

SP MEANS “SP”ECIAL



Extra 9349 West, with the SD45T-2 of the same number on the point, was at Cameron, Calif. (milepost 370.4, 10.3 miles west of Mojave) on May 28, 1988.

Recent operational and motive power changes have made “Espee Watching” as much fun as ever.

Text and photos by Ken Rattenne

Not too many years ago, Southern Pacific was known for its incredible variety: Not just *models* of diesel locomotives, but *builders* of, too. As is the trend, though, SP during the last 15 years has phased out most of its oddball and older power. Today's roster is younger and leaner, with only the vast fleets of rebuilt GP9s and SD9s remaining from a simpler time.

Thus, the lament of the SP aficionado has been that there isn't much to shoot on the modern “Friendly.” Those of us in California seem to lament even more than our brothers on the Sunset Route, for aside from an occasional GP38-2, the Golden State is mostly six-axle territory. Granted, we have a wide variety of SD45 models to choose from (there aren't many Class 1s that still roster SD45s, let alone rebuild them), but one can only take so many 20-cylinder behemoths before overindulgence sets in.

So imagine our collective surprise—and glee—at discovering that several recent operating changes initiated by SP would perk up “Espee watching” in California. The most dramatic change occurred in 1987 when the company began

experiencing a motive-power crunch as traffic levels began to rise. Earlier that year, SP retired well over 200 older units, many still operational; this, coupled with the traffic increase, left the company hurting for operating units. The solution? Lease. Units in foreign paint schemes began appearing on SP lines all over the system—units with exotic and mysterious names painted on their flanks such as P&L, VMV Enterprises and HLC. What a treat, especially in California, where pooling is not very common outside the realm of the Sunset Route.

So it was that several leasing companies began doing business with SP. Especially noteworthy was VMV Enterprises of Paducah, Ky., which supplied a small fleet of ex-Erie Lackawanna—nee Conrail—SDP45s. All of a sudden, bizarre elements were combining to make unusual photographs: Witness SP Extra 9349 West rolling upgrade in the Tehachapi Mountains between Mojave and Cameron during Memorial Day weekend 1988 with former Conrail SDP45 6695 as one of seven trailing units. During spring 1988, the Blue Beast had become a fixture on trains rolling through the

The Mission Bay Turn, with SD45T-2 6828 in the lead, runs over the UP (former WP) at Altamont, Calif. on July 3, 1988.



Meeting at Altamont, Calif. on UP rails is the Mission Bay Turn, No. 6828 leading, passing SD40T-2 8544 and mates eastbound July 3, 1988.



sage brush, sand and Joshuas of the Mojave. One had to wonder: Did 6695 miss the rolling hills of Ohio? The thick forests of the Catskills? The cityscapes of Philadelphia? Like it or not, this Eastern “graduate” was now a denizen of the West, hauling heavy tonnage up the Tehachapis and running at 60 per along the Central Valley floor to Roseville or Tracy.

But Espee wasn’t through with surprises. In 1987, the company shut down its historic Coast Line to all through freight: Only long-distance locals and Amtrak’s *Coast Starlight* used the route. The balance of traffic was sent down the Central Valley, over the Tehachapi Mountains and Cajon Pass, then on to West Colton. At the same time, yard jobs were restructured in the San Francisco Bay Area to reflect the lack of through trains on those lines. Warm Springs (in Fremont) was closed, with the company shifting several locals to Tracy, in the Central Valley. Rather than run these trains north on the Mococco Line to Martinez, then south to San Jose via Oakland, SP finally played out its hand with Union Pacific. In the early 1980s, SP and UP signed a trackage rights agreement allowing SP to run trains over Altamont Pass, opening the way for SP to officially abandon its own 1860s route over the Diablo Range. However, aside from a couple of test trains, SP never exercised its option.

In the spring of 1988 *that* changed, as UP began hosting SP’s Mission Bay Turn, Salinas Hauler and a fleet of sugar-

beet trains. Once the beet season was over, the “beets” ceased running over the former Western Pacific First Subdivision, and we were left with the two locals and extra freight movements.

Initially, the Mission Bay Turn (two trains a day, one in each direction to serve South Bay cities and the San Francisco Peninsula) ran at night over Altamont Pass so as not to interfere with Caltrain commutes running between San Jose and San Francisco. But that, too, changed, as the trains began making daylight runs over the pass, often meeting each other at the summit. That was the case on a Sunday evening at 5 o’clock sharp, when UP Extra SP 8344 East met Union Pacific Extra SP 6828 West at the west end of Altamont siding over the 1988 July 4th weekend. To make things even more interesting, one of SP’s three surviving red-and-yellow switchers, SW1500 2539, was tucked in as second unit on the 6828. Seeing that consist roll across WP’s famous High Bridge at the western end of the pass was a thrilling sight if ever there was one. And just when you thought it was safe to put your camera away!

A TRAINS reader once wrote the editor of that magazine after an all-SP issue, complaining about the preponderance of Southern Pacific in the magazine and wondering why SP was on so many minds: Well my friend, all I can say is, SP stands for SPecial! *Real* special.