



*American Car and Foundry builder photo showing the Western Refrigerator Lines scheme WP put on its first few reefer cars.*

*- FRRS Archives*

### **Saving Western Pacific PFE Reefer 55069**

*- Eugene Vicknair*

In November 2018, Lisa DaFonte contacted the Society and revealed that her family owned an amazing artifact they wished to donate to the Museum collection: a 1924 build wood refrigerator car, Western Pacific 55069. This car was part of the WP's portion of the Pacific Fruit Express fleet, the existence of which is a fascinating story.

In 1923, the Western Pacific was looking for better ways to compete with its larger and more powerful rival, the Southern Pacific. One area that was important to both railroads was the movement of fruits and vegetables grown in California. The major supplier of the required refrigerator cars in the Western United States was Pacific Fruit Express, co-owned by the Union Pacific and Southern Pacific Railroads.

The WP used cars from PFE just like other western railroads, but it wanted a better deal. So the WP announced that it was founding its own competing refrigerator car line. The little underdog railroad even went so far as to order a fleet of cars painted for its new company.

In the face of possible competition, PFE reached an agreement with the WP to lease its new cars and make WP part of the PFE family. The Feather River Route received preferred use rates and access to over 40,000 refrigerator cars, rather than just the 2,775 cars it had built. This

shrewd and nervy strategy paid off in decades of rate savings. WP's fleet of refrigerator cars was retired by the early 1960s and very few survive today. We have two examples in the WPRM collection, one a 1950s rebuild and one unrebuilt, but they each have issues and one of the cars is likely unrestorable.

Lisa and her family were planning to expand the house next to the car and, unfortunately, that meant it had to be moved or demolished. As this car had been a big part of her life, Lisa felt that it deserved a chance to be preserved. She contacted several museums, but all passed on the car or never responded. She eventually contacted the California Trolley and Railroad Corporation (CTRC) in San Jose, but they also decided to not pursue the car. However, Ken Middlebrook of CTRC encouraged Lisa to contact the FRRS. I received the email and agreed to meet her and Ken at the home off Bascom and Naglee in San Jose to take a look.

Ken and I reviewed the car closely and found that it was in amazing shape. Placed alongside a house in San Jose 39 years ago, the carbody had been put onto railroad ties in a shallow pit dug just for the car. This had prevented rot from entering the underside of the wood body and destroying the floor and main structure. What damage there was came from dirt that had piled up alongside the car over the decades and led to rot in the siding and the outer boards of the frame. Few 95 year old wooden cars have survived as well as this one.

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We are very close to covering the last costs for moving WP PFE 55069! We need about \$1,500 more to finish paying Taylor Heavy Haul, who came in at the last minute to save the day. Following this, we will begin raising funds for the restoration of the car itself. You can donate through the Go Fund Me page (accessed through WPLives.org), through our online donation page (<https://donate.wplives.org>) or by mail to FRRS-WP 55069 Fund, P O Box 608, Portola, CA 96122.

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As Lisa revealed to us, the story of how it came to sit beside her house had an unusual path. In 1980, San Jose City Councilman Jerry Estruth, the homeowner at the time, wanted something special for an event at City Hall. He found WP 55069 in a field near the Santa Clara County Fairgrounds and purchased it to act as a backdrop for the bar at the event. With this task complete, he had the car trucked to his home, which lacked a garage, and placed next to it as a storage shed. Lisa's family moved in a few years later.

In further researching the car, its low number was noted. WP's first 167 cars were painted in its own Western Refrigerator Lines livery before the deal with PFE was struck. The cars never turned a revenue wheel in these colors, but instead were routed to Roseville, California where PFE promptly painted them into its own livery complete with WP feather herald. While research is still ongoing, the low number of 55069 leaves open the possibility that it was one of these specially painted cars. (Only 900 of WP's 2,775 cars were rebuilt in the 1950s, so the number sequence was disrupted.)

