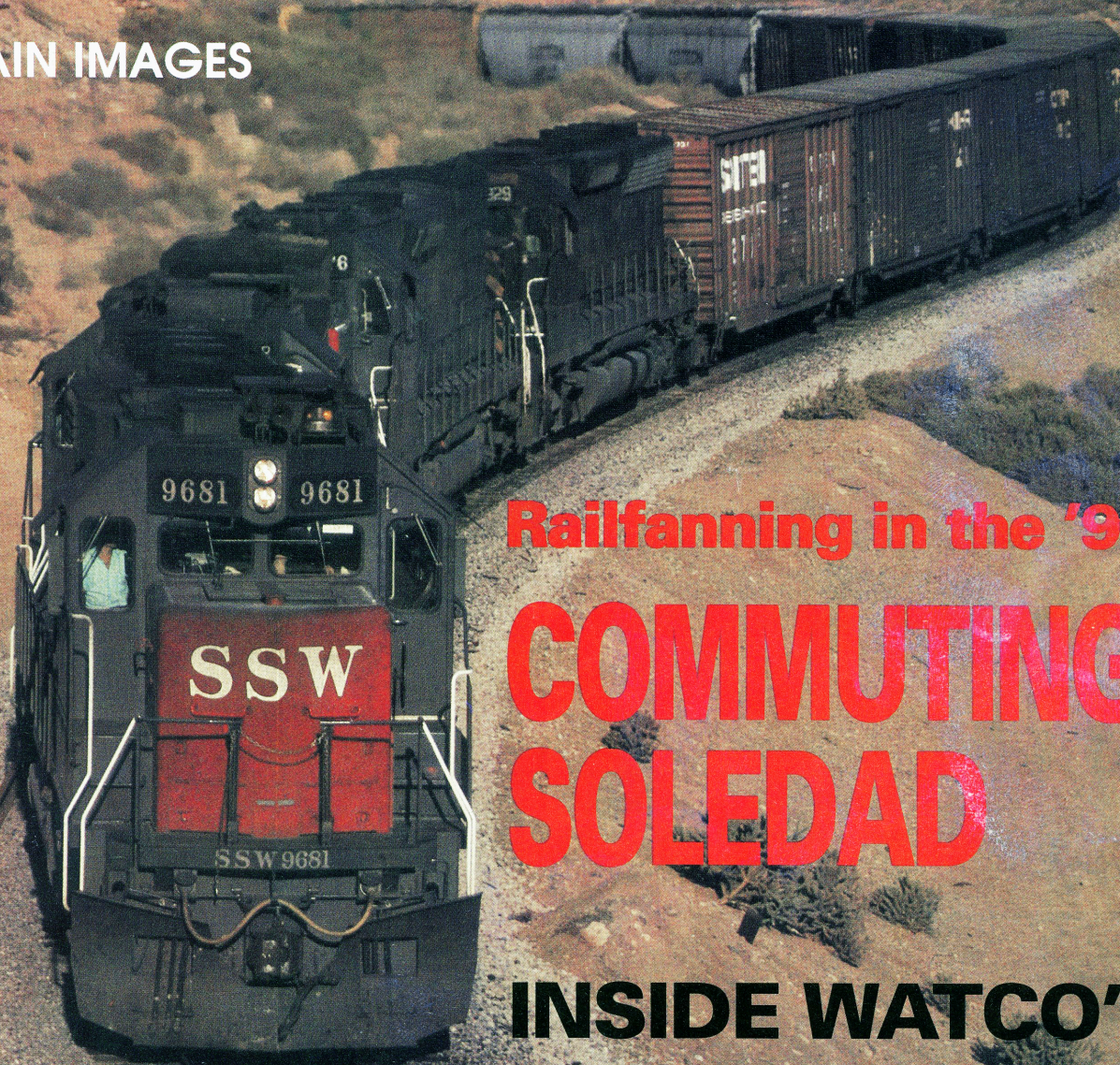


PACIFIC RAIL NEWS

From the Heartland to the Pacific

CITY SCENE ON SANTE FE:
BARSTOW AND CLEBURNE

PIG TRAIN IMAGES



Railfanning in the '90s:

