

## Stan Kistler's L.A.

### One of the West's top photographers looks back on the 1940's and '50's in Southern California

Transcribed from *Classic Trains*, Spring 2000 issue. Used with permission.

When you compile the major rail hubs in the United States in the steam-to-diesel transition period, Los Angeles has to be high on the list. It may not have had as many Class 1 railroads as, say, St. Louis or Chicago, but the sheer volume of freight and passenger traffic originating and terminating there during the post-war years was phenomenal.

I was privileged to be a railfan and a spectator to this era of Southern California rail history. Born and raised in Pasadena, with short stints in San Diego and Long Beach in my first 20 years, I roamed the railroad scene as much as I could with only public transportation and a limited income of a teenage from a middle-class family.

#### The hub: Mission Tower

In 1945, just after V-J Day ended the Second World War, I often spent my Sunday afternoons riding the Pacific Electric Oak Knoll Line or Short Line from Pasadena to downtown Los Angeles in one of the comfortable 1100 class interurban cars. I would alight at the foot of the Aliso Street bridge, walk back to the Santa Fe Railway right-of-way along the Los Angeles River, and hike about a half-mile to Mission Tower. Here, at the gateway to Los Angeles Union Passenger Terminal, I could be entertained for hours with the parade of passenger, freight, and switching movements of the Southern Pacific, Union Pacific and Santa Fe. All this for the princely sum of 50 cents – 40 cents for the PE round trip, and a dime for bus fare between the PE and my home!

Railfans were not so numerous in the late 1940's, and I rarely saw another person beside the tracks. The operators began to notice my visits, and invited me up into the tower one Sunday. Three operators manned the 195-lever interlocking machine. I was astounded at the hubbub of activity – trains calling for routes with whistle signals from remote microphone locations, constant voice communication with Terminal Tower at the station throat, phones ringing, relays clicking, and interlocking levers being pulled and pushed.

It was also a great vantage point for train watching and photography. There was a constant stream of SP passenger trains, all steam powered by an assortment of 4-8-2's, 4-8-4's, and cab-forwards 4-8-8-2's. Well-kept 0-6-0's moved trains to and from the coach yard across the Los Angeles River, where freights on the lines to Yuma, Arizona (on the *Sunset* and *Golden State* routes), and Los Angeles harbor also could be seen.

UP's presence was the smallest of the three railroads, with only six daily passenger trains, usually powered by 4-8-2's bearing the initials of subsidiary Los Angeles & Salt Lake on the rear of their tenders. The 10-times-a-month diesel-powered *City of Los Angeles*, and only an occasional transfer move of freight on the east bank of the river, made up the rest of the UP action.

At the time, Santa Fe fielded 24 daily scheduled trains, plus numerous extra sections. These were all stream-powered, except for the *San Diegans* and the twice-weekly *El Capitan* and *Super Chief*, which rated Electro-Motive E1, E3 and E6 diesels. There were plenty of switching moves to and from the coach yard; these were handled, for the most part, by hefty 0-8-0's. Once in a while an Alco HH1000 diesel would appear, and transfer jobs to and from the SP would often be seen with a 2-8-0 or 2-8-2.

All in all, Mission Tower was *the* place to be for an L.A. train-watcher in the postwar period.

## Ranging around L.A.

It was late 1951 before I had a car of my own, having put my priorities on the purchase of a professional "Speed Graphic" camera in 1949. This camera made 4x5 inch negatives and was a great improvement over the "six-20" roll-film cameras I had started out with. Public transportation still got me to most places I wanted to go, and an occasional offer of a ride with other local railfans who had cars gave me access to the famed reaches of Cajon, Soledad Canyon, Tehachapi, and other nearby scenic railroad routes. Southern California's three big railroads were rapidly phasing out steam power, and I was determined to photographically record as much as I could.

