



NARROW GAUGE ALCOS IN THE DESERT

PLASTER CITY ALCOS

CHARLES FREERICKS/PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

YOU MAY NOT KNOW IT, but there are wide-nosed, narrow-gauge, Alco-designed, Bombardier-built, 35-year-old DL-535Es running right now in the California desert.

Located two hours south of Palm Springs, and 90 minutes east of San Diego, Plaster City, Calif., is perhaps the ultimate company town with a single *raison d'être*, which is to house the sprawling U.S. Gypsum facility that gives the town its name. Small as it is, Plaster City also hosts three railroads, one of which is unlike anything you can find anywhere else in the contiguous 48

states. This is the last industrial narrow gauge railroad in America, the U.S. Gypsum mine line that runs north to a quarry in the Fish Creek Mountains, which is estimated to contain a deposit worth 25 million tons of gypsum.

It was the search for oil that first brought speculators to the Imperial Valley in the early 1900s. While they didn't find oil, it would be nearly 20 years before anyone decided to exploit the large deposit of gypsum that they did find. Operations on the railroad date back to 1922 and, except for the need to occasionally replace worn-out

equipment, have continued in a similar fashion for the 95 years since.

On most mornings, one of the burbling DL-535Es with an incongruous large snow plow on its pilot will trundle from the engine facility south of Evan Hewes Highway, build its train, and head the 26 miles to the quarry where the train will be loaded with crushed gypsum that will then be brought back to Plaster City for finer crushing and processing. Depending on housing starts, this process is repeated two to three times a day. The present schedule is three times a day, with at least one Saturday run, too.

OPPOSITE: One of U.S. Gypsum's freshly repainted DL535Es shows off its snazzy new white-and-gray corporate paint scheme at the end of the narrow gauge track at Plaster City, Calif., on August 9, 2017. **TOP:** The afternoon mine train is barely a mile into its run as it pulls away from the vast U.S. Gypsum processing plant in Plaster City. The line has no official name, simply referred to as "the railroad" by employees.



ABOVE: The unloading area in Plaster City is both the easiest place on the line for photographic access and one of the most interesting shots. In this view, a train is less than halfway done unloading.

RIGHT: The first move for every mine train is a light engine run across the highway to pick up the water car.



The mine railroad was originally conceived and built by San Diego pharmacist Samuel Dunnaway, who had relocated to El Centro and became aware of a vast deposit of gypsum in the Fish Creek Mountains. (As a personal aside, my great-grandfather was also a San Diego pharmacist who moved to a desert town and tried to take up mining at about the same time, but to lesser results.) Dunnaway formed the Imperial Gypsum & Oil Company in 1920 and the following year began construction of a three-foot-gauge railroad from the mine to a connection with the San Diego & Arizona Eastern in what would eventually become Plaster City. Construction (and later operation) was challenged by drifting sand, as well as sand's lack of resistance to flooding, but there were no major issues and the line was built as scheduled. It had no formal name, and was simply referred to as "the railroad."

When trains began running in 1922 there wasn't a plant yet in what would

become Plaster City, so the gypsum was transloaded to standard gauge trains for shipment to processors. Shortly thereafter, Dunnaway sold his operations to Pacific Portland Cement, which took over in 1924 and built the first processing facility where the plant sits today. During this period, secondhand steam locomotives provided power. Sometime around 1945, the railroad acquired its first diesel and the entire operation was

sold to U.S. Gypsum. The entire line was upgraded from 35-pound to 70-pound rail, and dieselization was essentially complete by 1947.

When the diesels proved problematic, the railroad turned to leasing Southern Pacific's own narrow gauge 4-6-0 No. 8 for a few months in 1949. The last hurrah for steam came in June 1952, when SP 4-6-0 No. 9 pinch-hit for an ailing Whitcomb diesel.

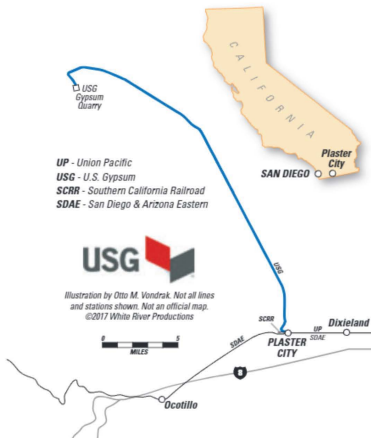


Illustration by Otto M. Vondrak. Not all lines and stations shown. Not an official map. ©2017 White River Productions



Why Snowplows?