COMMUTING SOLEDAD

INSIDE WATCO'S SHORTLINE EMPIRE

COMMUTING

SOUTHERN PACIFIC'S SAUGUS LINE



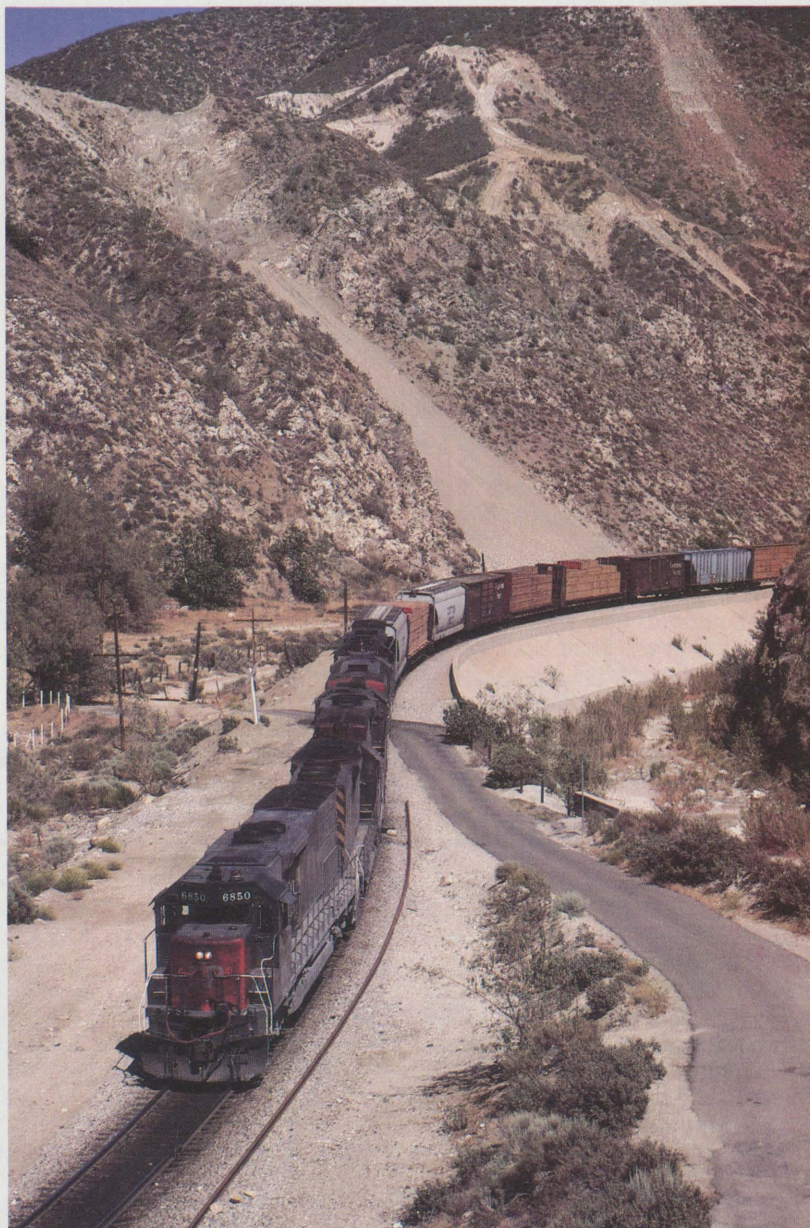
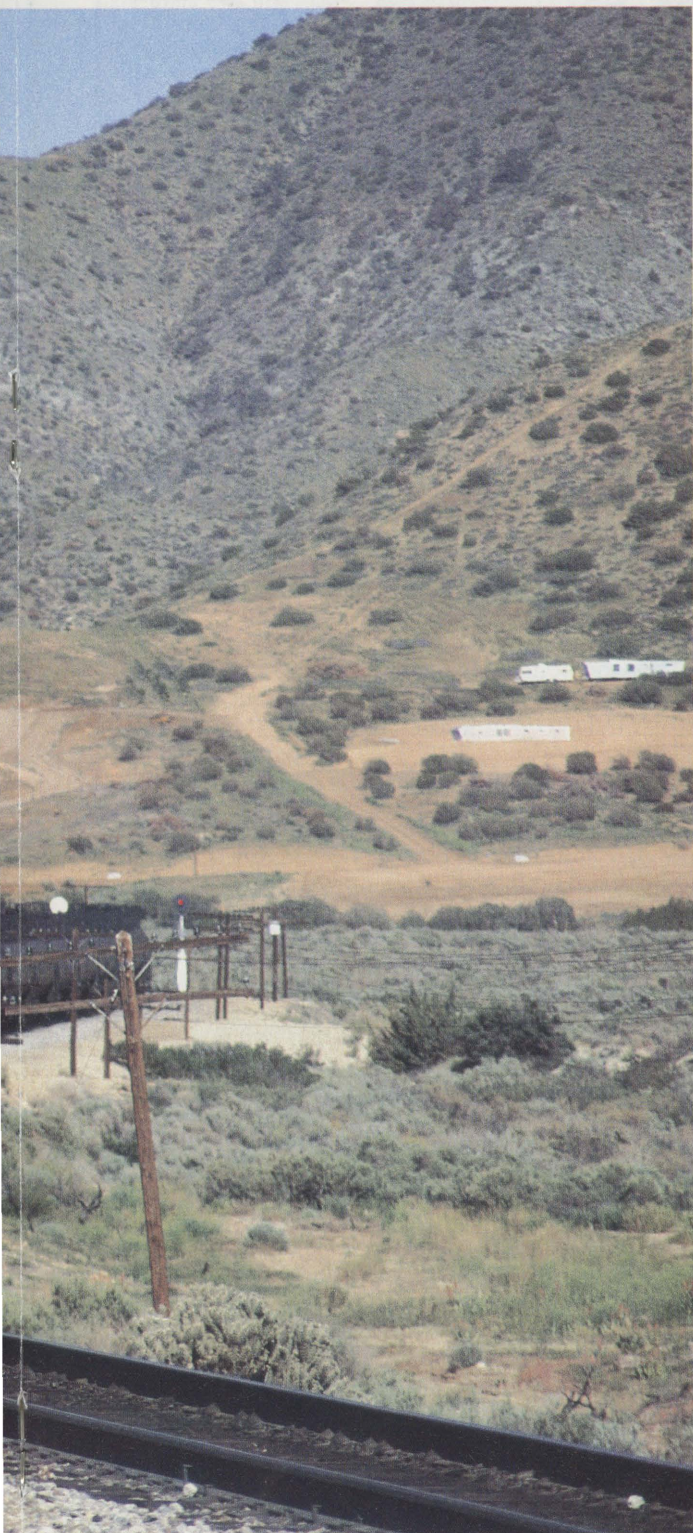
Commuting is a trend that is growing by leaps and bounds as Americans move out of the big cities and into the suburbs. Although people move away from the city, they typically still work where the jobs are—in the city. Therefore there is the need to commute. Highways have become congested and tempers flare. For some that commute long distances to and from work (like myself), the need to break the monotony of the drive is essential. I'm lucky enough to drive a route that follows SP trackage

