

Santa Fe's Oro Grande/ Hodge Turn - Final Report

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To all:

I've been too busy to work on this for the last several days, but it's time to wrap it up now:

Train: ATSF's Oro Grande/ Hodge Turn

Direction: Eastbound to Victorville and Oro Grande, then return Westbound.

Description: Santa Fe local freight from San Bernardino to the industries and cement plant at Victorville and to the cement plant at Oro Grande, returning the same day. Usually listed as the Hodge Turn to attract better crews for the better pay.

Origin: San Bernardino.

Destination: Victorville and Oro Grande, then back to San Bernardino.

Railroads Represented: ATSF and possibly others from connecting railroads.

Products: Cement in covered hoppers and bagged in boxcars, supplies in boxcars, fuel oil for the cement plant kilns, fuel for the Standard Oil distributor, airplane fuel for George AFB, lumber, empty cement bags, limestone, clay, talc, household goods, cement clinkers, produce.

Train Length and Weight: Relatively short, up to twenty cars. Much heavier westbound than eastbound..

Car Types: Covered hoppers (such as Ga-52s, Ga-58s, and Ga-65s), Bx-11 and Bx-12 boxcars with roof hatches, regular boxcars, open cross-hoppers, tank cars, flat cars, gondolas, reefers.

The tank cars for the cement plants were black and carried crude oil. The tank cars with airplane fuel for George AFB were silver and probably had UTLX markings.

Typical Schedule:

The train went to work at or before noon and worked eight to fourteen hours.

1956 sample: On duty San Bernardino at 11:15 a.m. and off duty 8:30 p.m.

Road Power: Pairs of GP7s or pairs of H16-44s. By 1956, four GP7s or F7 ABBA sets.

GP7s 2656-2659, 2662, 2678-2679, 2681-2697 were equipped with dynamic brakes and (by 1956) worked the Oro Grande Turn in four-unit sets. Later, RSD-4s (and presumably -5s) were assigned the same as the GP7s.

Helper Power: Often needed westbound from Victorville to Summit (when there were only two road engines). No helpers needed eastbound.

GP7s 2656-2659, 2662, 2678-2679, 2681-2697 were equipped with dynamic brakes and worked in helper service, usually in two-unit sets.

Operations Details:

After the First District locals were abolished (c.1951), a new assignment was established and identified as the Hodge Turn with overall mileage of about 151 miles if that mileage included a side trip of 10 miles on the Adelanto Spur. It was advertised in that way in case there was a need for work at Bryman or Helendale. If the assignment had been bulletined to turn at Oro Grande, a second day's pay would be in order for the crew going east of that point. There was top dog seniority on the Hodge Turn because of the guaranteed mileage and short hours on the job.

The name of the Turn could flip back and forth from Oro Grande Turn to Hodge Turn, depending on the traffic levels. The name change took place in the Bulletin Book, where trains were advertised for crew members to bid on in a Bid Book. Sometimes the trainmaster re-advertised a job to get someone better to bid on the job.

The assignment was advertised to run about 140 miles, which was an incentive for the crew to get over the road and not stall for overtime. If the crew could get the work done in 6, 7 or 8 hours they had a day and a half pay in their pocket. On the other hand, if the work was heavy they would have to work a little over 13 hours before they could go on overtime.

For all practical purposes, Oro Grande was the turning point. The train rarely, if ever, ran to Hodge. If it did, it would only be to pick up a repaired hot-box or some such.

The train went to work at or before noon in San Bernardino and worked eight to fourteen hours.

The UP's Leon Turn and the Santa Fe's Oro Grande Turn operated each day except for Sundays. Each railroad picked up the cars that were destined for customers on its own railroad. Both were daylight jobs, but the UP's Leon Turn went out earlier in the day, and the SF's Oro Grande Turn didn't leave San Bernardino until late morning.

The shippers didn't have preferences for using one railroad over another (Santa Fe vs. UP). It depended on which railroad had the most direct route to the cargo's destination, with the fewest interchanges.

The Oro Grande Turn was normally longer than UP's Leon Turn (which also went to Oro Grande each day and back). It was made up in the B Yard on Track 11 and consisted mostly of cross-hoppers, covered hoppers, a few empty boxcars for loading with sacked cement, and sometimes oil tank cars to fuel the cement plants.

Preliminary Work by the Victorville Switcher:

The Victorville Switch job served both cement plants and left cars to be picked up by through trains at hours other than those when the turns were in town. In this way, both cement plants were switched several times a day. So the Hodge Turn and Leon Turn, although they stopped to leave empties and pick up loads there, were not considered to be switching those plants.

When the local switcher took cars to Leon, they combined the cars with the cars from Leon, and they separated the Santa Fe-bound cars from the UP-bound cars and put them on separate tracks there for separate trains to pick up.

The Leon plant had an "oil spur" where the switcher delivered tank cars of fuel oil. The cement plant at Victorville (Leon) could only hold six to eight tank cars, and usually only a few were shipped in or out at a time. Same for the Oro Grande cement plant. At the cement plant at Leon, besides the "oil spur" there was also an "interchange track," where the Victorville switcher would spot supplies for the cement plant, such as boxcars of empty cement bags.

