

# Western Pacific's U23B's

-and the Story of Why We Didn't Get a WP U23B for Portola

by Kent Stephens

During the spring of 1971 Western Pacific's management was finalizing plans for a new order of EMD units that would enable WP to retire most of its remaining F's and FP7 units. A letter of intent was sent to EMD in May 1971 for fifteen GP38's to be delivered during fourth quarter of 1972. The new GP38's not only would eliminate most of the remaining covered wagons but also would replace some larger hood units then in branchline assignments, releasing them for mainline service. Several GP38's would also work the planned hump yard at Oroville. The hump yard, however, was never built. Banks are willing to lend money to railroads to finance locomotives and cars with trust certificates - a default leaves them with equipment that can be sold. Yards can't be financed with trust certificates and have to be built with money generated internally by railroads. Inflation in this Vietnam era was setting in, and WP never found the necessary funds to build the hump yard.

The GP38's also did not come about. The railroad's top management suddenly decided to buy GE's rather than EMD's and cancelled the letter of intent to EMD in November 1971. The fifteen GP38's were replaced with an order to General Electric for an equal number of U23B's for delivery during the second quarter of 1972. A possible reason for this change may have been a check with Santa Fe about their 6800 class of U23B's. Santa Fe had been the first western carrier to buy U23B's in 1970 and they were happy with their performance.

WP's fifteen green U23B's (#2251-2265) arrived on schedule during May and June 1972 and a number of tired F units went in on trade for the new power. The "baby boats" supposedly were purchased in part to replace the covered wagons on the High Line, but they worked a wide range of assignments. An indication of this range of planned assignments, including the proposed hump yard, is that they were equipped with dual cab controls. WP had also specified EMD (Blomberg) trucks for the units.

We are very fortunate at Portola Railroad Museum that WP's top management changed their mind about the GP38's and bought the U23B's instead. One of the trade-ins was #805-A, traded to GE for credit toward #2260. If WP management had evaluated U23B's but decided to stay with the letter of intent to EMD for GP38's, and assuming that #805-A would have been traded for a GP38, we would not have #805-A. GE has been willing to sell any trade-ins until the last several years when they were holding them for the planned Super 7 rebuilding program. EMD, however, will not sell trade-ins and has an exclusive contract with Pielot Brothers to scrap all trade-ins. No. 805-A would have been scrapped in Pielot's yard near EMD instead of surviving on GE's scrap line for several years

until being sold with WP #921-C and a number of SP F7A's to the owners of WAG (Wellsville, Addison & Galton) and Louisiana & North West for service on the two short lines. (Actually two GP7's from an eastern carrier did survive EMD trade-in a few years ago to return to service. Providence & Worcester managed to get EMD to "sweeten the deal" on a single unit GP38 delivery with purchase of two GP7's that had been traded-in. The two Geeps are among the very few EMD trade-ins that escaped torching at Pielot's yard. Among the notable units torched at Pielot in the early 1970's was most of Santa Fe's fleet of Alco PA's. Illinois Railway Museum tried to save a three unit A-B-A set without success. EMD, of course, now has a lease fleet of hood units.)

The U23B's not only worked the High Line, but also could be found in lash-ups with other power on mainline trains. They also worked on locals and could be found occasionally in a switching assignment. One was tried on the Tidewater Southern not long after their delivery. The Tidewater's line had not been upgraded as it has since been for the unit grain trains of recent years, and the largest power up to that time had been the Tidewater's pair of Alco RS-1's. The trial use of the U23B didn't go well - the unfortunate "baby boat" nearly ripped open its fuel tank on some high-crowned grade crossings that hadn't bothered the Alco RS-1's at all.

Thirteen of the original fifteen U23B's made it to the merger (#2256 wrecked on the UP at Devils Slide, Utah, Nov. 17, 1979 and bought by UP as parts; #2259 wrecked by WP at Deeth, Nevada, Sept. 12, 1981.) In the August 1987 issue, THE CTC BOARD carried a report and tabulation in the UP column on "Western Pacific Power Disposition" since the merger. In this report it was commented that WP's GE fleet had not fared as well as the road's EMD's - most of the EMD's had survived. The U30B's had been stripped and sold for scrap, although in mid-1987, the last few hulks remained at Omaha pending sale for scrap. Only one WP U30B has survived #3051 safe at Portola.

The remaining thirteen U23B's had spent their time in storage after the merger. The Aug. 1987 report in THE CTC BOARD stated the U23B's "...are currently stored unserviceable at North Little Rock waiting for their lease to expire on Sept. 1, 1987. After expiration, it is expected that the units will be returned to lessor (First Security Bank of Utah) who will in turn sell them for scrap."

When I read this portion of the report, two points struck me about the U23B's - first, the units would probably go to scrap; second, the lessor was a bank in Utah, not some eastern financial institution. Utah is former WP territory, and possibly some bank official might be sympathetic to saving one of the "baby boats" by donation to Portola. It certainly seemed worth a try, and it fitted in with our collection policy.

