Life as a WP Switchman

By Al Fonseca

I know most of you understand many of these moves and speak "railroad" but for the few novices and new railfans I will try to word this as plainly as possible. These explanations and moves are from the prospective of a switch foreman or a conductor but the engineer's experience, ability and timing is always an integral part of every move.

Terminology and meanings differ from area to area and from road to road. On the WP, and later on the UP, we had terminology and meanings at the west end that differed from the east end of the railroad. And, the Tidewater sometimes did things differently than the rest of the world but the basic moves are all the same.

First, a "train" is defined as "One or more engines coupled, with or without cars, displaying a marker, and authorized to operate on a main track". I may also add, "displaying the proper identification". A "Cut" of cars is generally a string of two or more cars that are coupled that is not necessarily a train.

At a switch, the trailing point direction means approaching a switch from the pivotal end or the stationary end of the switch points and allowing continuous movement only on one track. The facing point direction is approaching from the "Point" or moving end of the switch points allowing, depending on the alignment, continuous direction on either track.

Free rolling cars can be controlled by grade and/or handbrakes or by "bottled air" (air brakes) but for the purpose of this post lets assume no air was being used with any of these moves or switching. And, cars stay where they're cut off and not roll away.

There are many variations of the double cut but usually it's meant when kicking cars. Kicking cars is a move that involves shoving against cars, usually at full throttle, pulling a pin (uncoupling) on one or more cars then stopping the engine with the still coupled cars and letting the uncoupled cars roll ahead. Pulling a pin can only be done when the slack is in or bunched otherwise the uncoupling mechanisms (pin) will not operate. Kicking cars is considered "flat switching" and is very common to save time and eliminates the need to shove cars into various tracks.

After a kick and the initial jerk and release of the first cars there's usually a second occurrence of slack allowing a pin to be pulled again on the cars still coupled to the engine. The second release of cars from an initial kick is called double cutting thus allowing each set of cars to roll into different tracks. The more cars you have and the lighter the engine the better the chance of double or even triple cutting. With fewer cars or more braking force the less chance of the second bunching of slack.

A continuous move forward containing one or more kicks is called a pass. A pass can continue forward until you are beyond a track you need to put cars in, this would be called "sawing" the switch. Then you need to backup far enough to be able to get multiple kicks in again before sawing a switch and again backing up.

Dropping cars is a move for the propose of getting your engine on the other end of your cars where there's no siding or run-around available or the crew just wants to save time. In the "old days" it was usually the latter. For a successful drop one needs a facing point switch and enough room on one track for the engine and the other for the cars. Usually you want to send your engine towards the straighter of the two tracks as to cut down on the possibility of derailing it. Another good idea is, whenever possible, leave yourself an out. Meaning if the cars don't roll into the clear you can still get your engine out some how.

Straight drops can be called differently from area to area, the wiggle, the flip, the jerk, etc. But, the move is pretty much the same everywhere. The switch foreman directs the move and usually places himself at the switch. The cut is brought up to the appropriate speed, the pin is pulled and the engine pulls away going one way and the cars the other way at the switch. Of course, a "gravity" drop means you cut your engine off on a grade and let "gravity" start and move the cars past a facing point switch.

Generally speaking a dutch drop or a dive is a gravity drop with the engine going in the reverse direction than the cars. Meaning, cutting your cars off on a grade and running the engine over a trailing point switch, lining the switch and running your engine the opposite direction in the clear and then letting the cars roll by.

The flying drop was always one of my favorite moves. It is usually initiated with all crewmembers on the engine and well in the advance of a facing point switch. After obtaining your desired speed the pin is pulled and the engine pulls ahead but slows at the switch to let a crewmember off then pulls clear, the switch is thrown and the cars roll the other way. Many conditions have to be favorable before this move can even be considered. The switch initially must be lined for the direction you want the engine to go. There must be room and a safe direction for the engine and the cars. There shouldn't be a grade crossing involved even if you can block it with your engine before the cars cross it. The switch CANNOT (or should not) be locked. When possible, as with any drop, you want to leave yourself an out if the cars don't roll in the clear.

A double run-around is a method used to get around a cut that's longer than a run-around or siding. Incidentally, a run-around is a siding or any track connected on both ends to another track not necessarily off a main track.

The common move is when approaching a run-around is to cut some of your rear-end cars off before reaching the first switch, let's call it switch "A". Then pull the head end cars in-between switches "A" and "B" and leave them. With the lite engine run-around your head end cars, through the clear track, and grab your rear-end cars and pull ahead against your head end cars. Cut your rear-end cars off between switches "A" and "B" and shove your head end cars beyond switch "B" and cut them off. With the lite engine run-around your rear-end cars and shove your train together over switch "B". This method leaves your cars in the same order as when you arrived.

Of course there are many variations of this move sometimes ending up with some of your cars ahead of your engine and some behind depending on your needs. You can make your cuts in opportune places for reverse spotting. Also, you can run-around a hundred cars at a five-car siding, five at a time.

Many of the above moves are considered technical, meaning, speed, tons, timing and crew's experience, judgment and teamwork are crucial. As a switch foreman, the type and sound of the engine and the engineer's consistent reaction time is also a consideration. Some engineers operate the throttle and

brake handle with one hand and some move both handles at the same time using both hands. That split second makes a difference on my end judging speed when kicking cars or making other moves. What's important here is consistency not method.

