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## Western Pacific Railroad Company Records

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## **Descriptive Summary**

**Title:** Western Pacific Railroad Company Records

**Dates:** 1902-1984

**Collection Number:** MS 43

**Creator/Collector:** Western Pacific Railroad

**Extent:** 1900 linear feet

**Repository:** California State Railroad Museum Library and Archives  
Sacramento, California 95814

**Abstract:** Business records of the Western Pacific Railroad.

**Language of Material:** English

### **Access**

This collection is open for research at our off-site storage facility with one week's notice. Contact Library & Archives staff to arrange for access.

### **Publication Rights**

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### **Preferred Citation**

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### **Acquisition Information**

Union Pacific Railroad and others.

### **Biography/Administrative History**

The Western Pacific Railway Company was in operation from 1903 (incorporated June 6, 1903) until it was reorganized and renamed the Western Pacific Railroad Company on June 6, 1916. WP lands stretched from from the San Francisco Bay through California and Nevada to Salt Lake City, Utah, and north-south from the Feather River Canyon to near the Oregon line. THus WP provided freight shippers in California and the Northwest an alternative to Southern Pacific Railroad Company, and provided travelers with comfortable and picturesque passenger trains, including the "California Zephyr." At the peak of its operation, Western Pacific Railroad Company and its subsidiaries had 1,266 miles of mainline track, 237 miles of secondary mainline and 216 miles of branch line. It provided employment for thousands. Western Pacific Railroad also actively encouraged industrial development in cities along its route, and was indirectly responsible for the city of Oakland regaining control of its waterfront from the Southern Pacific Railroad Company in 1905. CORPORATE HISTORY In the 1860s, a young Scottish surveyor, Arthur W. Keddie, dreamed of a transcontinental rail route across the California Sierras. With the help of San Francisco lawyer Walter J. Barnett, and behind-the-scenes assistance from financier George J. Gould, Keddie was able to realize that dream decades later. The Western Pacific Railway Company was organized in San Francisco on March 3, 1903 and was incorporated on March 6, 1903, with Walter J. Barnett as its first president. In 1905, George Gould appointed Edward T. Jeffery (then President of the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad) president of the Western Pacific Railway. Construction on a line between San Francisco and Salt Lake City began in the fall of 1905. Despite a court challenge by Southern Pacific to prevent construction, Western Pacific workers successfully erected a waterfront terminal at Oakland. On November 1, 1909, after a series of delays and cost overruns, the last spike was driven on the Spanish Creek bridge in the Feather River Canyon. This new line, known as the Feather River Canyon Route, was 924 miles long and included 41 steel bridges and 44 tunnels. It was significant because it was competitive with the Southern Pacific Overland Route, the original transcontinental route. It crossed the Sierra at 5,000 feet, a lower elevation than the Southern Pacific line's 7,200 ft. elevation, and thus faced fewer problems with the weather. The Western Pacific grade, at 1%, and a 10% curvature, made navigation on this line easier than Southern Pacific's. Through freight service on the Feather Canyon Route began on December 1, 1909 and passenger service commenced in August of 1910. Construction costs for the Feather River route were much higher than anticipated, and acute financial problems led to the bankruptcy and subsequent auction of the Western Pacific Railway Company on June 28, 1916. It was reorganized and renamed the Western Pacific Railroad Company. Shortly thereafter, in March 1917, the company acquired a 75% interest in the Tidewater Southern, which ran from Stockton to Turlock, California. During the 1920s the Western Pacific acquired additional lines and added new branches. For example, the San Jose Branch was completed in 1922. In 1923, Western Pacific entered into a contract with Pacific Fruit Express, jointly owned by Southern Pacific and Union Pacific to supply refrigerator cars to WP customers.

