

by Keith Jordan

Santa Fe's Surf Line, running from a connection with the transcontinental main line just east of Los Angeles, through San Diego to National City, Calif., was always distinctive for its close proximity to the ocean and its authentic Southern California character. Orange groves, Mission-style depots, and stainless-steel streamliners were its stock in trade. Never a player on the national scene, everything changed with World War II. Southern California, instead of being a backwater as it was in World War I, became the jumping-off point for the U.S. war effort in the Pacific.

Of the three transcontinentals that served California—Santa Fe, Southern Pacific, and Union Pacific—Santa Fe played the lead role in the transportation of fighting men. Only it served all three of California's principal seaports, San Diego, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, and each was essential to the war effort, with shipyards, aircraft construction, and training centers. The Surf Line, pastoral at war's outbreak, forever changed into a main artery.

PASSENGER TRAINS AND OPERATIONS

San Diego, not Los Angeles, would have been the big city had the railroad never been invented. It had an outstanding harbor, whereas Los Angeles had to build its harbor from a tidal swamp. Railroads changed everything, and in the early 1900s, Los Angeles overtook San Diego in size and importance. Trains from the east began terminating in Los Angeles, and Santa Fe's line to San Diego became a secondary line. Regardless, Santa Fe served San Diego from Los Angeles with fast passenger service, about 3½ hours each way. In the 1920s and '30s, there were typically four trains in each direction, some with through Pullmans and parlor cars.

In a classic Surf Line scene, a *San Diegan* speeds along the Pacific Ocean east of San Clemente. The line was busy with passenger trains by day, so freights usually ran at night.



Santa Fe photo, Keith Jordan collection

SURF LINE, 1940

The Santa Fe's Line to San Diego on the Eve of War





Santa Fe photo, Kansas State Historical Society collection

In 1946, as part of its extensive Surf Line improvements, the Santa Fe replaced the aging Oceanside depot with this modern concrete design. The small building at the right housed the CTC machine and operator for the local territory. Today, commuter trains from Los Angeles and San Diego often meet here.

In March 1938, as part of Santa Fe's debut of diesel-powered streamliners, the Surf Line got the *San Diegan*. The single trainset made two round-trips daily, using a baggage mail, lunch counter diner, three to four coaches, and a parlor observation, behind a single unit, Electro-Motive E1A No. 7. This diesel was assigned to the Surf Line until rebuilt as an E8 in 1952. When out of service for maintenance, it was usually replaced by a 3700-class 4-8-2 or 1337-class 4-6-2.

In 1940-41, a pair of heavyweight passenger trains made a round trip each. One was an all-stops local, carrying a storage mail, baggage express, and two coaches. The eastward train arrived in San Diego in the middle of the night, but passengers were allowed to stay on board until 7 a.m. The other train, a holdover from the previous all-heavyweight schedule, carried a baggage mail, baggage express, coaches, smoker, and parlor obser-

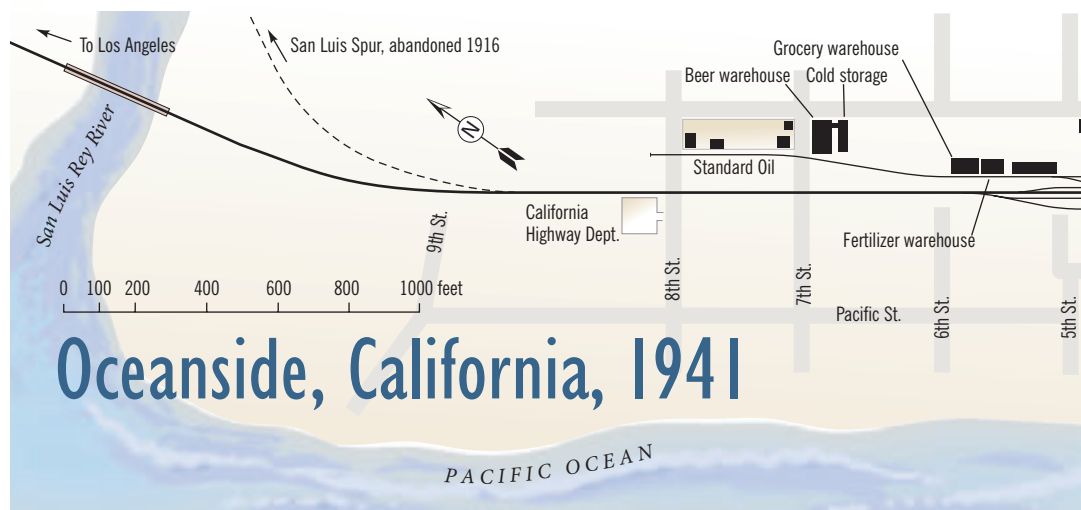
vation. Until July 1940, this train also had a lightweight coach and a 14- or 16-section tourist Pullman off Santa Fe's *Scout*. It arrived in San Diego at midday, turning around in two hours for the trip home.

Ridership ballooned with the growth of defense industry and training centers. Santa Fe added equipment as needed to the scheduled trains, as well as extra sections. By 1940, it was obvious that additional schedules and equipment were needed. It ordered a second *San Diegan* trainset from Budd. In the meantime, the *Valley Flyer* consist augmented the schedule. The *Valley Flyer* was created in 1939 for service from Bakersfield to Oakland for the San Francisco World's Fair. The all-heavyweight train consisted of three coaches, a diner, a lounge, and a baggage-club. It began service on the Surf Line on October 27, 1940, running without the diner until February 1941.

New equipment from Budd arrived in early 1941, enabling the addition of the second *San Diegan* in June. The second consist mirrored the first: each train had five to six chair cars, a lounge, lunch counter diner, and a chair observation, which was converted from the parlor observation. Power usually was E1s, then with booster units, or E3/E6s. The basic schedule of two *San Diegans* making two round trips each, plus a steam-powered, heavyweight local, became the norm for the next few years. During the war, the trains often ran in multiple sections.

FREIGHT TRAINS AND TRAFFIC

Freight business was largely through business, as there was little on-line traffic. Grazing and orange groves dominated. Rancho Santa Margarita, one of the last of the original old California ranchos, sprawled north of San Diego all the way to Orange County. In 1942, the U.S. government acquired it and built the Marine



Oceanside, California, 1941



Corps' Camp Pendleton there. The base retains its wild character even today. Even Orange County, today the epitome of sprawl, then was mostly orange groves punctuated by small towns such as Santa Ana, Anaheim, and Orange.

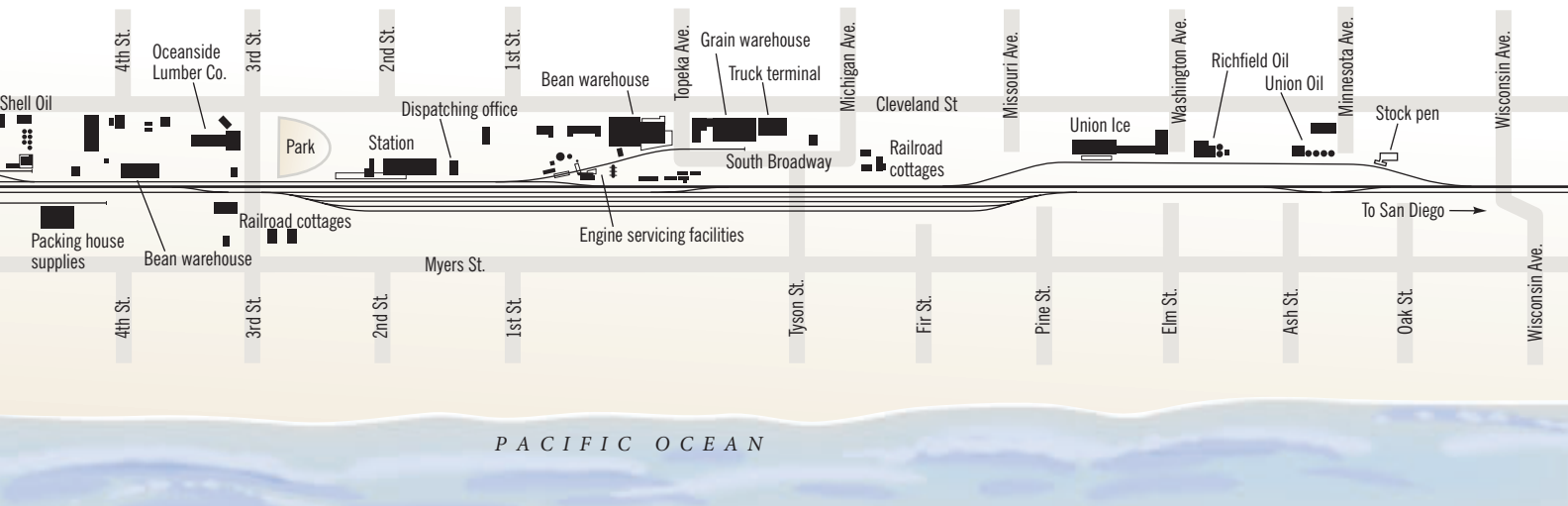
With certain exceptions, notably the Consolidated Aircraft Co., builder of the B-24 Liberator bomber, prewar San Diego was a consumer, not producer, of goods. Most of the city's industrial base consisted of light manufacturing supporting the fishing trade, such as canning, net-making, and boat-building.

The Surf Line thus needed only two freights each way per day, one from Los Angeles and one from San Bernardino. These did the local work en route, and ran at night to avoid the daytime passenger schedules. Only Santa Ana, in the heart of the citrus industry, rated a dedicated switcher, and daily-except-Sunday mixed trains worked out of Oceanside to the citrus packing houses in Escondido and Fallbrook.

