



Working for the SP

1876 - 1940

By Gilbert Gia

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In 1876 the Southern Pacific linked Los Angeles and San Francisco, and travel time between the two became a mere 25 hours. California businesses and the general public welcomed the progress, but employee deaths on the line were common¹, and the SP shops at Bakersfield were also dangerous: An explosion at the roundhouse on June 21, 1900, killed two workers and destroyed 12 engines.²

After the San Fernando Tunnel at Newhall was finished in 1876, rail traffic grew to the point that in 1891 the SP moved

¹ See *Railroading in Kern County, 1882* and *Train Wreck on the Tehachapi Line, 1907* by Gilbert Gia at www.scribd.com

² Salt Lake Herald, June 22, 1900

its engine repair shops to Bakersfield.³ Each train over Tehachapi pass required nearly two dozen employees, and the addition of the new repair center meant even more workers were needed. This period coincided with the immigration of Italians to Kern County, and many of them went to work for the SP.

Equal opportunity in hiring was unknown then. Those who washed their overalls in gasoline – meaning unskilled labor – owed their jobs as much to their foremen as to the bosses in the office. Italian workers were assigned Italian foreman who spoke the language and presumably watched out for their countrymen. But men routinely bribed their foremen. Nepotism was common through the 1950s and was encourage by the company. The author's uncle Eduardo Battini worked for the SP, as did many of his relatives. If a nephew stepped out of line, the foreman went to Zio to straighten out the young man. Italian families today tell stories of their fathers giving bread and wine to their foreman so that when work went slack they wouldn't lay them off first.⁴

³ *Bakersfield Californian*, Nov 21, 1891

⁴ Author's interview with Minnie Molinaro, 2003

Line supervisors and skilled workers– like the machinists – owned a measure of job security, but unskilled men didn't, and they were easy to replace. Italians, Mexicans, and Blacks were brought on as blacksmiths, boilermakers, helpers, sheet metal, and car-men but not as engineers, firemen, conductors, or brakeman.

Even the perfect minority employee wasn't completely free of being let go. Unspoken baggage that came along with a regular SP paycheck was the company's watchful eye over personal lives of employees. If a man failed to pay his grocery bill, and if the store garnished his paycheck, the SP started an investigation that could put the man out on the street.

In spite of labor's best efforts to stay employed, the SP ultimately hired and fired according to the bottom line, and that bottom line changed often and without warning. During the Thirties, the SP hired Ray Robinett's father, but when potato season was over they cut him off. To make ends meet, the family moved to Breckenridge Mountain and lived there for

several months until their father got his job back.⁵ My grandfather Ezio Gia wasn't furloughed, but he went on reduced hours, and at that time he held four jobs: the SP job, ranch work for Ray Fanucchi, bottling plant work at 21st and R Streets, and some truck farming he did on rented property on South H. Men dug in and waited for better times.

SP was mindful of its workers. Railroad man John Papasergia remembered Pie Books issued to new hires. The books were really a set of coupons that a man could redeemed at stores, hotels, and diners on Baker Street. But when he counted his pay envelope, the SP had already subtracted the cost of the coupon book from his earnings.⁶

Family life in East Bakersfield was regulated by the SP's noontime whistle. As one shift left for home, another 12-hour shift was coming on, and while one group of wives was saying good-bye to their husbands, another group was lined up on Kentucky street with baskets of food for their husbands and sons. The whistle also signaled businessmen on Baker Street to

⁵ Author's interview with Ray Robinett, 2003

⁶ Author's interview with John Papasergia, 2003

prepare for the next rush of single men coming off work. The whistle's routine continued year after year.⁷

The company's tight control over employees' lives ended briefly in May, 1894, when the newly-organized American Railway Union called a nation-wide strike. It paralyzed the nation. Bakersfield workers also went on strike, but in three weeks the strike was over.⁸ President Grover Cleveland had sided with the railroads, and they blacklisted the strikers. Two years passed before any American railroad hired the men back.

In January, 1912, after a wave of SP layoffs and reductions in wages, 440 men walked off their jobs at the car repair, round house, and machine shops on Kentucky Street. The SP brought in scabs, and the strike-breakers didn't have to cross picket lines; they roomed and boarded at the company's two-story dormitory on SP grounds at Kentucky and Haley Streets.⁹ That strike lasted four months, others followed in the 1920s and 1930s, but the SP won-out every time.¹⁰

⁷ Author's interview with Minnie Molinaro, 2003

⁸ July 1894

⁹ *Morning Echo*, Jan 14, 1912

¹⁰ *Los Angeles Times*, Jul 2, 1892; Sep 1898

The company let men go, but there were times when the company scrambled for extra help. Pacific Fruit Express, a subsidiary of the Union and Southern Pacific Railroads, ran an ice deck just east of Kentucky and Haley Streets. A pair of tracks straddled a single platform there, and deck crews loaded ice into 55-car trains at the same time.



