

## **Stabbed At Fields\***

Trackside Series #16

By: Lloyd Palmer  
August 2006

An experience on a recent railfanning trip with two other friends resulted in the subject of this, the sixteenth issue of our *Trackside Series*. The practice of searching out trains and photographing them can lead to all types of emotions. Getting that shot of a train with nice looking locomotives in full sunlight at a scenic location can give one the feeling of great accomplishment. On the other hand, instances where the sun dips behind the only tiny cloud in the sky as the train passes, finding an extremely filthy locomotive on the front of the oncoming train or your camera deciding to malfunction at the precise moment the train shows up can be quite frustrating. Another element of the chase can be the experience of getting caught totally off guard while in the pursuit of the perfect train photo, and that's exactly what happened on a recent trip.

During the first part of August two other good friends from Tacoma, Washington, and I, got together to photograph trains. Our plan was to spend four days on Willamette Pass and in southern Oregon photographing trains and getting some roster shots. I met Tom Arrington and Chris Marshall in Albany on a Tuesday morning and after shooting some roster shots of Portland & Western RR locomotives we headed south. After catching a P&W train in Junction City we stopped by the Central Oregon & Pacific RR shops in Eugene to capture a few of their locomotives on film.

Our plan was to head east towards Oakridge where we would buy a few groceries and supplies then head up to Willamette Pass and spend the night camped along the tracks at Fields. Highway 58 between Eugene and Oakridge parallels the Union Pacific's mainline for much of the way but other than a couple of trains in some sidings we saw nothing moving. These parked trains, with no crews aboard, should have given us a clue of what to expect but it didn't register in our heads. We got our supplies at Oakridge, ate a late lunch at one of the fast food joints and headed up into Willamette Pass.

Several miles east of Oakridge, and just beyond McCredie Springs, we left the main highway as we turned up a gravel road marked with a sign pointing to Wicopee and Fields. These two locations were both important points along the Southern Pacific's line over the pass in the days of steam locomotives and helper engines.

There are several things about the railroad's climb over Willamette Pass that make Fields and the area around it an ideal spot to photograph trains. First of all, the tracks make a giant s-curve as they climb the mountains. This allows a person to take pictures of a train pointed into the sun no matter whether it's climbing or descending the pass. Another good thing is that while waiting high on the hillside at Fields you can hear the trains far below you as they begin their long slow climb to the summit. Passing through McCredie Springs and Heather as they start up the hill it will take them almost forty-five minutes to reach Fields. This gives a person lots of time to pick out a good photo location. There are also talking trackside detectors that alert the railfan of

oncoming trains if you have a scanner along. In addition, the tracks pass through nineteen tunnels making for numerous photo opportunities.

Before getting into the meat of the story, let's address the subject of the direction a train is moving in this area. The easiest solution would just be to say that a train is going up the hill or down the hill but that's not how either the SP, in the past, or UP currently describe train movements through the pass and as this is a story about trains that wouldn't be too appropriate.

Geographically the line runs mostly east/west but with the large s-curve the trains have to traverse they will actually point both directions as they either ascend or descend the hill. So, describing a certain train as being headed east or headed west can only be confusing at best.

During the days of the Southern Pacific RR trains throughout their entire system were designated as either westbound or eastbound, period! Since San Francisco was the company's headquarters they decided that any train headed towards the City by the Bay was a westbound train and all trains headed away from the city were eastbound trains. It didn't matter which geographic direction they were headed, they were either an eastbound train or a westbound train. With this in mind, a train headed downhill on Willamette Pass was an eastbound train and one going uphill was a westbound train since it was headed towards San Francisco.

The line running over the pass is now Union Pacific's mainline between California and the Pacific Northwest. Since it roughly parallels the Interstate-5 freeway it's commonly referred to as the I-5 corridor and runs mostly north/south. So, under UP's current ownership of the line their dispatchers refer to train movement as either being northbound or southbound. As a result, trains headed downhill are now northbound trains and trains pulling up the hill are southbound. Therefore, from here on out in this story, train movements will be described as either northbound (downhill) or southbound (uphill). Whew, after all this I think I'm even confused.

Armed with maps of the area, railfan guides with all the pertinent data about the railroad and a scanner that picked up railroad frequencies we headed up the gravel road towards Fields, six mile away. About five miles up the hill the gravel road crosses the tracks at a location known as Slide. The area is fairly open and is a favorite location for railfans to take some nice photos. We decided to wait there for awhile to see if we would be lucky enough to shoot a couple of trains before going on up to Fields.

Luck was with us. Soon after we arrived Amtrak's northbound train (downhill), the Coast Starlight, scooted by, several hours behind schedule. A few minutes later we heard a train far below us, as it started it's southbound climb up the hill, so we jumped in our rig and drove to Tunnel 18 where we caught the UP freight blasting out of the uphill portal.