The DL-535E (also classified as a RSD-35) was among the last locomotives constructed by Alco before the plant in Schenectady, N.Y., shut down in 1969. Seven units were built by Alco and completed by Montreal Locomotive Works in 1969, with an additional three units built by MLW in 1971. The next batch was manufactured by Bombardier in 1982, which had acquired MLW and its designs. The locomotives built in 1982 employed the now-familiar full-width "safety cab" which was adopted by Canada more than a decade before it became common in the U.S. All 14 DL-535Es are powered by a 251 prime mover producing 1,200 h.p.

Why do these desert Alcos have snowplows? The locomotives were originally built for Alaska's White Pass & Yukon in July 1982, but were never delivered, since the railroad had suspended

operation. USG purchased two units (Nos. 112 and 113) of the original order of four in March 1991, only to wreck one about two years later. USG purchased a third (No. 111) at that time. In the intervening years, the WP&Y was reactivated to serve the tourist train and the final unit (No. 114) was delivered in 1994, 12 years after the initial order was placed.

Current Operations

Today, the railroad operates with two crews. The morning crew starts at about 6:30 a.m. in a small office that is connected to the locomotive and car repair shops on the south side of Evan Hewes Highway. Using one locomotive, they cross the highway and switch a small tank car loaded with fresh water from a loading spur to their mainline. They then pull to the north end of a short siding where a cut of 20 to 24 empty low-sided open-top hoppers is



TOP: USG's handsome new paint scheme has given operations a brand new look. Engine No. 111 shows off its new paint on the hairpin curve in Ocotillo Wells.

ABOVE: These low-sided hoppers are used to carry gypsum from the quarry to the processing plant in Plaster City.

LEFT: A morning mine train begins building air. While the dirt road that follows the railroad gets quite treacherous, it is navigable up here, just north of the plant.

usually stored overnight. After coupling onto the north end of the train, they shove southward to couple the tank car onto the rear end. Once the air brakes are working properly, the train departs on a two-hour northbound run to the gypsum mine near Ocotillo Wells (about 90 minutes south of Palm Springs).

The line passes across the flat western edge of the Sonoran Desert, also crossing the Naval Air Facility—El Centro bombing range. A public off-road trail parallels the tracks across the range, and signs warn motorists not to stray off the roadway. In several spots, windblown sand gathers against the rails covering the ties and right-of-way. Crews must be hyper-alert and can stop the train to clean out overblown sand if necessary. In extreme cases, the railroad will bring out its own heavy equipment to clear the right-of-way.

As the tracks near the base of the



ABOVE: An evening mine run returns to Plaster City, sweeping around the big curve that lines it up towards the unloading facility. At the time of this photo the engines were facing north. They've since been repositioned and now face south.

RIGHT: Trains can run even when the mine is not operating. Water is still needed at the quarry and the railroad will run a water-car-only train as needed.

Fish Creek Mountains, a couple of curves guide the line onto a low concrete bridge over Carrizo Creek, well below the famous gorge. Continuing north, the tracks then descend into a low valley, dropping below sea level for about two miles. As the tracks begin to climb again back above sea level, the grade stiffens. The tracks turn to the west around the northern tip of the Fish Creek Mountains, before turning southward into a steep narrow valley that houses the quarry.

Upon arrival, the crew cuts away from the train and runs the engine around to the opposite end. They remove the tank car and spot it on an unloading track. There is no fresh water supply, so a loaded tank car of water is brought in a couple of times daily from Plaster City. After the water is spotted, the crew begins the process of shoving empty hoppers into the enclosed gypsum loading facility.

Each car takes about five minutes to load. With one short whistle, the next car is shoved into position for loading. Once the entire train is loaded (approximately an hour), the crew couples the emptied tank car to the rear before easing the heavy train downhill towards Plaster City. This return trip usually leaves between 10:00 and 11:00 a.m., and arrives back at the plant two hours later.



