



WESTERN PACIFIC RR ROUNDHOUSE AT PORTOLA IN 1939, LOOKING NORTHWARD

James E Boynton Photo

SURROUNDED BY STEAM LOCOMOTIVES DURING THE GRAND AGE OF STEAM

In response to our request for articles about people's past activities on the late great WP has brought us this wonderful story of operations in Portola during the Grand Age of Steam.....

by John R Daly

Over the deafening roar of about a half dozen of the fourteen steam engines surrounding my office at the Western Pacific roundhouse came the unmistakable sound of breaking glass. I remember instantly thinking that it could not be an earthquake because that region high up in the Sierra Nevada mountains of Northern California is not prone to quakes. But in a split second I saw loco #57 come charging right through the wall and in doing so it took down the walls and the ceiling of what had been the office containing the Enginemen's Board in the roundhouse at Portola, Calif. A hostler had just brought the engine in on a track which ended about twelve feet from my office but the cylinder cocks were not opened properly and this allowed steam pressure to build up in the massive main cylinders. Under those conditions nothing in the world will contain a loco until it has moved itself far enough to exhaust the built up pressure.

And loco #57 did just that, coming to a stop about half way through my collapsed office as the leading wheels sank into the ground under what had been the office floor. Luckily no one was hurt as I managed a very hasty retreat out a rear door but I still have a mental picture of hostler helper Dan Rascon as he leaped over a five foot high counter in the office with only a standing start.

That was just one of hundreds of experiences I had, some frightening, some sad, and some humorous, during the fifty-one months I was in the service of the WP during WWII. The WP was a major trans-continental carrier running for 928 miles from Salt Lake City to San Francisco and like so many other American railroads it performed with unparalleled effort night and day all through the war in transporting troops and mountains of war supplies in quantities never before heard of. I was in charge of the Enginemen's Board on the swing shift at Portola seven days a week for eight and sometimes sixteen hours a day and as such I dealt directly with all the locomotive crews running between Oroville and Winnemucca, Nevada. Because of its geo-

graphical location, right at the crest of the famous Feather River canyon, almost all locomotives going both east and west were changed and serviced at the Portola roundhouse and because of this I found myself constantly surrounded with steam locomotives including some of the largest and most powerful 2-8-2 mallet engines in the US.

Portola was actually the dividing point between the western and eastern divisions of the railroad so we had locos from both divisions as frequent visitors in the Portola roundhouse. I can recall at least ninety-seven different steam locos which were turned and serviced there including eleven of the 2-8-0 consolidation freight engines built by Baldwin in 1906. Almost twenty-five of the 2-8-0 engines built by Alco in 1909 were frequently in and out of Port. As were at least nine of the remaining 4-6-0 TP-29 passenger engines built by Alco at their Brooks plant in 1908 and 1909. This class of engines powered Western Pacific passenger trains for over 17,000,000 miles between Oakland and Salt Lake from the time the railroad started operations in 1910 until they were displaced by the larger mountain type 4-8-2 locomotives in 1936. These fast stepping 4-8-2