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The Famous “Northerns”: Starting about 1930, major railroads began ordering 4-8-4 steam locomotives to haul their finest and heaviest passenger trains. Although the Lackawanna called them “Poconos,” on the New York Central they were “Niagaras,” and individual railroads had their favorite designations, they were all known as “Northerns.” The 4-8-4 means four front truck wheels, eight driving wheels, and four rear truck wheels. Designed for high speed and sometimes for fast freight, the driving wheels on most railroads’ Northerns were between 70 inches and 80 inches in diameter.

One of the first Northerns was also the first Timken-bearing locomotive, built for the Northern Pacific about 1930. The pre-war *Empire Builder* on the Great Northern was pulled by Northerns (I saw this westbound train at Glacier Park in 1941). The Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac had a fleet of Northerns named for governors of Virginia. On the Norfolk and Western, Northerns that pulled the *Pocahontas* and the *Powhatan Arrow* were known as J-1s (I rode the cab on the *Powhatan Arrow* from Roanoke to Bluefield and return in 1956). The Reading had about 24 Northerns that they called T-1s, and they used these on the very popular rail rambles (including two on the Wilmington & Northern Branch) in the early 1960s. Most of these Reading locomotives were scrapped by Luria Brothers at Modena on this branch. The C & O had some, as did the B & O on its western divisions. Union Pacific had a lot of them, some of which had streamlining covering many of the working parts. Shrouded Southern Pacific Northerns pulled their longest West Coast passenger trains, and the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe relied heavily on this type for its Chicago-California service. In fact, several series of these Santa Fe oil-burning Northerns would run through from the windy city to Los Angeles, nearly 2,200 miles, without change.

In mid-July 1944, less than a month after I arrived at Roswell in New Mexico to forecast weather, a friend and I made a trip to Clovis, about 115 miles away, where he had a close friend at Clovis Army Air Field. Here I saw my first-ever B-29 Super Fortress. More important, I made two trips to the Santa Fe station in Clovis, where several Chicago-Los Angeles trains stopped daily. This was the only time I saw a true Fred Harvey trackside restaurant in service. In mid-afternoon, a long passenger train arrived from the East, and all the passengers piled out to be fed in the Harvey dining room (part of the station) just off the railroad platform. Inside, there were long tables with white tablecloths and neatly groomed waitresses who served everyone from the train a full-course meal and had them out the door in about ½ hour. Locomotives were changed, and two fresh engines were hooked to the front of the train to handle the grades ahead crossing the front range of the southern Rockies (not nearly as steep as in Colorado to the north). With black smoke from the oil fires, the train was off and was soon out of sight.

The second trip to this station was more important. I arrived just after dark and a big 4-8-4 eased by with a train that seemed as if it had no end. When it finally came to a stop, there were 18 passenger cars that could be counted, and behind these were 35 more freight cars, most of them flat and open with all sorts of army ordinance painted in olive drab color. It turned out this eastbound Santa Fe train was moving a division with all its men and supplies, possibly to a port on the Gulf of Mexico. I was soon standing alongside the locomotive and getting up nerve enough to ask the engineer or his fireman some questions. Months before, when attempting this at South Station in Boston, I would be run off the platform in the name of security. I expected the same here in Clovis. Instead, the engineer invited me into the cab and described the various levers, valves, and other controls. He said it was a brand new locomotive, having been run less than 1,000 miles. It carried 300 p.s.i. steam pressure (most locomotives were between 150# and 200#). I asked him how fast he traveled with his 53-car train. He said 55 M.P.H. was his usual speed. Although the last 4-8-4s were built about 1948, this 1944 Santa Fe locomotive was just about the ultimate in steam locomotive design. Larger articulated engines, like the Union Pacific’s Challengers and Big Boys, were around mainly for freight service, but the famous and numerous Northerns outclassed them all.

Our scale-model Auburn Valley locomotives, #401 and #402, are 1/8-sized copies of Union Pacific 4-8-4s with 80-inch diameter driving wheels (scaled to 10"). Built in 1960 and 1961, respectively, they have carried happy passengers around the grounds at Auburn Heights off and on for more than 50 years.