



San Gorgonio Pass is a gap on the Pacific Crest, which is the drainage divide between the Great Basin and Pacific Slope. The 2,500-foot pass is not a low point on a typical "mountain pass," which would be a relatively low saddle on a high bedrock ridge, but rather is a number of coalescing alluvial plains shed from 11,503-foot Mount San Gorgonio to the north and 10,834-foot Mount San Jacinto to the south. Despite the towering mountains on either side, the Southern Pacific Sunset Route (1881) crossing of the Pacific Crest at San Gorgonio Pass required no tunnels, no major cuts or fills, or even any significant curves. Compare this to the Central Pacific (1869) crossing of the Pacific Crest at Donner Pass, with its tunnels, horseshoe bends, and miles of snow sheds, and it's easy to see why the southern transcontinental is by far the easiest. San Gorgonio Pass is also the easiest route into coastal southern California and certainly would have been the route of the first transcontinental railroad, except that the Civil War was raging when Congress, with no Southern representation, would not support the southern route. Thus, the difficult Central Pacific route (from the 1855 surveys; see tab Southwest Railroad Framework) was the first transcontinental railroad.

We'll explore the SP Sunset Route (1881) crossing of the Pacific Crest at San Gorgonio Pass from west to east, the direction in which it was built, starting with this westward view 9 miles west of San Gorgonio Pass. On this very special day, the Union Pacific Big Boy locomotive is climbing the western approach to the pass via the floodplain of San Timoteo Creek. The Big Boy is an articulated 4-8-8-4 steam locomotive, meaning it has two pairs of pistons, each pair driving 8 wheels (4 wheels per piston on each side of the engine), with 4 non-driving guide wheels (pony trucks) in the front and 4 more in the rear and an ability for the engine to pivot (articulate) in the center so the extremely long locomotive can negotiate curves. The Big Boys represent the culmination of steam technology. The American Locomotive Company built 25 Big Boy locomotives between 1941 and 1944 for the Union Pacific to haul freight over the Wasatch Mountains between Ogden, Utah, and Green River, Wyoming. The Big Boy was the only 4-8-8-4 engine ever built. The design immediately acquired its nickname after a worker scrawled "Big Boy" in chalk on the front of No. 4000, then under construction as the first of the Big Boy class. The Big Boys were in revenue service until 1959, when they finally were replaced by diesels. Eight Big Boys survive, seven of which are on static display at museums across the country. One of them, No. 4014 (seen here), was re-acquired by UP and restored to operating condition from 2016-2019, regaining the title as the largest and most powerful operating steam locomotive in the world. In October 2019, during its grand tour excursion of the West, the No. 4014 proudly climbed the western approach to San Gorgonio Pass on the SP Sunset Route (1881)(now UP).



The Big Boy continues eastward, same locations as previous, pulling delighted passengers with a little help from a diesel engine.





Now we've moved 9 miles east to the grade summit at San Gorgonio Pass. The topography is very subdued and identification of the actual "pass" – the low point on the drainage divide – is very subtle. Topo maps show the pass as an area rather than a specific location. The actual pass – the low point on the drainage divide – is within a gated retirement community 3 miles southeast of the grade summit at an elevation of 2,510 feet. All else being equal and following the rule of follow-the-drainage (see Railroads and Geology tab), the SP Sunset Route (1881) would have crossed the Pacific Crest at the pass (2,510 feet) and followed the first drainage – Potrero Creek, which is a Pacific Slope drainage – southward and down in elevation; the grade summit would be at an elevation of 2,510 feet. But all else is not equal because the Potrero Creek route would be too steep and would end up in the wrong place (the right place is Los Angeles). So the alignment crosses the Pacific Crest one mile north of the pass, at 2,560 feet then continues the gradual climb through the upper Potrero Creek drainage to this location on the drainage divide between Potrero Creek and San Timoteo Creek (both of which drain to the Pacific Ocean). The pass between these two drainages is a half mile southwest of the grade summit at an elevation slightly below 2,600 feet, whereas the grade summit elevation is slightly above 2,600 feet (this location). Thus, the pass through the Potrero - San Timoteo drainage divide is almost 100 feet higher than San Gorgonio Pass and is thus a very subdued "chimney" on the "roof" of the Pacific Crest (see Railroads and Geology tab).

