

I REMEMBER THE ZEPHYR by Norm Holmes

As soon as my seniority would permit, I bid in a job as fireman on Nos. 17 & 18, the California Zephyr. I had the pleasure of making 90 round trips during a three-year period in the early 60's. working between Oakland and Oroville. When we went on duty in Oakland, it was our responsibility to see that the supplies were and that the steam generators were ready to fire. We took the units from the roundhouse ready track to the "launching pad" where the train was waiting. We coupled on and a car toad hung a blue flag on the engines so he could safely go between the cars and engine to couple air and steam lines. After the air test was completed, the flag was removed. Buses soon arrived with the San Francisco passengers and we departed for the Oakland passenger station at 3rd & Washington. The trip down Third Street was always interesting especially, after crossing Broadway where the produce district was located. Men pushing hand trucks with crates of vegetables crossed ahead of the train, sometimes barely in time to avoid getting hit. Trucks were often parked on the tracks necessitating a continual chorus on the horn.

After leaving, the street running speed picked up, but the horn had to be sounded for the numerous crossings. The stop at Fremont always produced a good number of passengers for the train. Niles Canyon with its two tunnels was the most picturesque part of the trip. On weekends there were always some early picnickers to wave at. After crossing Altamont Pass we descended into the San Joaquin Valley. Springtime was the nicest with green grass and wild flowers. However often we descended into a dense fog bank called "tule fog". Signals often appeared for only a few seconds and road crossings were difficult to find. This was the most scary part of the trip as one would not know when a car or truck would appear in our path out of nowhere. I was lucky having hit only three vehicles on 90 trips.

If the westbound Zephyr was on time, not too often, we would meet at Kingdon, otherwise we might meet at any siding beyond. There was no set pattern as to which train would take the siding, ditto for meets with freight trains. Often we would go in the hole for a hot freight.

At Oroville yard, the fireman had to pick up Third Subdivision orders on the fly as there was no operator at the Oroville depot. I always marveled at the engineers who could approach Oroville station at full speed and manage to stop right on the designated spot. I never had the chance to try, but I'm sure it would have taken a lot of practice. We stayed overnight at the Western Inn located behind the depot. We had one day off at Oakland then made another round trip. Being a fireman on the CZ was one of my most enjoyable railroad experiences.