much of the way and I fight boredom and fatigue by observing and photographing trains along the way.

My daily Southern California commute takes me from my home in Victorville (in the Mojave desert) to my work place in Chatsworth (in the western San Fernando Valley) and back for a round-trip of 184 miles. I follow segments of three Southern Pacific main lines during my commute, including a portion of the Colton Line (better known as the Palmdale Cutoff) and a segment of the Coast Line in Chatsworth. For much of

THE CANYON

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY RANDY KELLER



LEFT: SP's loaded "oil can" train—symbol BKDOU—rolls through Soledad Canyon at milepost 425, site of the former Paris siding. Power for the May 14, 1991, train included four units up front and another five as helpers. ABOVE: SP 6850 East curves through Lang at the west end of Soledad Canyon between tunnels 18 and 19 on May 22, 1990.

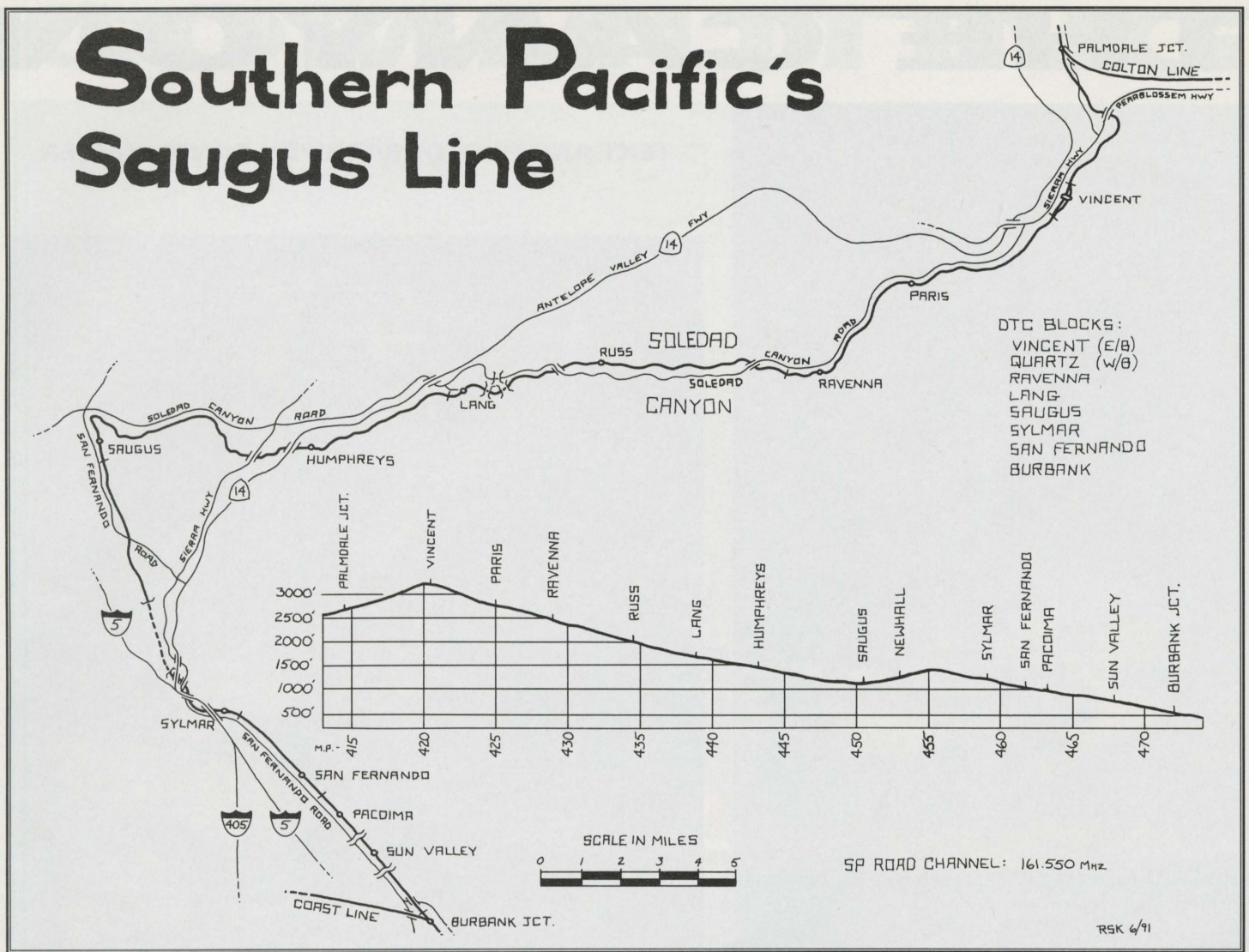
my trip, though, I "commute the canyon" as I follow the winding and scenic Saugus Line through Soledad Canyon. I've found that on this route I can turn a monotonous commute into a rewarding railfan trip.

The Saugus Line opened in 1876, providing rail service between San Francisco and Los Angeles. It is now one of three paths that Southern Pacific utilizes to get into the Los Angeles basin from Northern California. The Saugus Line splits off from the Colton Line at Palmdale Junction and makes a southwester-

ly run through Soledad Canyon and into Saugus. At Saugus the rails make a sharp turn to the southeast, running to Burbank Junction, where the Saugus Line joins the Coast Line. In SP terms, eastbound trains run from Palmdale to Los Angeles and westbound trains run from Los Angeles to Palmdale. This creates a unique situation in Soledad Canyon as eastbound trains head geographically west and westbound trains run eastward.

My hour and 45 minute drive into work begins at 3:45 a.m., so no photography takes place in the morning. When

Southern Pacific's Saugus Line



the workday ends at 4:30 p.m., the camera gear gets loaded into the truck and I head for the highway. First eye contact with the Saugus Line is at Sylmar at the junction of the 5 and 210 freeways. The siding at Sylmar is well used for meets and is where helper locomotive sets are removed from eastbound trains. The line is followed westbound on San Fernando Road (which basically parallels the line all the way into Los Angeles) for a little over a mile, before I turn to enter the 14 freeway and the railroad bores into tunnel No. 25 and the Santa Susana Mountains. Exiting the tunnel, the line empties out into the Santa Clarita Valley and the towns of Newhall and Saugus. Those two towns are accessible by exiting the 14 freeway and taking San Fernando Road west to the tracks, where the road curves and parallels the railroad to Saugus.