These freights had many idiosyncracies. L.A.-San Diego No. 136 was a second-class time freight, one of very few on

The stainless-steel cars of a *San Diegan* glitter under the floodlights in a postwar scene at San Diego. The SDG&E power plant opposite the depot was a landmark for years.

the Santa Fe—the road preferred to run freights as extras. Its primary role was to handle livestock, perishable, and merchandise traffic off Chicago-L.A. hotshot No. 43. It left First Street Yard in L.A. at 10 p.m., arriving Fullerton at 11 p.m., Santa Ana 11:35 p.m., Oceanside 1:35 a.m., and San Diego at 3:10 a.m. The engine crew would leave the train in the





Pacific 1369 barrels through San Clemente with train 73 on November 5, 1940. Engines 1369 and 1376 and a heavyweight consist were painted silver with red, black, and yellow striping for the Bakersfield-Oakland Valley Flyer. After the Flyer came off, the colorful set moved to the Surf Line.

yard at San Diego, and tie up at the engine servicing facilities in National City. A yard switcher would sort the train for delivery to industries or interchange with SP's San Diego & Arizona Eastern.

The westward counterpart of No. 136 was an extra, but it had a nifty name: the

Nightcoast. It was scheduled out of San Diego at 10 p.m., and arrived in L.A. about 9 the next morning. It needed the extra running time to do local work from Oceanside to Fullerton, picking up cars at San Juan Capistrano, Santa Ana, Orange, and Anaheim.

The San Bernardino freights were extras, symbols SDX and SBX. Daily-except-Monday SDX left San Bernardino at 10 p.m. and was scheduled to arrive San Diego at 6 a.m. It handled the less important freight off No. 43 that was not allocated to No. 136. It also carried empty reefers beyond Orange County for loading. SBX left San Diego at 7:30 p.m., with a San Bernardino arrival of 6 a.m. It did all the work from San Diego to Oceanside, as well as pick-ups at the stations for movement to San Bernardino. Cars for L.A. were left at Santa Ana or Orange, as the SBX (and SDX) went from Orange to Atwood via the Olive District. A quirk of the timetable was that a train running from San Diego to Orange ran westward, then became eastward from Orange to San Bernardino.

Other Surf Line locals were Santa Ana-Los Angeles each way: a Santa Ana-Oceanside turn; and a San Diego-Del Mar turn. The Santa Ana-L.A. trains left at

Gerald M. Best photo, California State Railroad Museum collection



Ernest Sevde

6:30 a.m., arriving at about 2 p.m., while the turns left in the mid-morning, returning about 6 p.m. to their respective home terminals. The locals handled delivery, pick-up, and spotting of cars, while the night freights did the hauling to and from L.A., San Bernardino, or San Diego.

The prewar freights were short, often fewer than 25 cars. Santa Fe assigned them its smaller, older road power, such as 3100-class 2-8-2s, 900 and 1600-class 2-10-2s, and even 1950-class 2-8-0s. By war's end, some of Santa Fe's big 3800-class 2-10-2s were necessary to make time on full-tonnage trains. Prewar trains bound for San Diego that were too heavy to make the 2% helper grade at Linda Vista left their tonnage at Oceanside for pick-up the next day.

WAR CHANGES EVERYTHING

The wartime tonnage increase was remarkable: Surf Line ton-miles soared

from 315,554 in the first quarter of 1940 to 864,112 in the same period of 1942! The number of trains ballooned from an average of 16 per day in 1941 to an average of 42 in 1943.

This was a lot of traffic for a secondary line! In 1939, as defense spending geared up, Santa Fe began a major improvement program, replacing 90-lb. rail with 112-lb., and adding almost 23 miles of second track. Miles of auxiliary tracks were constructed, passing tracks lengthened, curvature eased, and yards enlarged. A whole new yard was built at San Diego, relieving congestion at the old depot yard. Because of its proximity to the ocean, the Surf Line was vulnerable to washouts from storms and floods. South of Del Mar, crews raised 3½ miles of track three feet in elevation and placed 30,000 cubic yards of rip rap along the ocean at San Clemente. New depots were built at Anaheim, Orange, Santa Ana, Oceanside, and Linda Vista.

The biggest change came with the installation of Centralized Traffic Control. Previously, trains moving by timetable and train orders often had to wait for hours because dispatchers couldn't keep up. Double-tracking was considered, then rejected because of costs and

E1 No. 7 stands at the San Diego depot on March 27, 1938, just in from L.A. with the first revenue run of the *San Diegan*. The station's many-arched forecourt structure was demolished in 1954 for a parking lot.

manpower shortages. CTC, with certain track changes, boosted capacity at a cost somewhat less than double-tracking.

CTC installation began in 1943, and soon paid off. In 1944, *Railway Signaling* reported that freight trains were saving two hours or more in running time. Time was saved in helper-engine moves, too, doubling them from one cycle in eight hours to two in eight.

World War II changed the world, and it changed the Surf Line. No longer a secondary main through rural country, it became a vital link between two of California's largest cities. Yet even today, with the Santa Fe's *San Diegans* replaced by Amtrak's *Surfliners*, one can get a glimpse of the old prewar Surf Line. You just have to look quickly. **I**

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Visit a layout based on the Surf Line in the August 2004 issue of *Model Railroader*.