

TRANSPORTATION

The Suntan Special is only a memory

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SANTA CRUZ — Pardon me, boys, is that the Suntan Special?

Naw. The Suntan Special hasn't been seen around these parts in 24 years.

The year 1959 marked the end of an era — the last season for the Suntan Special on the Southern Pacific line.

The Special was special — it carried sunseekers from San Francisco to Santa Cruz for holiday and weekend excursions to the beach during the good-weather season.

But better freeways, faster cars and declining popularity spelled doom for the Suntan Special.

"We expect everything to go so fast

now," remarked Madge Craig, wife of the late Jim Craig, a railroad man all his life. Mrs. Craig remembers the Suntan.

"It was a good ride, but it wasn't too fast," she recalled.

It took \$3 and almost four hours for the Suntan to wind its way from San Francisco to Santa Cruz.

But beachgoers from the city were willing to endure the slow train for the promise of a day of sun and fun.

Maybe the Suntan Special was a little short on speed, but it was long on scenery.

The Suntan Special was instituted in 1927 with a run between San Jose and Santa Cruz through the redwood country of the San Lorenzo Valley.

In 1932, San Francisco was added to the

line, then Oakland two years later, said local historian and writer Skip Littlefield.

But heavy rains in 1939 and 1940 washed out the tracks in the Santa Cruz mountains. The Suntan Special was re-routed via Watsonville junction.

The Suntan enjoyed a post-war high in popularity in 1956 with 15,000 people riding and 13 schedules. By 1959, shortly before its discontinuance, ridership had dropped to a record low of 7,700.

In a newspaper account, Joseph B. Haggerty, general passenger agent for Southern Pacific, described the Suntan in 1960 as a "money-losing train."

Since that time, various groups have worked to revive the Suntan Special or something like it.

The revivalists include train buffs, the Modern Transit Society and those who argue a light-rail link between San Jose and Santa Cruz would solve some traffic problems on crowded, dangerous Highway 17.

But so far the Suntan Special remains only a memory on the track of time.

Some Santa Cruz officials and residents would just as soon see the last nail driven into the coffin of the Suntan Special.

"We are not in favor of construction of a route over the hill, either on the old Los Gatos alignment, or on a new alignment, because it would open Santa Cruz for major commuter traffic," said county Supervisor Gary Patton.

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Patton, and others, are in favor of trying to preserve tracks for a rail service within the county and support recreational train trips to Santa Cruz via Watsonville.

What will happen to the dormant Southern Pacific line through Felton remains to be seen.

Jim Loveland, spokesman for Southern Pacific in San Francisco, said the railroad company "is considering a lot of options," but no decision has been reached.

State parks officials say they have an interest in acquiring the SP property to remove the rails and to cut a hiking trail through Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park to the beach.

Another option is sale of the line to an independent railroad company.

The Suntan Special has faded into history, but train romance and nostalgia still lingers.

The air is thick with memories of days gone by at the monthly meetings of the Santa Cruz chapter of the National Association of Retired and Veteran Railway Employees.

At these meetings, the clock is turned back and railroad retirees reminisce about the days when trains were a way of life for them.

They start their meetings with a prayer and the Pledge of Allegiance, then sing "My Country 'Tis of Thee" while one of their members pounds out the accompaniment on the piano.

The meetings move slowly, like a tired engine rumbling its way to the roundhouse.

Part of their meetings is devoted to a report on the sick — members who are in convalescent homes or have had operations.

They discuss at length what will be the refreshments for their next meeting.

There are 50 to 60 local members. Dues are \$3.50.

The retired railroaders had spent the better part of their lives as engineers, firemen, brakemen, tower workers and signalmen.

They recalled the sad sight of wounded soldier carried in hospital trains during war years.

They lamented the passing of an era in the mid-50s with the switch from steam to diesel engines. The switch meant a loss of jobs for many railroad workers.

"As far as I'm concerned, these diesels are just overgrown trucks," commented member Clarence Castro.

Their heroes are men like the late Jack Holst, who for 16 years worked to save a locomotive from rust so it could be restored to service.

Holst oiled the engine in Portland every day for 16 years.

He died before his dream was realized.

In 1976, the engine — No. 4449 — was chosen to pull the American Freedom train in celebration of the Bicentennial.

While men, women and children cheered alongside the tracks, the noble engine — made shiny through Holst's hard work and devotion — pulled its cargo of early American museum pieces from depot to depot.

Mrs. Craig summed up: "There's something fascinating about the railroads. They get into the blood."