

southwest corner

by John Hathaway

Southern California railfans are fortunate insofar as trainwatching is concerned. There is an unlimited opportunity to see mainline railroading on three major roads within half a day's driving distance from San Diego.

Along the coast between San Diego and Los Angeles one can watch Santa Fe's San Diegan as it skims along the Pacific's coastline six times daily. Last month's column listed the train's schedule.

Four freights a day also traverse this route, but for the most part they are night operations. The first freight out of San Diego in a typical evening, the First San Bernardino Extra, usually clears the Harbor Boulevard yard at about nine at night. Its crew and engines have tied over from the night before.

Next freight activity is usually the San Diego "Turn." This train originates in San Bernardino and arrives in San Diego around ten at night or later. Its crew and engines drop one string of cars, pick up another, and make the return trip to San Bernardino the same night.

And finally the "Night Coast" shows up from Los Angeles. Its time of arrival is very erratic and can range from nine at night until nine the next morning. It is this train that ties over until the next day when it departs as the First San Bernardino Extra.

Santa Fe also has two daily local freights operating in San Diego County. The Fourth District Local, which services lineside industries from Fallbrook to San Diego, clears the San Diego yard around five-thirty in the evening. It runs daily except for Saturday out of San Diego.

The Escondido Local operates out of Ocean-side on the very profitable Escondido Branch. It too runs six days a week, with the crew laying off on Sundays.

The through freights are often 60 or 70 cars in length and are powered by three to six of Santa Fe's most modern diesel electrics. The two locals are considerably smaller of course, and are usually serviced by one or two road engines.

Across the way on the SD&AE, Southern Pacific runs one train a day between El Centro and San Diego. These are powered by three or four of SP's older road units and sometimes exceed 60 cars in length. The eastbound train leaves here around nine in the morning, while the westbound freight usually arrives in San Diego in the late afternoon.

The Santa Fe operations allow local fans an opportunity to see fast, modern mainline rail operations at their best. With a little luck a fan can watch three or four trains within a one or two hour span during the late evening hours. This 'tie-up' occurs occasionally when the First San Bernardino Extra, the San Diego "Turn," and the San Diegan #78 are operating pretty close to each other on the schedule for the night.

And of course, the SD&AE offers the fan an opportunity to see smaller mainline railroading in the beautiful San Diego back country if he is willing to do a little back roads exploring.

NEXT MONTH: We'll extend our tour of railfan haunts to the rest of Southern California to such locations as Colton, Cajon Pass, and to be sure, Tehachapi.