

Reflections of the Western Pacific – Part 4

–Jack Palmer

At the invitation of a co-worker, I drove to Oroville April 25, 1980, to visit him at his home there and noticed that his property was next to the WP yard.

After our visit that morning I went across the WP yard to the office and was promptly directed to Mr. Al Hill, Trainmaster, at his desk in the far corner. He appeared to be a very tall and robust individual and had a booming voice.

After introducing myself and while requesting permission to take photos on the property, I assured him of my conduct to do so safely. I could see that he was sizing me up and his final remark was: (Quote) “You can go out there and take all the pictures you like --- but if you get hurt I will send all the parts down to Oakland!” Although he was smiling, those exact words were deeply impressed in my mind to this day.

I found only a few things of interest except a set of four WP units near the turntable; GP-35 No.

3001 and GP-40's Nos. 3525, 3506 and 3531.

I returned to the office and told Mr. Hill that I was still alive and inquired of any train activity. He said a crew would be called at noon to take those engines and 50 Auto Racks up the canyon.

I began thinking that this might be the best chance I would ever have to ride a WP drag up the canyon before the pending merger. I returned and informed my friend of the idea and packed my knapsack, camera and jacket and headed for the string of Auto Racks shortly before noon.

At mid-train I chose to ride on AT&AF No. 88547 and stayed down out of sight as much as possible.

We finally began moving at 4:00 pm, crossed over the Feather River and soon came to a stop. A few minutes later I was surprised to see our power as it came back down and out of sight. I immediately realized we had been set out on a siding.

I thought, Oh well, so much for the ride, got



David "Fritz" Elems works on a part for the steam crew on 12 May 2018.

–Greg Elems Photo.

down and began walking back to Oroville and soon saw the Conductor coming toward me. I jokingly said "a fine bunch of guys you are to drop me off away out here." He replied, "Don't worry. I saw you back there. We'll take care of you. When the power comes back up from around the corner get up on the last unit" I promptly thanked him for his courtesies. I began thinking how lucky I was that the Conductor allowed me this privilege rather than kicking me off his train. (Willing People) I felt greatly relieved to see our power coming back and boarded the last unit as it was going by.

I couldn't get over the fact that this was really happening to me. Here I am sitting in the engineer's seat of a locomotive going up the canyon. It just doesn't get any better than this! (Yes it does)

About an hour later I thought it would be nice to go up to the lead unit and get acquainted with the crew. (The devil made me do it) Bill Reed was the engineer and we soon became friends when he learned of my interest in the WP.

He told me that he lived in Portola and was hired out by our mutual friend Mr. Mel Graham and our train was the WPE (a Peddler Freight). We didn't pick up anything until we arrived at Sloat for a couple of Wood Chip cars on our way up to Portola. By then it began to get dark and he radioed ahead for their dinners and reported that he was going slow because the Head Light was not working.

At that point I knew I was pushing my luck when I asked Bill what my chances might be to go further east when we arrived at Portola. He said that he would speak with his replacement and the "proper words" I should use in any future crew changes. We met with the new crew and it was OK for me to stay in the last unit and to stay down out of sight whenever going through towns. (Now I was really cranked up!)

It was getting cold so I turned the heater on. I was having the time of my life enjoying all the comforts of home, sitting in the engineer's seat with the window partially open, running at the advertised speed and listening to our Nathan M-5's at the crossings. Suddenly smoke came

pouring in as we entered the Chilcoot Tunnel and I began choking before I could close the window. (Big surprise!)

When we reached Winnemucca I got down out of sight when I saw a man as he was checking the water level in each of our units. We soon left and got into Elko at 4:00am. They tied the train down and we then went into the Crew Shack. Not having dinner last night I was satisfied to buy a candy bar at a vending machine and the crew was soon gone.

Soon a man entered and really put me to the test with a barrage of various questions as he had never met me before and loved to talk. I was struggling at times to provide suitable answers to his questions and was greatly relieved when the new crew came in. Once they were prepared to leave we all walked out together and I climbed up into the last unit without saying a word. I remained there and finally got some sleep before getting into Wendover, and when leaving Wendover I was extremely happy that I was about to complete my trip to Salt Lake City – all made possible by those wonderful WP guys.