The next meet with the Saugus Line comes at Humphreys, where the 14 freeway crosses over the tracks. Humphreys siding was reduced to a shortened spur track not long ago, so only bad order equipment and work trains use the old siding now. From Humphreys to Lang the railroad parallels the highway, but at a distance and it is not easily (quickly) accessible. Depending on my goals for the day, I either exit at Soledad Canyon Road or continue on the 14 freeway which meets the railroad again at Vincent.

Upon exiting the freeway, Lang siding is just to the east, accessible by Lang Road. Lang is at the western mouth of Soledad Canyon. Two monuments stand beside the siding, one declaring the site as California Historical Landmark No. 590, where SP President Charles Crocker drove a golden spike on Sept. 5, 1876, celebrating the completion of the San

Joaquin Valley line. The other monument has two plaques marking the centennial of the golden spike driving and honoring the over three thousand Chinese workers who helped build the Southern Pacific and the San Fernando tunnel.

Proceeding into the canyon, the railroad traces the path of the Santa Clara River, with both carving their way through the San Gabriel Mountains, while Soledad Canyon Road climbs along the hillside. Shortly after entering the canyon, the railroad crosses the river and winds its way through two tunnels, Nos. 19 and 18. Access between the tunnels is available by turning onto Capra Road just before the top of the hill and the highway tunnel. After exiting the tunnels, the railroad works its way through several photogenic curves before it passes under Soledad Canyon Road. From this point to Ravenna, about five miles away, access to the railroad is limited to maintenance roads and a couple of campgrounds that occupy the canyon, but a long lens also works nicely from the road at a few locations.

In the heart of the canyon, Russ siding was at one time in service between Lang and Ravenna, but was pulled up long ago. Russ was located behind the Soledad Campground, which was a favorite of motorcyclists, but has been closed for a couple of years now. The Oasis Park campground, further to the east, provides the easiest access to the railroad in the middle of the canyon, but extreme caution should be exercised when passing through.

Just before Ravenna, the rail line passes under the road again and from there the two pace each other almost all the way to Vincent. There are several nice curves to take advantage of just west of Ravenna, all easily accessed by a short

SP 6788 East—the BKDOU—rolls through the town of Acton at milepost 425.8. Five six-axle units are the standard head-end power for the loaded oil cans, while another seven units have been cut into the train two thirds of the way back as helpers.



climb. The sole surviving siding in the canyon is Ravenna. It is host to many meets and is equally photogenic with winding curves throughout its length.

East of Ravenna, Crown Valley Road is an alternative to Soledad Canyon Road, as Crown Valley Road snakes along beside the tracks, while Soledad Canyon Road climbs along the hillside above. Soledad Canyon Road provides the best opportunities during the evenings and you will not get blocked by trains as you would on the other road. Both roads meet again after only a mile and a half in the town of Acton. Acton was the location of the Paris siding, but it has been slowly dismantled during the past couple of years. May 1991

saw the removal of many of the then-redundant signals in the Acton area, including a cantilever-type signal at the "east" end of the old Paris siding.

Two miles west of Vincent the road begins to climb in elevation quicker than the railroad and the two separate, with the main line disappearing as it twists its way through a small valley. A half mile west of Vincent, Soledad Canyon Road ends and empties out on to Sierra Highway. A right turn will take you to a couple of nice vantage points above the tracks, one just "east" of Vincent on a nice sharp S-curve coming around the hill and the other at the "east" end of Vincent.

At Vincent, the apex of the Saugus Line, the railroad be-



Eastbound at milepost 435.7—but traveling almost due west—SP 7417 has a doublestack train in tow as it approaches the Soledad Canyon Road overpass on Nov. 2, 1990.



gins its decent into the Mojave Desert. The track winds its way along the rim of the surrounding hillsides, passing under Pearblossom Highway and once again follows Sierra Highway down a valley all the way to Palmdale Junction.