With these facts in hand, a plan was formed to try a new approach to acquiring and restoring equipment by the FRRS. Instead of moving the car to the WP Museum in Portola, an agreement was proposed between the FRRS and CTRC to move the car to CTRC's restoration facility at the Santa Clara County Fairgrounds. There FRRS volunteers in the Bay Area would have access to the car year round to work on in closer to home. In addition, crowdfunding would be used to seek the funds needed for the move. The location of the WP 55069 was needed for an expansion of the house and the car was hemmed in by fences, trees and the house itself. After discussing options for having volunteers lift the car, it was decided to engage a professional house moving crew with experience in historic buildings and rail equipment.

With approval by the FRRS and CTRC boards, the grand endeavor began, with a deadline to move the car that eventually extended to late February or else it would have to be demolished. Lisa and her family were incredibly supportive of this effort, even as it delayed their home remodel. The family also donated a sizable percentage of the funds needed to lift and move the car. Thank you is wholly insufficient in showing our gratitude for their help and patience. (We also need to thank their neighbor, who allowed the demolition and rebuilding of the fence between the houses.)

A deal was struck with a crew from Kelley Brothers Housemoving in San Jose. With partial donation of labor, the eventual cost was almost half of the original quote, a huge savings. A Go Fund Me page went live on January 27, 2019, complete with a video discussing the history of the car and WP's reefer battle with PFE. On February 16, I took down the redwood fence that had covered one side of the car, marking the official start of work. On February 18, the house movers began digging around the car and bracing it for the lift. San Jose Mercury News reporter Sal Pizarro came out on February 20 and did a story on the car and our efforts to save it. Published on page 1 of the next day's local section, it generated immense interest and spurred almost \$2,000 in donations over the next 2 days.



*One of the ice bunkers is still completely intact, while the other is just missing its fans and some of its interior facing. The structure and wire cage for the ice are all still in place. The inside is filled with loading notations and locations the car travelled to.*

*- photo by Eugene Vicknair*

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*The carbody is now lifted free. While the lower metal will need to be replaced, the damage seen in the siding boards is mostly contained to the lower part of the boards and does not invade the main structure. The remaining metal work on the doors is in great shape, with only the kick plate at the bottom suffering any damage.*

*- photo by Eugene Vicknair*

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Things were moving along. Funds were coming to, work was progressing, the crew was reporting the carbody felt solid and the restoration site was prepared. The goal was to move the car the following Saturday, but trucking issues nearly sank the plan.

- In the next issue: *A Lesson in Trucking!*

*More photos of the WP 55069 move are shown on the society's web page ([www.WPLives.org](http://www.WPLives.org)) in the WPRM Photo & Video Gallery on the "About Us" pull-down menu.*



*EMD GP20 -WP 2001*

*- photo by Mike Mucklin*

### **WP 2001 Returns to RAL Fleet**

Western Pacific 2001 is arguably one of the most historic preserved diesel locomotives in the world. 2001 is the first production turbocharged EMD locomotive, the first of thousands of turbocharged EMD diesel locomotives to roll off the assembly line in 1959. Competitors American Locomotive Company (ALCO) and General Electric were wringing 2500 horsepower out of their new locomotives at a time where the highest horsepower EMD offered out of their Supercharged locomotives was 1800 from the GP18. EMD realized that to remain competitive, they too would have to adopt turbo charging for their next series of locomotives, and the GP20 was added to EMD's catalog.

Our 2001 was the first production GP20 built, and EMD showed it off around the country before releasing it to the WP.

After a long absence, the WP 2001 has returned to our Run-A-Locomotive Fleet and you can operate this piece of railroad history. Check out the details on the RAL webpage or call the museum and ask about the *2001 Special!*

Prime Mover: EMD 567D2 - 16 Cylinder Turbocharged

Horsepower: 2000

Built: November 1959

Operating Weight: 256,890 lbs. (128.5 Tons)

Builder #: 25623

Length: 56 ft. 2 in.

Maximum Speed: 65 MP