(See footnote for engine details)¹¹

¹¹ "Gilbert: Your grandfather is posed in front of one of Southern Pacific's icon steam locomotives. No. 4233 is Class AC-10, which stands for "Articulated Consolidation of the 10th type", and since they were only owned by the SP, they were a signature locomotive. No. 4233 was built by Baldwin Locomotive Works in May 1942, and placed in service in June 1942. This one, and its similar types, were called by various names: Cab Forward, Cab Ahead, and Cab in Front, amongst others. The SP designed them to

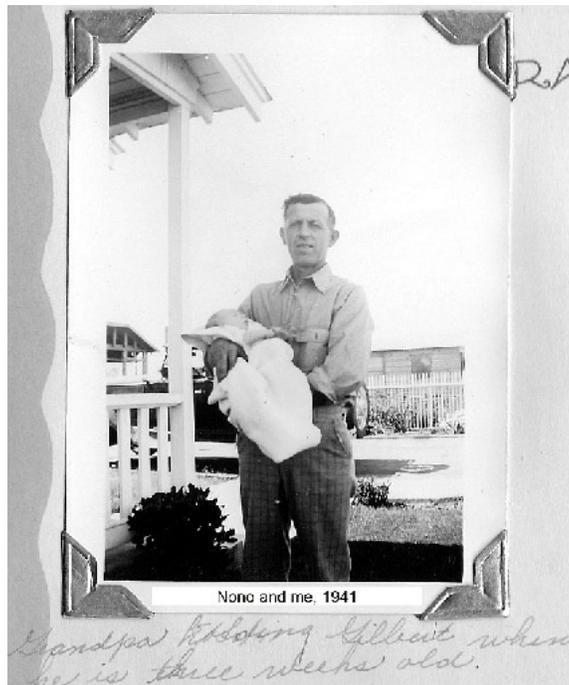
During potato season the SP shipped 200 carloads of spuds a day, but loaders weren't all the help the SP needed. The company had an ice-making plant and cooling towers where Kentucky Street crosses the East Side Canal, but if they ran out of ice, more was available at the Union Ice Company three miles west at Garces Circle.¹²

For additional help during spud season the SP turned to its "extras board", a list of men the company had furloughed or made part-time. Then there were the boomers. They were experienced railroad men who chased seasonal work all over the West. Many had been fired for "Rule G" violations – drinking on the job.

operate in tunnels and snowsheds without choking the crew, therefore the locomotive cab in front, smoke box behind it, and the tender trailing behind. Cab Forwards were used extensively over the Tehachapi line, sometimes up to three or more in a train. AC-10 had a 4-wheel pilot truck, followed by two sets of eight wheels under the boiler, and a 2-wheel trailing truck. Whyte Classification system designates it as 4-8-8-2. No. 4233 was vacated (SP's term for taken off the books and stored) at Bayshore Yard, San Francisco, on 24 September 1958. It was sold for scrap to Purdy Co., Los Angeles, on 23 March 1959 and would have been towed dead to LA for scrapping. -Richard Percy, 2003. My Espee Modelers Archive, <http://espee.railfan.net/index.html>"

¹² Today this restored brick building faces Chester Avenue at the railroad underpass that is north of Garces Circle.

Railroads never knowingly hired back a man fired for Rule G, and the companies shared their blacklists, but boomers worked "under the flag", that is, they used false names. During rush season, labor was so critical the SP didn't check names very carefully. When the front office asked, " Where'd you last work ?" the answer came back, "Pocatello, Iowa." That was a safe response because railroad records at Pocatello, Iowa, had been lost in a fire. So the boomers were hired on 90-day probation, but spud season didn't last that long, and by the time the company got around to investigate, the men were gone.



The author and grandfather, 1941

In the days before labor laws, family men who needed a steady pay check put in long hours for the Southern Pacific and worked under uncertain conditions, kept their heads down, and bribed their foremen. In return the SP used them, paid them, discarded them, and then called back. Pay envelopes made the rent, sent kids to school, and produced later generations that have no idea what their grandparents went through.

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