UP had completed dieselization into Los Angeles by 1948 except for a couple of 0-6-0's leased to the Harbor Belt Line at Wilmington. For some reason, possibly the lower volume of traffic and the absence of mainline steam locomotives, I rarely trained my cameras on the UP. I did get some shots of the UP at Union Station, Colton, and San Bernardino, places I visited mainly to catch steam on the other roads.

The Pacific Electric was also a major player in the Los Angeles area, in both passenger and freight operations. But at the end of the 1940's, PE's interurban network was shrinking rapidly, particularly in the northern and eastern sections of the L.A. Basin. Freight business, however, was booming, and as the originating carrier for long haul shipments, PE's revenues brought substantial profits from the freight rate split in effect at that time. There were still many citrus groves all over the basin, and PE lines served a multitude of packing houses. PE served the ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles, as well as the oil refineries around El Segundo, and as the Korean War escalated after mid-1950, the PE was there to haul military supplies to the ports. Steeple-cab electric freight locomotives and leased diesel switchers from parent Southern Pacific made up the motive-power fleet, which even included a couple of former Northwestern Pacific gas-electric cars on isolated non-electrified lines. As I think back I wish I had given more attention to the PE with my camera. But money was hard to come by for me then, and what film I could afford was exposed on the steam roads. At least I can say I rode and observed the Pacific Electric at one of its busiest times.

Santa Fe photo opportunities abounded in my own front yard in Pasadena between 1946 and '48, when our home was less than 100 yards from the L.A.-San Bernardino main line in the Lamanda park area. Steam was still king in those years, with doubleheaders not uncommon on the *California Limited*, *Fast Mail*, and *Scout* eastbound because of the 2.2 percent grade from Los Angeles to midway through Pasadena. Unfortunately, all these were night trains, and not easily photographed. Westbounds in the morning were another matter, and I often trained my lens on anything that was pulled by steam. The bog 4-8-4's, as well as 4-8-2's, held forth on most of the passenger trains. The local freights rated 2-8-0's and 2-8-2's, and once in a while a drag freight would come through with a 2-10-2.

By 1951 Santa Fe was about 65 percent diesel in both passenger and freight service into Los Angeles. Extra sections of passenger trains still were almost all steam-powered, as were local mail trains between L.A. and San Bernardino. Some branchline freights that required their locomotives to be kept overnight at remote junctions such as Corona, Santa Ana, or Oceanside remained steam-hauled for a little longer than mainline locals; the latter were better able to utilize the new GP7 road-switcher arriving from EMD in droves. Manifest freights west of San Bernardino via Riverside and Fullerton were pulled either by 3800-class 2-10-2's or two-unit FT diesels. The Santa Ana River canyon west of Corona made for some scenic locations, and there was usually plenty of traffic to warrant an occasional trip down there. The Surf Line to San Diego diverged at Fullerton. It handled four daily San Diegan round trips until 1952, when a pair of Budd RDC's joined the service and added two more round trips. Surf Line freights were generally handled by 2-8-2's and 2-10-2's up until the 1950's when GP7's and FT's replaced them.

On my numerous trips to Cajon Pass or SP's Beaumont Hill in the early 1950's, I always tried to catch some action at Colton, where the Santa Fe and UP crossed SP's Yuma main line. The crossing was controlled from an interlocking tower with "Armstrong" levers and hundreds of yards of connecting rods to the switches, derails and signals. There was plenty of activity here on all three roads, especially the SP which had a roundhouse as well as a Pacific Fruit Express icing dock at Colton. SP based several types of steam engines here, including small 2-6-0's, 2-8-0's and 4-6-0's for locals. Helpers were added for the climb to the top of the eastbound grade at Beaumont, and for along time 2-10-2's and the big three-cylinder 4-10-2's held these assignments on freights, with 4-8-2's helping most of the passenger trains. Yard switching most often rated 2-8-0's.

