

Los Angeles Times
latimes.com



find all the games & accessories
you could ever want at Circuit City

FREE SHIPPING*

shop now ▶

<http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-train14feb14,0,1791292.story?coll=la-home-headlines>

End of the line for railroad's 'Dinger dynasty'

Tom Dinger, a third-generation train engineer, makes one last Los Angeles-to-San Diego round trip. Dingers have been working on the railroads for nearly 90 years.

By Bob Pool

Times Staff Writer

February 14, 2007

The long, mournful wail of a 3,000-horsepower diesel locomotive's horn on the outskirts of downtown Los Angeles signaled the end Tuesday of American railroads' "Dinger dynasty."

After 43 years in the locomotive cab, third-generation passenger train engineer Tom Dinger pulled into Union Station for the last time.

"It's a little bit melancholy," Dinger said as he eased up on the huge engine's black-handled throttle.

For nearly 90 years, a Dinger has been at the controls of U.S. passenger trains.

"I love this job. It was my father's career, my father's father's career and mine. We've been through it all — the Great Depression, World War II, the transition from steam to diesel and all of the more recent changes in passenger rail service."

And he's been through the challenges — even on the spectacular, ocean-side Amtrak route s between Los Angeles and San Diego and Santa Barbara that were Dinger's specialty.

These days, passenger trains compete with long freight trains for space on Southern California's crowded rails. Impatient motorists dart around the red-flashing crossing arms where tracks intersect with busy streets. People wander across railroad rights of way, scampering to safety only when the engineer leans on the locomotive's large blue horn button.

"It's a daily challenge because so much is going on out here. There's a lot of track work taking place. There are a lot of trains ahead of you and behind you and you have to keep your eye on your signals, which is about all you have to depend on," Dinger said.

On his last 258-mile round trip between Los Angeles and San Diego, Dinger was constantly on the radio reporting signal light colors to dispatchers and to conductors in the five coach cars he was pulling. Red lights over green meant a track switch was coming up. A single green meant Dinger could continue straight and did not need to detour around oncoming trains on a side track.

Dinger, 63, of Silver Lake has never kept track of his miles. But co-workers say it's in the millions.

He started working on the railroad straight out of John Marshall High School when his father, William Dinger, got him a job as a fireman — an apprentice engineer — with Southern Pacific.

He was promoted to engineer in 1971, the same year Amtrak took over U.S. passenger rail service.

By then, it was clear that locomotive diesel was in his blood.

His father had operated coal-fired steam engines for the Pennsylvania Railroad out of Pittsburgh and Altoona before relocating his family to Los Angeles in 1952 and becoming a Southern Pacific engineer.

Grandfather Leroy Dinger was a train engineer for the New York Central Railroad in upstate New York's Buffalo and Schenectady areas for 50 years starting in early 1918.

"It's ending with me, unfortunately. My daughter, Chloe, is not interested in pursuing a railroad career. She's a registered nurse. I don't think she's cut out for this," he said.

But Dinger is bullish on the future of trains. "I think it will be OK. We'll be around. Ridership is growing as the price of gasoline keeps going up and they keep putting more trains on and they become more convenient."

He joked that the toughest part about being a train engineer is climbing the 8-foot ladder that leads to the cab of the 270,000-pound locomotive. From the operator's seat on the right side of the compartment, hand levers control speed, brakes and the pressurized-air system that runs them. He doesn't have to steer.

The sheer size of the locomotive is comforting, he said. But every engineer has visions of vehicles pulling in front of the train at a grade crossing. Heavy trucks such as cement mixers and gravel haulers are large enough to derail even his huge diesel-electric engine.

He never derailed. But his trains have been involved in 15 fatal accidents.

Even though all 86 grade crossings that Dinger encountered Tuesday between Los Angeles and San Diego have crossing gates, cars could still sneak through.

"The incidents I've had at crossings, all fatalities, were all drug- or alcohol-related, with the exception of a couple of suicides," he said. "You realize it's not your fault, but it's on your mind. You see it over and over, you replay it. But there's nothing you can do. You have to take it as something you can't do anything about."

Dinger started his final run Tuesday with a steam-whistle salute from ancient Santa Fe steam locomotive 3751, which hauled passengers between 1929 and 1953 and was at Union Station for a school program. Los Angeles City Councilman Tom LaBonge, a Silver Lake neighbor, showed up on the passenger platform to praise Dinger for his work "in the busiest area outside of the Northeast rail corridor."

Dinger was accompanied on his last run by a pair of Amtrak engineers he helped train. "He taught me to be humble as an engineer and to handle the train and the people in it with respect," said Eric Strumpf. Engineer Eric Smith said Dinger showed him the value of being calm under pressure.

As his train slowed from speeds of up to 77 mph near a construction site, track workers laying a much-needed new second set of rails along a single-track stretch lined up to salute Dinger as he passed. At the Anaheim station, Amtrak ticket agents greeted him waving a sign that said, "Good Luck, Tom! We'll Miss You," and presented him with roses.

In his new free time, Dinger plans to work at graffiti removal and the renewal of the Los Angeles River.

From his locomotive window, he's gotten a good view of the work that needs doing. He also plans to travel extensively across the northern part of the U.S. to Maine. By train, of course.

That goal drew a wry smile from wife Pat, who remembers traveling by air with him in order to catch distant trains that he wanted to ride.

She likes the rails, too, she said. But she added: "Four or five days, even in a train's luxury cabin, can be enough."

*

bob.pool@latimes.com

Copyright 2007 Los Angeles Times | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#)
[Home Delivery](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Archives](#) | [Contact](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Help](#)

PARTNERS:

