

What the heck was POLING?

- Staff

Did you ever wonder what the small round dimples are that are found on many pieces of our equipment at the museum? They are what were known as pole pockets. A push pole was used to move equipment on adjacent tracks during switching. Pole pockets are found on a wide variety of equipment at the museum on both cars and locomotives from before the 1960's. Our Western Pacific 501, 1939 EMC SW-1, locomotive still carries a pole under the fireman's walkway.



"Poling" was used by most railroads. It was a practice of using a hickory or oak pole with a band of steel around each end to prevent splintering. The pole was used to push a car (or a couple of cars) on an adjacent track when performing small switching jobs. It was very dangerous. A crew member had to hold up the pole up between the locomotive and the car it was going to push to drop it into the pocket. Some of the old stories indicated some of the poles split and hit crewmembers while performing this procedure.

The practice was mostly stopped sometime in the

1950's. It has been reported it lasted into the 1960's on some railroads. It is not known when the WP stopped, nor does it appear it was ever prohibited by the ICC. From photos, WP and UP GP20s had poling pockets, SP and Santa Fe, as well as the EMD demonstrators, do not seem to have them. Our photos of GP30s and GP35s do not show poling pockets. Same with U30Bs and SD24s, so it looks like those 1960s models were the switchover point for having pockets.



Top right: WP 501, 1939 EMC SW-1

Top left: WP 6550, 1945 long gondola

Above: WPMW 90, 1952 Brownhoist Crane

Bottom left: WP 707, 1952 EMD GP7

- photos by Greg Elems