

JOTTINGS

“Prosperity Special” and “Productivity Plus”

If your memory reaches back to 1922, you may recall hearing about the “Prosperity Special.” Perhaps you were among those many people who saw it come and go. Even if not, you may be intrigued by the story of a train made up of twenty locomotives and sent across the continent from the Baldwin Locomotive Works in Pennsylvania to Exposition Park in Los Angeles, California. The train, famous from coast to coast in its day and symbolic of the nation’s recovery from post-World War I recession, raised the spirits of Americans living in remote parts of the country at a time when their economic future seemed gloomy.

In 1921 when Southern Pacific Railroad ordered 50 heavy freight locomotives from Baldwin’s Eddystone Plant, the company’s president, S.M. Vauclain, saw opportunities to “inspire confidence among the people of this country,” and to “convey to every part of the world the fact that the two great shores of this country are in unison with each other.”

To accomplish that purpose, a campaign was launched to advertise the transfer from the east to the west coast of the first twenty engines ready for delivery. On May 26, 1922, hundreds of invited guests attended ceremonies conducted by Baldwin Locomotive when the line of coupled pufferbellies (plus the ones used to propel the nearly 2,000-foot-long train that weighed about 4,000 tons) departed from the company’s Eddystone Plant.

Throughout the 3,743-mile trip, routed by way of East St. Louis, Illinois; Corsicana, Texas; and then on to Los Angeles, the “Prosperity Special” traveled only during daylight hours to allow people all along the way to view the train and cheer it on. Widely publicized, the train’s scheduled appearances drew crowds.

People in small towns mustered at depots; people in rural areas assembled at grade crossings; people came down from the hills and mountains of the Alleghenies to watch the train go by. In the plains states, farmers left their plowing and wives neglected their chores to congregate at tank stops. All across the dusty prairie, people gathered alongside the tracks to see the train pass. Even in the sparsely settled Yuma territory, people drove long miles across the desert to wait for the train of locomotives to come into view far down the flat straight roadbed, approach with a ground-shaking clamor and then, after it passed, to linger while the caboose seemed to grow smaller and smaller until it disappeared into the distant haze.

Although it is unlikely today that any amount of promotion

would whip up such enthusiasm, a comparison may be drawn between the “Prosperity Special” and 1983’s “Productivity Plus,” a train which will move over the rails later this year from Sharon, Pennsylvania, to a Shell Oil Company refinery in southern California. Americans may watch on their televisions the launching of a spacecraft, but would give little notice to the passage of a train. Sixty years has made an enormous difference in our response to stimuli. Nevertheless, it is edifying to learn that the Age of Innovation has not come to a close.

“Productivity Plus” is a train of specialized tank cars, 72 of them, being leased by Shell to transport crude oil between storage facilities in Bakersfield, California, to a refinery 200 miles away in the southern part of the state.

Just as the “Prosperity Special” was a symbol of growth in the railroad industry in 1922, according to James M. Goff, president of General American Transportation Corporation which is shipping the new tank cars, the “Productivity Plus” is also a symbol, a symbol of renaissance in America’s railroad industry. These special tank cars, he believes, offer to bulk liquid handlers a level of productivity that will make rail shipments more competitive with pipelines, barges, and trucks.

Because all the tank cars in the “Productivity Plus” train are interconnected with flexible hoses, the entire string of them can be filled or emptied from a single connection, thus substantially reducing loading and unloading time and manpower requirements. Unloading, a 40,000-barrel train is expected to take no longer than four hours, making the system a viable alternative to trucking and pipelining.

In addition to providing an economical method for shipping oil or other bulk liquids, the system is safer for personnel and the environment. It is also anticipated that few chemical vapors will escape into the atmosphere because the number of connections that must be made is reduced to a minimum.

While no effort is being made to attract crowds to watch the “Productivity Plus” train pass by as it follows essentially the same route as that taken by the “Prosperity Special” in 1922, people who do happen to see it, and who can remember the long-ago day they watched the spectacle of 20 locomotives, together with their propelling engines belching clouds of smoke and steam, thundering along the rails, may stop to stare for a few moments as 72 cars roll by. They may stop to reminisce.