We returned to Slide to await the next train, which didn't take long to show up. Another southbound train was climbing the hill and we photographed it as it popped out of Tunnel 17 at Slide. We scurried back into the pickup and headed up the road to Fields in a cloud of dust, hoping to again photograph the same train up at Fields, about a mile away by gravel road. The distance between Slide and Fields is two miles on the railroad due to a large loop in the line so we figured we had just enough time to get our cameras set up at Field before the train arrived.

A few minutes later we reached Fields as we drove across the tracks and parked at the campsite where we would be spending the night. Jumping out of the pickup we quickly set our cameras up and were able to take a couple of quick pictures of the train as it passed. Success! We were feeling one of the railfan emotions I described earlier, a sense of great accomplishment. However, things had just changed, although we weren't aware of it at the time.

There's a long siding at Fields so in reality we had crossed two tracks as we drove into our campsite. In addition, the road we had used to cross the track ends at the campsite so the only way out is to drive back across the tracks. A few minutes after we photographed the passing locomotives of the train we noticed it began to slow down and finally came to a halt, on the siding, and blocking the road crossing. No problem. This meant there was probably a northbound train coming and we would have a great opportunity to photograph another train, this one headed into the late afternoon sunlight.

Sure enough, a few minutes later a train drifted downhill past our cameras. After it had passed we figured that the southbound train in the siding would be leaving as it continued its run up the hill towards Cascade Summit and beyond. When this didn't happen we wondered if the dispatcher was holding it for yet another oncoming train. Sure enough, another train showed up, headed downhill with its dynamic brakes whining, and we again got some great photos.

Wow, such luck! So many trains in such a short period of time and everything had gone perfect. No little cloud in the sky for the sun to hide behind, the cameras had all worked properly and there was cold beer in the cooler in the back of the rig. The fact that the train was still waiting in the siding, therefore blocking our only way out, was not a concern.

As the sun went down behind the trees a couple hours later and darkness began to sit in the train was still resting in the siding. Even at this point it hadn't dawned on us that we were blocked in. Tom and I had camped at this location several times in the past and had never been trapped. Trains in the siding had always moved on and opened up the grade crossing. Besides, maybe the dispatcher was holding the train in order to let Amtrak's late running southbound Coast Starlight run around it.

The campsite at Fields is right along the tracks and we had set our cots up only about fifty feet from the rails. As a result, I was awakened several times during the night as trains went by. I'd pop my eyes open just enough to take a quick peek at the locomotives then bury my head back in the sleeping bag before the rest of the train had passed. As a result, I couldn't see whether the train in the siding was still there since it was hidden by the passing train on the closer mainline, and besides, it was pitch black outside.

About 5:00 AM the next morning another northbound train woke me up just as daylight was beginning to break. I watched as it slowly drifted downhill, observing the entire train as it passed. When the back end went by I noticed that our train from the night before was still sitting in the siding. For the first time it dawned on me, we were blocked in! There was no way out. We had been "stabbed\* at Fields."

We knew that due to the length of time the train had been sitting on the siding that the crew had gone dead on the hog law, meaning that they had reached their maximum twelve hour work day. Therefore they would have been removed from the train and it was going to stay parked for an unknown period of time.

At this point in time we weren't too concerned. We had planned on spending the day on Willamette Pass anyway. The only difference is that we wouldn't be able to drive anywhere in order to select good locations to photograph trains. We had lots of groceries and water and the ice chest contained a sufficient amount of beer to be able to survive a few days.

After eating the normal railfan breakfast of coffee and donuts Chris and I decided to walk up to the head of the train to see what was going on. Milepost 555 is right at Fields and the south end of the siding, where the front of the train would be, was at milepost 554 so we knew we had at least a two mile hike up and back. Besides, the north portal of Tunnel 15 was just beyond the end of the siding and maybe we'd be lucky enough to get a couple of pictures of a train coming out of the tunnel.

About twenty minutes later we arrived at the head of the train. The three locomotives were sitting there idling but there was no crew to be found. We jokingly toyed with the idea of climbing up into the cab, since the door was unlocked, and calling the UP dispatcher. We could tell him we were the new crew and needed clearance to move ahead, and out onto the mainline, far enough to clear the grade crossing at Fields. Using our better judgment we shelved that idea.

Since we weren't going anywhere anyway Chris and I decided to wait at the tunnel portal for what we hoped would be an oncoming train. Three hours later, a train finally showed up but it caught us off guard and we missed photographing it! Darn. This wasn't starting out to be a very good day.