SP had diesels on the *Golden State* and *Sunset* but Coast and San Joaquin passenger trains and most freights still were predominantly steam, as were many branchline freights, and most of the switcher at the huge Taylor yard in Los Angeles. Glendale and north along San Fernando Road were great places for train watching and photography, particularly when the passenger trains would accelerate from their

station stops. Burbank Junction, where the Coast and Valley lines split, had its attraction to many fans of the period. Dick Steinheimer in particular made some impressive photos here, but it was a spot I seldom visited.

SP's Coast Line played host to the famous *Daylights* as well as the all-Pullman *Lark* and a daily "maid of all work," trains 71 and 72 that handled more milk cans, mail, and express than passengers. My favorite photo spots for these trains, and the numerous freights that moved this way, was up in the rocky area between Chatsworth and Santa Susana. It took some hiking to get to these places, but the results made it worth the effort.

SP's San Joaquin Division started at Burbank Junction and ran northwesterly toward Newhall and Saugus, where it turned east into Soledad Canyon. My first exposure to the scenic attractions of the area between here and Palmdale was courtesy of the Late Frank J. Peterson, a photographer I first met in 1947. Frank had been making train pictures in the area since the 2930's, and showed me most of his favorite spots. There were numerous tunnels, cuts, fills, and "S" curves, as well as rocky cliff backgrounds in the Soledad Canyon, all making for interesting and varied composition. Luckily, many of the locations did not require long hikes.

Here the *San Joaquin Daylight*, *Owl*, *West Coast* and *Tehachapi* entered and left the L.A. Basin on their runs to and from Northern California via the Tehachapi mountains. The *San Joaquin Daylight* regularly was handled by double-headed 4-8-2's or a 4-8-2 and a GS-Class 4-8-4. On occasion, a cab-forward 4-8-8-2 would be substituted. The *Owl*, a night train with a heavy consist, usually was pulled by two cab-forwards. What a sight! The *Tehachapi*, trains 55 and 56, was a slow mail and express train that made all local stops, and rated a cab-forward between Los Angeles and Bakersfield. Until the coming of the F3 and F7 freight diesels in the early 1950's, the freights through this area were almost always handled by two cab-forwards, one on the point and one ahead of the caboose.

### **The end of L.A. Steam**

In early 1956, Southern Pacific completed its steam to diesel transition in the Los Angeles Basin. On February 19, an excursion sponsored by the Southern California Chapter of the Railway & Locomotive Historical Society ran to Indio and back with GS-4 4436. On April 22, two Consolidations, 2582 and 2828, were pulled out of storage, fired up, and run light to Bakersfield, ending the era of steam locomotion for all practical purposes.

Santa Fe's last L.A. steam operation was the Railway Club of Southern California's "Farwell to Steam" excursion to Barstow and return with 4-8-4 3759 on February 6, 1955. Four of the 3751 class 4-8-4's remained in storage in L.A. for a few more years until 3758 and 3760 went to scrappers in late 1956, and 3759 was donated to the city of Kingman, Arizona in May 1957. The last to go was 3751, donated to San Bernardino, in June 1958. Years later, this engine was the subject of a massive restoration job undertaken by the San Bernardino Railroad Historical Society. No. 3751 has steamed on Santa Fe specials in 1991 and '92, and most recently ran over the Burlington Northern Santa Fe to Railfair '99 in Sacramento.

Watching 2751 perform flawlessly on the busy BNSF main line between Barstow and Northern California brought back fond memories of my youth in the Los Angeles Basin, when steam trains were still an everyday sight. Even the diesels that replaced them are now almost extinct, themselves succumbing to more-modern, high-tech motive power. It was an exciting period to be trackside. I was lucky to be there.

*Stan Kistler, 69, lives in Grass Valley, California. He is semi-retired from the industrial and graphic arts photography trade. His railroad photos have been widely published, and he was the recipient of the Railway & Locomotive Historical Society's Photography Award in 1996.*