When the train reaches Plaster City, the crew spots the water tank car for loading again before slowly pulling the hoppers through the unloading facility that is located right along the highway (and a great place to shoot from public property). The unloading process takes a bit longer, about 75 minutes. After all the cars are emptied, the train is tied down until the afternoon crew repeats the same process, leaving sometime between 1:45 and 2:30 p.m.

Along the route, trains are allowed to run 25 m.p.h., but are restricted to 10 m.p.h. through the few curves. Most of the line consists of lightweight rail laid on standard gauge ties. There is no turning facility on the northern end of the line, so the engines will operate long-hood forward on the northbound run. Don't be surprised to find the nose door open on the lead unit power pretty much all of the time as the crew do their best to cope with extreme desert heat.

Visiting Plaster City

Railfanning the line anywhere outside of Plaster City is challenging, but also rewarding. It requires a four-wheel-drive vehicle with high clearance. While there is the previously mentioned dirt road that runs right along the east side of the tracks, it is soft in many areas and the sand can get quite deep. If you are not that adventurous and don't have full survival gear and water in your rig (and aren't able to dig yourself out), you can reach the mine on better roads from Ocotillo Wells by taking Split Mountain Road south to the quarry. This is a long drive from Plaster City, including a stop at a U.S. Border Patrol station, but you will at the least get the train leaving again.

If you are adventurous, and plan to follow the right-of-way the whole way, you not only need to be aware of heavy sand. In the midsections of the line, it is not uncommon to find Border Patrol

agents on quad ATVs inspecting the passing trains for trespassers. But possibly the most attention-grabbing part of the drive is the previously mentioned NAF El Centro base. The military often practices bombing and helicopter attacks in the area. The aircraft can fly quite low and there has been at least one reported case where an armament reached the tracks. Be aware of your surroundings.

Add to this the abundance of scorpions and snakes, as well as temperatures that can crest 110 degrees and you can see why chasing the train is not for the faint of heart. If you do have the right vehicle to make the run, also make sure you have shovels and lots of water, and then more water on top of that.

Generally, I have found the USG train crews to be quite friendly. That being said, USG is a large company and the nonrailroad employees may have no idea

why you are hanging out with a camera. I recommend stopping in the office on the north side of the highway, just west of the track, and letting the folks there know you are taking train photos. You may get a friendly "fine," or a warning not to interfere, but they seem to know about railfans and are accommodating as long as you are not intrusive. Whatever you do, do not enter USG property or go into the plant.

Plaster City's other two railroads are the Union Pacific, which comes in on the eastern end of the old SD&AE from El Centro, and the Southern California Railroad, a captive switching operation. When the U.S. Gypsum plant was expanded about a decade ago, it took over the railroad right-of-way, allowing Southern California Railroad to park its sharply painted GP9 and GP40 in an inaccessible part of the plant. These

engines used to switch cars of wallboard three times a week but are now on an as-needed schedule that requires luck to find them running.

The UP comes to town usually on Tuesdays and Thursdays in the form of local LOE36, which goes on duty in El Centro at 7:00 a.m. and is in charge of two second-generation geeps. If all goes to plan, a fourth railroad may join the festivities in the next few years, as Tijuana's Baja California Railroad has acquired operating rights on the SD&AE tracks west of the plant.

Finally, if you are planning on shooting the railroad and can give yourself more than one day, that could end up being very helpful. There are lots of hotel/motel choices in El Centro (as well as fast food and stores for supplies), and it is only about a 25-minute drive. Trains won't run if there isn't a need that day and having the second day, except in extreme situations, should ensure you get some photographs that were worth the trip. 📷

Charles Freericks grew up in New Jersey and took his first train picture in 1970. He is the author of Southern California Local Freight Trains. The author would like to thank Nate Mulethaler for his assistance in preparing this article.



LEFT: The Southern California Railroad is a switching subsidiary of American Railroads Corporation that operates in an inaccessible spot behind the plant. Trains can pull up to where they can be viewed from the highway in Plaster City, though, when they are operating.

BELOW: An empty mine train heads across the Sonoran Desert to the quarry, catching the winter afternoon sun on its flanks.