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During World War I, the federal government created the United States Railroad Administration which took control of all U.S. railroads operating in the United States. After being placed back into private hands in March 1920, the government awarded Western Pacific nine million dollars for damage caused to the railroad while under federal control. Western Pacific used this money to buy the Sacramento Northern Railroad (July 8, 1925) which ran between Sacramento and Chico. Western Pacific acquired the San Francisco-Sacramento Railroad at the end of 1928, merging it with the Sacramento Northern to form a continuous electric interurban railway from San Francisco to Oakland to Chico. In 1926, railroad financier Arthur Curtiss James acquired controlling interest in Western Pacific. He began renovating Western Pacific property and facilities. He authorized construction of a north-south line, from Keddie to Bieber, allowing Western Pacific to connect with the Great Northern Railroad at Bieber and the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway at Stockton. This through route from the Pacific Northwest to Southern California competed with a similar Southern Pacific route. On November 10, 1931, at Bieber, Arthur Curtiss James drove the final spike of what was came to be called the "Inside Gateway" or the Northern California Extension. Western Pacific experienced more financial problems during the Depression, defaulting on its bond interest in March 1935. After a second reorganization, Western Pacific Railroad emerged from receivership (December 29, 1944). During World War II, both passenger and freight traffic increased substantially. Passenger traffic on Western Pacific Railroad received a boost when the "California Zephyr" was launched on March 20, 1949. A joint effort with Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad, and Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad, the luxurious "California Zephyr" provided passengers with exemplary service and the beautiful scenery of the Feather River Canyon. In July 1949, Western Pacific Railroad Frederic B. Whitman became President. Although WP had purchased a few freight diesel locomotivse during World War II, it was not until 1949 that real progress was made in modernizing its motive power. By 1953 full dieselization had been attained. A freight car program aimed to increase car ownership with emphasis on special equipment and the upgrade of existing cars. A major bridge and tunnel improvements project was initiated as well. During the 1950s, Western Pacific began to acquire more land, particularly in the San Francisco Bay Area. A finance company, Delta Finance, was created to fund Western Pacific Railroad land purchases. A holding company, Standard Realty & Development Company, was established to deal with real estate transactions and encourage development. The WP purchased land along its lines and developed it for industrial tenants. A major success was the Ford Motor Company to locate its assembly plant at the yard in Milpitas in 1954. Competition with the trucking industry, which brought about a decline in revenue among all railroads, led to changes in the way railroads did business. Western Pacific responded by implementing a new marketing concept. Instead of allowing the operating department to determine when to run trains, they began listening to the shippers and tailoring freight schedules and equipment to customer demands. In addition, Western Pacific was a leader in the development of special purpose freight cars such as gondolas with cradles for steel coils, Compartmentizer Cars, new Car-Pac cars, and a new design of wood chip cars. Piggyback service was another response to the challenge presented by the trucking industry. Western Pacific began hauling trailers on flat cars (TOFC) in 1954. In 1967, Western Pacific Railroad ended its contract with Pacific Fruit Express and became a member-owner of the Fruit Growers Express Company, which provided refrigerator cars and piggyback equipment to its WP freight customers. In the late 1960s, Western Pacific experienced financial difficulty because weather related damages to the Feather River Canyon route disrupted service. Wages and prices increased substantially. At the same time, Western Pacific Railroad's revenues from passenger service declined primarily due to the large inroads made by automobile and air travel. At its peak, revenue from passenger service represented only 4% of revenue. Once the "California Zephyr" began to lose money, Western Pacific applied to the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC), asking for permission to cease its passenger service. This permission was not immediately granted. Finally, on March 22, 1970, with ICC approval, Western Pacific passenger service ended, when the "California Zephyr" made its last westbound run into Oakland. New management arrived in December 1970. Western Pacific Railroad President Alfred E. Perlman reversed the financial picture and Western Pacific was again profitable by 1971. Western Pacific Industries, Inc. was established as a holding company for Western Pacific Railroad and other operations. President Perlman and his successor, Robert G. Flannery, worked to improve marketing, operations, service and car supply and diversified Western Pacific holdings. In 1973, Western Pacific created its own transportation company, Western Pacific Transport Company (which was renamed WPX Freight System in 1980) to increase service to shippers by providing door-to-door delivery. In 1974, in an effort to further diversify its holdings, WP Industries acquired Veeder-Root Industries, a group of companies which manufactured such things as fasteners, components, plastics, counting and recording devices. WPX and Veeder-Industries were consistently profitable for WP Industries. A new holding company, Newrail, was formed on February 13, 1978 and Western Pacific Railroad's assets were sold to it on January 26, 1979. Western Pacific Railroad continued to operate as before. On January 21, 1980, Western Pacific and Union Pacific announced that they would be pursuing a merger. Western Pacific Railroad President Robert Flannery blamed "galloping fuel price increases, jumps in the cost of materials and contract wage costs, and increases in interest rates." (Western Pacific Railroad Annual Report, 1979) In mid-October 1982, the Interstate Commerce Commission approved the merger, (which also included Missouri Pacific) and the Western Pacific Railroad Company ceased to exist as a corporate entity.

#### **Scope and Content of Collection**

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Material in the Western Pacific Railroad Company Collection is arranged by record groups which are designated by the name of the department or office that generated the records. Information about the organizational structure of the Western Pacific comes from various by-laws and corporate organization charts. To date these RECORD GROUPS are: 1. OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT 2. OFFICE OF THE TREASURER 3. LAND DEPARTMENT 4. PUBLIC RELATIONS DEPARTMENT 5. ENGINEERING, BRIDGES & ROADWAY DEPARTMENT 6. TRANSPORTATION DEPARTMENT 7. MECHANICAL DEPARTMENT 8. AUTHORITIES FOR EXPENDITURE 9. TRAFFIC DEPARTMENT 10. OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY 11. MARKETING DEPARTMENT 12. LEGAL DEPARTMENT • As additional material is acquired and processed, new record groups will be added. •Related collections include MS 17 Gilbert Harold Kneiss Collection and MS 31 Louis Lorenz Stein, Jr. Collection. For additional information about Western Pacific subsidiaries, search the Archives and Manuscripts catalog by corporate name.

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