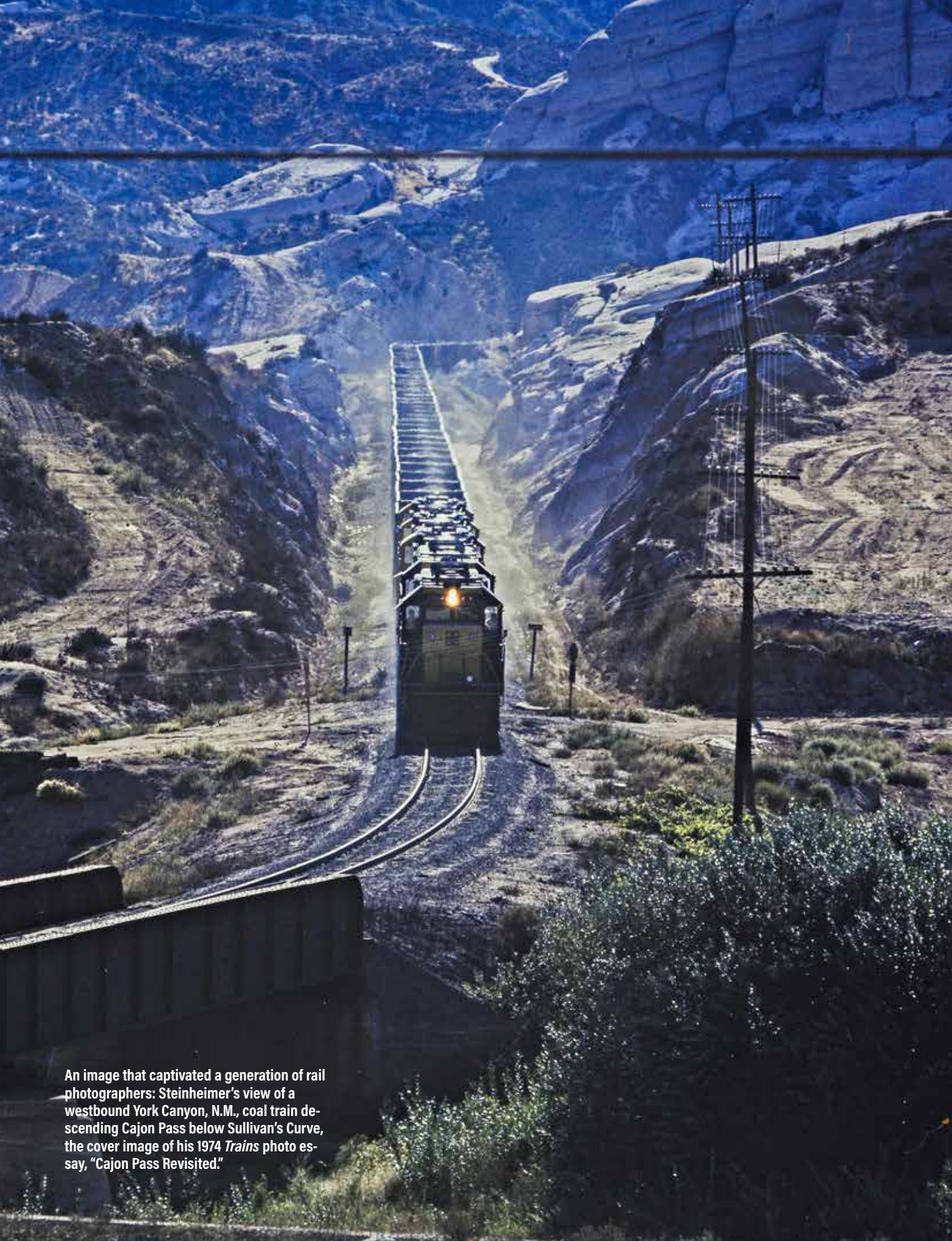
As far as we know, Stein never photographed the Fontana steel mill itself, but he did capture one of the many diesel switchers that worked the plant. He more than made up for that gap with three decades of photographing the many coal and iron ore trains to and from Fontana during the 1950s, ‘60s and ‘70s; these included Santa Fe’s unit coal trains from a Kaiser-owned mine in York Canyon, N.M., and Rio Grande-Union Pacific unit trains that debuted in 1969 at Kaiser’s Sunnyside, Utah, mine. And of course, he photographed SP’s iron ore trains on the Sunset Route between Ferrum and South Fontana, where loaded westbound trains left the Sunset Route and traveled north

Sunnyside Unit Train Loading Facility Dedicated

the INGOT

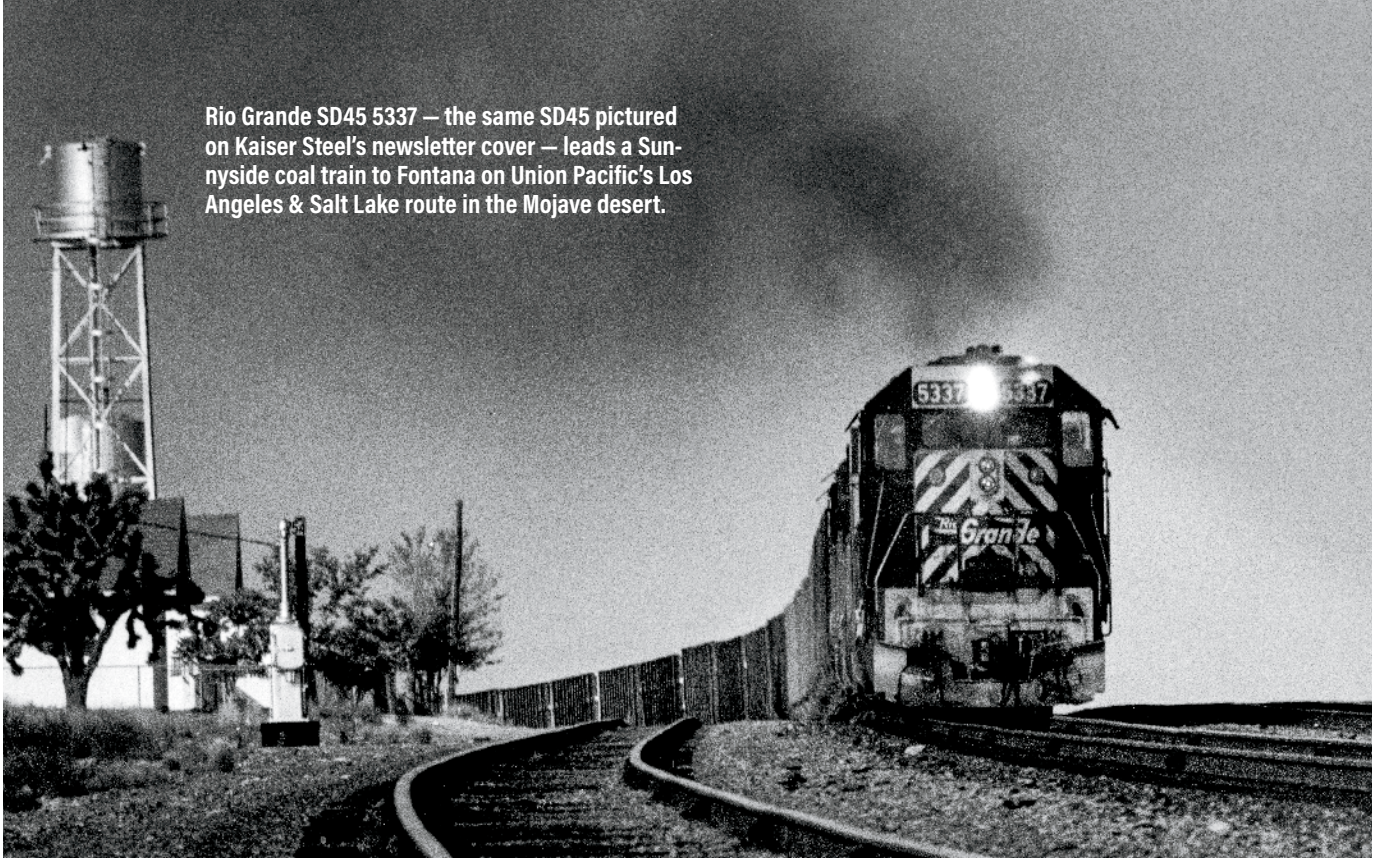
Carlson, Railroad Officials Gather for Ribbon-Cutting

Steelmaking milestone
The July 1969 issue of Kaiser Steel's employee newsletter, *The Ingot*, proudly announced the dedication of the unit train loading facility at Sunnyside, Utah. Elrond Lawrence collection



An image that captivated a generation of rail photographers: Steinheimer's view of a westbound York Canyon, N.M., coal train descending Cajon Pass below Sullivan's Curve, the cover image of his 1974 *Trains* photo essay, "Cajon Pass Revisited."

Rio Grande SD45 5337 — the same SD45 pictured on Kaiser Steel's newsletter cover — leads a Sunnyside coal train to Fontana on Union Pacific's Los Angeles & Salt Lake route in the Mojave desert.



to the Fontana plant.

Increasing competition and lower costs from overseas steel manufacturers finally spelled the end of Kaiser Steel's storied Fontana plant in the early 1980s. Two years after a \$287 million modernization upgrade, the company announced in late 1981 that the steel mill and the Eagle Mountain mine would close. The final coke oven at Fontana was switched off on Dec. 29, 1982, and the plant fully closed the next year. Following cleanup operations, the last Eagle Mountain train operated in September of 1983.

Following the plant's closure, a portion of the site continued under California Steel Industries, a steel finishing operation, and a NASCAR auto racing track opened in 1997 on a large part of the old mill. Surprisingly, the California Speedway closed in 2023 and faces an unknown future.

The California Steel site was also known for being the home of Santa Fe 4-8-4 No. 3751 in its final years of restoration to operation. In a setting where steam engines were once scrapped on site and occasionally used for steam to power plant buildings, it's ironic that the 1927 Baldwin was saved on the same ground where so many of its fellow locomotives became history.

The closed Eagle Mountain mine was once touted as a possible landfill location coupled with a trash-by-rail operation that would add a disposal solution for



Steinheimer caught a runaround near Java, Calif., on the Needles District in September 1976. A fast TOFC train passes a westbound York Canyon train holding the main.

Southern California's increasing refuse. After years of political football tossing and environmental battles, the concept was abandoned due to Eagle Mountain's proximity to Joshua Tree National Park.

By 2023, the railroad was dismantled across the entire right of way, and little remains. Only the company town survives, now believed to be California's most modern ghost town. The mine and town were recently sold by Kaiser Ventures (Kaiser Steel's successor) to a China-based corporation and is guarded

by round-the-clock security.

Nearly 75 years after they were made, Richard Steinheimer's pictures are a great example of the constant surprises that are emerging as the Center continues to catalog and process his landmark photography collection. They remind us of an innocent, hopeful era when the West's greatest steel company gave railfans an open house they would never forget. ■