From the engineer's prospective, the switch foreman's judgment of speed and distance, timing and clear and precise signals and ability to "paint" a clear "picture" of what's happening on his end is crucial for the smooth and safe movement. Once again, consistency is a big factor here.

Locals and industry jobs, whether spotting a few places or many at large industrial parks, usually block or switch their train/cut before attempting to spot them. This allows them to put their cars in some order for spotting, but not necessarily in station order from head to rear. Spur and industry tracks come off of drill tracks and lead west and east, north and south, backwards and forwards. One industry may take tanks, hoppers and boxes on different tracks or on the same track in specific order. Meaning, each track may have spot #1, #2, etc., or door number 1, 2, etc. And, the next industry may be as complex but in the reverse direction whereas you must run-around their cars, drop them or already have them on the other end of your engine in order to spot them.

Switchmen and enginemen are professionals in the sense that it takes many years of experience to acquire the skill, timing and teamwork to perform these moves safely and successfully every time. Usually these moves are not spontaneous or drawn up in the dirt but are well planned out and anticipated when the cut/train was initially switched and blocked. Switching fifty or more cars to come out in perfect order for spotting west and east, north and south, backwards and forwards doesn't happen by accident.

Western Pacific switchmen in the "old days" possessed and performed all the exotic car moves…..and sometimes, successfully. Drops, dutch drops, double cutting, dives, gravity drops, double run-arounds and the all too infamous super drop. There are eight million stories in the naked yard and this is just one of them….Oop's wrong movie.

Track six in the new Oakland yard is where the old yard cars were stashed. Usually once a shift the rip job gathered up the old yard track two and delivered it to the new yard and brought back six rail. When pulling out of track six you were eastbound with your cars behind you and to switch them at the old yard you need to be on the other end of them. No problem, just pull them around the balloon and you can start banging them out.

Now, in the old days true switchmen never passed up an opportunity to make a drop especially a spectacular one. Many times track six contained fifty or sixty cars. So, the two switchmen delivered track two and gathered up new yard six and the foreman stayed at the old yard to make the drop and man the switch. Usually the drop was made at the four-lead/scale switch just west of El Dorado.

Dropping one are two cars is fairly easy, dropping ten or fifteen cars gets a little tougher, but trying to drop fifty or sixty cars can get down right exciting and disastrous. Usually you want to put the engine down straight track or the straighter track to cut down on the possibility of derailing the engine. You want to start back far enough to get up enough speed to get the cars in the clear so you don't trap the engine. And, whenever possible, you want to leave yourself an out if the cars don't roll clear of the switch.

Drops are made under the direction and judgment of the switch foreman but the engineer's judgment and ability plays a big part. Uncoupling (pulling the pin) cannot be done when the slack is stretched, only when it's bunched so after your speed is built up the foreman will give an easy or a pin sign, the engineer will slow the engine enough for the pin-puller to uncouple, the foreman will give a highball and the engine will pull away far enough for the foreman to throw the switch. Hopefully, the engine will go one way and the cars the other.

Many things can go wrong when making a drop and most are bad. Not getting up enough speed and the cars not going into the clear. Cutting it too close at the switch and not being able to throw it, or not getting it over in time and putting the cars on the ground. Not having enough room to throw the switch and put them back against your engine. Not getting the slack to pull the pin, and don't think this one hasn't happened, after the engine clears finding out that the darn switch is locked! So, a tip for you young switchmen, check the switch BEFORE you start the drop.

Now, back to our drop in Oakland. Once six was together the engineer highballed down the main towards the old yard, winding up those old EMC SW1's or if you were lucky an S2 or S4 Alco, as fast as it would go. At the last possible second with the engine huffin and puffin and the dust flying the foreman would give a big easy sign for the pin-puller to get the pin and then give a big highball to try to get the engine over the switch in time to throw it.

With those old girls if the engineer just flipped the generator field and/or gave the independent a touch it was just enough for the pin-puller to get a little slack to pull the pin. If he closed the throttle you were out of luck, he would never get his speed back to pull away from the cars in time.

Well, if everything went according to plan, and you and your crew didn't make the six o'clock news, the engine would go down four rail and the cars would fly around the curve onto the scales.

If the cars didn't go into the clear you simple went through track four, around the balloon, grabbed the other end of the cars and pulled them out. Remember what I said about "leaving yourself an out"?

For the outbound California Zephyr in the morning the outside hostlers or the "Rip" job would bring the power out of the house and spot it at the east end of the "launch pad" or Short Four. The "Short Side" was the four tracks next to Middle Harbor Road across from the SP Homestead yard. The rip job would then double over the coaches at the coach yard making up the outbound CZ and pull around the back of the old roundhouse and out #7 and shove it against the power making up the train.

The balloon track started and ended at El Dorado Street. The south side leg was the scale track it went around the back of the old roundhouse and came out (the north leg) as track number 7.

As for the inbound in the afternoon the power was put away and the rip job would shove the train onto the scale track and leave it then run down #7 around the back of the roundhouse and grab the other end and shove it into the coach yard thus turning it for the next days outbound.

While shoving into the coach yard at one to two mph the carman would inspect the wheels for flat spots, cracks, etc. During these inspections I would sit in the coaches what seemed for hours enjoying the ambiance of this cross-country marvel.