

Run a detour train

Encountering a “Detour Ahead” sign can make a driver’s heart sink, especially in parts of the country where a detour can add hours to a journey, not a handful of city blocks. On the other hand, a railroad detour might attract fans to drive 100 miles or more for a rare shot of foreign power on a host road.

Such an occasion produced a photo of Southern Pacific Cab-Forward 4268 (a “backup Mallet” or simply “Mallet,” as Espee railroaders called the type) in unfamiliar surroundings. It heads No. 60, the *West Coast*, at Summit on Santa Fe’s Cajon Pass. Overlooking the scene are the depot and the iconic “Descanso,” where famed operator Chard Walker lived. A layout owner can arrange an event like this without traveling farther than the basement steps, so let’s see how railroads detour.

The *West Coast* and three other name trains reached Los Angeles via Santa Fe rails through Barstow on January 16, 1952, when storm damage blocked SP’s main near Saugus, Calif. This was the same weather system that left the *City of San Francisco* snowbound on Donner Pass for three days. Espee officials certainly had their hands full, but they could count on detour relief from a competitor because long before then, railroads recognized the need for cooperation when natural disasters, lengthy maintenance projects, wrecks, and other emergencies struck.

Such cooperation takes the form of standing detour agreements. They detail fees and other conditions so that superintendents can act quickly when a detour is necessary. The railroad requesting a detour (the Foreign Company) informs the Home



Handsome Electro-Motive Division E8s lead No. 2, the *Erie Limited*, as it glides across the Susquehanna diamond at Sparta Junction, N.J., during an August 1955 detour over Lehigh & Hudson River. Richard Young photo, courtesy Anthracite Railroads Historical Society

Company how many trains it wishes to operate and their end points so the home road can determine if it can accept them. Typically, the detouring road’s crews operate its trains. A home road’s employees may not be familiar with foreign power. However, the home road adds a pilot engineer and sometimes a pilot conductor to assist a foreign crew who is not familiar with the home road’s rules, signals, or physical characteristics.

The photo above shows the *Erie Limited*, the road’s crack passenger train between Chicago and New York City. Hurricane Diane heavily damaged Erie lines in southern New York, making a rare occasion that varnish visited Sparta Junction on the Lehigh & Hudson River, a freight-only, all-Alco road. This detour’s full route isn’t known, but the train probably reached L&HR via the Lehigh Valley.

Detours cost money, so they tended to be short in both duration and distance, but there were notable exceptions. A massive mudslide walled off the Rio Grande

main line at Thistle, Utah, in 1983, sending Amtrak’s *San Francisco Zephyr* and several Rio Grande freights over Sherman Hill on Union Pacific every day for almost three months while Rio Grande constructed a new main line.

Midwestern flood waters in 1993 were so extensive that “you couldn’t get a train across the Mississippi from Minneapolis to Memphis for a week,” UP veteran Steve Dolezal told me as he described extraordinary efforts routing unit coal trains to power plants to keep them running.

Modeling opportunities abound.

Routing trains around a wreck on a nearby line can add variety to an operating session. Jim Heidt found another way on his Ogdensburg & Norwood Ry., drawn from his grandfather’s memories of Erie

detours over New York, Ontario & Western. The O&N is a bridge line in New York’s Adirondack region connecting Canada with southern New England set in 1948. It’s freelanced, but two prototype New York Central lines run through its territory. Jim’s scenario has a serious washout close one of them, sending NYC traffic over O&N between Norwood and Tupper Lake. Entering O&N trackage involves a difficult back-up move, like prototype detours where connections over interchange or seldom used tracks required low speed and great care.

This prototype practice is a snap to adapt. Hosts often ask regular crew members who are qualified and experienced on the layout to assist newcomers at operating sessions. Wouldn’t “pilot” be a good term, whether a detour is involved or not? **MR**



RAILROADS RECOGNIZED THE NEED FOR COOPERATION WHEN NATURAL DISASTERS, LENGTHY MAINTENANCE PROJECTS, WRECKS, AND OTHER EMERGENCIES STRUCK.
— JERRY