The Leon plant (Southwestern Portland Cement) had a large, open clinker pit, and there was a spur that ran up a ramp over the pit. Cars could dump clinkers into the pit, or the overhead traveling crane could load clinkers into the cars for shipment elsewhere.

When the cement cars were loaded at the cement plant, the Victorville switcher would pull the loads out and leave them on the two side tracks next to the eastbound main, east of the plant (in the case of the Victorville plant at Leon). The westbound Oro Grande Turn would pick up westbound cars there later.

The direction of the cement traffic depended partly on where the big construction projects were at the moment. 90% of the cement traffic moved west.

If the switcher brought a few (up to a half-dozen) westbound cars into Victorville, it would set out the cars on one of the engine tracks by the wye, if there was an empty track there, for a westbound freight to pick up. This way, the freight train didn't have to cross over the mains at Leon to reach into the cement plant to get them. It was a hassle to cross over at Leon (the plant was on the RR east side of the mains).

At each location where the switcher set out cars for pick-up by local or through freights (Victorville, Leon, or Oro Grande), they tried to arrange the cars so that the trains didn't have to do any extra switching to pick up their cars. The switcher separated cars into four

categories: eastbound Santa Fe, westbound Santa Fe, eastbound UP, and westbound UP. They tried to put the four blocks onto separate tracks, so that a passing train could directly reach the cars going its way.

The eastbound Oro Grande Turn would set out empty cement hoppers and supply boxcars at Victorville (not Leon) and at Oro Grande. The drop-offs were mostly empties, which were easy for the local switcher to take to the cement plants, but the pick-ups were mostly loads, too heavy for the switcher, so the local trains picked those up right at the cement plants (after the switcher had placed them on a convenient track).

Leaving San Bernardino Eastbound:

The train left SB around 11 a.m. or noon. It departed San Bernardino with empty covered hoppers for the two cement plants and other traffic short of Oro Grande. But all traffic in and out of Ono was handled by the Redlands Loop local. The train picked up repaired bad orders at the stations en route to Oro Grande and did the other necessary switching.

Going east, the train wouldn't have headed into any sidings, because it had mostly empties and could climb the pass faster than the passenger trains. As it headed east, it normally didn't stop at Summit, unless it had to pick up an empty domestic water car from the stock track to take to Victorville for refilling. And there was usually nothing to do at Hesperia when heading east.

But they might stop at Thorn to set out empty cars for storage there, or to pick up empty cars that were needed now. The Thorn siding was used to store dry reefers when not needed and was no longer used as a passing siding. The only industry there was a short (double-ended) spur with one ramp for loading cross-hoppers, probably with limestone.

Arriving Eastbound in Victorville:

When the eastbound train arrived in Victorville, they set out the "Victorville shorts." The cars were put in the Storage 1 or Storage 2 tracks across the mainline from the depot. Most of these were cars that the Victorville Switch would later take to the cement plant at Leon, but some were for local industries in Victorville.

Storage tracks 1 and 2 (across the mains from the Victorville depot) were only used for set-outs from local trains going eastbound. They would drop both loads and empties there. Neither track was assigned to a particular railroad.

The train set out empties at Victorville proper (track 1 or 2), not at Leon, but it took them to Leon if there was no room in the Victorville yard.

The cars that were spotted in Victorville might be a tank car of fuel for the Standard Oil spur, empty cars for the Lime Rock plant (later Pfizer), a car of lumber on the back track

(for unloading into trucks, team track style), and a flat car or gondola of granite slabs (only about once a month) for the Texas Quarries (later Allied Granite) spur.

At the Victorville Lime Rock plant (later Pfizer) trucks brought in the limestone. The railroad spotted boxcars of empty bags there. The traffic out was ground-up limestone and clay and talc, and it went out in bulk in covered hoppers and also in bags in boxcars. They loaded 3 to 6 cars per day there. The local switcher would pull out the loads and then push in the empties.

They also set out any cars that were destined to go up the Adelanto Spur to George AFB, which included reefers with meat, potatoes, and onions. There were also boxcars with machinery and airplane parts. There were tank cars of airplane fuel, until a pipeline was built into there (in the 1970s). There were also boxcars of household goods, as people moved in and out of the base.

Then the train would continue across 6th Street and into the eastbound siding, where they parked it, and they rode the engine back to the 6th St. end of the siding and parked it by the caboose on the siding. From there, they walked to a restaurant in Victorville (such as the Red Rooster).

Leaving Victorville Eastbound:

After the meal, they took the engine back to the front of the train and departed eastbound out of the siding. The train passed through Leon without doing anything there, as the Victorville Switch normally handled the work at the cement plant and brought the cars back into Victorville.

Arriving at Oro Grande Eastbound:

Then it went to Oro Grande to drop empties in the yard there (not at the adjacent Riverside cement plant). At Oro Grande, the train headed into the siding or into a double-ended storage track (because they needed a run-around). They got a switch list from the agent and set out all their remaining cars there per the instructions.

