



# The By Don Richardson secret borax train

When a Santa Fe engineer took a mysterious midnight call, he figured he was in for an adventure — and he was right

**T**HE PACIFIC COAST BORAX COMPANY, producer of the famous “20 Mule Team” cleaning product, operated a mine just north of the Santa Fe Railway’s main line between Barstow and Mojave, Calif. The mine, located at the world’s largest deposit of borax, was served by a 3.4-mile spur off the main line at milepost 784.4 near a station originally called Amargo and later renamed Boron. Though in earlier times Pacific Coast Borax did use teams of mules to move its product across the desert, it subsequently was a big shipper on the Santa Fe. Much of the mineral went south from Barstow to Los Angeles for overseas shipment from the port of Wilmington.

On October 1, 1974, I had just marked up

Illustration by Jay Smith, based on a photograph by Joe McMillan



# Some men at the roundhouse smelled a rat, and I agreed with

on Santa Fe's Los Angeles freight engineers' extra board, an assignment I had been working off and on for the past year. As one of the only men on that board qualified for passenger, I would often run Amtrak trains to San Diego, but my wife was getting tired of my being gone all the time. I had made the mistake of taking her to a trainmen's dance, where she learned from some of the other rails and their wives that I could hold something other than the extra board. So we made a deal: I would work a regular job for a while, then go back on the extra board as a form of "recreation" from time to time.

For a while my regular job was the daylight Top End job at Hobart Yard, Santa Fe's big L.A. freight facility. We were the main classification job, using a two-unit set of CF7's to pull cars out of the inbound yard and over the hump, then sort them into the various tracks according to destination. It was the most important job in the yard, it had great hours, and I had a great engine foreman, D. L. McManus. We were able to deliver our quota of cars and be on our way home well before our official tie-up time of 3:30 p.m.

Then, just after I'd gone back on the extra board, I got a call:

"Richardson, you're called for Train 3254-B-2, on duty at 0001 hours at the roundhouse," the crew clerk said.

The time was around 10 p.m., and the call was for something really unusual: a "Second Night Coast," on duty at one minute past midnight on October 2. It sounded more like a Halloween or April Fool's Day call. I should have started putting two and two together and made some phone calls before leaving the house, even at that time of night.

When I got to the roundhouse, I discovered that my power was five big EMD's: 5590-5560-5670-5612-5685, all SD45-2's except the 5560, which was a late-model "straight" SD45. The symbol for my train indicated it was the second section (-2) of the Night Coast (3254) of October 2 (B).

But there was no such thing as a "Second Night Coast." The Night Coast was a regularly assigned freight train between L.A. and San Diego, going down as 3254 and coming back as 3253. As a regularly assigned train, it was advertised to go on and off duty at Los Angeles—and was considered to be perhaps the best assignment on the entire division. A "second section" would be an unassigned job, called a "San Diego Extra," and would go not to an L.A. man like me but to a Valley Pool crew, people who worked out of San Bernardino and protected all unassigned freight work west of there. Some Valley Pool men at the Redondo Junction roundhouse were smelling a rat, and I agreed with them. We were connecting the dots but missing the big picture.

**M**Y CONDUCTOR, turns out, was the same Don McManus who'd been my foreman on the Hobart Top End. Our rear brakeman, O. L. "Orrie" Mills, had also been on that job. Amazingly, we had all decided to go back on the road at the same time without letting each other know. We laughingly called our midnight sojourn the "Midnight Top End of the Fourth District," referring to the official railroad term for the San Diego line. With a 1958 date as a yard helper and a 1960 date as a foreman, Don gained brakemen's seniority in 1959 when the road and yard men combined their seniority lists, then was promoted to

conductor in '72. Orrie Mills had an even more roundabout route. He originally hired out as a fireman in 1956, was forced into train and yard service in 1965 with the elimination of firemen, and then promoted to engine foreman in '67.

At the time, although the crew office had been moved to Hobart Yard, train crews still went on duty at First Street Yard and road-engine crews still did so at Redondo Junction.

