

**Riding the Rails with Richmond Pacific**  
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**August 3, 2004**

Over the past year or so, I have continued to look for solutions to the honking of train horns in Richmond in a manner that many citizens believe are unnecessary or excessive. I have also explored ways of mitigating the excessive blockage of grade crossings in south Richmond from long BNSF trains shuttling back and forth from the Port of Oakland.

The City Council has authorized initiatives to address both problems, but, unfortunately, no further steps have been taken.

A third problem involves the use of train horns during switching operations. I have previously proposed changes to Richmond's noise ordinance that would perhaps outlaw some of the use of horns for switching, but my position has consistently been opposed by the local Richmond Pacific Railroad. Neither has the rest of the City Council shown much sympathy for my noise reduction proposal.



Engineer Ed Rogers skillfully maneuvering Richmond Pacific's 50-year old switch engine into position to attach a car

Trying to learn more about Richmond Pacific's point of view, I accepted an invitation to take a ride on a switch engine. Richmond Pacific Railroad is operated by Levin-Richmond Terminal Corporation and provides switching services for a number of customers in the south Richmond area. I reported for duty at 3:00 PM on August 3, boarding the engine at the intersection of West Cutting and South Fourth Street.

I was accompanied by Jim Cannon and John Cockle of

Levin-Richmond Terminal Corporation. The engine operator (engineer) was Ed Rogers, who was assisted by two switchmen. Richmond Pacific works only from 6:00 AM until 10:00 PM, and Ed was in the middle of his 2:00 PM to 10:00 PM shift.

We first headed southeast and spent about an hour moving tank cars in and out of the California Oils complex on Harbour Way South. The only street we crossed was Wright Avenue. There is a stop sign for the train at Wright, which Ed explained was because the crossing gates are set to close when the engine is only a few feet from the street. Before

starting across the intersection, Ed gave a single medium-length blast on the horn with a slight pause in the middle.



Coupling and uncoupling a car puts a switchmen at maximum danger if the engine moves

In the process that followed of coupling and uncoupling cars and moving them to various tracks in and around California Oils, Ed blew a short blast on the horn to warn his ground crew each time the engine was about to move. The reason for this is that each time a car was coupled or uncoupled, a switchman had to move into a position between cars, or between the engine and a car, to connect or disconnect the compressed air hose or to manipulate the couplers.

An individual in this location during movement is in significant danger.

All other communication with the switchmen was by radio. The lack of 100% reliability of radio for the pre-move warning was cited as the reason that it, alone, could not be relied upon for safety.



See, it's not really that hard

As we moved a string of cars into California Oils, Ed blew a long blast on the horn that he explained was to warn of the approaching train. Parts of the facility were filled with large vehicles, and a number of workers were moving about.

After servicing California Oils, the engine moved further east across Harbour Way South and Marina

way South to the 23<sup>rd</sup> Street Yard with the intent of leaving a number of tank cars on one of the spur tracks. At the grade crossings, neither of which had a stop sign for the train, the same medium horn sound with a middle hesitation was used. There was no traffic on the street in either case.



An engineer's view of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Street Yard

In order to back the cars onto a siding in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Street Yard, the engine had to pull east across Marina Bay Parkway, which was blocked for a few minutes while switches were set. Eventually, the engine cleared the Marina Bay Parkway grade crossing and backed the cars on a siding.

After two hours of interesting but not exactly exciting railroading, Cannon, Cockle and I got off and drove back to Levin-Richmond Terminal in a truck someone had left for us at Marina Bay Parkway.

Here is what I learned from this experience:

- Richmond Pacific is not responsible for what I consider to be the excessive honking in Point Richmond and South Richmond during the hours between midnight and dawn. It appears we can mostly thank BNSF for our sleep deprivation.
- Richmond Pacific makes extensive use of radio to communicate among crew members for switching operations.
- Richmond Pacific makes minimal use of horns during grade crossings, particularly when compared to BNSF. Hopefully, this can be eliminated when and if Richmond implements Quiet Zones.
- Whether or not the use of radio could be expanded to include warning of train movements remains, in my mind, an open question. While the operating company is adamantly opposed, I could see a system where radio could be used to warn of an impending movement and the horn sounded only if a clear acknowledgement is not received from the switching crew.

Everything considered, Richmond Pacific does not appear to be the primary culprit challenging the right of Richmonders to a good night's sleep and reasonable use of streets to get around.



Marina Way Parkway grade crossing



The train crew was critical of this bicycle rider inside the marina Way parkway crossing gate