The Turn did not normally switch the plant. That was left to the Victorville switcher. But sometimes the Turn had to fill loading tracks 1 and 2 full of empty hoppers and pull the loads down away from the loading hoses to make room for more loads as the plant dropped them down.

They sometimes had to spot oil tank cars to fuel the cement plant too, and empty boxcars for bagged cement, if the Victorville switcher had not already done that. There was a lot of open hopper traffic at the cement plant, besides the covered hoppers for cement.

Then they picked up the loaded cement cars, both UP and Santa Fe on the same track, and weighed each car in turn on the scale there (if the Victorville switcher had not already weighed them).

The train would get the westbound Santa Fe loads from the Oro Grande yard, assuming the switcher had not already taken them to the Victorville yard.

The Oro Grande plant was also shipping limestone in open-top cars to Kaiser Steel (in Fontana). In the plant, the last track on the lead was called the "high line," and that's where they picked up cross-hoppers of limestone for Kaiser. In San Bernardino, the hoppers of limestone were transferred to the Santa Fe's local train to the Kaiser steel mill. The limestone rocks could also be shipped to other cement plants in open hoppers for processing. The plant at Leon did not ship out any limestone.

Another semi-raw material would be the clinkers, which are the marble-size balls of cement that come out of the kilns, before they are ground up into powder. These could also be shipped to other plants in open hoppers. Conversely, clinkers could also be shipped into the cement plants from other plants.

Leaving Oro Grande Westbound:

After they built their train of westbound loads, they put the caboos onto the other end of the train and started back west to Leon and Victorville. (The name Leon was removed from the timetable in 1945, but the railroaders still called the siding by that name.)

They took sidings for passenger trains as needed, but usually that was only for Train 7 (the westbound Fast Mail) at Oro Grande.

Arriving Westbound at Leon and Victorville:

At Leon, if the Victorville Switch hadn't taken the loads "uptown" (into Victorville), the Turn would stop there, cross over, and pick up the westbound loads (and empties, such as tank cars). The Leon plant used their trackmobile to spot cars for weighing on the scale track within the plant. They had a certified weigh master on duty there.

Then they headed into Victorville and into the westbound siding, with the Leon cars (if any) in the front half of the train. At Victorville, the switcher had already stored westbound loads on the Santa Fe engine track inside the wye, in the years after helpers were no longer used there. The road engine would uncouple from its train, back into the (double-ended) storage tracks inside the wye, pull the cars out, and couple them onto the front of its train.

In Victorville, they parked the train in the westbound siding and went for coffee or another meal (depending on time of day). Going westbound, the engine was now near the 6th St. grade crossing, so there was no need for it to run around the train to get closer to the restaurants.

Often the Turn got a helper from Victorville to Summit, if it had many loads of cement, and if it had only two road engines.

And sometimes (every two or three weeks) they picked up the domestic water car from Victorville and took it along to Summit. The tank car had been filled on the caboose track near the 6th St. grade crossing, using a standpipe that swung over above the dome and had a fire hose hanging down from it.

If the Turn was going to need extra braking power for descending Cajon Pass westbound, they would get empty boxcars from the Victorville yard, and if none were available, they would use empty covered hoppers for braking. Or they might pick up empty cars at Hesperia (from Cushenbury, starting in 1956). The empties would probably go on the front of the train, for easy adding and removing later. They needed one empty for every three loads. Going westbound they might pick up empty reefers at Thorn if needed for braking power.

Leaving Victorville Westbound:

Then they headed west out of Victorville towards Summit. They might stop at Hesperia to pick up a reefer of onions or potatoes at the "potato house." There was also a team track there, where they might deliver a car of lumber (a boxcar or a flat car), or spot a carload of plaster board (a boxcar or bulkhead flat car). There was a track off the west end of the siding that went down a hill to two spurs; one was the potato house, and the other was for lumber or plaster board.

Then they stopped at Summit for a brake test and to turn up retainers on the cars. They cut off the helpers (if any) and dropped off the domestic water tank car (if present). On the way home the train was just another freight and observed the timetable rules about stopping at Summit and Cajon and Devore.

The train finally pulled into the A yard at San Bernardino.

Months without the Oro Grande Turn:

The Oro Grande Turn only ran about six months out of the year, depending on the cement traffic. In some months the Turn was canceled due to low traffic. In these months, the Victorville switcher would take the loaded cement cars into Victorville itself and put them on the Santa Fe or UP engine track (except back in helper days, when those tracks were busy). In helper days, if their engine track was full of cement cars, the helpers would wait on the House Track by the depot instead.

The drag freight out of Barstow did the westbound cement pick-ups during the other months.

Later the locals were pulled off, and through freights would set out and pick up cars at Victorville and Oro Grande.

Modeling the Train: Use mostly ATSF cross-hoppers, covered hoppers, Bx-11 and Bx-12 boxcars with roof hatches, a few regular boxcars, and sometimes tank cars, flat cars, and gondolas. Sometimes include some cars destined to George AFB (boxcars, reefers, and UTLX airplane fuel tank cars).

Comments and corrections are welcome.

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