But just what was this mystery train? I called McManus to find out where our train was, since nobody at Redondo Junction knew and I would have to let the tower operator know which way to line me up, to First Street or Hobart.

"They tell me we're a cab hop and our caboose is here at First Street in Track 32," McManus said. "Cab hop" was our slang term for what Santa Fe officially called "waycar light," meaning just an engine and caboose ("waycar" being a term used for "caboose" on some roads).

"I've got five big jacks—an awful lot of power for a cab hop. Must be something up somewhere," I replied.

When I got to Sixth Street, the old lower end of First Street Yard, the head brakeman was there to meet me. "Look what we have," he said. Track 32, the longest track in the yard, was full to the brim with cars of borax—about 80 in all. Our train would be no cab hop!

Now it all dawned on us. There was a strike on at Pacific Coast Borax out at Boron. The company had hired strikebreakers, and, despite the presence of pickets at the plant, was managing to ship out some covered hoppers of borax. To prevent the export of any non-union borax, the union put up picket lines at the Wilmington docks. As a result, First Street Yard had been filling up with those borax cars.

With Wilmington blocked, the Santa Fe and Pacific Coast Borax had obviously decided to make an end run around the dock pickets by diverting a ship to San Diego and sending the loads down there to meet it. Because it was a "stealth" shipment, they chose to run it in the dead of night using a crew out of Los Angeles that would be less familiar with freight trains. McManus had absolutely no paperwork on the train. Today, that would be grounds for refusing to take the train out of the yard. It probably was then, as well, but we were too unsure of our position to make a stand, so we tied onto the 80 cars and departed for San Diego at 1:15 a.m.

**D**ESPITE THE LACK OF PAPERWORK, it didn't take a genius to figure out we had at least 9000 tons and were therefore limited to 45 mph and required to double Miramar Hill east of Sorrento, so that's how I proceeded. Being a solid train of loads of equal tonnage, it was an easy train to handle as long as I allowed plenty of braking room. Once past Hobart Tower, I notched out to 45 mph and maintained that speed with throttle and dynamic-brake manipulation. The dispatcher had me lined up pretty much all the way, so the first time I had to set the air was for the 40-mph curve into Orange. Wanting to give McManus and Mills a good ride on the caboose, I left the throttle in Run 6 as I made about a 10-pound set, well in advance of the curve. After the service-application port stopped blowing, I looked at the speed indicator to see what kind of effect had resulted. The hairs pricked up on the back of my neck when I saw it reading 60 mph!

Since it was a "stealth" shipment, they chose to run it in the

them. We were connecting the dots but missing the big picture.

“What the . . . ?” I thought to myself. Then, realizing what was happening, I reduced my throttle and watched the speed indication drop rapidly to 40. That 18,000 horsepower was producing a wheel-slip, and I would be lucky to keep the speed at 35 mph on that curve.

I soon learned that a 6-pound set was sufficient for most braking purposes, using that “minimum set” to stabilize the train through the many sags on the Fourth District. At one point near Del Mar, I’d been riding a minimum set for miles when I got up off the seat to go get a drink of water. I accidentally hit the brake-valve handle, moving it to Release. Just like an engineer bringing his train down Cajon Pass, I feared I’d messed up the “perfect set” and would have to spend the rest of the trip trying to get it back. I immediately made another set, knowing I would have to go just a bit farther on the quadrant to get the same braking effort with the now-undercharged brake system.

Next, things got interesting: I had to manage the train through the sag between Del Mar and Sorrento, get slowed down to 15 mph to enter the Sorrento siding, maintain that speed through the 4877-foot-long siding, and stop our approximately 4400-foot-long train in the clear so Mills could walk up and make the cut to double the hill. Further, I had to do all this without stopping short, breaking in two, or over-running the red signal at the east end of the siding.

As we started down the 1-percent grade about a mile past Del Mar, I made my usual 6-pound set. First it held at 45 mph, then I watched the needle climb as we took the turn away from the Pacific Ocean and headed toward Sorrento. I resisted the urge to set more air.