Several factors can dictate successful railfanning during a commute. Railfanning during my commute only takes place during the summer months, typically from early April to late October, as any other time of the year does not provide enough sunlight. Summer is also the best time for photography in

Soledad Canyon; poles line the south side of the track and can limit creativity during other times of the year. Weather conditions can also limit photo opportunities in Soledad Canyon. During many summer mornings coastal fog rolls into the Santa Clarita Valley and even all the way up to Vincent. The famous Los Angeles smog can also create a dense haze and unsatisfactory conditions all the way up the canyon, although the closer you get to the desert, the clearer it gets. In the winter it also occasionally snows in the canyon. Although this condition is



LEFT: West of Ravenna, Soledad Canyon Road closely hugs the SP trackage, allowing easy access to a lot of great photo locations. On June 1, 1990, SSW 6884 East rolls downgrade through the S-curve at milepost 427.7 ABOVE: The oil cans, a daily fixture on the Saugus Line, cross over Crown Valley Road on Sept. 5, 1990. RIGHT: A colorful array of motive power leads an eastbound SP train past the site of the former Humphreys siding below the Highway 14 overpass on Aug. 2, 1991. The train is the BALAF, rerouted off the Coast Line because of the derailment at Seacliff.



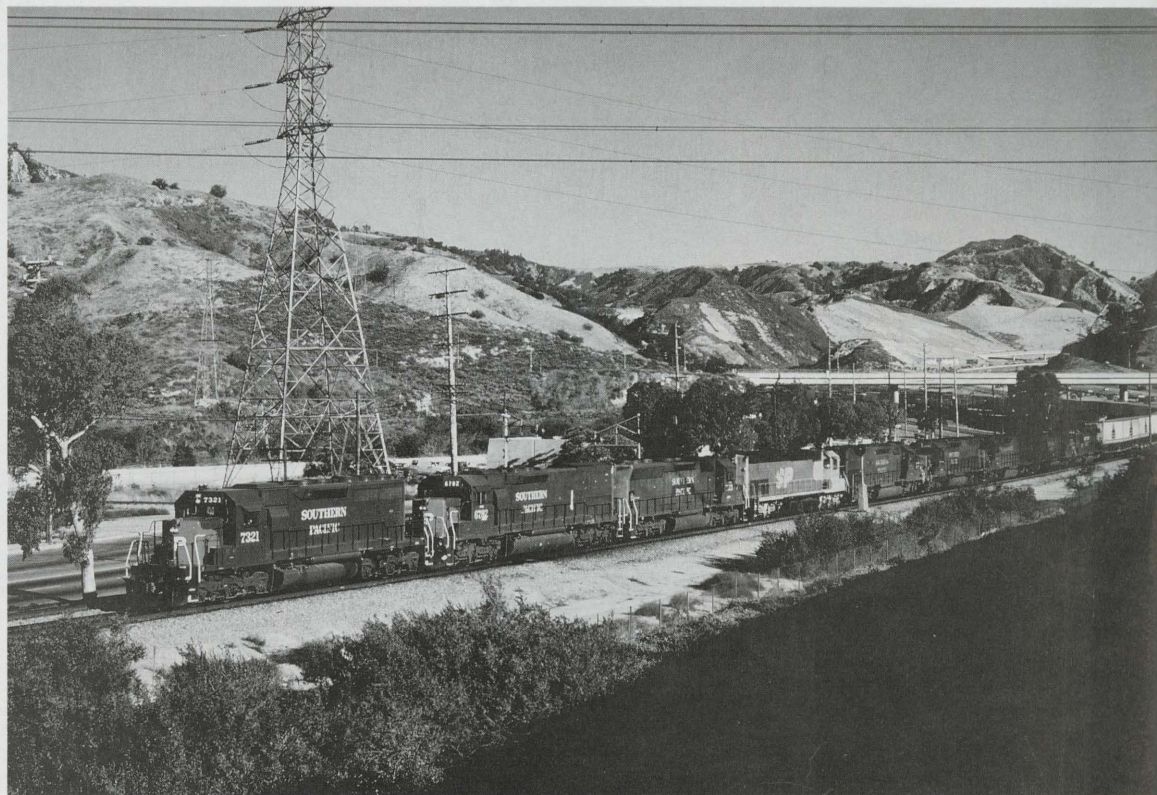


quite scenic, it can also be quite hazardous. Railfanning in snow during a Southern California commute is not a good idea, as most of the drivers are just not comfortable in this type of weather. It is best to save this activity for weekends when there is less traffic (Soledad Canyon has become a favorite al-

ternative to the 14 freeway for many non-railfan commuters) and more time on hand. If it does snow, it usually lasts only a day or so and it is typically only in the Vincent area.

