The Operators
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Decisions, decisions

The fun in timetable-and-train-order operation as an engineer or conductor is that you have to think your way across the railroad. To give you some sense of what that means, here's a review of the decisions involved every time a train heads out onto the main line. To save time and space I won't spell out all the rules involved. If you're curious about them, see the book *Rights of Trains* by Peter Josserand (Simmons-Boardman).

First we ask ourselves if we have authority to use the main line. At our initial station that means a clearance card authorizing our train to run on a timetable schedule or with a Form G train order authorizing us to run extra with our assigned engine from the initial station to our destination. If we're running extra we'll have to display white signals on the engine, flags or classification lights, to mark our status as a train without a time-table schedule.

If we'll be running as a sched-uled train, we either have to wait for our scheduled departure time, or if that's already past, make sure it's still less than 12 hours after that time. Unfulfilled timetable sched-ules expire after 12 hours.

We'll also have to see if our clearance specifies that our sched-uled train is running in sections, meaning two or more trains mov-ing on the authority of the same timetable schedule. If so, we should have a Form F train order with our clearance telling us to display signals (green flags or class lights) for the following sections. If we're the last section (or the only one), we won't need to display signals.

When we're certain of our author-ity, we next need to make sure that no other train's authority exceeds ours. For that we need to know if all opposing superior trains due within 12 hours of our departure have in

Southern Pacific 4-10-2 no. 5016 is meeting Train 2, the eastbound *Sunset Limited*. Whether the 5016's freight train leaves after the passenger train passes depends a series of decisions by the freight's crew, and the signal indications may not be a factor. Walter H. Thrall photo

fact arrived. We have to look only 12 hours back because any schedules older than that have expired.

At our initial station we do this by checking the train register, a book where the conductors of arriving trains sign in. At the same time, we can sign out for our train's departure. If an opposing superior train due within the last 12 hours hasn't shown up, we'll have to wait for it. Intermediate stations typically won't have registers, and we'll be responsible for identifying the other trains we encounter to know where we are in respect to schedules.

Next we need to read all the train orders that may have been delivered with our clearance to see if they modify the schedules or superiority of trains. We may have a Form A order to meet a late-running superior train at some station down the line, or a Form C order giving our train right over a train we'd otherwise wait for. If we're running extra, we want to be especially careful to look for orders regarding opposing extra trains. That's because our primary protection against them – especially if it's a "dark" railroad with no block signals – will be train orders.

Are we ready to leave now if we've satisfied all those requirements? Maybe, but smart railroaders won't pull out onto the main track with-out a clear idea of how far they can safely go. If we have an order specifying a meet or giving right over a superior train to a certain sta-tion, that may be a goal we can aim for. Otherwise we'll read the time-table and match our running time against the schedules of other trains to decide which passing siding down the line our train can get into at least five minutes before the next opposing superior train is scheduled.

So that's how we'll get over the railroad, thinking our way from point to point based on the book of rules, the timetable, and the clearances and train orders we receive. We won't be picking up a phone or keying a radio to ask the train dispatcher if we can pull out of a yard or work on the main line. We'll be making those decisions for ourselves using the information we've been provided.

It's a challenging way to operate, and not necessarily for everybody. But if it sounds like a good time to you, give timetable-and-train-order running a try. **MR**