“If it goes above 55 mph, I’ll set just a little more,” I promised myself, knowing that in less than a mile the grade would be flat with 2½ miles to the switch where we’d head into the siding. The speed-indicator needle went to 55 mph and hung there. As we started up the slight incline out of the slough by Torrey Pines, the speed began to fall. At the siding switch it was right on 15 mph. My throttle manipulation kept it there all the way to the other end, and a gradual reduction to the Run 1 setting brought us to a stop at just the right spot because of the grade, which was over 0.5 percent ascending.

Mills walked up, made the cut to uncouple the rear portion of our train, and rode the rear car of our front portion as the dispatcher lined us up the 2 percent Miramar Hill. After the short 3.9-mile climb, we entered the secondary main track at the top of the hill. At the time, there was a dispatcher-controlled crossover at milepost 255, 2 miles past Miramar. The train crew and I had a difference of opinion as to how to make the move. I wanted to stop just in the clear of the crossover and leave the first cut there. They wanted to stop just in the clear of the switch at Miramar. As in all such disagreements, the train crew won out—the conductor was, after all, boss of the train. But I still insist I was right, thanks to later events.

Leaving the head brakeman (whose name I now forget) to set handbrakes and guard the first cut at Miramar, we went back to Sorrento, coupled onto the rest of our train, and hauled it up the hill, this time staying on the main track. At the milepost 255 crossover, we dropped off Mills and picked up the head brakeman. Then we cut off the cabooses, left it

standing on the main track, and got in position for the double-over shove through the crossover.

After getting permission from the dispatcher, we began backing through the crossover toward the rest of our train . . . and now the train crew’s earlier decision would come back to bite us. Had we left our first cut just in the clear of the crossover, it would’ve been only a short, easily managed shove. Instead, we had to proceed in reverse about 10,000 feet, doing so with some 2300 feet of engines and cars.

These were the days before handset radios (although we did have fixed radios in both the caboose and the engine), so we had to use hand signals. Fortunately, by this time dawn was beginning to break. Mills, riding the lead car on our shove, passed signals to the head brakeman, who was standing atop one of those borax hoppers about 10 cars from the engine. The head brakeman, in turn, passed the hand signals to me.

After a while, the head brakeman gave me the “I dunno” sign—spread arms with palms up—as Mills went out of sight around the curve and up the grade toward our objective, the other part of our train. We were going to make a “radar joint,” but I just kept shoving—what else could I do, stop and wait for reinforcements? I kept the speed at around 1 mph and hoped that when contact was made—of 5000 moving tons meeting 4000 standing tons—we wouldn’t break something. I just hoped they’d had sense enough to leave the knuckles open.

**T**O MY RELIEF, we reached the other cars without incident, and soon the singing of my brake-valve told me that Mills had made the joint and opened the angle cock to charge brake air into the rest of the train.

“I hope Orrie takes his time letting off those hand brakes, because when he has let off enough of them, this train will start, ready or not,” I said to the head brakeman. The other downside of having left the train where we did was that it was stopped on the steepest part of the hill: a 2 percent downgrade, which extended about a mile and a half, decreasing from there to a more manageable 1 percent or so.

As it turned out, I was able to manage the train speed fairly well and get stopped on the main at M.P. 255 so that McManus could roll the caboose to a joint once the dispatcher had restored the power crossover to normal.

What we should have done at M.P. 255 was leave the entire second cut with caboose on the main above the crossover, then go against the first cut and double to the rear portion, but we were new to this. The Night Coast with Los Angeles crews seldom doubled Miramar Hill.

Despite all of this, everything went smoothly and we arrived safely at San Diego at 7:14 a.m. In fact, the train crew said it was a great ride, with nary a ripple of slack felt in the caboose the whole trip. We left San Diego as a true cab hop at 8:15 and arrived back in Los Angeles at 10:45, making the return trip in 2½ hours, the running time of Santa Fe’s original *San Diegan* passenger trains and almost a half hour faster than most of today’s Amtrak *Pacific Surfliners*.

Oh yes, somehow a telephone call reached the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor later that day about the bootleg borax at San Diego. I don’t know if it did any good. ■

dead of night. We had absolutely no paperwork for the train.