Rail traffic on the Saugus Line varies from one year to another; much of this is dependent on which of the three north/south

TOP: SP 6835 East passes the remains of an abandoned ranch on Vincent Hill, near the east end of the Saugus Line, on July 24, 1990. The Joshua tree is a sure sign that this part of the line is in the Mojave Desert. **RIGHT:** A well-powered PTLAT—nine units—has entered the L.A. basin on an unusually clear morning in June 1988. The location is Sylmar, a tangle of railroad tracks, power lines and highways (the 5 and 210 freeways). **TOP RIGHT:** SP 6849 East curves its way past Ravenna siding on June 12, 1990, after meeting the empty oil cans train, the DOBKU, visible in the distance.





routes SP chooses to run its trains on. Some recent examples of changes include the loss of the LABAF/BALAF symbols to the reopened Coast Line and the JRCIP moving to an all-Colton Line routing. Trains remaining on the Saugus Line include eastbounds PTLAF, RVLAT, OALAT and BKDOU and westbounds LAPTF, LARVF, LABRF and DOBKU. A new pair of trains were added in May of this year—the *Pacific Coast Express*, symbolized PTPCX eastbound and LAPCX westbound.

Two westbound TOFC trains are typically the first trains in the canyon on any given day. The LABRF is first, closely followed by the LARVF and both are normally past Vincent by 5 a.m. When enough empty doublestack cars gather in Oakland (usually 20-30), an OALAT is run which hits the canyon around dawn. After sunrise, the PTLAF is first to run the canyon in daylight. Next in line is the second section of the PTLAF, the RVLAT and the BKDOU (loaded Shell tank train, better known as the "oil cans") any of which may be seen in the canyon after 2 p.m. on into the late evening; this is the parade to catch. Closing out the day in darkness are the new *Pacific Coast Express* trains, the LAPTF and the DOBKU (empty oil cans). One additional train is seen regularly on the Saugus Line, but does not go through Soledad Canyon. This train is the Saugus local, based out of Gemco Yard on the Coast Line. The train works the Saugus Line as far west as Saugus and operates Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

Power on the Saugus Line is almost exclusively Southern Pacific six-axle locomotives: SD40s, SD45s and the same of the tunnel motor variety. Other units rostered by SP do creep in occasionally; GP60s have been making a good showing recently, particularly on intermodal trains. At times when SP has been power short, lease units have made appearances on the

Saugus Line, as well as Rio Grande SD45s, SD40T-2s and GP40s, making for some colorful motive power consists.

Helpers are well utilized on the Saugus Line as grades reach 2.4 percent on the "west" side of Vincent Hill and 2.2 percent on the "east" side. Helper sets range anywhere from seven units to one. Manifest freights and the loaded oil cans typically have their helper set cut into the train, while TOFC trains usually have a one- or two-unit pusher on the rear end if such is required.

Trains are controlled by Western Region dispatcher 52 (WR 52), who handles both the Saugus Line and the Colton Line. Movement on the Saugus Line is authorized by Direct Traffic Control (DTC), in which trains are given permission to proceed into a given number of blocks. Listening to the SP road channel on a radio scanner provides the greatest information on the movement of trains on the line. Eight blocks make up today's Saugus Line: Burbank, San Fernando, Sylmar, Saugus, Lang, Ravenna, Vincent and Quartz. The Vincent/Quartz block is double-track territory; the Vincent block is used for eastbounds and the Quartz block is used for westbounds. Blocks have come and gone since the induction of DTC, with the removal of the Sun Valley, Humphreys and Paris blocks (the latter corresponding with the removal of the Paris siding) and the more recent additions of the Vincent and Quartz blocks in 1990.

Commuting the canyon has given me many great opportunities to photograph Southern Pacific on one of its most historic and scenic lines, while also providing a distraction from the long daily drive. Although many of you may not be able to share in this commute through the canyon, try taking your camera with you on your next drive into work and see what you come up with. You may even start to enjoy your trip to work!

COVER: On Oct. 4, 1990, Southern Pacific's PTLAF curves its way through Soledad Canyon at Vincent, Calif., powered by a rarely seen GP60. In the hectic 1990s you look for relaxation and leisure time anywhere you can get it. Starting on page 28, author—and veteran commuter—Randy Keller takes us on a tour of SP's Saugus Line, a route he railfans each day to take the stress out of a harrowing drive to work in the L.A. basin. Randy Keller