Experiencing another one of the railfanning emotions, this one being disgust, we decided to return to Fields. Arriving at Fields, we found Tom resting in his camp chair reading a recent issue of *Trains* magazine. He'd heard the last train approaching, the one we had missed, and has gotten some nice shots of it.

By the time we finished our leisurely lunch (no rush, we weren't going anywhere) we had begun to wonder what our plan would be if the train was still in the siding by later that evening. Another night on the mountain was not out of the question since we had no idea of what Union Pacific's plan was for the train. There was no cell phone service in the area so I couldn't call my daughter in Eugene and tell her to come and rescue us. The only plan we could come up with was that I would hike the six miles back down to Hwy. 58, hitch a ride back to Oakridge and call Marie in Eugene. Since I was the one facing the long walk I was sure hoping the train would be moving before too long.

About 1:30 PM we finally heard a car approaching on the far side of the train. It turned out to be a pickup with a UP herald on the door. As the fellow got out of his rig we yelled at him from our side of the tracks and told him our situation. Suppressing a good laugh, he informed us that camping where we were probably wasn't the smartest thing we had ever done but that he would be more than happy to contact the UP dispatcher and find out when we could expect a replacement crew to arrive.

We were in luck. A crew had left Eugene within the past hour and the van they were in would arrive in about an hour. We chatted with the UP employee for awhile then waited for the crew to arrive, hoping we would be on our way shortly thereafter. We were anxious to get out of there but as Tom commented, "we're saving money while we're trapped here since we're not shooting up much film." I'd have rather been spending the money on film.

Finally, at about 2:30 PM the van arrived, driving up on the far side of the train. They quickly realized that the locomotives weren't actually at Fields but were a mile away, at the upper end of the siding, so drove off. Again we waited. About half an hour later we heard our scanner squawk as the crew informed the dispatcher that they were on the train and once they had checked things out would be calling him for clearance to leave. Oh boy, we were finally going to be able leave. Or, so we thought.

We had the rig loaded up and were ready to make a hasty exit once the train moved ahead and cleared the crossing. An hour went by before we again heard chatter on the scanner from our crew. This time they informed the dispatcher that they were having problems with one of the locomotives and would get back to him when they had corrected the problem. So, we still weren't going anywhere. We decided to pull the camp chairs out of the back of the pickup, grab a couple of beers from the cooler, along with a railroad magazine to read, and again found a shady spot under the trees. We were getting good at waiting.

As the afternoon drew on into late afternoon and the shadows go longer, nothing happened. No more chatter on the scanner from the crew on the head end of our train. Finally, at about 5:30 PM we heard them report to the dispatcher in Omaha that they had fixed the problem with the locomotive and were ready to roll. We were finally going to be on our way! Not so. The dispatcher came back on the radio telling them that there was another train heading south, coming up the hill and once it had passed Fields he would give our crew clearance to leave.

The southbound train finally reached Fields about half an hour later, slowing rounding the sweeping curve as it fought its way up the hill. After taking a couple of photos of the locomotives we watched the train pass. About thirty cars went by when we noticed a lot of smoke coming from one of the axels on a passing car. It was much too hot. With no way to contact the crew on the passing train we couldn't inform them of the problem.

However, the crew on our train saw the problem as the defective car passed their location and we heard them radio the crew on the passing train. Since the back end of the uphill train was still going by us at Fields we saw it come to a halt. Great, now there were two trains blocking our escape route. Things were going from bad to worse.

Late afternoon became early evening as both trains still blocked the crossing. Finally, about 6:30 PM we heard the engineer on the southbound train inform the dispatcher that they had corrected the problem with the defective wheel and were ready to roll. A few minutes later we saw the train begin to move as it continued its trip up the hill. The end finally cleared the grade crossing leaving only our original train in the siding.

Finally, after being blocked in for more than a day, the train in the siding began to move forward, up the hill, as the dispatcher realigned the switch and allowed them to pull out onto the mainline. We quickly threw our chairs in the back of the rig and drove to the grade crossing as we awaited the passing of the tail end of the train. We were going to be ready the instant the grade crossing clearing, not wanting to take any chances.

I decided to get out of the pickup and shoot one last photo. As the train disappeared uphill around the curve I shot a photo of Tom driving across the tracks. He and Chris had huge smiles on their faces. We were all experiencing another railfan emotion, jubilation. We were free at last!

Will we again return to Fields in the future, to photograph trains? Yes, definitely. Will we camp overnight there? Yes, most likely. Is there a possibility of the same thing happening again? Probably, that depends on Union Pacific. I guess some of us are just slow learners. Will we forget about the day we were "stabbed at Fields?" Never!

\* The term “stabbed” is sometimes used by train crews when they’re run into a siding and left there for any period of time to let other trains pass. The term sure seemed appropriate for the title of this article.