Westward view of the SP Sunset Route (1881) at its summit in the San Gorgonio Pass area. The two welded tracks to the right are the mainline, which is double-tracked for many miles in both directions with concrete ties. The bolted track in the foreground is a siding that splits off the closer mainline a mile to the west. A 1942 topo map shows at turning wye on the south side (left) of a single-track mainline, the west branch of which was within this view. All traces of the wye are gone. The present bolted track may have been the 1942 mainline (with the double track added later and the old mainline relegated to a siding) or the bolted track is newer, it and the double track being new (since 1942).





Eastward view of the SP Sunset Route (1881) at its summit in the San Geronio Pass area, same location as previous. The welded double track with concrete ties is on the left and the bolted siding is in the foreground. The east branch of the turning wye was within this view to the right (south) of the siding. Again, there is no trace of the wye, which was used to turn helper steam locomotives at the top of grade. In the right distance, the siding curves to the right to serve a (former?) customer. The overpass is for California Highway 79, which in 1942 was a level grade crossing.





Southward view of the bolted siding on the SP Sunset Route (1881), same location as previous. The dirt path in the center is on or within a few feet of the center of the turning wye; the two wye branches once converged at the far end of the path and the straight track beyond ran just feet west of California Highway 79 (the embankment to the left of the path is for the current Highway 79 overpass). Just when I thought there was no evidence whatever of the turning wye, I noticed the discarded tie on the ground just to the left of the utility pole; we'll take a closer look at that tie in the next photo.





Closer view of the discarded tie. The tie is 12 feet long, much longer than a normal tie, with an indentation on the near end much wider than would be made by a simple rail plate. This was almost certainly one of two long ties used to connect a switch lever to a track switch. It could have been a switch for an old siding because the 1942 topo map shows three now-removed sidings that start 100 yards west of here. However, the proximity of the tie to the former wye makes the wye interpretation more likely.





Eastward view just east of the Highway 79 overpass, where the bolted siding veers to the south to serve a (former?) customer.





Northward view of the mainline double track and the bolted siding, with 11,503-foot Mount San Gorgonio in the distance. Note the slight cut to level the topography that slopes gently up toward Mount San Gorgonio.





Westward view of the SP Sunset Route (1881) 16 miles east of grade summit at San Geronio Pass. There is welded double track with concrete ties, just like at the summit. The tall building in the left distance is the Morongo Casino, the billboards to the right of the tracks are along Interstate 10, and the Big Boy is steaming toward us on the nearer of the two tracks. Note the desert vegetation, on the rain shadow side of the Pacific Crest, very different from the grassland and chaparral at the pass.





The Big Boy is closer and I have moved out of the way of this 772,250-pound titan of the rails, the heaviest steam locomotive ever built.





Big Boy gets closer.





Eastward view of the Big Boy as it continues toward Yuma, Arizona, on the SP Sunset Route (1881) in October 2019, and passes a billboard for one of the many newly-legalized cannabis dispensaries in Palm Springs.





Southward view of the SP Sunset Route (1881) 3 miles east of the previous location and looking southward at 10,834-foot Mount San Jacinto. Mount San Jacinto is the north end of the Peninsular Range geologic province, which extends southward to the tip of Baja California, and borders the south side of San Geronio Pass. These signals guard a switch for a crossover track on the UP double-tracked mainline.





Eastward view of the SP Sunset Route (1881) same location as previous. The signal to the left of the track is the closer of the two signals in the previous photo. The switch and crossover track are in the right distance. The grade continues downward to the Salton Trough, where the SP grade descends below sea level about 30 miles down the line.