I discussed it with Norm, who sounded it out with board members, then I received the go ahead to approach the bank without committing FRRS to anything. After

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checking POLK'S BANK DIRECTORY (First Security is a big bank!), the phone calls started, the first one to First Security's Loan Department. After I explained my request, I was transferred to the Commercial Loan Department. Then a discussion with a surprised secretary: "Locomotives? Well, I don't know anything about that. We wouldn't have lent money to buy something like that." I then explained to her that it was indeed First Security that financed WP's U23B's in 1972 and it would have been a large transaction - over a million dollars. The still doubtful secretary proved to be very helpful though, taking my name and number, and promising to check. Later in the day she called, elated with her success, saying that I needed to talk to the head of the bank's Leasing Department, and gave me his name and number.

In the phone call to the head of the Leasing Department, I learned that "...Yes, we leased those diesel locomotives to the Western Pacific..." and the outcome wasn't quite as predicted by the author of the column in THE CTC BOARD. The bank had discussed the units with the Union Pacific and reached an understanding with UP officials that the railroad would buy the units at the end of the lease, rather than turning them over to the bank.

I advised Norm of the outcome; he subsequently contacted UP for a donation of one unit. The suggested unit was #2260, rather than #2251, due to a unique situation at our museum. As mentioned earlier, in GE records the trade-in to GE for #2260 was #805-A! Now, wouldn't it be unusual for our museum to have both units? But it was not to be. After a time, UP replied that the unit wasn't available for donation, as all U23B's had been scheduled for trade-in to General Electric on new power.

Again with Norm's OK, I went on the trail of getting #2260. I called General Electric Transportation at Erie, and after a transfer I was talking to right person. As I explained what we were interested in, the response on the other end went like the following: "...Yes, the WP units are here...No, they are not going for scrap, they are being held for a possible rebuild program...Yes, a donation could be possible if we decide not to do the rebuild program and start selling the trade-ins for scrap again... Please write to us, so we will have your letter in our file..."

Norm did write to GE... but we won't be getting a WP U23B. One of the big stories of 1988/1989 in railroad motive power is General Electric's rebuild program, creating rebuilt "Super 7" series diesels from trade-ins. The program started in August 1988 with one of WP U23B's as the prototype unit.

The rebuilt "Super 7-B23" models have very little resemblance to a U23B. General Electric has been evaluating their "Super 7" concept for several years for its potential on the lease or sale market, aimed at Class 1 railroads, regionals and short lines. The Super 7 line is designed to utilize a combination of Dash 7 and 8 technology on the platform of a traded-in older model GE unit. Components are either rebuilt or upgraded to offer a conservative, lower

priced unit. The car body, cab, cooling system and dynamic braking of a Dash 8 series is combined with the best components of the Dash 7 line to result in the equivalent of a 1986-built C36-7. A Super 7 unit has a computer package, but not at the level of the high-tech microprocessor that is in the Dash 8 line. The Super 7's are essentially new units.

GE was so certain of the market potential of the Super 7 that they started several years ago to accumulate trade-ins at the Erie plant for possible conversion instead of selling the old units for scrap. The 13 former WP U23B's became part of GE's stockpile following the trade-in from UP. By early 1989 nearly 100 units were stored at GE. Nine railroads were represented in lines of stored U23, U30, and U33 series B's and C's.

WP #2263 was selected from the storage tracks during August 1988 to be the prototype unit for the Super 7 Program. Some months later it emerged from the Erie plant as GE #2000. The gray "Super-7-B23" bore little resemblance to the former green U23B. One of the most striking external changes in the car body was the radiator overhang, similar to the configuration of the U33 model.

The prototype program continued with additional units, but GE contracted with an outside rebuild for the work. A contract was signed with Morrison-Knudsen to rebuild WP #2251 and #2257 into Super 7-B23 demonstrators #2001-2002, plus the first three six-motor Super 7-C30's #3000-3002. The latter were conversions from Union Pacific U30C #2956 and Southern U33C's #3811-3812.

By April 1989 #2000 was being tested in road service, with #2001-2002 following in May. Reportedly the demonstrators were well received. Initial testing of #2000 was on the Buffalo & Rochester RR, a recent regional railroad. B&R crews, who operate secondhand Geeps, raved about #2000, saying it was so different from the Geeps, that it was "rocket science." GECX #2001-2002 initially demonstrated on the Monongahela Ry., a Pennsylvania short line, again with success.

In early May 1989, the first production Super 7-B23's were being built at GE's recently acquired plant in Montreal, formerly the Montreal/Bombardier/Montreal Locomotive Works. The initial production was planned to be 10 units. Again it was the ex-WP U23B's that were being rebuilt - #2252, 2254, 2255 and 2258 were the first four sent to Montreal. Shortly afterward GE sold the first group of remanufactured Super 7 units. Eleven Super 7-B23's, all ex-WP, were sold to the Monongahela Railroad, leaving only two ex WP units still owned by GE. A photo of #2001-2002 powering a Monongahela coal train was in November 1989 issue of THE CTC BOARD.

— Information sources for this article: WESTERN PACIFIC DIESEL YEARS, by Joe Strapac; THE CTC BOARD, UP news column, August 1987; "Diesels for hire" by Greg McDonnell, TRAINS, October 1989, for the GE Super 7 information; and THE CTC BOARD, Nov. 1989.