We were soon rockin' an rollin' doing the advertised speed and the Sanding light began flickering on and off so I decided to use that as an excuse to meet the engineer. I held tightly to the railing all the way up to the lead unit because the trackage in that area was extremely rough. The Engineer, Bob Smith, and his Fireman were both totally shocked to see me when I opened the cab door. Apparently when we changed crews at Elko nothing was said about me riding in the last unit.

I began telling him about the Sanding light in the last unit, introduced myself and explained why I was riding in their last unit. The Engineer appeared quite apprehensive at first and I'm not sure to this day if he was serious or kidding me when he told me he thought I was a company spy sent to check him out. When he recovered from the situation he introduced himself as Bob Smith and lived in Sandy, Utah, and was known as "Iron Jaws" by the members of his union.

He became sincerely interested when told of my trip originating at Oroville and we laughed

about the “Iron Jaws’ thing and had a great visit. At one point he told me (Quote) “When we get to Roper, you stick close to me and I will take good care of you. When the Taxi comes to pick us up, you get into the Taxi with us”.

On our arrival at Roper Yard April 27, 1980, the Taxi came out for the crew and took us to the office. I waited until Bob came out of the office and we then “went for Beans” and exchanged our names and addresses. We returned to the office area and he told me to wait while he was making arrangements for my return trip to Oroville.

When he came out he said: I have some good news for you – You’re going back on the “Ford Fast”. I replied are you kidding me? He said no, the “Ford Fast” was next out. I thanked him for his many courtesies and friendship before he left and I waited there until “train time” and joined the crew as we headed out to the bright and shiny set of four UP SD-40’s heading up the “Ford Fast” and climbed up and into the last unit.

After leaving Salt Lake City I began thinking that THIS was Western Pacific railroading at it’s best – a high priority train, a WP crew, nice comfortable cab, beautiful music from an EMD 16 cylinder unit, and sailing on WP rails. The only thing different was the sound of the “Bull Horns” rather than the WP’s melodious Nathan M-5 chimes. Also, I was sure we were running on time because there were no delays whenever we changed crews.

As we neared Reno Junction I closed the windows at the moment we entered the Chilcoot Tunnel. After we passed Chilcoot I knew I was soon coming to the end of my adventure. I left my cab and walked up to the lead unit and had a brief visit with the crew and thanked them for a great trip. We had no time to exchange names as we arrived at Oroville in the last afternoon of April 28, 1980, and I promptly got off with the crew.

I walked to my friend’s home, apologized for my absence, and told them of my enjoyable visits with the engine crews and exciting experience, enjoyed a fine Italian dinner, thanked them for

their hospitality and left for home.

On following trips to Portola, I visited Bill and Jan Reed in their home. One time he said he needed to purchase a new Railroad Approved Watch and if I was interested, he would buy one for me too.

I was more than happy to pay for mine and proud of still wearing it every day in remembrance of all those truly “Willing People”: Mel Graham, Al Hill, Norman Holmes, Bob Larson, Bill Reed and Bob Smith and the pleasure of their friendship, although Mel Graham, Al Hill and Bob Smith have since passed away.

Yes, I remember Western Pacific and it’s Willing People!

WPRM Steam Dept News

– Roger Stabler, Steam Dept CMO

The Spring work week was very successful with many of the outstanding tasks getting completed and some of the more technical work getting closer to completion. The week culminated with the Light the Fire dinner.

I arrived at the museum a week early to get some prep work completed on the WP165 before the rest of the team showed up. The week did not go as planned as there were several items at the museum that needed attention so the museum could be up and running during the steam work week.

I did manage to get the lower cab floor installed in the 165 as well as some prep on the rear tube sheet. Hank Stiles showed up to help for the full two weeks, Hank put all the brake rigging back on the tender, made up some new air brake hoses for the tender and spent most of the steam week re-conditioning the steam valves in the cab.

Bob Sims and Kirk Bair worked on the oil tank for the 165 as well as the sand box. Kirk and Bob also moved a lot of the material from various storage spots at the museum to the shop to get them ready for installation.